

# KURDISH FEMALE FIGHTERS: THE WESTERN DEPICTION OF YPJ COMBATANTS IN ROJAVA

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*Abstract:* As this paper is drafted, the YPJ continues to clash against Daesh's patriarchal impositions. This paper considers three significant questions for its purpose; first, who are Kurdish female fighters and why did they choose to take up arms in an organized militia? Second, how did the Western media portray the YPJ? Third, it considers whether the Western representation of female soldiers is coherent or not with the subject. In conclusion, the essay will attempt to summarize in a nutshell the reality of the Kurdish female fighters. The aim of this essay is to identify a possible misrepresentation of the objective entailed in Rojava's liberation struggle, since this could compromise the real understanding of the subject, withholding from the audience the opportunity to learn about the plight of the Kurdish female fighters. The study of YPJ's representation was pursued with the Analysis of Textual Data (ATD). However, the subject material for the socio-political analysis on the background of YPJ fighters was pursued through reference to books and interviews of Western reporters that were engaged in Rojava. Furthermore, a written interview was submitted to Meral Çiçek, of REPAK (Kurdish Women's Relation Office). The results show an overall heterogeneous representation of the subject, as it is still not entirely exhaustive. The socio-political and ideological stand of YPJ combatants is often not addressed in a proper manner, therefore diminishing some aspects of their struggle. While Western fascination with Kurdish female fighters has slowed down, the YPJ battle is still ongoing. To that regard, the analysis in this paper ought to be considered as a starting point for further research.

*Keywords:* YPJ, Rojava, Kurdish female movement, gendered militarization, Western media.

## PREMISE

When studying complex issues such as this paper does, it is of absolute value to prioritise the heterogeneity of the subject in question. By 2016, the Kurdish liberation movement was the result of a network of ethnic and political groups, rendering intricate the political analysis of the context. In fact,

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an important feature of that intricacy concerns the systemic relationship between the social, ethnic, religious, political, and military organizations of the Kurdish people. Sure enough, the territory of Kurdistan is divided into four States – Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria – and its population is the world’s largest population without a State. Thus, the goals and objectives possessing particular relevance for a specific Kurdish group may not be valid for another. Therefore, in this essay, Kurdish Women’s Movement and Kurdistan refers mainly to Syrian Kurdistan, precisely to the Rojava region in Northern Syria.

Another important premise concerns the political context the paper considers; within the overall political framework of Kurdistan, the YPJ are pursuing a social and political fight i.e. the Rojava Revolution. The ideology and policies of the YPJ have several links with the PKK – Kurdistan Workers Party<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, YPJ fighters (together with YPG, the People’s Protection Units) look to Abdullah Öcalan – the founder of the PKK as their ideological leader. This puts the YPJ in a peculiar predicament – because PKK is considered a terrorist group by Turkey, US, and the EU – given the tense regional political landscape where geopolitical power play determines allegiances, and circumstances are ever mutating. With that in mind, a clear definition of the socio-political context and values of YPJ fighters was necessary to pursue this research, in order to outline a comprehensive profile of the subject. Nonetheless, the analysis tries to be as objective and critical as possible, without overbalancing political affairs and ideologies.

## THE DEMOCRATIC AUTONOMY OF ROJAVA AND THE YPJ

The YPJ is an all-female militia has been doing battle against Daesh for the last half-decade in Rojava<sup>2</sup>. The momentum towards autonomy of the territory began to take shape during the Arab Spring in Syria, when Kurds from different political and social backgrounds joined in the uprising. Not to be left out as history unfolds, Kurdish women also made their mark – in the form of “*Jin, Jiyan, Azadi!*” the motto of the

Kurdish Female Movement which translates as “Woman, Life, Freedom”. The Democratic Autonomy of Rojava was then proclaimed in January 2014 under a Social Contract. From a political perspective, Rojava is a *de facto* autonomous region which consists of three confederated and self-governing cantons: Kobane, Jazire and Afrin<sup>3</sup>. The decision-making organization is composed of several councils, established through a bottom-up structure from the local level – neighbourhood councils, city district/village councils and city councils – to the regional one. The overall governmental administration of the region pursues the so-called “grassroots democracy”, based on the active political participation of citizens and implemented through the Democratic Confederalism system. Democratic Confederalism was theorized by Abdullah Öcalan – the ideological leader of the PKK – and is described as follows: “It can be called a non-state political administration or a democracy without the State. [...] States are founded on power; democracies are based on collective consensus [...]. It is a flexible, multi-cultural, anti-monopolistic, and consensus-oriented system. Ecology and feminism are its central pillars” (Öcalan 2011: 21).

The essential element of this social experiment is the existence of local councils encouraging the political participation of the people living in the region. Local assemblies based on familial and tribal allegiances have been an important practice of social organizing among the Kurds for hundreds of years; this is one of the reasons why the organization through assemblies has become one of the pillars of Democratic Confederalism, which aims at working on a direct democracy model. Above the city councils’ level, there is a system similar to a council parliamentary system, with rotating representatives; a Legislative Council; an Executive Council composed of Canton’s co-presidents; an independent Judicial Council, and a Supreme Constitutional Court (Charter of the Social Contract, Self-rule in Rojava, Part VI-VIII).

Democratic Confederalism has been adopted in Rojava as a form of government by the Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM), the interim governing body in the region. It is based on three main pillars: libertarian municipalism; radical

pluralism; social ecology. Murray Bookchin's theory can serve as a theoretical background to understand self-government in Rojava: it can be defined as a libertarian-socialist political system, which refuses the Nation State's structure while striving for self-governance and popular democracy. Thus, the aim of the Rojava council system is to maximize the local decision-making process through decentralization, achieving at the same time a regional coordination. All bodies forming the political administration of Rojava are obliged by the Social Contract to have a proportional representation of the ethnic communities that are living in each canton of the confederation - Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, Chechens, and adherents of Islam, Christianity and azidet. Moreover, all governing bodies, institutions and committees shall be made up of at least forty per cent of either sex - as enshrined in articles 47, 65, and 87 of the Social Charter<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, the co-presidency principle is enshrined in the Social Charter and practiced in each division and institution - meaning that there is one man and one woman governing together in every institution, council and committee. This principle ensures equity within the decision-making processes.

In the three Cantons of Rojava, there are women's self-defence units, women's communes, academies, tribunals, and cooperatives. Autonomous women's councils exist parallel to the people's councils at the same governance level. Many non-Kurdish women, especially Arabs and Syriac Christian women have joined the ranks and the administration of Rojava. Three official languages were declared: Kurdish Arabic and Syriac.

Feminism is one of the founding principles of Rojava and essential practice in the three cantons: indeed, women are considered pivotal political and social actors in the construction and development of Democratic Confederalism, as gender equality is one of the pillars on which it is based (along with ecology and grassroots democracy). Altogether, the main idea which differentiates and makes the Kurdish Women's Movement a compelling organization is that in contemporary Rojava it pursues female emancipation as a fundamental part of the democracy-building process. Women's liberation is not an objective to be achieved once the democracy is established.

Rather, it is a complementary and necessary element for democracy to be built. This idea originates from the belief that the liberation of the woman is the basis for the eradication of Daesh: in fact, it would be mistakenly dismissive and a gross misconception to limit the YPJ's fight as a military campaign – it is primarily an ideological one. The aim of the YPJ and fundamentally, of the Kurdish Female Movement, is to defeat the enemy primarily by deconstructing the patriarchal impositions that underlies ISIL itself.

From the military perspective, the main fighting forces in Rojava are militias composed of volunteers: the YPG militia – Kurdish: *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, People's Protection Units – and the YPJ militia – Kurdish: *Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*, Women's Protection Units –, with an estimated number of 60,000 fighters at the end of 2016 (Perry, 2017, March 20). YPG and YPJ are part of an umbrella military alliance founded in October 2015: the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a unified fighting force which is comprised of Kurdish and other local Arab, Turkmen, Assyrian and Armenian militias. Their military goal is the defeat of ISIL and other Jihadist groups in the Syrian Civil War. Beside this, the military alliance also has a political goal: the formation of a self-governing, autonomous democratic country in northern Syria. The political branch of SDF is the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), an assembly founded in December 2015 which aims at the creation of a democratic, secular and federal system of governance.

## WOMEN ORGANIZING: THE KURDISH FEMALE MOVEMENT, THE YPJ AND THE PKK

Although Western media's fascination with Kurdish female fighters arose only a short time ago, Kurdish women have been organising themselves politically and militarily since the '80s. From a political point of view, during the 1970's and the 1980's Kurdish women began to be politically active. The armed movement developed by the PKK during the 1980's along with the development of ethnic-based political parties during the 1990's formed the basis for numerous women to

move from the “domestic” and private sphere to the public one. The struggle for their identity, language and culture created an individual consciousness and personal independence; these factors helped women to move from the ethnic struggle to the struggle for women’s human rights. In these years’, women started acknowledging their “double discrimination”, as women *and* as Kurds. Since the 1990’s the feminism that nowadays permeates the Rojava cantons grew in the political lines of the PKK.

Meral Çiçek, of the REPAK (Kurdish Women’s Relation Office) addresses the relationship between the YPJ and PKK as follows:

Right from the beginning of the armed guerrilla struggle within the PKK women took arms, too. While the number of the female fighters in the guerrilla ranks was not very high in the 1980’s, in the early 1990’s their number increased significantly. [...] This did not just create new opportunities but also challenges as it exacerbated class and gender conflicts within the PKK. On one side there was a class conflict between female fighters from the universities with a high intellectual level on the one hand and villagers, who were mostly illiterates, on the other hand. On the other side there was the gender conflict with men that tried to maintain traditional gender roles and for this tried to split the women, using the class conflict for their own interest. In this context, the decision to form separate units of female fighters and to build an own women’s army was not only a goal but functional at the same time. It was a way to make conflicts productive with the aim to establish a true unity between women and to strengthen women’s gender consciousness. In this sense the 1st women’s congress in the mountains of Kurdistan, which started on 8th of March 1995 and the announcement of the Kurdistan Free Women’s Union was historic. For the first time, women had their own headquarters, own commanderships, own academies, own camps and own decision-making mechanisms. This marks at the same time the main foundation stone of the Kurdish women’s liberation movement. Women’s liberation ideology, the Kurdistan Women’s Liberation Party, overcoming quota within own structures and the implementation of equal participation and representation all came later. The Women Protection Units (YPJ) in Rojava represents a further development of the Kurdish women’s liberation movement, ideologically and practically. Ideologically, because it’s based on women’s self-defence theory and practically, because it’s a kind of



socialization of self-defence. The members of the guerrilla are members of the PKK. They are cadres, professional militants. They have no private life outside the movement. But YPJ fighters do not join the struggle for a lifetime. They do not consider themselves as revolutionaries but rather protectors of their land and people. By doing this, they are deeply influenced by the ideology of the Kurdish liberation movement and the paradigm of its leader Abdullah Öcalan. It would be an oversimplification to draw a sharp boundary between PKK and YPJ. Instead one should recognize that the PKK is not the only representative of the Kurdish freedom struggle and that both the PKK and YPJ are part of a broader Kurdish liberation movement (Meral Çiçek, personal communication, June 30th, 2017).

The Kurdish Women's Movement has developed in this context, differing from other feminist movements. Kurdish women's groups do not consider the dominant understanding of the dichotomy "male" and "female". What constitutes the "other" for Kurdish feminist is not the "man" alone; their identification is made by gender, but also by their ethnicity, which constitutes an important and fundamental part of their womanhood. This indicates that being Kurdish, they have also other problems that come with being female, such as war, abuse, rape, forced migration and so on, underlying that they cannot differentiate between all the problems. The two identities complement and reinforce one another: both of these emancipatory struggles should be fought together. In fact, the "oppressed nation" and the "oppressed gender" are two issues that must be viewed as one, as equal to each other. The meeting point of these two kinds of oppression constitutes the Kurdish Feminist Identity (Çaha 201: 435-499).

In practice, Kurdish women guerrillas are an example of a new model of feminist authority, and the Rojava region is, in fact, a territory in which new ways and new modes of political, and economic development can be implemented, along with a new concept of gender relations.

## AFFINITIES AND DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN JINEOLOGY AND FEMINISM

The word “Jineology” (Kurdish: Jineolojî) is meant to be a new science built on one main principle: a society can call itself free only with the actual freedom of women and with a real consciousness surrounding them. From an etymological perspective, “*Jin*” in Kurdish means “woman”, but the word jineology also comes from the root *jîyan*, meaning “life”. Interpreted in a broad acceptance, it means “the science of women”, or “women’s wisdom” or “women’s knowledge”. It represents a cross-cutting, prospective science that aims at using alternative paradigms to assess and revise several fields such as economy, history, religion, politics, culture, sociology, philosophy etc., from the “female perspective” (Öcalan 2013: 54-56).

The background from which Jineology has developed is strongly politically defined: it pertains to an anti-state, anticolonial, and anti-capitalist ideology. It aims at the subversion of the cultural and social construction of femininity and masculinity, therefore at the deconstruction of the traditional understanding of gender, of what is “female” and “male”. Within this paradigm, the re-definition of the role of women within society is essential in order to undergo a revision of the male-centred perspective in social, historical and political sciences. Also, Jineology refuses the masculinization process that a lot of women had to undertake to reach certain power positions, especially in the military sector. Indeed, this kind of alienation would mean to reject the female nature: the goal of the women’s science is, instead, to build and identify real female nature as complementary and equal to the male’s one (Duzgun 2015: 22-30). Öcalan states that a deconstruction of the “hegemonic masculinity” is needed to achieve the liberation of both women and men. Thus, the women’s science is not only addressed to females, since its theorization and implementation will be useful for the whole society (Duzgun 2016: 285).

The relationship between feminism and the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Rojava is complex and delicate, as there are some major differences but also strong commonali-

ties between these two mind-sets. First, Jineology is not to be conceived as a Kurdish Feminist Theory: still, feminism is acknowledged as a Western school of thought that was decisive in improving gender equality and in enhancing women's movements. However, feminism is an essential part of Jineology and Democratic Confederalism. Nevertheless, the Kurdish Female Movement developed a strong critique towards colonialism, capitalism and the State: this perhaps suggests that anarchist, postcolonial, and socialist feminisms are the closest to the Kurdish Female Movement and Jineology approach (UIKI Onlus 2016: 37).

The ambition of the “women's science” is to investigate and understand the limits of feminist movements: not with the purpose to reject them, but rather to move beyond them, to systematize them, in order to unveil common interests and aims (Dirik 2015, April 20). Jineology's main criticism to Western Feminisms concerns the lack of heterogeneity: within this perspective, Western Feminisms have barely succeeded in overcoming the capitalist and orientalist philosophies, not achieving solid results for a wider social change. The failure in the development of a united theory and in the creation of a shared environment for common struggles “has brought along weakness when it comes to getting results, despite all the great efforts” (Dirik, Levi Strauss, Taussig, Wilson 2016: 67). Thus, the concept of Jineology steps forward as an alternative paradigm to tackle these issues. The aim of Jineology is to highlight the local experiences of women, with their specific characteristics and multiple dimensions. If we analyse waves such as postcolonial feminism, black feminism, Kurdish feminism, Islamic feminism, we can recognize common multiple dimensions between them, but at the same time, we cannot reduce them to only one aspect of their struggle. Also, Jineology wishes to exalt the heterogeneity of the different waves. Nonetheless, the Kurdish Female Movement recognizes that feminism addressed fundamental gender issues, influencing in a positive way the Middle Eastern woman, and women belonging to different cultures. Jineology steps forward as a theory, a program to pursue mechanisms of action in order to implement social freedom and equality.



In conclusion, Jineology's general intent is to access a new kind of knowledge, from the women's perspective: this leads to a re-interpretation of all the acquired information in history, culture, and religion. It is believed that the deconstruction of "femininity" as a social, pre-constructed identity is possible only with the development of a social process that goes against the stateliest, colonial and patriarchal forces. The reconstruction process – that is to say, building new social structures to fight the repression of women – is now ongoing in Rojava and in other communities in Europe. The Kurdish Female Movement is trying to mobilize in order to reach concrete results, both through theoretical discussions and debates as well as actual lived experiences and practices.

#### “YEKÎNEYÊN PARASTINA JIN”: WOMEN'S PROTECTION UNITS

The events which led to the necessity of an organized resistance in Rojava are undoubtedly the massacres perpetrated by ISIL in Kobane and Sinjar in 2014. The resistance that developed afterwards has since then created new imaginaries and frames for the women living in the region, due to the central role that they played in it. Since the Kobane defence that took place in September 2014, Kurdish female fighters became a symbol. Indeed, many women in the ranks of the defence forces fought and are still fighting against ISIL and its allies. Embodying a new model of the woman in the Middle East, the international enthusiasm for YPG and YPJ militias has arisen since then. Nevertheless, when the YPJ forces began to be known in the West, they had already been waging an armed resistance against the radical Islamic militias for over a year.

At the beginning of the 2010's, women belonging to the YJA-Star (the PKK women's army) began to train women in Rojava, providing them with skills concerning the military sector and offering their decades of experience in this field (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga 2016: 106-108). This included both practical and theoretical trainings on how to handle weapons,

along with discussions regarding self-defence. This process led more women to join the training. With the beginning of the revolution in 2012, thousands of women joined the fight. The militarization of women became, in the struggle for national liberation, a necessity to preserve the identity and existence of the Kurdish movement. Since women fighters were considered essential both to the defence of Rojava and to the struggle for women's liberation, autonomous women's units were created in early 2013. The YPJ militia was founded on the 4th of April 2013: all women that were previously in the YPG's mixed units became part of the all-female militia. With the establishment of women's forces, YPJ centres and women's defence academies were built in every district.

One of the basic principles of YPJ is the legitimate self-defence: all military activity is reactive in nature. Öcalan theorized what he calls the "Theory of the Rose": he states that in nature, living organisms such as roses with thorns develop their systems of self-defence not with the aim to attack, but to protect life, to protect itself from threats (Çiçek 2015, January 13). This principle is enshrined in article 15 of the Social Charter: "The People's Protection Units act in accordance with the recognized inherent right of self-defence"<sup>5</sup>. It is not meant as a way to destroy the enemy: rather, it is meant as a reaction to an external threat. Also, it is a tool to protect the society, the ideology and the ideas that are rooted in Rojava. Within the YPJ and YPG the task of defence has two main goals: from the military perspective, to protect the achievements of the Democratic Autonomy; from the political and ideological perspective, to educate people in the ideas of democratic autonomy and to spread its ideals.

In Rojava, a Women's Military Academy is present in each one of the three Cantons. The first one was founded in the Jazire Canton, after the creation of the YPJ. Those who want to join the militia receive a comprehensive training and education in both theoretical (history, politics, sociology) and practical fields (weaponry). The most commonly used method is the non-formal education process, in which each fighter shares her knowledge, teaching one another and learning in a collaborative manner, with the aim to foster their collective con-

sciousness. Furthermore, in each of the larger cities, the YPG and the YPJ have a centre. The purposes of the centres are several: first, they collect the acceptance of those who want to enlist and join the militias; second, they are the connection between YPG/YPJ fighters and their families, acting as interlocutors (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga 2016: 119-120).

There are mandatory eligibility criteria required for joining the fight; only limited acceptance is permitted to: underage volunteers; only child; a person belonging to a family that has suffered the loss of several members in the battlefield; a person with health problems. Generally, mothers are also not allowed to enlist; and they will accept underage girls only when they are victims of domestic violence or want to escape a forced marriage. These last categories however, can only actively participate in the daily life of the militia but cannot fight in the battlefield until they are eighteen.

Concerning this topic, in June 2014 the YPG and YPJ forces signed the Geneva Call's Deed of Commitment to protect civilians from both anti-personnel mines and sexual violence in armed conflict. Geneva Call's delegation also raised the issue of child recruitment:

Despite earlier measures to prohibit the recruitment of children under 18, we admit that the problem persists, we are aware of the international concern about this issue, and we are making every effort to find a permanent solution, in collaboration with all stakeholders, and particularly with Geneva Call. We have decided to record all under-18 combatants in our ranks and to demobilize them (Statement by YPG Deputy General Commander Redur Xelil).

The YPG-YPJ also agreed to no longer admit new recruits under eighteen and to sign the Geneva Call's Deed of Commitment protecting children in armed conflict. However, a delegation of the Geneva Call led by Pascal Bongard visited Rojava and notified that the implementation of the law concerning the recruitment of people underage was still not completely realized.

Given the above, this essay aims to deepen the understanding of YPJ's mission within the broader revolution. Murat Bay, a reporter for Sendika.org, talked with some YPJ

fighters about their struggle not only against ISIL but also against patriarchy, feudalism and the capitalist system. Comrade Heval Aryan explained how the war they are fighting is predominantly a war against the dominant system: they believe Daesh is the outcome of the male dominant system. If women cannot be free, the society and men cannot be free either. Therefore, the main task of the YPJ is not only to fight physically, but rather to recreate society, overcoming the feudal understanding of gender relations in the area. YPJ combatants represent the antithesis of the commonly perceived model of women in Middle East, as they are pivotal actors in the construction of a new way of being woman: “We re-conceptualize freedom from being an abstract notion and we materialize it. Freedom has no limits. When we reach our target, we want even more. In other words, change is always present in this process” (Bay 2016: 61).

Militarizing themselves, women joined the process of destruction of the dominant logic that permeates the area, shattering the societal habits that had been constructed following that logic and transcending the traditional understanding of femininity and masculinity. Thus, their struggle aims at the liberation of women as an active method. This does not mean that in Rojava a feminist, totally equal society has been established, but that the women’s liberation agenda in the region is truly revolutionary. In the city centre of Qamislo, a banner declares: “we will defeat the attacks of ISIS by guaranteeing the freedom of women in the Middle East” (Dirik, Levi Strauss, Taussig, Wilson 2016: 66).

## LIMITS AND POTENTIALITIES OF THE YPJ’S ACTION IN ROJAVA

Midia Mahmud, an independent researcher and legal activist, states that “these organizations [the organizations administering and defending Rojava] have failed to create any women’s movements. [...] To keep up with any kind of work needs steady funding, a thing no organization gets unless it’s affiliated with a political bloc”. Mahmud considers the politi-

cization of civil society and women's organizations as the main weakness of this process: "No women's organization should be affiliated with a political party. One must not use women's conditions in society for political or ideological [ends]". Also, she addresses the question concerning human rights: "those who violate human rights can't respect women's rights. Those who don't believe in diversity can't take into account any organization that doesn't ideologically follow suit" (Sheikh 2017, April 22) referring to the Democratic Union Party's (PYD) violations in Kurdish areas<sup>6</sup>.

Although the YPJ militia is autonomous and claims to be untied to political parties and organizations, the fact of the matter is that the Kurdish Women's Movement is actually affiliated to a party. The ideology driving the YPJ female fighters and the female movement is unquestionably tied to the PKK policy. More precisely, both the Kurdish Female Movement and the militias refer to the ideological leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan. The interconnection which stands between the Rojava experiment, its policy, its administration, and the organization of its society – including the role that women play in it – is inevitably ingrained and related to a political party, namely both the PKK and the PYD. Furthermore, from a theoretical point of view, the system of Democratic Autonomy is based on collective consensus, it is flexible, open to different political factions, multi-cultural and anti-monopolistic. Contemporarily, the whole ideology was formulated and developed by one man, which members of the Kurdish Liberation Movement consider their ideological – and almost spiritual – leader: Abdullah Öcalan. This could represent both a limit in the success of the project and, prospectively, a contradiction within its inner structure.

Focusing on the concept of Jineology is certainly an ambitious and envisioning project, necessary to tackle gender issues. Identifying this "cognitive revolution" as the women science, giving it a name, is an important step forward in the acquisition of gender equality. Jineology is a revolutionary concept and from the sources accessed for this paper, it is actually being implemented in the Rojava Region: introducing a change in an area where women have been historically op-

pressed and discriminated. The internal organizational structure, the implementation of quotas, the principle of co-presidency, the women's houses and committees are positive signals of an actual implementation and practice of Jineology. Sure enough, it is providing women with autonomous structures and organizations where they can develop and strengthen this science themselves. Furthermore, several laws affirming their rights have been approved. Female emancipation in a conservative society such as the one in Northern Syria has substantial consequences on socioeconomic dynamics. Nevertheless, the main question is if Jineology will succeed in its purposes within a temporal continuity, being self-reliant and self-sufficient to sustain and support the pursued principles in a long-lasting period and in a wider territory.

PYD and YPG took advantage, in the last six years, of the political and military changes in the region to reinforce and stabilize their power, but the persistence of Rojava (and thus, of the entire system that followed) throughout a long-lasting period is questioned by several factors: firstly, the controversial legitimacy of the PYD; secondly, its contentious relationship with the PKK and, ultimately, the tense relations with Turkey, Iraqi Kurds and the Assad Regime. In addition, the PYD has established political and military relations with both the US and Russia, but at the same time, those international alliances could prove to be ephemeral once the political and national-security interests of the US are guaranteed. Indeed, the US have supported the Kurdish campaign equipping the YPG and YPJ against ISIL but did not – until now – show any political effort to help the PYD access to peace talks (Federici 2017: 99-108).

Although these potential internal and external potential limits are present, it is necessary to highlight the fundamental role that the YPJ fighters play in the liberation fight: their will to take up arms influences the debates concerning militarism, nationalism, and feminism. The Kurdish Liberation Movement claims to be different from other movements for two reasons. On the one hand, it pursues the temporal continuity, meaning that the women of Rojava will not be relegated to the previous private and domestic sphere once the war will be



over; on the other hand, it argues that women participating in the revolution are not combating a male war, they are instead fighting their own war untied from the common-perceived masculinization of the military field. Women pursue this objective by building autonomous ranks and building in a practical way, the principle of gender equality, with the means described above. They use violence as an instrument of legitimate self-defense, useful to seek their goal within a determined context and time, as an inevitable reaction to a threat; indeed, the fight itself is only part of the wider process to reach their territorial, political, and social freedom. The above analysis concerning Kurdish female fighters will be useful to address the representation that emerged through the analysis of Western fascination with the Rojava revolution.

#### WESTERN MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF YPJ FIGHTERS

The analysis of the Western depiction of Kurdish female fighters took into consideration newspapers published in Italy, the United Kingdom and the US: this method was pursued because of language limits; therefore, in this essay, the “Western depiction” is referred specifically to the three nations mentioned above. For these reasons, it is necessary to underline that this research has been carried out within the limits and the applicable measures suitable to conduct a specific but not comprehensive analysis of the Western fascination with Kurdish female fighters. That being stated, 85 articles have been analyzed: a) thirty articles from eight Italian newspapers: *Il Corriere della Sera*; *La Repubblica*; *Quotidiano.net*; *La Stampa*; *Il Messaggero*; *Il Giornale*; *Il Fatto Quotidiano*; *Il Mattino*; b) twenty-two articles from ten American newspapers: *The New York Post*; *Marie Claire*<sup>7</sup>; *Daily News*; *The Washington Post*; *USA Today*; *New York Times*; *CNN*; *The Huffington Post*; *The Mercury News*; *Houston Chronicle*; c) thirty-three articles from six British newspapers: *BBC News*; *The Telegraph*; *The Independent*; *The Guardian*; *Daily Mail*; *International Business Times*.

Preference was accorded to articles and news items published from July 2014 to June 2017. This particular time frame was chosen based on the spreading of YPJ narratives in Western countries. In fact, most of the newspapers considered began publishing news concerning Kurdish female fighters in October 2014: the media attention raised after the Sinjar occupation by ISIL and, above all, after the liberation of Kobane by the YPG and YPJ militias in January 2015.

The analysis of news items has been carried out through Analysis of Textual Data, more precisely with the software Iramuteq. It is a software for data and textual mining; it can perform different types of text analysis and visualization on large text corpora. For reasons relating to language, the texts in Italian and English were analysed separately. The analysis of the graphics elaborated through Iramuteq evaluated the articles in English, then the texts in Italian. Furthermore, the similarities and discrepancies resulting from the comparison between the two groups will be evaluated. This will lead to an overall interpretation of the Western depiction of Kurdish female fighters and the related misrepresentation and prospective gender stereotypes deriving from it.

### *English-speaking media*

In the corpus of texts each news item is the sub-text correlated with each newspaper. The first graph displays the similarity analysis. The word similarity analysis (Flament 1962; Flament 1981; Marchand, Ratinaud 2012) interprets the relationships between words and identifies the co-occurrences (pair of terms) within the fragments of texts. Pavone and Russo (2017) explain the mode of operation of the software as follows:

Through the Iramuteq software, it is possible to perform this analysis based on an algorithm that measures how many times words are two-by-two “next” in the fragments of texts. As a result, a co-occurrence matrix is obtained, whose generic term contains the number of co- occurrences between each pair of words. A graph analysis of this matrix produces some synthesis of the relationships

between the lexical units considered. [...] To each semantic sub-network is associated a colour. The vertices' size is proportional to the word's frequency and the edges' width indicate the word's co-occurrence strength (Pavone, Russo 2017: 11).

The most used words in English-speaking newspapers are “woman” and “Kurdish”. Terms which are interconnected with “woman” branch off towards others, displaying the relationship with other topics and subjects; therefore, it creates a network of words which is a graphical representation of the content published by the newspapers.

The analysis in fig. 2 is called “Analysis of Correspondence”. The diagram illustrates how the lexical content of the corpus is distributed in different clusters – represented with different colours, displaying how they are interrelated between one another. In the upper frames, clusters are strictly linked with one another: they represent a heterogeneous group of lexical contexts. Nonetheless, the lexical group in pink deals with the private and family sphere of the woman (“mother”, “daughter” etc.) and is independent and separated from other clusters. This means that the topic concerning that specific cluster is homogeneous, it is a specific subject mostly unrelated to the others. It is interesting to notice the specular position of cluster 6 (in pink) and 7 (dark blue). The former refers, again, to the private sphere of the female fighter, depicted as mother, sister, and daughter; the latter refers to the political role of women in Rojava, democracy and gender equality. They are represented in opposite and specular frames in the graphic: this illustrates how the different contexts are completely disparate and unrelated between one another.

### *English-speaking media*

The Analysis of Textual Data is based on method developed by Reinert (1983, 1990, 1995).

Reinert's method [...] takes the need to combine quantity and quality into account by using valid and effective tools to follow pathways that refer to the modern lexical-textual approach [...]. The main



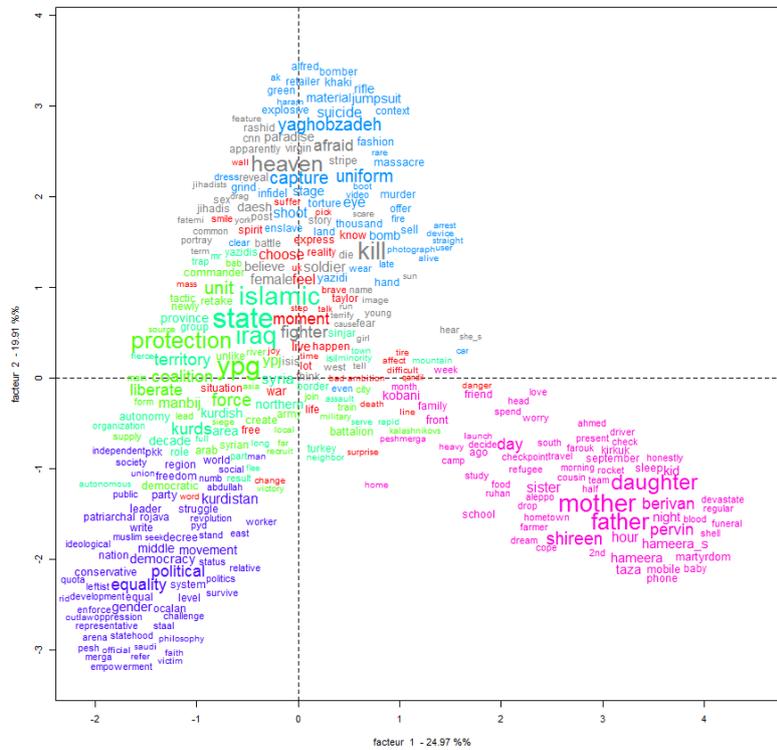


Fig. 2. Analysis of Correspondence. The diagram illustrates how the lexical content of the corpus of text is distributed and related between different clusters.

The Analysis of Correspondence (CA) not only displays the occurrences and co-occurrences of words in the articles, but also comprehends their relationship in the whole context. The graph resulting from the analysis of Italian-speaking media (fig. 3) shows how the topic of YPJ was addressed referring mostly to single figures which perished in the battlefield. First, the cluster in pink refers to Ayse Deniz Karacagil, a female combatant whose nickname was “Red Scarf” – “cappuccino rosso”; she was imprisoned after she took part in the Gezi Park demonstration in Istanbul in 2013, accused of militancy in a terrorist group (the PKK), and then sentenced to one

hundred and three years in prison. When on probation, she escaped from Turkey and joined the YPJ militia. Her story represents a cluster homogeneous in and of itself. Secondly, the cluster in yellow refers to another YPJ combatant: Rehana, or “The Angel of Kobane”. The news of her death in the battlefield (presumably beheaded by a jihadist) was notified by many Italian newspapers. On the other hand, it is notable how the other clusters are heterogeneous.

Conclusively, English-speaking newspapers outlined a more comprehensive depiction of the overall context to which YPJ combatants belong. The UK and US representations are more heterogeneous than the Italian one, as it takes into account the structure and the organization of the militias of the YPG and YPJ; furthermore, it reports in a significant manner the theme of gender equality. However, this specific subject is not preponderant in Italian newspapers. The issue concerning gender roles in Rojava is barely mentioned, as equality is not acknowledged as frequently as in English-speaking media. However, Italian newspapers focus on single figures, depictions of specific female fighters as Rehana and Ayse.

That being stated, in both English-speaking and Italian media there is dearth of references to the ideological and political context of Rojava, which is the fundamental root-cause of the development of the YPJ’s fight. Even if in English-speaking media a clear depiction of the democratic acceptance of the political organization in Rojava is present, “Democratic Confederalism” as a form of government is mentioned only once, by the Washington Post, in the article *What are the Kurdish Women units fighting for in Syria* by A. A. Holmes (2015, December 23).

The overall depiction is thus not entirely comprehensive and exhaustive: the socio-political analysis and above all, the ideological one, is often not addressed in a proper manner. Indeed, the Kurdish women’s resistance against ISIS is depicted for the most part as a military fight, not taking into account the women’s political and ideological motivations, their ideals and broader goals.



which the women are fighting against ISIL is in fact on the terrorist list of many Western countries (Dirik 2015, April 20).

Dirik points out the fact that the ideology to which female fighters belong is connected to Öcalan, the ideological leader of the PKK, which is considered a terrorist group by Turkey, the European Union, and the US. When reporting about the YPG and the YPJ, we noticed how in Western newspapers little attention is given to the link between the militias, the government of Rojava and Öcalan – and therefore the PKK.

Furthermore, the general misrepresentation could be also a consequence of the broader Western portrayal of Middle Eastern women, often ingrained with judgments which lead to gender stereotypes of females in that specific geographical context. Conversely, in the narrative taken into consideration in this essay, many journals describe female fighters giving the audience a depiction which challenges the common understanding of Middle Eastern women. Women fighters represent a kind of novel reality, a surprising and unexpected subject for the audience. This narrative in some cases led to an oversimplification in the description of the issue, not considering the reasons and wishes of the overall Kurdish women's movement. Indeed, apart from the practical and physical fight against ISIL, women in Rojava are leading a political, social and ideological revolution which has extensive implications, going beyond the mere military struggle.

Consequently, Dirik asserts that the Western press depicted distorted and simplistic representations of Kurdish female fighters, therefore depriving public opinion of a full understanding of the women's ideologies and principles. These depictions often divert the attention from the actual sacrifices, losses, and ambitions of Kurdish female fighters by focusing only on the mere military fight (Hoffman 2015, July 8). As Alvina Hoffman stated, "by defending and liberating their people, these women are defending and liberating themselves" (Hoffman 2016). In presenting a simplistic image of the combatants, the Western press is thus depriving the public opinion of a comprehensive and complete understanding of the background context to which the fighters belong, and this de-

prives the audience of a comprehensive representation of Kurdish female fighters. Indeed, the struggle which is being pursued in Rojava is far more nuanced, heterogeneous and complex; it is fundamental to highlight the fact that women have a significant, active and influential role in the subversion of socio-political categorizations.

To integrate this analysis, a written interview submitted to Meral Çiçek is reported below. When asked to give her opinion about the consistency or, otherwise, inaccuracy of the Western press, she argues:

I think it really depends. Media and journalists are influenced ideologically, politically, socially and culturally by the system they are living in. In this sense the capitalist modernist system in the West with its deep-rooted ideology of liberalism and the middle-class perspective clearly affects the people. Look at the current situation: The German government banned the flags of YPG and YPJ and Britain detains its citizens that fight IS in Rojava. So, there are still a lot of criminalization politics against the Kurds. Sometimes there is pure unknowingness like the German Spiegel that named a Kurdish YPJ fighter in Raqqa yesterday [June 29, 2017] “member of a female Peshmerga unit”<sup>8</sup>. They should know that there are no Peshmerga fighters in Rojava and that the female Peshmerga units established by the KDP [Kurdistan Democratic Party] in Iraqi Kurdistan do not participate in fights. This might be also ignorance. In general, I think that although the depiction of YPJ fighters in Western media often needs critique and is problematical at the end there have been very good reports, too. I would not call the depiction in general distortion of reality although there have been cases like this also (M. Çiçek, personal communication, June 30, 2017).

Conclusively, it can be stated that the Western press represented Kurdish female fighters in a heterogeneous way, focusing on different aspects of the subject matter and different points of view, depending on the country, the newspaper and the time-frame in which the different articles were published. Notwithstanding, the general depiction of YPJ combatants in the media lacks a complete and comprehensive explanation of the overall aspiration and significance of the struggle itself. The liberation from oppression and patriarchy for all the women living in that context is, for YPJ combatants, a pro-

cess: it is not just an aim, a goal to be reached with the armed fight; instead, it is a real method for women to be raised, educated and liberated in an active, progressive and positive manner. Female fighters are not just soldiers, they are the contemporary protagonists in the construction of a different and democratic Middle East, in a region surrounded by terrorist groups, neo-colonial powers, and local patriarchal authorities. Therefore, they play a leading role in shaping and combating two fundamental battles: on the one hand, they defend their territory and their people with the military fight; on the other hand, they are the subject of a broader and innovative process, in laying the foundations for the construction of a different order. Citing Meral Çiçek “They are not roses or angels or Amazons. They are women; struggling women” (Çiçek, 2015, June 8-11. In *Upholding Gendered Peace at a Time of War: Academics and Activists Speak Out on the Shifting Places of Women in the Arab World*, Beirut Conference).

## CONCLUSION

The drafting of this paper has been accompanied, throughout the overall investigation, by some major research questions. Aware of the potential limits of the analysis, it drafted a profile of Kurdish female fighters from a socio-political and ideological point of view, outlining the main aims entailed in their struggle in Rojava. Furthermore, the analysis evaluated how British, American, and Italian media portrayed YPJ combatants, in order to better comprehend both how the press interpreted the subject and if that representation is reliable and credible – or if it gives rise to misrepresentations.

The Western fascination with YPJ combatants touches upon several key factors. On the one hand, female fighters represent an atypical and previously unexplored subject, in other words, a captivating novelty for the audience. On the other hand, this narrative often results in a discontinuous depiction of the subject, overshadowing some aspects in favor of other, more suitable, features.

There are several reasons for this inner contradiction. First, the complexity of the geopolitical context to which the YPJ belongs. As a matter of fact, Kurdistan – as a mosaic of cultures, societies, political views and aims – represents probably the most intricate geopolitical framework in the Middle East. Its inner heterogeneity can actually lead to a simplistic portrayal of both Kurdish female fighters and their military and political position. Indeed, a complete and comprehensive depiction of this subject should imply also a clear overall view of Kurdistan, recognizing its fundamental role in the region. Also, interstate equilibria, international relations, and political agreements affect the media, influencing the way the subject is tackled.

The battle for the claim of the Kurdish identity fits into the process of redefinition of the concept of identity itself, through the bilateral processes of localization and globalization. The YPG and YPJ forces fight in Rojava not only to defeat a common enemy to the Western world but also to claim their identity according to an innovative, participatory and inclusive system - the so-called Democratic Confederalism. This new type of identity claim opens up new communication horizons under various aspects: gender equality, democracy, the nation-state, war, and politics. Furthermore, the war on terrorism is one of the great global challenges of our time, and the local dimension of this battle in the Middle Eastern context can be a peculiar key to interpreting the concept of war, gender equality, and popular identity.

In drawing the conclusions for this paper, another major question arises. Indeed, the subject addressed is nowadays in continuous development. The path of the analysis pursued displays the general media success of Kurdish female fighters between 2014 and 2017: they reached a major media peak in Autumn 2014. The Western fascination with female soldiers has, since then, moderately slowed down: nowadays we – as the western audience – read sporadic news about the female militia. By contrast, it is necessary to bear in mind that YPJ's social, political, ideological and military struggle is actually ongoing.

It is fundamental not to forget that these women are still on the front, combating a multifaceted war. It is necessary to recall the fact that Daesh's offensive is a war against women, too: the violations and femicides practiced by Daesh are not discretionary, as they follow a specific ideology of patriarchy and sexism, oppression and domination. In these circumstances, women are not perceived as human beings with rights and freedoms, but as objects to be raped and enslaved. In order to fully understand the struggle of Kurdish Women against ISIL, it is crucial to bear in mind: the ongoing fight in Rojava is a clash between two opposite ideologies, two prospects, two worldviews, opposing one another, colliding in the same geographical area. The outlook of YPJ's action is to break down the feudal and patriarchal mind-set that underlies and determines Daesh itself.

The challenge now is not to forget this open-ended clash. Similarly, the analysis pursued in drafting this paper cannot be considered fully complete until Kurdish female fighters' battle is over.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* (PKK). The PKK's ideology was originally a fusion of revolutionary socialism and Kurdish nationalism which was intended to be used as the foundation of an independent, Marxist-Leninist state known as Kurdistan. The PKK fought an armed struggle against the Turkish state for cultural and political rights and self-determination for the Kurds in Turkey.

<sup>2</sup> Thereinafter, refers also to as ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) or ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria).

<sup>3</sup> At the time of the drafting of this essay, Afrin is under the control of Turkish forces, that entered in the city on the 19th of March 2018.

<sup>4</sup> The principle of 40 per cent gender balance is enshrined in article 87 of the Social Charter: "All governing bodies, institutions and committees shall be made up of at least forty percent (40 per cent) of either sex". Gender quotas are also enshrined in article 47: "[...] The Legislative Assembly must be composed of at least forty per cent (40 per cent) of either sex according to the electoral laws. [...]" and article 65: "All institutions of the Judicial Council must be composed of at least forty per cent (40 per cent) of either sex".

<sup>5</sup> Article 15 of the Social Charter of Rojava: "The People's Protection Units (YPG) is the sole military force of the three Cantons, with the mandate to protect and defend the security of the Autonomous Regions and its peoples, against both internal and external threats. The People's Protection Units act in accordance with the recognized inherent right to self-defence. Power of command in respect of the People's



Protection Units is vested in the Body of Defence through its Central Command. Its relation to the armed forces of the central Government shall be defined by the Legislative Assembly in a special law. The Asayish forces are charged with civil policing functions in the Autonomous Regions”.

<sup>6</sup> The PYD (Democratic Union Party) is the main affiliate of the PKK in Syria, and purportedly supports the Democratic Confederalism of its parent organisation. On June 19th, 2014 Human Rights Watch released the report “Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves of Syria,” which documents arbitrary arrests of the PYD’s political opponents, abuse in detention, and unsolved abductions and murders. It also documents the use of children in the PYD’s police force and armed wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG). The full-text version of the report (which includes the response of the PYD) is available at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria>.

<sup>7</sup> One news item published by Marie Claire has been taken into consideration as part of the corpus of texts in English (composed by 55 articles in total). Marie Claire is not a political daily: the choice to insert that specific article in the analysis is due to the fact that it is considered as the starting point from which the Western attention on YPJ arose, as Marie Claire has been one of the first journals to write about the topic.

<sup>8</sup> The Peshmerga unit is the military force of the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan. Peshmerga also refers, historically speaking, to the armed forces fighting for the independence of Kurdistan from Iraq and Iran. Peshmerga also have a female unit, but they are not present in Rojava nor in Syrian Kurdistan, as they do not participate in the fight for the autonomy of Rojava.

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