



**YPJ** IS BREAKING THE RELIGIOUS  
SHACKLES IN MIDDLE EAST

For you, who believes in the impossible. For you, who is ready to stand up and start a revolution of their own.

### About the Author

Tajzan Sharif was born in Bashur, Southern Kurdistan, but she grew up in Finland. She has always been interested in her roots even though she did not have the chance to grow up in her hometown, Kirkuk. Thus, she has dedicated her studies into researching Kurdish matters.

Currently, she is a MA graduate from Tallinn University. She did her MA in International Relations with a major of International Security and Conflict Studies. This research is her MA Thesis and it was first published in Tallinn University's Academic Library's repository.

This research is her second research that is focusing on Kurdish matters. Her first research "Importing Educational Services from Finland to Kurdistan" was an analyze of two very different educational systems and how the two education systems could be transferred into something completely new by integrating the Kurdish educational system with the Finnish educational system.

### Author's Acknowledgments

When in 2016 I started my studies at Tallinn University, I already knew that I would dedicate my MA thesis to Kurdish matters. However, I was not sure what will I write. At first, I thought I would continue my BA thesis and carry on my research on how to rely on local human resource in the next 10-20 years by enhancing the educational system in Southern Kurdistan, Hawlér. During my studies, the media was constantly talking about these "badass female fighters" and I was wondering how is it possible that these Kurdish women are free to pick up a gun and enter the battlefield alongside men in the middle of the Islamic World. This was the moment when I decided that I would research the YPJ and the reasons behind the rise of female fighters.

Toward the end, I relied on many people to help pull this research together. First, I would like to thank my Mom, Dad and Siblings for always supporting me with my studies and pushing me to aim high. I don't think I could have finished this research without the guidance and help of my Aunt, Awaz Majeed . Special thanks to my dear friend, Ada Davis-Nouri , who stayed up with me until 2 AM to figure out the outline of my research and making sure that my language was intact. Last but not least, I need to thank my Professor, Matthew Crandall , for the incredible support and believe in me.

### Preface

"I believe capitalism enslaves women. In capitalism men dominates while women are underdogs. The main problem is that women accept this oppressive system." (Desine Combatant, Eleftheria, 2014, 10:57).

As a Kurd, as a woman, and as a human - this paper is close to my heart. It is not because I am trying to prove to the world that they are doing us

wrong, in fact, I am trying to present the opposite. I want to explain in detail how women - especially in the Middle East - are willingly accepting their situation as it is; yet it takes one woman to stand up and say, "Enough is enough". We are as human as any man in our society, and we can also protect our freedom and home. Unfortunately, it does not matter where in the world we are, women are quite often considered to be second-class citizens. Consequently, the reason I am writing this thesis is personal. I, as a researcher, want to share the story of Kurdish women with the world and most importantly prove to the West that the Middle East was not always, what it is today.

Due to the amount of information around us, today people do not really choose what they want to know and remember. The media pictures our thoughts for us. Often, we look for negativity due to our survival mode (Burak, 2014); thus, when we see and hear violence through the news, social media and radio, we create our own thoughts of other people around us. Hence, how can the West know about the struggle of the Kurdish women if all they see is women fighting against ISIS and, thus, sexualized in the midst of the battlefield? I personally want to draw attention to the reasons behind the creation of the YPJ (The Women's Protection Units) and why these women are willing to lose their lives for freedom. This fight is not only about destroying ISIS into pieces, rather, it is a fight for equal rights, freedom, and a society that accept women for who they are: as capable as men.

In my opinion, to the West, Kurdish women are oppressed because they are Muslims and live in an Islamic society. This could not be further from the truth. Let me start to explain why.

## Abstract

The focus of this research paper is to examine reasons behind the rise of female fighters in Rojava (The Democratic Federation of Northern Syria). The Kurdish female fighters are in the YPJ (Women's Protection Units) militia as an all-female unit and they cooperate with the YPG (The People's Protection Units) militia as a mixed gender force. In 2012, YPJ was created to fight against the Syrian regime and protect its land and people. During the few years, since its creation, YPJ militia has become famous for being a unique military unit that is fiercely fighting against ISIS. This gave the world a chance to know these extraordinary women who even ISIS fears.

Behind every narrative, there is an untold truth, and this is what the research in hand aims to reveal. There are several reasons behind the increase of the Kurdish female fighters. These reasons range from a common enemy to the desire to change the society in which these women live. The YPJ is a great example of a group with a feminist ideology whose dedication and purpose is to fight against the Islamic belief that women cannot participate in either politics or combat.

The Kurds are the largest ethnic group in the world that is without an official state. Throughout history, the Kurds have been oppressed by colonizing states today know as Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. It was not enough that the Kurds were denied their rights as humans, but they were "the wrong kind of people", which led to Arabization and Islamization. The

author will not take a specific time frame but rather analyze the phenomenon from a point of view where Islam is the cultural colonizer. This research explains in detail how decolonization is appearing in a semi-autonomous region called Rojava. The case example of the research is an all-female unit called YPJ. The YPJ unit itself is revolutionary, but the unit alone does not explain the reasons behind the rise of female warriors in combat. Behind the revolutionary phenomenon is a man called Abdullah Öcalan and his thoughts of a better world for all women in the world. The keyword for this revolution is Democratic Confederalism.

Keywords: YPJ, YPG, Female Fighters, Islamization, Arabization, Colonization, De-Islamization, De-Colonization, Democratic Confederalism, Abdullah Öcalan, Feminism, Middle East, Kurdistan, Kurds, Rojava and Indigenous Culture .

Abbreviation and Key Terms

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### Introduction

“I am now a free woman, brave and able to defend myself and my people. I fight for the enslaved women, help their liberation from oppression.”  
(Desine Combatant, Eleftheria, 2014, 10:48).

This thesis will discuss Kurdistan, Kurds and, in particular the Kurds in Syria and their fight against the Syrian Regime and ISIS. In addition, this thesis discusses the will of the Kurdish society that are fighting to free their society in the 21th century. The Kurds are widely known as the biggest nation without a state and the fight against ISIS has brought positive attention to the Kurds, especially to the female fighters. The most interesting point for the whole world is how the Kurdish men and women are fighting together against ISIS without a hint of a gender issue. This is especially of note considering the fact that these women are living in an Islamic society and surrounded by other Islamic states. Generally, the West would say, female fighters in the Middle East are a rare phenomenon to see or know of. This is the reason why this rare phenomenon is so interesting not just for the West but actually, for the whole world.

The focus of the thesis will be the female fighters in the YPJ forces and their increased participation in the battlefield. The reason why the author chose to focus only on the Kurdish female fighters in the YPJ ranks is due to the scope of the research paper. If the author had chosen to consider all female fighters in Kurdistan, it would have made the research scope wider. Thus, limiting to one female fighter unit was a better decision for this research. For background information, the author will first introduce the scope of the research theory and methodology. The author has chosen Postcolonial Feminism to explain the phenomenon and to link history with current events happening in Rojava. Due to the limited scope of this research paper, the author had to separate the data collection into primary and secondary sources that are available. The primary sources are information that come directly from women in the YPJ forces. The secondary sources will be from books, articles, interviews, and other forms of information that will support the research by providing a clearer understanding of the topic and the above-mentioned phenomenon. In order for the reader to understand the topic of the research in depth, the author must first draw an outline that provides enough information for the reader so that understanding this phenomenon will be easier.

After the theory and methodology chapter, the discussion of the research will continue to the background of the Kurds as a nation. The Kurdish historical, cultural and religious aspects will be introduced in order to prove that there are other reasons for the creation of the YPJ than just the will of the women to protect their own land and people. The next phase of this

paper will take the reader toward the Kurdish military forces in Rojava. The all-female military force has an ideology that is based on the same ideology as the PKK's (The Kurdistan Workers' Party) ideology. The Kurdish leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan (Apo), is quite important for the YPJ because Apo is the one who is for pro-women rights and the one who basically created Kurdish feminism in Bakur and Rojava. His thoughts and ideologies of women will be introduced at this point.

The last part will put the entire research into a larger perspective considering the Postcolonial Feminist theory and the post-Islamization era among the Kurds in Rojava. The author will complete the paper with conclusions and reasons behind the increase of female fighters in Rojava.

The research question of this paper is as follows: How has the Islamic colonization of Kurdish indigenous culture led to violent Islamic radicalization and thus, the rise of Kurdish female fighters? Since the First World War, Kurds have been oppressed by the colonial powers Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. These colonial powers have stripped Kurds from their human rights and denied their existence by first trying to Arabize their identity and later on Islamize their religion. However, the Islamization and the Arabization started during the Islamic conquests and continued to the Ottoman Empire until today (Csaplar, n.d). Nevertheless, the Kurds have always been rebellious and fought back as hard as they can but even today, the Kurds have not managed to win back what was originally theirs. At first glance, it seems that the Kurds have and will always fight for an independent state but the case in Rojava proves this statement wrong. The Kurds in Rojava are not only trying to have an independent state but actually change the society within. The Kurds in Rojava have realized that what use there is of an independent state if half of its population, the women, have no rights over themselves. In short, this is what the research question above tries to examine in depth.

The main argument of this paper is as follows: Kurdish cultural identity is based around Zoroastrianism, which is a religion that is highly focused on women rights and equality. Since the colonization of Islam (Islamization), Kurds have struggled with their identity and the recent violence of ISIS reminds the Kurds of their history and true indigenous culture. Therefore, the Kurdish female fighters in Syria are fighting the Islamic World and going back to their indigenous culture by showing what it means to be truly Kurdish.

There are several reasons why this research paper is important. First, there is not any previous research regarding this phenomenon, especially from a point of view of Postcolonial Feminism in the Islamic framework. Second, it is important to find out how Islamization has affected cultures that were forcefully turned to Muslim and how the effect is displaying today. Third, the phenomenon of Kurdish women in the battlefield is known globally but not many has questioned the reasons behind it and how it is even possible that such a phenomenon exists in an Islamic society where women are not seen as equal to men. Thus, this research will often answer to questions such as: 1) Who are the Kurdish female fighters in Rojava? 2) How can Kurdish women fight alongside men in an Islamic society? 3) How is it possible that Kurdish women are free to decide what they want to do?

The research paper's goal is to compile concise and valid information on an otherwise unexplored topic, which will cover the full scope of the issue being explored at hand.

## I. Theory and Methodology

This chapter focuses on the theory and methodology part of the research. The aim of this chapter is to provide the reader an outlook for the thesis as a whole. In the beginning, the author will explain thoroughly the reasons behind the chosen theory, sampling, and the constraints of the research. Once the practical outline of the research has been discussed, the author will present her chosen theory (Postcolonial Feminism) and the most influential scholars who are vitally linked to this research. The theory is a necessity for the research because it draws a framework for the thesis, which then allows the case study to be implemented into the theory and, thus, conclude the research.

### 1.1 Value of Theory

In order to understand the research as a whole, one must consider the fact that the research focuses almost solely on Kurdish female fighters in Rojava. The reason for this is because the Kurdish matter as one is too large to research in one research paper, thus, the author chose to limit to Kurdish female fighters in Rojava. For many, the history and culture of the Kurdish people are not familiar. Even Kurds themselves are lacking knowledge in their own history and culture. The reason for this is due to the contradictable history of the Kurds; throughout history Kurds have been colonized and stripped of from their identity and this has led the colonizers to destroy the history of Kurds and every piece of proof that would give the Kurdish people to know about their indigenous identity (Shorash, 2015). Despite some Western writers and recent published books, there is no written literature produced by a Kurdish author that could academically approved confirm the history of Kurds. It is fortunate that, recently published books present some ideas about who and what are the Kurds, and from this, the author has drawn conclusions and chosen Postcolonial Feminism theory.

The following reasons explain why Postcolonial Feminism theory was chosen to help the author solve the research question.

The most important reason that Postcolonial Feminism theory was chosen is because the Kurds have been under colonizers, not in the modern sense, but as Islamic colonizers. As common knowledge might suggest, Kurds are not originally Muslims. Geopolitically, Kurds are surrounded by Islamic nations and thus, have been excellent targets to be Islamized. This has led to violence between Kurds and Arabs. Today, nearly every Kurd is either a Muslim or in name a Muslim. The Kurds perceive themselves as “the right kind of Muslim”, and the Kurds who are actually following Islam are strong believers of Allah and the teachings of Quran. Still, the interesting part is that Kurds are pagans in the eyes of other Muslims. Other Muslims see Kurds as pagans due to the non-radical application of Islam in their daily lives and, also due to the historical background of Kurds. The original religion of Kurds, Zoroastrianism, is seen as devil-worshipping by the Muslims (Jalabi, 2014) and this has led Muslims in the Arab nations to also believe that Kurds are devil-worshippers, even though Islam is the most prominent religion among Kurds. Kurds, even today, follow their original culture such as celebrating N wroz (Persian new year), wear traditional clothes, play traditional instruments and dance in traditional dances during celebrations. This most probably explains why the Kurds have been Islamized in the first place and why the Kurds are still not accepted as a fellow Muslim in the Islamic World. The colonizers have not been able to fully Arabize or Islamize the Kurds throughout history. With this, the author can conclude that the Postcolonial Feminism helps to create an outline why Kurdish women are different from other Muslim women in the Middle East. For clarification, the author has chosen scholars that focus mostly or mainly on women in the Middle East, thus leaving out Western Postcolonial Feminism scholars. This will assure the research to be precise and theoretically correct.

The second reason why the Postcolonial Feminism theory was chosen has to do with the Kurdish Female fighters’, the YPJ, ideology. These Kurdish women are willing to die for their rights as women and have a firm belief in freeing women in their society. The women in the YPJ is fighting alongside male soldiers, thereby showing the Islamic World and the West that Kurdish women are different from their fellow Muslim women in other Muslim states. This leads to the reason why Kurdish women are different from other Muslim women and, to some extent, the Postcolonial Feminism can answer the question from a theoretical perspective.

The third reason why the Postcolonial Feminism theory was chosen is because this theory is a pattern for the Kurds to reclaim what was previously theirs. The Kurdish women are a great example for this theory, as the Kurds have had enough and they are saying “no” to other Muslims in the Islamic World. They are letting other Muslims know that they do not get to determine what is appropriate for women. Postcolonial Feminism is, though not limited to, the best theory to explain the reasons behind the rise of Kurdish female fighters in the combat and, thus, confirm the research’s argument. There is not a single theory that can thoroughly explain this phenomenon, but the closest theory that can is the Postcolonial Feminism theory. This theory will also help explain how the exploitations and imperialism in the past have influenced the Kurds today.



The reader needs to keep in mind that the author is not using the Postcolonial Feminism theory in the traditional sense. As previously mentioned, the author is not actually blaming the West as the colonial power and thus as an oppressed “enemy” but rather using the theory to explain how other colonial powers in the Middle East today known as Turkey and Syria have oppressed the Kurds with the power of Islam. Due to the scope of this research, the theory needs to be exact and focused on answering the research question as precisely as possible.

## 1.2 Sampling

The scope of this research has been limited to the Kurds in Rojava. Thus, the sampling part of this thesis is highly important. The thesis uses purposive sampling in order to give the author the possibility to choose and collect data that are notably important for the sake of the research. The reason why the author is using purpose sampling is because the phenomenon that is researched in this research paper is new in the field. Purposive sampling gives the author the possibility to choose reliable Kurdish sources that will help the author to answer the research question. In addition, the author has merit due to the fact that she is Kurdish and part of the community she is researching about. Thus, the author can provide information that can be used to conclude the research.

The primary sources are articles, news, social media posts and YouTube videos that are published by the YPJ Press Office. The YPJ has its own official press office and their goal is to provide as much information as possible to the outside world. Most posts, especially YouTube videos, are in Kurdish but the videos that the author is referencing in this research has English subtitles. This has given the author the possibility to crosscheck if the translation has been correct since the author speaks Kurdish fluently. Also, books that are written by Abdullah Öcalan will be considered as primary sources since YPJ follows Öcalan’s teachings by heart. This means that, analyzing Öcalan’s thoughts on women is highly crucial in order to understand what women in the YPJ ranks want to accomplish in the long run. Analyzing the primary sources is critical in order to prove that the information YPJ offers is not to stir propaganda, but instead to share their ideology with the rest of the world.

The secondary sources will be articles, journals, news, and books that discuss Syria, the Kurds in Syria, the Revolution in Rojava, Zoroastrianism and the history of the Kurds. For an example, the author uses in multiple occasions “The Kurdish Project” as a reference. The Kurdish Project is a great example of a reliable independent Kurdish source that provides information on the Kurds in English and they have many articles that cover the history of Kurds to recent developments in the Kurdish matter. In addition to this, the author is using direct quotes of Kurds in diaspora that are researching the Kurdish matter. One of these researchers is Dilar Dirik. The secondary sources will neither directly answer the research question nor confirm the argument of this thesis, but will help the author by completing the research framework with necessary information. All of the data must be carefully analyzed since there is no previous research done on the same topic.

Both the primary and the secondary sources have been mostly from Kurdish sources even though also Western sources has been used in this research. The author chose to use Kurdish sources in order to get relevant information that was needed in order to understand the phenomenon. Western sources could not, in depth, answer the research question because there is no previous research done related to this phenomenon. Due to the researchers' language skills, she was able to recognize which Kurdish sources are reliable and which sources are not. Some of the Kurdish sources that were available were only in Kurdish, but the author chose not to use them in this research, since it will be more reliable if the reader is able to read the source in English. Instead, the author searched for Kurdish sources that are either completely in English, translated into English or the source has English subtitles.

### 1.3 Constraints

There are certain constraints that may or may not effect this research's validity. These constraints are mostly due to the limited number of reliable sources that would easily answer the research question at first glance and thus, confirm the author's argument. As mentioned previously, the Kurdish matter is quite new as a researched subject, which in turn makes any research about Kurdish issues difficult. There is plenty of information available, but to find valid information is a challenge. It was important for the author to analyze the chosen data with objectivity since subjectivity may change the results of this research; however, the vast amount of information on the Kurds may also be an advantage. Surely, it makes the research more difficult since there is a lot more work when analyzing the data, but the author has the choice to choose the best sources with the most credibility. One of the risks that needs to be mentioned in order to provide a reliable research result is how the West has sexualized the Kurdish female fighters in combat. Some sources might believe that these Kurdish female fighters are just propaganda. It is the author's obligation to prove that this is not propaganda, but actually a phenomenon that may in the future be the hope we all seek in the Middle East: a truly democratic society in the midst of the Islamic World where women are not men's property but equal in every aspect.

### 1.4 Understanding Postcolonial Feminism Theory

The feminist movement is an approach by women across the globe to advocate for women's rights, eliminating any form of discrimination on the basis of gender; however, it is important to understand that the experiences of women in the Third World during the colonial period were quite different from the experiences of their counterparts in the Western World. Western feminism was founded on the virtue of sisterhood, where women were urged to support one another and reaffirm their position in society. On the other hand, women in the Third World had witnessed utter discrimination and other harrowing experiences as a result of their cultures and religion. The women were viewed as second-class human beings whose role was to be seen, but not heard. In these societies, women were treated as objects, as a form of property. (Lewis & Mills, 2003). Their roles were restricted to their homes. They were to take care of domestic duties and childbearing. The

proponents of Postcolonial Feminism were determined to improve the social standing of women in their communities. This form of feminism was therefore a response to the inadequacies of mainstream Western feminism. As stated above, the experiences affecting women in the Western World versus those of the Third World women were quite different mainly due to backward cultural and religious practices and beliefs. It is important to highlight some of these differences in circumstances for both groups to have a better understanding of the effect of colonization and the need of Postcolonial Feminism. In European nations and in the Americas, women were fighting for equality in aspects such as equal education and employment opportunities, issues of gender pay gap and objectification of women through pornography. On the other hand, women in other parts of the world such as the Africa and the Arab world in the Middle East were dealing with issues related to their total exclusion in their communities, though this was not the case in every corner of the Middle East. For example, Kurdish women, although also perceived as oppressed by the West and as women excluded from their communities, this in fact is not the case. These issues will be discussed at length in this chapter.

With the research shifting its direction on Postcolonial Feminism in the Middle East, the focus is directed to the plight of women in these countries. A woman's place in the Muslim world had for a long time been disregarded by society. The conservatism practices in Islam had put men at the apex of society and all the privileges were left for men. Women were viewed as inferior to their male counterparts, and they were relegated to domestic activities where they were expected to take care of their homes and the young children. In the modern postcolonial age, while the women are considered to be more educated, empowered and enlightened, they continue to be the more oppressed gender. Feminism has for a long time considered the trials and tribulations of the Western woman, forgetting that the Third World communities completely fail to include women in the community. Postcolonial Feminism, especially in the Middle East and in the world of Islam, has been studied by different scholars, including Chandra Mohanty, Lily Ling, and Anna Agathangelou, and others.

Literature on Postcolonial Feminism

Postcolonial Feminism differs from the mainstream Western feminism in that it renounces the concept of making the experiences of all women across the globe failing to take into consideration the differences in nationalities, ethnic backgrounds, and social backgrounds. According to Chandra Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes* (1988), the Western feminists tend to consider women from the Middle East Islam societies as a composite and unit group of individuals who are victims of their societies being in the control of males. The nuances of Western feminists are also misled by the notion that the traditional culture of these communities has created a lack of inclusion for the women in these societies; however, this is different from the information perpetuated by Postcolonial Feminism, which goes the extra mile to consider both the cultural and historical contexts of the Third World communities. (Mohanty, 1988). The effect of this has generally been a difference between the described situations by these two forms of feminism, since Western feminism is seen to be the norm against which the Third World communities are evaluated.

Western feminism paints a deceptive picture of women in the Third World communities just like Mohanty explained in her book *Under Western Eyes* (1988). Mohanty clearly disagrees with several Western feminism authors and contributors in this research. The effect of this has been a universal categorization of women, considering the relationships that they have with the Western culture. Mohanty argues that it is unfair to brand women who are from a different ethnic background as uneducated, poor, victimized and bound by their tradition simply because their cultures are different from the Western culture, which has been universalized. The Western culture has been used as the global benchmark in a world that is extremely diverse.

The concept of critical theory reinforces the supremacy of the white culture and its beliefs in other parts of the world that have different histories and cultures that are different from that of the Western culture. John Hobson's *Is Critical Theory Always for the White West and for Western Imperialism* also echoes the sentiments of Chandra Mohanty through an analysis of the role of women in society and the relationships between feminism in the Third World, the critical theory, and psychology. Hobson points out that it is possible that the Western concept of feminism has been forced down the throats of many Islamic women living in the Middle East, without considering that the women have to live the lives they lead because their concept of life, as well as their religion and culture, are better understood by them. (Hobson, 2001). This means that Hobson promotes Postcolonial Feminism by expressing that women from Middle East communities are fine as they are and that they do not need to be saved through the concept of Western feminism, but instead through Postcolonial Feminism because it factors in their traditions and cultures.

The author, Hobson, encourages readers to move away from the critical International Relations theory that encourages Westphalia tendencies by accepting that different parts of the world have different traditions and cultures that are far from the Western traditions and beliefs. He points out that the notion of Eurocentrism, which celebrates all things that are aligned to the Western culture, brainwashes people and even brings about neo-colonialism, because what is not aligned with the Western culture is

condemned. In understanding the role of culture and traditions in other parts of the world whose cultures are not necessarily aligned to that of Western world, Hobson highlights that the political reconciliation between the West and the non-Western cultured Third World communities can be effected. The reconciliation would mean that, for instance, women from the Middle East communities will not be seen as poor, uneducated and victimized according to Mohanty. This is because people will understand that many factors like culture, tradition, and religion, contribute to the lifestyles led by the women from non-Western cultures.

It is therefore safe to imagine that there lies a great diversity in the experiences of women from different parts of the world and cultures. Another author, Gayatri Spivak, also echoes the sentiments of Chandra Mohanty in *Feminism and Critical Theory* and calls for deconstruction of the universalization of the mainstream concepts of feminism. Both of the authors delve deeper to analyze the colonial pasts and explore the racial identities of the world's most renowned feminists. (Spivak, 2008). The conditions, specifically for women in Third World economy countries like the Islamic Middle East nations, are extremely different from those in the Western world, revealing a difference of perspectives that cannot be applied universally for all women. Understanding the differences between the perspectives of women from cultures that are well aligned with the Western culture and those that greatly differ from this culture, according to Spivak is the first step toward understanding the differences between identity, race, and feminism.

Spivak uses concepts like the nurturing nature of women in comparison to the nature of men to emphasize that women tend to put their interests after those of the men and the children in many communities such as the Middle East. She also highlights that some cultures have allowed woman to be considered as a possession of man, which also brings out the need to understand historical and cultural aspects between the Middle Eastern communities and the Western communities. Spivak challenges the power of the male gender in society by questioning the role of the man in different societies to explain that there is a big difference in the perspectives of the communities, and this should be the case with Postcolonial Feminism.

Postcolonial Feminism also demystifies how the ethnic backgrounds, social class and even gender issues in communities whose cultures are not aligned with the Western culture have been used to form misleading perspectives of Third World societies. This is clearly explained in Lily Ling's *Postcolonial International Relations*, which echoes Hobson's sentiments by highlighting how the International Relations theory can be used to analyze how oppressive beliefs and powers hidden in Eurocentrism and Western imperialism have been used to negatively paint other cultures and traditions. In this process, Ling is able to demystify how the social institutions in such communities are framed without considering any nuances from Eurocentrism and white imperialism. This, in turn, enlightens the reader not to implement a colonial approach to the societies whose cultures are far from those that follow Eurocentrism and white imperialism. This is because Ling is able to clearly highlight the role of culture, traditions, and beliefs on the sexual identities and the power relations of

women from these communities, thus shedding light on the perceived oppressions. (Ling, 2002). As has been mentioned earlier, the weakness of Western feminism is also clearly pointed out in this literature, as having the tendency to homogenize and universalize women's experiences across different parts of the globe without consideration of the historical struggles and differences and inequalities in the social backgrounds of different communities.

Lily Ling also highlights the effects of Western feminism on communities that have not embraced Western culture, claiming that it has enhanced more struggles in the neoliberal economy of the world. In so doing, Western feminism has disadvantaged women in some cultures that are not Eurocentric as it has continued to promote specific forms of resistive knowledge, which in turn deny women wealth and sometimes even power in these communities. Ling clearly highlights that an understanding of the social factors such as the culture, class, sexuality, ethnic backgrounds, and even gender promote social interactions that could bring forth power and wealth to those who are considered oppressed in their culture. This means that Postcolonial Feminism International Relations theories have been utilized in Ling's work to establish the role of power and its organization in societies such as these, to establish that power and oppression in such communities continue to coexist, shift, and renegotiate, to include all members of the society.

Western feminism fails in many ways because it does not consider the culture and traditions of the Middle East communities. According to Stephanie Sanches, in her article *Disempowering Feminism in the Middle East*, the effect of this has been an alienation of women from the Islam communities of the Middle East, instead of saving them as is the goal of Western Feminism. This is because the campaigns that have been used by other feminist communities to fight for the rights of the Islamic women fail to consider what the Islam communities stand for, and thus instead of helping them, these Western feminist campaigns tend to alienate them even further. (Sanches, 2014). Sanches uses a very good example of the Femen group of feminists from Ukraine who use topless protests to fight for the rights of Islamic Women from the Middle East. Without considering the culture and history of women from the Middle East, the extreme method used by the Femen group alienates the Islam communities even further from the truth and the Western notions of feminism. The communities of women from the Middle East indeed have voices of their own that can be used to fight for their own rights, but they are unable to fight for these rights themselves because the rest of the world has made it their business to protest for them and see them as an oppressed lot that needs someone to save them. Instead, the effect left by these Western feminists tends to drown the efforts of those that require the help, alienating them further from trying to rescue them from the oppressive patriarchy of the communities in which they live.

The impact of Western feminism has also been felt on the ground by these women who come from such communities, because it has had an effect on geopolitical factors as well as power and wealth distribution in these communities. Anna Agathangelou and Heather Turcotte (2010) in

Postcolonial Theories as Critique and Challenge to First World-ism highlight that a critic of feminisms in the postcolonial era has greatly impacted insights into power relations that have contributed to hegemony and violence. The frameworks of feminist International Relations have been said to be a result of the contributions of the differences between the people, lands, customs and even the perspectives or knowledge of these people. For instance, in the Middle East communities, women have been said to be oppressed by the countries following a different form of feminism common in the First World countries whose culture is synonymous to the Western culture. In the real sense, however it is only because of the difference in the geopolitical aspects mentioned above that the culture, traditions, and religions of the Middle East communities that these women appear to live in oppression. This opens a discussion for the authors, Agathangelou and Turcotte, to analyze the differences between feminisms especially for the First World countries, and how this concept creates differences in the perspectives of feminism across the globe. Agathangelou and Turcotte point out that feminism greatly draws on the historical perspectives of different communities and mainly incorporates the role of social relations and aspects of power shifts into geopolitics of different communities. (Agathangelou & Turcotte, 2010). Agathangelou and Turcotte also established that International Relations theories can be applied into an analysis of the concepts of feminism to critique presumptions of feminism in different cultures, while at the same time relying on the people's knowledge and material wealth to determine and maintain different structures of power.

According to Agathangelou and Turcotte, a better understanding of the social problems that ail different communities across the globe can be achieved through a theoretical analysis of the geopolitical factors that influence social relations in different parts of the world. This means that an analysis of the social interactions in relation to race, wealth, power, and even the culture and traditions of a person could provide a deeper understanding of the differences in the communities that we study and thus bring our communities even closer to solving the inequalities on a global scale. These communities are contributed to by the social interaction notions of the community, including the aspects of knowledge, culture, wealth and power. Postcolonial feminist International Relations theory allows a keen analysis of geopolitical factors affecting marginalized communities and, thus, the establishment of reasons why a community is the way it is and what can be done to help that community.

Western feminism, thus continues to worsen the wars that have begun in the Middle East for the sake of women's rights, as well as propagate the existing patriarchy in such communities. The rhetoric of feminism, especially its understanding among the communities that are alienated to the Western culture and those that are simply not, continue to be at loggerheads with traditions and cultures of communities that have not embraced the Western culture. As a result, the discourse concerning the rights of women in the Middle East completely leaves them out of the conversation, as the Western feminist forces forget to consider their traditions and their cultures, while they themselves are forced to accept the outcomes of the society in which they live. The voices of those affected can, thus only be heard if their concerns are considered and their issues are addressed at the same time.

## The Plight of Women in Islam in the Middle East

In light of the Postcolonial Feminist theory and the insights that have been collected by the six pieces of literature discussed so far in this research, Western feminism is obviously less accepted and considered in the Middle East, as a result of the geopolitical factors in this part of the world. (Abu-Loghod, 2012). In addition, political Islam continues to take root in the region, where the Western feminism and women's empowerment are considered synonymous to each other, because they promote imperialism of the Western culture. Thanks to Postcolonial Feminist culture, the women in these regions have embraced their own history, technology, and traditional beliefs to progressively fight for the rights of women.

According to Isobel Coleman's book, *Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women are Transforming the Middle East*, the author analyzes many communities of the Middle Eastern Islam to recount on a branch of Postcolonial Feminist theory thrown as Islam feminism. Coleman's book details the courageous stories of several men and women who are utilizing the Islamic religion to create all manner of opportunities for women, ranging from political power, economic capability of societies, and even educational and knowledge based opportunities. The advocacy of those fighting for Islamic feminism entails progressive aspects of the Islamic religion that can be interpreted to bridge power and control conflicts between those who are for women being empowered following the traditions and the religious considerations of such communities. Islamic law which is used in many of these communities, is thus being used in Islamic feminism to create political, social, economic, and even cultural opportunities for women, by granting human rights for all. (Coleman, 2013). While the struggle for Islamic feminism is heavily being opposed by those who are of the idea that the role of women in society is childbearing and nurturing, the champions for Postcolonial Feminism and Islamic feminism continue to promise change for the Islamic communities of the Middle East.

A great example in an Islamic society is the YPJ Army, which is a women's protection unit army in Rojava, composed of an all-female armed brigade of the Kurdish army. The YPJ also teams with the YPG unit as military coalition, which is also a great example of a mixed gender brigade that is rarely seen in the Middle East. The YPJ army with the YPG army has been extremely instrumental in the fight to recover control of a number of towns captured during the war against ISIS. The influence of these women in this war has been magnanimous, as they know they stand to be raped and killed if overpowered by ISIS. For this reason, the female brigade is devoted to fighting against ISIS and to succeed in this battle in order to avoid putting their communities through the agony of being captured by ISIS warriors. (Dirik, 2014). The beliefs on ISIS about being killed by a female warrior also work in favor of the YPJ army, as they know that ISIS fighters strongly fear the dishonor and disgrace of being killed by a female, and also believes this would deny a warrior access to paradise in the afterlife (Dearden, 2015). The YPJ are thus one of the feminist groups in an Islamic society that are bringing all manner of opportunity for Middle East communities, who before the intervention of feminism continued to live in the fear and misery of war.



Since the YPJ has been successful in returning peace and security to a number of towns that were formerly under the control of ISIS militia, the concept of feminism in an Islamic society has proven to be a new chance at social, economic, cultural, and even political opportunities for many people whose lives have changed as a result of adjusted perspectives. However, the acceptance of the culture and traditions of the Islamic community in these areas is the only thing that has made empowering the Middle East communities successful. This is because there exist great differences between the cultures of people, and these cultures determine how the concept of feminism will be accepted in the Middle East so as to bring benefits such as the YPJ to the region.

Feminism refers to a social ideology, which is fundamentally concerned with the view that women and children are the weaker composites of the society and the correction that this view is not correct. In some parts of the world, the ideology is fitted to factor in the differences between the Western culture and the local culture in the Postcolonial Feminist theory. This branch of feminism has become popular considering the concerns and issues raised across the board for all women are not priority issues for other communities due to the differences in the beliefs, traditions and also the different aspects of worldview. The concepts of feminism and Postcolonial Feminism have been adequately represented in this research through a review of the literatures, and the specific case of the plight of women in the Middle East with a focus on the YPJ all-female Kurdish army fighting ISIS in Rojava.

To conclude the Postcolonial Feminism theory chapter, it is highly important to focus on a few matters that have been addressed throughout this chapter. The groundbreaking matter at hand is that in most cases the West has been to blame when it comes to the Postcolonial Feminism theory, however in this research, the colonizer has been Islam and the states today known as Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Throughout the history of Islam, the Middle East has been Islamized, and today most countries in Middle East are predominantly Muslim. Kurdistan and the Kurds were one of the ethnic groups that went through Islamization and, thus, colonized by Islam. YPJ is a great example of how the true culture of a colonized group is relieving itself by stopping the oppressors and taking matters into their own hands. In the following chapters, the Kurds and the YPJ are presented in more depth.

## II. Background

This chapter focuses on necessary background information on Kurdistan, the Kurds, focusing on the Kurds in Syria. For the importance of this research, the history, culture and religion of the Kurds also will be discussed. After introducing Kurds, the author will address the position of women in the Kurdish society. Thus, this chapter is a short introduction to better understanding Kurds. Furthermore, this chapter is crucial for the reader because it will be the backbone of this research by filling the frame of this research paper.

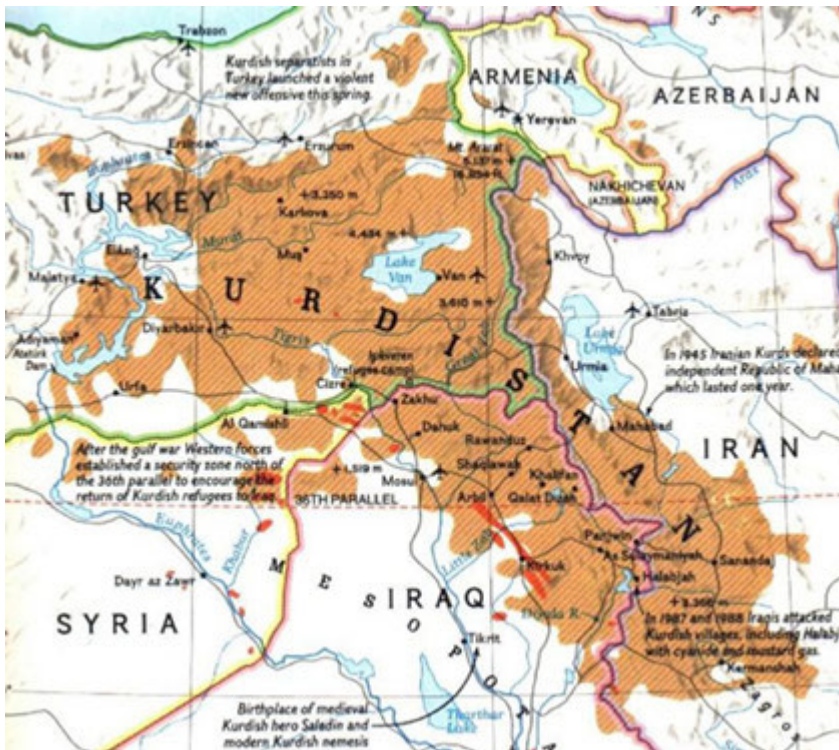
### 2.1 Kurds in Rojava

Being a Kurd in the 21st century is a bliss and at the same time a burden. The reason for this is that for the first time in centuries Kurds will not have

to answer the question “Who are the Kurds?” At the same time, they must constantly worry about their families’ and friends’ safety. Kurds today are obligated to protect their land and, at the same time the rest of the world.

The inconvenient truth is that Kurds have never had a country of their own, except in 1920 when there was an independent Kurdistan for 3 years. In 1923, Kurdistan was divided between the countries known today as Turkey and Iraq. (Countries and their Cultures, 2016). Since that moment Kurds have tried to reach their only goal - having their own state. If we go back a few years, many did not even know the existence of Kurds. Today, nearly the whole world is standing by them.

In today’s map, Kurdistan has spread its borders from Iraq, Turkey, Iran and to Syria. To make it clearer for the reader, below is a map of Kurdistan. There is a debate on how many Kurds there are overall. Some sources say there are 20 million and some say 40 million (Ekurd Daily, 2015). Even though most Kurds live in Turkey there are also many who fled Kurdistan in the 90’s and now are living all around the world (Chandler, 2014).



The Map of Kurdistan. (Oriental Review, 2015).

Since Kurds are not just located in one area, it has led to a differentiation between them. The Kurds who live in Iraq have, comparatively, a much better situation than the Kurds in Turkey or Syria. The reason behind this is that the Kurds have been persecuted in Turkey and they did not even have the right to speak their own language (Kurdish Academy of Language, 2016). The Kurds in Iraq managed to achieve a semi-autonomous region after the fall of Saddam Hussein. This led to a Kurdish President, a Kurdish Parliament and an official army. (Kurdistan Regional Government, 2016).

In Syria, Kurds are the largest ethnic minority and they are located in the northeastern part of Syria, also known as Rojava. Kurds in Syria are fighting both the Syrian government and the Islamic State. The biggest political group in the Kurdish region of Syria is the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PYD has a military wing that includes both People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ). (The Kurdish Project, 2015). The female fighters are fighting in the YPJ ranks, but they cooperate a lot with the YPJ forces.

## 2.2 Culture and Religion from a Historical Point of

### View

In order to understand the Kurdish communities, one must understand their cultural and religious aspects. Kurdistan is both ethnically and religiously a mixed region. The religion of the Kurds is not perceived as simple as the media presents it. Surely, most Kurds are Sunni Muslims, but Kurds are known not to be religious. One of the reasons for this is that Kurds have been oppressed by the colonizing states through Arabization and Islamization since the Islamic conquests. The second reason is that the original religion of Kurds is Zoroastrianism, which in turn makes the Kurds as equals to pagans in the eyes of the Islamic colonizers. (The Kurdish Project, 2015).

"The Iranian world, in which Zarathustra's religion has its roots, is much larger than the modern political borders of Iran. For example, during long periods of its history, Mesopotamia, i.e. present-day Iraq, belonged to Iran. The Kurds in the north-West also speak Iranian languages, and in several respects the Kurdish cultures can be described as 'Iranian'." (Stausberg, 2008, pp. 7).

Kurds have one of the richest cultures, because they share commonalities with many other regional cultures and this has led to a mix of Iraqi, Turkish, Arabic and Persian cultures. A major difficulty for all Kurds has been the fact that practicing their own language and teaching it to others has been forbidden. There were times when a Kurd could not even say that they were Kurdish without being persecuted (The Kurdish Project, 2015). To continue, Kurds have been colonized by today known as Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria throughout the history of Kurds. The Kurdish people in all of the countries mentioned above have gone through persecution, Arabization, Islamization and they have been stripped from all of their rights. Kurds have been struggling for their rights even before the First World War but even before that the Kurds were not able to be who they are, talk in their own language, practice their own religion nor culture. (Mella, 2015, p. 1-17). This sums up to a following fact: generally spoken, the West has been the "source of all evil" when we are discussing colonization and the post-colonization period. However, in the Kurdish case, the colonizers have been other Middle Eastern, neighboring states, that did everything in their power to strip Kurds of their identity and Arabize them to make Kurds like them. The Kurdish movement, also in this research known as the Rojava Revolution, is a movement towards a free world for the Kurds all over the world. The aim of the movement is to teach the Kurds their own culture and especially

language and most especially write down the history of Kurds in order to perceive their identity for future generations.

However, there is a lot of contradiction of the Kurdish identity such as of the indigenous Kurdish culture and religion. While writing this research, the author faced difficulties on finding sources that are serious studies and written objectively. Although, the author was able to make some conclusions. Even though in the eyes of the colonizing states, Kurds were pagans and needed to be Arabized and Islamized in order to be accepted as “one of them”. The Islamic colonizers forgot one thing and that is the Kurdish pride and a sense of nationalism that is pushing the Kurds to express their identity through blood.

“A female Arab teacher was teaching children of a Kurdish village and resides there and had an illiterate Kurdish female neighbor who had a child in her school. She asked the teacher about her son and the teacher answered that he was alright expect in the subject of religion, especially reciting Quran. The woman neighbor said straight away that we do not have anything to do with Quran as we are Kurds and can do without Quran.” (Mellan, 2015, p. 20).

Today, the situation is quite different, especially for the Kurds in Syria. Currently the Kurds in Syria hold a semi-autonomous region, which has led them to have their own official army and the right to practice their own cultural identity. This has given the Rojava governance a chance to show how democratic, egalitarian and secular they are. (Lieber, 2016).

### 2.3 Women’s Position in Rojava

“In order for women to be recognized as agents in society, the whole system needs to be changed.” (Isik, 2016).

Throughout history, the Kurds as a nation and as a society have had the misfortune of being identified as the “enemy” by the surrounding states. This has led the Kurdish society to tribalism in order to survive, and thus strengthen their existence. Sadly, the Kurds did not have a chance for a statehood, which has created a society that is both semi-nomadic and a guerilla life style. In a Kurdish society, the family within the tribal organization is based on matriarchy and freedom. This made the women have a lot of influence on their society, consequently, women were quite free. This also explains the strength and courage of the Kurdish women today. This old historical tradition has deep roots in the Kurdish society. Concluding from this, it is not a coincidence that the Kurds have the best-developed sense of freedom in the Middle East; however, before the Rojava revolution the situation of Kurdish women was pure slavery and they did not have a say in their society. In fact, the situation of women and children was quite appalling because they were denied a proper education, healthcare and the freedom of their own life was out of the question. (Öcalan, 2013, p. 39-41). “Marriage was the only life open to them, and they married young, even becoming the second or third wives much older men.” (Knapp, Flach & Ayboga, 2016, p.62). Kurdish women were seen as property and they were seen as the society's honor, which is contradicting since they were killed if they did not obey society's rules that were set for them (honor-killing). By

analyzing the women's situation, it is quite clear that men treated women like trash due to their lack of masculinity and it was only gained back by treating women poorly, thus, increasing their own power over the women. This made the male population feel masculine. (Öcalan, 2013, p.39-41). The Rojava revolution was not just a fight against the Syrian regime, ISIS or a way for the Kurdish people to get recognized and thereby gain their independence. In fact, the Rojava revolution was a revolution of Kurdish women who had suffered enough of suppression and so they chose to put their lives in their own hands. The Rojava revolution was a wake-up call for the Kurdish women and taught them one thing: the power within is stronger than any suppressed male-dominated society. It might be perhaps the first time in history that women played such a huge role in a revolution. When the social uprising caused the Arab spring, women in these regions were active and they participated equally if not more in the uprisings. Once the regime or government was changed into an Islamist organization that had partial or full political power, women were cut out and their situation become even more hopeless than before. (Knapp, Flach & Ayboga, 2016, p. 61).

However, the situation of Kurdish women in Rojava was quite different. Kurdish women are active in every sector: military, political, healthcare, education, etc. In general Syria is known to be patriarchal and regressive, but the resistance in Rojava has transformed the image of Kurdish women to the world at large and especially in their own society. Today, the Kurdish women are everywhere and part of everything. "The Kurdish women's movement seeks to overcome the alienation of Kurdish women - that is, the colonialist disparagement of their own culture." (Knapp, Flach & Ayboga, 2016, p.63).

This revolution and the Kurdish women's movement wants to ensure that women in their region and all around the world have the power to make decisions on their own and, thus, decrease the patriarchal society that is trying to divide and isolate women from one another.

To conclude, the position of women in Rojava has been like a rollercoaster. One moment the women are in power and live in a matriarchal society and the next moment they are stripped of from their basic rights. These ups and downs can be easily explained from a historical perspective. Culture and religion are two main factors that influence the society in the Middle East and the Kurds are no different. Before Islamization, the Kurds had a matriarchal society, but during and following the Islamization the society changed into a patriarchal one. The time frame that can explain these ups and downs are before the Islamic conquests, thus Islamization, until the fall of the Syrian regime. However, as seen in the situation of Kurdish women in Rojava: a nation cannot be changed by force and expected to obey forever. One day, someone will rise up and cause a stir. Today, the situation of the Kurdish women in Rojava is ideal, but every nation and society needs time on their side in order to plant their ideology deep into their roots.

### III. Kurdish Female Fighters in Rojava

“YPJ like fighting because they know why they are fighting. Women are killed, and we are in the 21st century. Women are sold and bought, women are taken slaves, don’t have any work opportunities. Women are living in inequality with men, despite all these slogans: women’s right, democracy, equality, social justice. If you put yourself in their position, and you experience their life, you will see there are no possibility. Any women in any country, can’t really consider herself free. In any country, which consider themselves as modern and democratic, women are being killed. The society doesn’t need an army to enslave them. The society needs forces which can protect them and their values.” (The High Commander of YPJ, Nesrin Abdullah, YPJ PRESS OFFICE, 2016, 15:18).

For the sake of this research, this is the most important chapter, because this chapter will introduce the Kurdish female fighters in depth. The chapter first introduces the ideology, Democratic confederalism, the reason for the phenomenon and the man behind the ideology, Abdullah Öcalan. The Kurdish female fighters are true followers of Abdullah Öcalan, also known as Apo, and their every action can be explained through Democratic confederalism. The author will first discuss the ideology and then continue with the female fighters. The Kurdish female fighters are fighting in the YPJ (The Women’s Protection Units) army but they cooperate with the YPG ( The People’s Protection Units) army; therefore, it is crucial to introduce both units and their respective roles. Following this, the author will present different possibilities that would explain the rise of the female fighters in Rojava. The author will conclude this chapter with discussion on feminism in the Kurdish female fighters.

### 3.1 Democratic Confederalism by Abdullah Öcalan

“A country can’t be free unless the women are free.”

(Abdullah Öcalan, 2016, p.7)

In the case of Rojava, the revolution started with one person and with one act, which will have a lifelong stain in the history books. This revolution is not just any revolution, but a revolution that will in the long-run shape the Middle East into a society the West can only dream of. Among the Kurds, Abdullah Öcalan is a legend. The reason for this is not only the fact he has fought for the freedom of Kurds and their rights for decades; additionally, this Kurdish leader has created a system that will serve every woman and man in their society.

Democratic Confederalism (Apoism) is a political system that was created by Abdullah Öcalan while he has been in prison. Democratic Confederalism is a libertarian socialist political system that has strong beliefs regarding a multi-cultural, anti-monopolistic, and consensus-oriented democratic system. The central pillars of this political system are feminism and ecology: two very important pillars that are rarely seen in the Middle East. The political system is a bottom-up system, which is created to serve non-states, such as Rojava. The whole idea of this system is to create a platform for all of their citizens and organizations, both religious and political, that offers them a chance to be heard and thus, have a say in all of the decisions that are made. This system gives its people a chance to participate in decision-

making and directly involve themselves in the political process. Democratic Confederationism is also a political system that becomes the strongest when the participation level of the society is high as this automatically gives the society power over their own lives. The ethnicity of each group is represented and for each man, there is a woman. This will assure equal representation of every ethnicity and gender. (Ocalan, 2011, p. 21-23).

Democratic Confederationism is a solid option for non-states such as Rojava. The political system was adopted by the Kurds in Rojava and each city inside that region (Kobane, Afrin and Cizire). (Omrani, 2015). For the purpose of this research paper, this political system was introduced because the YPJ unit are following Apo's ideology and implementing it in their daily routines. When the YPJ women are interviewed, they mention Apo and Democratic Confederationism many times. To these women, Apo is not just a man behind the ideology but the ideology itself. Apo might be the creator of the ideology, but these women are the ones who are implementing his political system and fighting for their people's rights. "The YPJ is fighting not only to defeat Daesh and secure the territory of Rojava, but also to break free from a sexist, patriarchal society that has not adequately protected women for centuries." (Clafin, 2017). With this political system, the YPJ is not only able to empower women but actually free them from a patriarchal system and oppression that has been going on for decades.

In the beginning of 2013, the representatives from three cantons in Rojava (Kobane, Afrin and Cizire) met in Cizire and declared a "Democratic Federation of Rojava - Northern Syria". Since then, Rojava has implemented the Democratic Confederationism into action by following the guidelines that Apo has given. Rojava's base level council system is "The Commune". Usually, in one city there are 30-400 households in the communes. The commune meets every two weeks and they elect a board. The board meets every week but all of the members of the commune are still able to attend the meetings. Gender wise, each post has to be equally represented, which means that each post has one male and female representative. (Anderson & Egret, 2016).

For now, Rojava is implementing Apoism in their daily life and with this political system, the rights of women are taken into account. As mentioned previously, one of the main pillars of Apoism is feminism and since Rojava is implementing Apoism in their daily life, this means the whole society is changing into a society that is no longer a patriarchal. When trying to change a society's mindset, it will not happen unless the society agrees on the changes together. Therefore, when the communes in the cities of Rojava agree upon the political system, they automatically agree to the ideology behind it. Apoism itself is radical and revolutionary, even in the West, but being able to actually implement it in a non-state, such as Rojava, in the Middle East and surrounded by other patriarchal states in the Islamic World, is an extraordinary phenomenon.

"For the Kurdish movement, the main social contradiction lies within the gender relations. This idea is now deeply rooted in the Kurdish movement. If we are to build a stateless society, he (Apo) argues, we must overcome patriarchy." (Knapp, Flach & Ayboga, 2016, p. 43).

Being able to implement Apoism successfully in Rojava is a crucial point for this research. As a political system, Democratic Confederalism is not old. Therefore, the political system itself cannot answer the authors' research question. However, the following sections will help to uncover the truth behind the rise of the female fighters.

When the society has been oppressed for centuries, when the indigenous culture is exposed, when the time is favorable for a revolution – that is when a true change in a society is possible.

### 3.2 The YPJ Forces

The YPG established the YPJ unit in 2012. The YPJ was formed for three reasons: to fight Syrian President Bashir al-Assad, al-Nusra Front and ISIS (Read About This, 2016). Both the YPG and the YPJ have the same democratic ideology (Democratic Confederalism) but the YPJ promotes gender equality and, therefore, is a unit consisting of women. The YPJ is fighting side by side with the YPG. The YPJ is making sure that they have enough women fighters representing the YPJ in the YPG army. Currently 40 % all of the fighters in the YPG ranks are women from the YPJ army. Even though decisions concerning military tactics are made together with the YPG, the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) is still independent. However, the fight against the Syrian Regime and ISIS are fought together with the YPG. (YPJ Rojava, 2016). According to Read About This (2016) there are said to be 7, 000 to 10, 000 women fighters in the YPJ unit.

In an interview, done by the YPJ Press Office, The High Commander of the YPJ, Nesrin Abdullah listed three main goals of the YPJ army.

“The main goals of YPJ are:

Unity of women worldwide

Build a new army culture

Build a free, democratic, ecologic society, which increases the equality among people.” (The High Commander of YPJ, Nesrin Abdullah, YPJ PRESS OFFICE, 2016, 16:18).

The creation of YPJ was not only to fight the existing enemy, but rather to create a revolutionary society that accepts women as part of that society. In a video, published by the YPJ PRESS OFFICE, the High Commander of YPJ, Nesrin Abdullah, points out the main goals of the YPJ unit. Therefore, it can be said that the YPJ unit is not only a revolution in the military world, but in fact a revolution in the Islamic World where despite their ethnic backgrounds, they are building a society that is free and thrives to achieve equality among women and men. The concept of women not being able to do anything without a man needs to be changed and this is what the YPJ is doing. Changing mentality is not a one-day task. Rather it is an idea that needs to be planted in the minds of each woman and man.

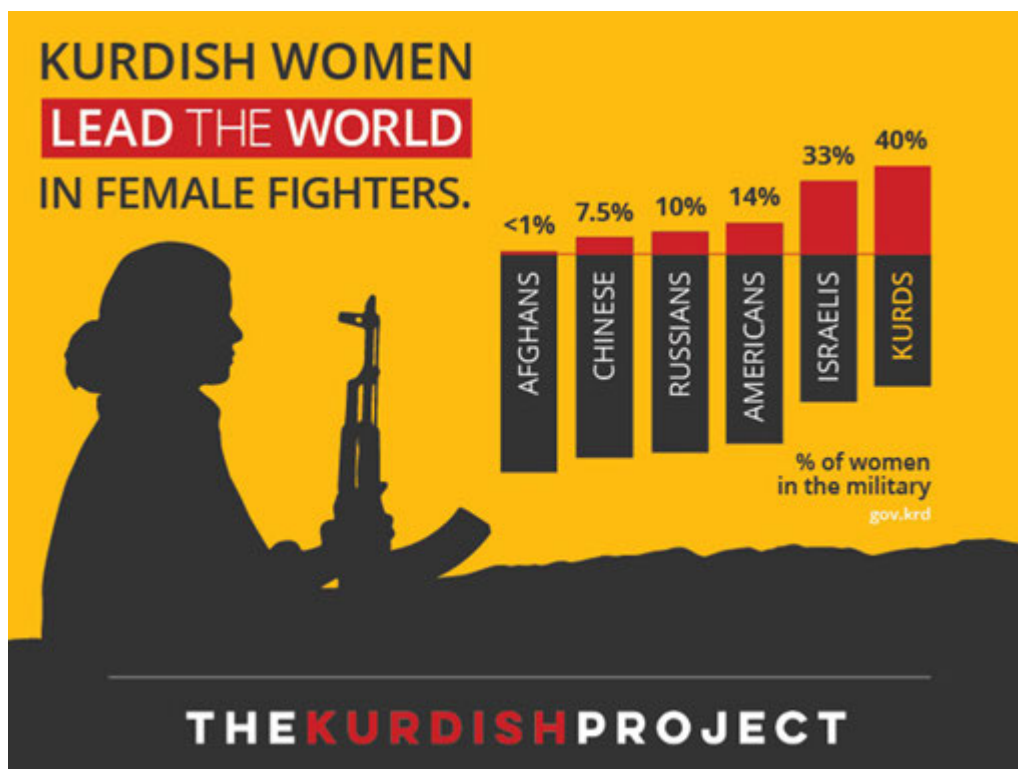
The women who join the YPJ receive full training to survive in combat. They are also taught their culture, language and their rights as women. For the



women in the YPJ ranks, it is crucial to get education because with education the women are able to understand the YPJ's ideology better and, thus, understand what their roles as a woman is in their society. A change in a society can happen only, when the mindset is ready for it.

“This includes training in gender studies and women’s history in addition to military training, and education on gender issues continues even in the battlefield. The emphasis on women’s education stems from the belief that a true women’s revolution has to start with women’s mindsets.” (Melis, 2016).

Before the creation of the YPJ, women were slaves at home. They did not receive any education and their rights were completely neglected. The amount of Arabization and Islamization that the women experienced was so powerful that they were forbidden to even talk in their own language. “The YPJ creates a space for women to challenge internalized feelings of incompetency projected on them by society, away from the scrutiny of men.” (Melis, 2016).

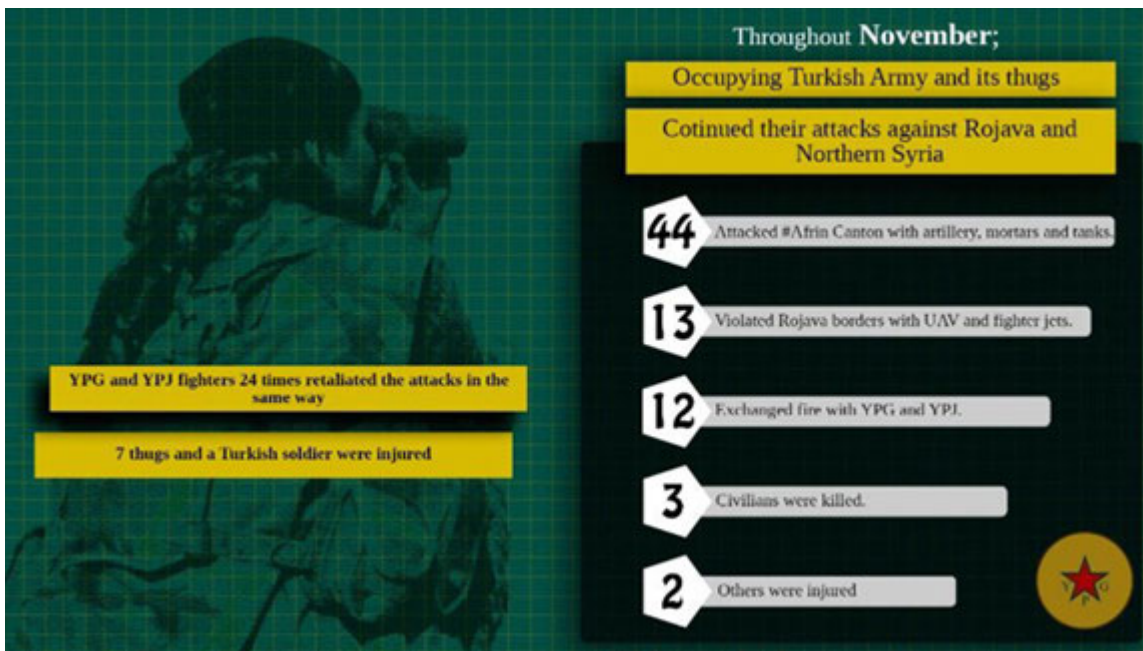


Poll: Are Kurds the Most Effective Fighters Against Daesh? (The Kurdish Project, 2015).

According to the Kurdish Project (2015) Kurdish women lead the world in female fighters (see the picture above): 44% of the Kurdish soldiers are women. If compared to the West e.g. Americans or to Asia e.g. Chinese, Kurdish women are much more active in the military. In contrast, in the Middle East e.g. the Israelis have 33% of their women active in the military, which is only 7 percentage point less than the Kurdish women. However, the crucial difference between these nations and the Kurds are that the Kurds are Muslims and do not have the typical Western mindset where it would be normal in their society to let females to join the military - let alone lead a unit. A great example of this is the chart above that says less than 1 % of the

Afghan soldiers are women. Afghanistan is an Islamic country where 99 % of the population practices Islam (NationFacts, 2017). According to IslamQA (n.d.) “In the army, it will be totally impossible and impractical for you (women) to avoid mixing with the opposite sex, and by doing so you will be violating the teachings of the Holy Quran.” Basically, this would mean that the women who want to join the YPJ would not be against the teaching of the Holy Quran as long as they do not mix with men. However, that is not the case since the YPJ army is cooperating closely with the YPG army (The Syria Institute, 2016), which makes them a mixed group and that is forbidden in the teachings of the Holy Quran.

Since the fall of the Syrian regime, Syria has been in a chaos. The Kurds in Rojava have been fighting against ISIS and the Syrian army since 2011. The Kurds have liberated many Kurdish cities from the hands of ISIS, but the fight has not stopped. Both the YPG and the YPJ are fighting against any enemy that want to attack the Kurdish region, Rojava.



13 days balance sheet of attacks and violations by invading Turkish army against Rojava. (YPG Rojava, 2017).

The most recent information provided by the YPG (2017) states the following: the Turkish army along others have made multiple attacks against Rojava and Northern Syria. The YPG with the YPJ have fought against the invaders and won the battle. This only concludes to one fact, the YPJ army is constantly fighting against different invaders. Even though the YPJ army has been in battle since the creation of the YPJ unit, many important battles have been won. One of these are the liberation of Kobane. In 2014, ISIS attacked Kobane and took over the Kurdish city. For months and months, the YPJ and other Kurdish military units fought to liberate Kobane and the people from ISIS. Finally, in the beginning of 2015, Kobane was liberated. (BBC News, 2015). With the help of the YPJ and the YPG, today, all of the Kurdish cities in Syria have been liberated from ISIS.

In other words, without the creation of the YPJ, the Kurdish women in Syria would still be oppressed and there would not have been any hope for a better tomorrow. Also, the goal of the YPJ women is to involve all the women in the Islamic World and not just their own people. The idea of free women needs to spread; thus, the YPJ needs every woman in the region to participate in order to make a greater impact in the world. The YPJ unit consists not only of Kurdish women, but also Syriac, Arabs and Western women. (Sabio, 2015, p. 52-55). The seed has been planted in the Kurdish society in Rojava and now the idea needs to grow and spread.

### 3.3 Women's Position in the YPG Militia

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Kurds are very diverse and due to their geographical location, also their political ideologies and beliefs are different. However, when it comes to the goal of the Kurdish fighters, they are all fighting for freedom and independence. There are many Kurdish forces all around Kurdistan, but the focus of this research, will be only on the following Kurdish forces: the YPG and the YPJ. The author chose to only focus on the YPJ female fighters in Rojava, because taking into account all militia groups in Kurdistan would make this research too wide. Thus, the author chose to narrow down to one militia. However, the YPG is crucial to examine because the YPJ militia was created by the YPG. Both the YPJ and YPG cooperate in the battlefield.

Each woman in the YPJ is with them by her own free will. All of the women in the YPJ ranks have the responsibility to safeguard national interests, but mostly to keep their own people safe. Women from anywhere in the world, no matter their background, can join the YPJ and all of them will receive the same military training in order to truly to be accepted as one of the YPJ fighters. (YPJ Rojava, 2016).

The YPJ wants to be the leading force for all the women in the world. Thus, they are training and educating all of their fighters in The Defense Academy of Martyr Shilan. In this academy, the fighters will learn their ideology, national consciousness, the art of fighting, war tactics, technical skills, understanding mental democratic freedom and strengthening their own intellectual character as an individual. (YPJ Rojava, 2016).

Women fighters are quite common among Kurdish fighters but not so common among other Muslim countries, since the Islamic World thinks women do not belong in combat. The YPJ is being an example to the rest of the Muslim countries by showing that both men and women are equal. Equality and respect are also seen among the women in the unit. All of the women stay loyal toward each other and they call each other as "Haval", which means "a friend" in Kurdish. (Argentieri, 2014).

Even though the YPJ unit is part of the YPG forces, they still have an equal say in all the tactical plans, and they can make their own independent decisions. Basically, although the YPJ is part of the YPG, at the same time it is a completely different and separate unit. Right now, they have a common enemy and they are fighting against them together as one. (YPJ Rojava, 2016).

The women in the YPG are greatly respected as equal to men because they are known to be fierce and skilled with guns. They have earned even greater respect because ISIS is afraid of them. This already gives the women in the YPG great respect. Many female fighters are snipers and they take down ISIS fighters one by one. (Fifth Estate, 2015).

Thus, to conclude, women fighters in the YPG unit are as equal as any man in the unit. Equality in Rojava is seen in any sector of the society and the army is not an exception (the author will cover this part later). The YPG unit consists of both women and men and in combat they are equally heard and represented. In the Middle East and especially in the Islamic World, this is not common; hence, the YPG unit is equally revolutionary to the YPJ since mixed gender units are a rare phenomenon in the Middle East.

### 3.4 Why Women Join the YPJ Forces

“--women are not congratulated for fighting as women but are respected for fighting in general, are examples of real progress when it comes to the role of women in the world today.” (Read About This, 2016).

Despite who you are and where you are from originally, you are always welcome to join the YPJ forces. This is how the unit defines themselves. What is the reason behind the fact that there are so many women fighters in the YPG (40 % of the fighters are female fighters from the YPJ militia) and, thus, part of the YPJ unit? The first obvious reason is the fact that the Kurdish women have dedicated their lives to protect others in their society. The second obvious fact is that they all share a common ideology: democracy, equality and freedom.

The real question here is, why do so many women leave home and decide to put their lives at stake and go to the battlefield to fight the common enemy? The following reasons below are different possibilities why the Kurdish women in Rojava have increased their participation in combat.

#### The Revolution in Rojava

The revolution in Rojava consists of one thing: Kobane. In the beginning of October 2014, ISIS managed to seize Kobane, one of the Kurdish cities. It took 130 days for YPG/J together with Peshmerga (Kurdish force in Bashur, North Iraq) to win back the city. Kobane is an important city for the Kurds, because in 2012 the Syrian Kurds declared Kobane as part of their autonomous region. (Vox, 2014). During the clashes between ISIS and the female fighters, the YPJ, the world realized that the Kurds might be the strongest weapon against ISIS. These women were not just any fighters; they were women who were representing a gender-free society and actual soldiers who knew how to use ak47 as well as any other male soldier. (Fifth Estate, 2015). Also, ISIS fighters were afraid of Kurdish female warriors, because if they died by the hands of a woman, they would not go to heaven (Malm, 2015).

#### Common enemies

Following the revolution in Rojava, Kurds in Syria have been trapped between two enemies. Firstly, the Syrian regime and secondly ISIS. This has led the Kurds into a difficult situation and their only choice has been to protect their people and the Kurdish territories.

## Ideology

As a military unit, the YPJ is still quite young; however, their ideology and beliefs are not. The women in the YPJ have the same democratic values and beliefs as the YPG. The only difference is that the YPJ is an all-female-unit and therefore also fights for equality of women in the military world. As mentioned previously, the ideology of the YPJ is Apoism, which alone is making space for women in society. Feminism is also one of the biggest drives for all the women fighting alongside the men.

## Equality and Feminism

As previously mentioned, the women in YPJ have equality and feminism as one of their strongest drives. Having a say in tactical moves together with the YPG automatically gives the YPJ soldiers an equal position with the men. According to The Kurdish Project (2015) the YPG soldiers, including the YPJ soldiers, are all treated equally despite their gender, religion or ethnicity. However, this does not mean that the women in the YPJ militia are the first or only female fighters in Kurdistan. The PKK militia has had women in their ranks for more than 30 years, which makes them much developed when it comes to women rights in the Middle East. (BBC News, 2014). As a conclusion, the Kurdish society in Rojava is a society that understands that without the participation of women, their society cannot achieve the rights of all of their people, despite gender or background.

However, the reasons above account for only part of the phenomenal rise of the Kurdish female fighters in Rojava. The reasons behind the rise of the female fighters goes deeper than recent attacks in the Kurdish territories.

“For what use is ‘a Kurdistan’, if it will end up oppressing half of its population? Kurdish women face several layers of oppression as members of a stateless nation in a largely patriarchal feudal-Islamic context, and hence struggle on multiple fronts. While the four different states over which Kurdistan is divided display strong patriarchal characteristics, which oppress all women in their respective populations, Kurdish women are further ethnically discriminated against as Kurds and are usually members of the lowest socioeconomic class.” (Dirik, 2014).

The YPJ fighters have the chance to break the society from within: kill the idea of suppressed women and from there become one of the greatest all-female-unit military forces in the Middle East. This would be incredibly motivating for other Muslim women in the Middle East to join the fight against suppressed societies. This is what the YPJ wants to show the world. Through these key reasons an assumption can be drawn: women join the YPJ unit in order to save their people and at the same time to start a revolution of their own. As commonly known, women in the Islamic World are seen as second-class citizens and, thus, women have not had the opportunities to have a voice of their own about their role in society. With Democratic

Confederalism, the women in Rojava, despite their ethnic background, can participate in every sector of society. The goal of the political system is to allow participation of women in decision making and thereby, free women from a typical mindset where women’s place is child bearing and taking care of their home. With the help of the YPJ, the women can educate themselves and participate in their society as equal to men.

The other aspect that needs to be taken into consideration is to examine who are the women that join the YPJ. As the Western media has shown, the YPJ does not consist only of ethnically pure Kurds, but rather of women from all parts of the world. “About 8,000 women from all over Syria, Iraq, Iran, Turkey and elsewhere have volunteered to join the YPJ, and their numbers continue to grow.” (Bailey & Trieb, 2015). In order to understand these women’s reasoning behind joining the YPJ, the author has created a Fourfold Table “Political and Military aspect (y) vs. Feminism and Gender aspect (x)” to distinguish between four different types of women that join the YPJ force.

<b>“Neither for feminism nor the war”</b>	<b>“Fighting for feminism but not the war”</b>
<b>“Fighting for the war but not feminism”</b>	<b>“Fighting for feminism and the war”</b>

Table 1. Political and Military aspect (y) vs. Feminism and Gender aspect (x).

Y and X as secondary: women that are fighting out of duty

Y secondary and X primary: Western women

Y primary and X secondary: Syrian women or other women from the Islamic World

Y and X primary: Kurdish women

Women who are in the section (a) are the type of women who join the YPJ out of duty. Their primary reason is basically to survive. This type of women can be women who live in the area and have no other choice than to arm themselves in order not to become sex slaves for ISIS.

Women who are in section (b) are the type of women who join the YPJ from the West. They are fighting for women's rights and to stop the oppression of women by the Islamic World and especially ISIS. These women might believe that they are acting as saviors for the other women in the area (White Feminism).

Women who are in the section (c) are the type of women who join the YPJ in order to stop the war and gain peace for their area. Their primary reason is not to fight for women's rights nor share the same ideology as the YPJ, but rather they want to fight in order to save themselves and their families. These women can be identified as the local Syrian women or other women from the Islamic World.

The women in the section (d) are the type of women who are behind the creation of the YPJ and who have created the unit in order to fight against the Syrian regime, ISIS, oppressors, Islamic World and are trying to gain a democratic non-state that is pro-feminism. These women are the Kurdish female fighters from Rojava.

"Instead of taking an orientalist-like fascination in these female fighters, we should acknowledge that Kurdish women have long been fighting for their rights as part of Kurdish nationalist movements. Romanticizing their armed participation against ISIS fails to capture the reality of their struggle. Looking at the state of women's rights in Iran, Iraq or Saudi Arabia, Kurdish communities have distinguished themselves by accepting some form of gender-mainstreaming." (Lamensch, 2016).

As Marie Lamensch (2016) explains, the Kurdish women have not been fighting for their freedom only since the recent chaos in the Middle East. Abdullah Öcalan has talked about the participation of women since the formation of female fighters in the PKK (The Kurdistan Workers' Party) in the 80's. The Kurdish culture is misunderstood throughout the world and seen as one of any other Islamic nation, when in fact the Kurds have been oppressed and colonized by Islam and other states in the Middle East. The Kurdish history is not clear, but what is commonly known is that the Kurds have always fought for their freedom. The original matriarchal society of the Kurds in Rojava is screaming to come out and the Kurdish women are fighting with every stick and stone to have a place in the society, as they did before Islamization.

### 3.5 Feminism in Kurdish Female Fighters

"Feminist research focuses on gender power dynamics and draws on feminist theories of the causes and remedies for patriarchal inequalities." (Spencer-Wood, 2011, p. 3-4).

Spencer-Wood has given us a perfect explanation for what this research is revolving around: inequality in the patriarchal world. The inequality

between men and women in an Islamic society is unbelievably high and this is what the YPJ is fighting to change.

In an Islamic society women are perceived as unequal to men. As an example, women in Iran cannot participate in politics, enroll to courses such as history or even think about participating in combat alongside men. (The Telegraph, 2012). For YPJ, women are as equal as men, and they have sworn to fight for equality. Having a feminist mindset fits their ideology perfectly. Men have a monopoly over almost everything in an Islamic society, but the case is different when it comes to Kurds, since today's Kurdish women has a sense of independence in the family. The YPJ is breaking the common mindset where women in an Islamic society cannot question the patriarchal system with examples of early history in the Islamic period. Family members of the Prophet Muhammad were also active in the public domain (Adamu, 2000). Despite this, women in an Islamic society are still perceived as oppressed and they do not have free will. According to Adamu (2000), what seems quite well said with this research, "But who is to define what is oppressive to Muslim women, the women themselves or some other?". The YPJ fighters have taken the definition into their own hands by creating an official military consisting of women. They are not asking anyone's acceptance or approval.

"As a liberatory framework emerging from the Kurdish movement, Jineology places women at the center of the struggle against patriarchy, capitalism and the state." (Neven & Schäfers, 2017).

In Sasson-Levy's (2003) journal, *Feminism and Military Gender Practices*, a very great point is made about how military integrates and empowers them while maintaining gender inequality shows what the world is truly missing, fighters such as the YPJ, who have their own military unit. This gives them the chance to fight against inequality without having to worry about masculinity and what women cannot do. Comparing the YPJ, an all-women unit, with other military units that have a small percentage of women in combat is difficult, since the other military units do not have the same opportunity in leading as the women in the YPJ unit does. The YPJ unit is a great example of a Postcolonial Feminist fighters that aim to stand up and fight for their rights in a matter that suits them.

Another great example that fascinates the world is a term called "Jineology". Jineology as a term and as a framework has been developed by the Kurdish movement since 2008. In short, Jineology tries to transfer the concept of equality between women and men in to the society (Neven & Schäfers, 2017).

"The term Jineology means 'women's science'. 'Jin' is Kurdish and means 'woman'. Logy is derived from the Greek term 'logos' for knowledge. 'Jin' in turn comes from the Kurdish term 'Jiyan', which means 'life'. In the Indo-European language group and in the Middle East the words Jin, Zin or Zen, all of which mean 'woman', are often synonymous with life and vitality." (Kaya, 2014).

The idea of Jineology is to criticize how all the power has been monopolized to men. Jineology is a theoretical paradigm but it is based on the actual



experiences of Kurdish women who have both faced patriarchal and colonial oppression. With this in mind, Jineology aims to offer an alternative methodology for the social sciences that already exist. In addition, Jineology also criticizes Western feminism for its mainstream way to achieve a social change by limiting the framework of the current order. There is another perspective that do address these issues and it is called Intersectional feminism, but the problem with that theory is that it is not implemented. Thus, Jineology proposes that it offers a method that will explore these questions in a collectivist manner and can be seen as a valid example of the need of Kurdish women all over the world that are thriving for a freer society for them. Even though Jineology discusses feminism a lot, it is crucial to point out that Jineology is not synonym to Kurdish feminism. The reason behind is this that even though Jineology has certain part of feminism in it, but the fact is that the Kurdish society and the Middle East cannot be changed by using feminism. (Neven & Schäfers, 2017).

“The people's uprisings against the colonization of Kurdistan (in Kurdish: ‘Serhildan’), which started after 1989, were led by women. From the viewpoint of Kurdish society, this was the beginning of a national resistance phase with a new women-focused character.” (Kaya, 2014).

#### IV. The Effect of Post Islamization on

##### Kurds in Rojava

This chapter is the last chapter of the research. The focus of this chapter is to finalize and complete the research. This chapter will answer the research question and confirm the authors' following argument “Kurdish cultural identity is based around Zoroastrianism, which is a religion that is highly focused on women rights and equality. Since the colonization of Islam (Islamization), Kurds have struggled with their identity and the recent violence of ISIS reminds the Kurds of their history and true indigenous culture. Therefore, the Kurdish female fighters in Syria are fighting the Islamic World and going back to their indigenous culture by showing what it means to be truly Kurdish.” Along with the confirmation of the argument, the author will explain in depth how the Kurds in Rojava are De-Islamizing their society by going through a De-Colonization process. After this, the author will explain the long-term goals of the Kurdish female fighters and complete this chapter by introducing the reasons behind the rise of the Kurdish female fighters in the YPJ ranks. Overall, this chapter will conclude the research.

##### 4.1 De-Islamizing a Kurdish Society in Rojava

In the Islamic World, religion plays a significant part in their society and especially in politics. One thing the West has in common with the Democratic Confederalism is that they both have separated religion from politics. As seen in the case of Syria, mixing religion with politics causes disastrous effects, and due to this the Kurds alongside with the Syriac people have been oppressed by the Islamic rule in Syria (Sabio, 2015, p. 55). This is not to slam the Islamic religion, but rather to point out how states are oppressing and colonizing each other with the power of religion, especially in the Middle East and in the case of the Kurds. Hence, if the Kurds in Syria

have been oppressed since the Islamic conquests, why did they stand up against the colonizers now and not centuries ago? This question is quite crucial, when trying to understand the goal of the Kurds in Rojava. When reading the mainstream media news, there is a lot of talk about “the badass female fighters” but no one seems to be questioning where did these women come from and what is their agenda. Are these women only trying to defeat ISIS, gain an independent state or what is it that they want? Before answering these questions, we must first look into the history of the Kurds as a colonized nation.

As explained in the previous chapters, the Kurds have never had an actual state in order for its people to have the feeling of sovereignty. Currently, to the colonizers the Kurds are “trespassing and illegally” staying in their land. This alone has led to violent clashes between the Kurds and the colonizers, because neither of them are giving up the land they hold as theirs. Still, the Kurds are in a disadvantageous place because legally they have no right over the lands they call Kurdistan but historically looking, the Kurds have every right to their land as any other would over their home. Hence, the colonizers have had the upper hand and, thus, oppressed the Kurds by denying their existence and not letting the Kurds to be who they are. Instead, the colonizers have tried to make the Kurds as one of them; Arabs and Muslims. Fortunately, the Kurds have never given up to the colonizers but fought every battle. Nevertheless, the Kurds have not been able to seize a piece of land and call it “Kurdistan”. However, considering the case of Rojava, this might change in the near future.

As explained in previous chapters, the Kurds have been oppressed since the Islamic conquests and by nationalities known today as Turks and Arabs. The Kurds have been denied from basic human rights, such as the right for practicing their indigenous cultural rituals and religion. “But the sort of colonialism that occupies the Kurdish people and Kurdistan is the worst and most dangerous kind in its ways for cancelling out the Kurdish personality and identity, and oppression of Kurdish people and humiliating them by drawing false picture depriving them of their name, history and address” (Mella, 2015, p. 139). Since the research focuses on the Kurds in Rojava, there is no need to explain in detail how the Kurds have been oppressed in the other parts of Kurdistan, such as in Turkey. However, the author can conclude by saying that the Kurds, despite which region they live in, has been colonized and stripped of from their rights since the Islamic conquests and more since the First World War.

The revolutionary phenomenon in Rojava is the first step of decolonizing the Kurdish society in that particular area. The Kurds in Rojava are claiming back their existence in the society and erasing all stains of colonization, in this sense Arabization and Islamization. “Decolonization is the ending of colonialism and the liberation of the colonized. This requires the dismantling of the colonial government and its entire social system upon which control & exploitation are based. Decolonization, then, is a revolutionary struggle aimed at transforming the entire social system and re-establishing the sovereignty of tribal peoples.” (Zig-Zag, 2011, p. 20). When considering what the Kurds in Rojava have achieved, Zig-Zag’s definition of Decolonization is exactly what the Kurds have gone through. Since the First

World War until the collapse of the Syrian regime, the Kurds in Syria have been without any rights and they have been treated as second-class citizens. Basically, to the Syrian regime the Kurds have been illegally on their backyard and hence, they should not be treated as the citizens of Syria. When the Syrian regime collapsed, the Civil War started and when ISIS became a threat, the Kurds in Syria got a perfect opportunity to seize the moment and, thus, declare a semi-autonomous region in Rojava, Syria. Today, Rojava is a stateless state and run by the Kurds alongside other ethnicities in the region.

When trying to explore the history of the Kurds, one might find it incredibly difficult since the colonizers have destroyed proves of the Kurdish culture and ethnicity. However, the Kurds have not forgotten who they are and the fight towards Kurdish freedom is a never-ending battle.

“They want to destroy everything that represents Kurds and Kurdistan. To achieve this goal they are using assimilation, physical genocide, prosecution, exile and cultural genocide tools simultaneously. Today they are setting Kurdistan’s nature on fire. Kurds are being thrown in that fire. Our towns are destroyed. Our people are subjected to forced migration and are arrested. Our language, culture and art are banned. All of these has only one aim: to destroy everything about Kurds.” (Bayık, 2017).

Now that the author has elaborated how and why the Kurds have been oppressed, it is time to discuss what the Kurds in Rojava want to achieve in the long-run. Today, the Kurds in Rojava have achieved a semi-autonomous region, but the question at hand is “What is next”?

“The will of the Kurdish women to be free from Islamic-, or any patriarchal values in greater Kurdistan area is not actually anything new. The modern movement for Kurdish women rights activism was sparked to life by now imprisoned Abdullah Öcalan, after being suppressed in Middle-Eastern societies for more than a thousand years. In ancient Middle-Eastern matriarchal civilizations, whom for example practiced Zoroastrianism as their religion, were known for their respect and adoration for the female and the natural ability to literally give life. In Kurdish, the word jin means ‘woman’, but also comes from the root word jivan, meaning ‘life’. Women give life and are to be seen equal, since there is no freedom in society, until there is freedom of women.” (Yasa, 2017).

According to Yasa (2017) the Kurdish society are keen to De-Islamize their society and return to their matriarchal society where women are at the highest appreciation. From this, the author can conclude the following statement: Democratic Confederalism is a political system that resurrects the Kurdish indigenous culture. This statement can be proven by once again going through what Democratic Confederalism stands for the Kurdish people in Rojava. One of the main pillars of Democratic Confederalism is women’s rights and that the Kurdish women are represented in each sector of the Kurdish society in Rojava.

The following question that needs to be asked here is: How does De-Islamization match with Secularism in today’s Rojava? The first thing that can explain De-Islamization and Secularism in Rojava, is their political

system, Democratic Confederalism. According to National Secular Society (2017) Secularism means “The separation of religion and state is the foundation of secularism. It ensures religious groups don't interfere in affairs of state, and the state doesn't interfere in religious affairs”. As explained in previous chapters, Democratic Confederalism separates religion completely from politics. This is not to forbid the existence of religion but not to let religion have any saying in the matter of their society. The Kurds in Rojava have adapted Democratic Confederalism as their political system and, thus, secularized their society. When talking about De-Islamization in Rojava, this does not mean that every Kurd in Rojava is leaving Islam and returning to their indigenous religion, because the fact is that the older generation of women still wear scarfs, follow the teachings of the Holy Quran and use terms like “Al-Hamdulillah” which is Arabic and means “Thanks to God.” A great example of this is a Kurdish mother of an YPJ fighter. In an interview done by Rozh Ahmad in 2014, the Kurdish mother called Manifa was wearing traditional Kurdish dress and at the same time wearing a religious scarf. (Ahmad, 2014, 20:21). This is contradicting to the women in the YPJ ranks because the women in the YPJ are everything against the teachings of women in the Holy Quran. However, this does not prove that the YPJ women are returning to their indigenous religion but rather adapting a revolutionary phase in their life and excluding religion from their life.

The process of De-Islamization in the Kurdish society in Rojava can be compared to a De-Colonization process because as proven in this research, the Islamization has been a tool of the colonizers to colonize the Kurdish people and, thus, erase their indigenous culture. Therefore, the De-Islamization process of the Kurdish society in Rojava has started long before the Revolution in Rojava.

## 4.2 The Goal of Kurdish Female Fighters in the YPJ

### Militia

Therefore, if the YPJ militia is not only fighting to protect their people and land from the Syrian regime and ISIS, what are they truly fighting for. What drives these female fighters to participate in combat? Are the fighters in the YPJ and the YPG trying to gain an independent state and, thus, separating themselves from Syria?

In 2015, Amy Austin Holmes wrote an article “What are the Kurdish Women’s Units fighting for in Syria?” that included a survey. Holmes interviewed 46 Kurdish women in Kobani (a Kurdish city in Rojava). All of the 46 women were in the YPJ militia, they were unmarried and their ages ranked between 18 to 34. The most interesting part of the survey was that 44 out of these 46 women did not want to establish an independent state in Rojava but rather wanted to remain part of Syria. This is contradicting, because the Kurds have been struggling for an independent state since they were colonized. However, the Kurdish movement led by Abdullah Öcalan never actually accepted the European-drawn borders. This then again, leads back to history when Kurdistan was divided between the colonizers. Since then, the Kurds have not accepted to borders that were drawn and, thus, the elimination of Kurdistan.

“Instead of an independent Kurdistan, the movement now aims to establish autonomous structures at the local level based on the principles of ‘Democratic Confederalism’ including a bottom-up democracy, cooperative economy, gender egalitarianism and environmentalism. In short, a stateless democracy.” (Holmes, 2015).

Holmes states that the Kurds in Rojava are not fighting for an independent state but rather protecting the stateless democratic society that they have created. Thus, the YPJ and the YPG are fighting against the Syrian regime and ISIS to protect their land and society from destruction and chaos. The Kurds in Rojava are not looking for a fight with the Syrian regime but rather fighting to keep their semi-autonomous region in Syria.

“Some have surmised that Syrian Kurds have adopted a more pragmatic stance, and reached an agreement with Assad: to fight ISIL in exchange for the measure of autonomy they achieved in 2013. Syrian Kurdish sources, however, insist they are fighting Assad forces, as well as ISIL.” (Goudsouzian & Fatah, 2016). In an article “Why Syria’s Kurds want federalism, and who opposes it?” written by Tanya Goudsouzian and Lara Fatah, the Kurds in Rojava indeed are looking for a stateless society that is legally accepted by the Syrian regime. However, the situation in Syria is so chaotic that the Kurds in Rojava have not been able to peacefully agree that legally such semi-autonomous region exist inside Syria. Thus, the YPJ and the YPG are not only fighting against ISIS (also known as ISIL) but also the Syrian regime to protect the stateless state they have created so far.

To conclude, the goal of the Kurdish female fighters in the YPJ militia is to protect their people and the society they have built. More importantly, the YPJ militia is fighting against the Islamic society that oppresses women and against the patriarchal society that controls the role of women in their own society.

#### 4.3 The Reasons Behind the Rise of the Kurdish

##### Female Fighters (YPJ)

The purpose of this subchapter is to finalize the reason(s) behind the rise of the female fighters (YPJ) in Rojava. The research question of this paper was mentioned in the Introduction chapter and it was as follows: How has the

Islamic colonization of Kurdish indigenous culture led to violent Islamic radicalization and thus, the rise of Kurdish female fighters? So far, the author has discussed several matters to answer the research question and here are some examples: Who are the Kurds in Rojava? What is the background story, history, of the Kurds in Rojava? Why is the Kurdish nation so different from the rest of the Islamic nations? In the end of this subchapter, the author will answer the research question.

Now that the history of the Kurds has been established in this research, the author can make the following conclusions.

Before the Islamic colonization, the Kurds have had a matriarchal society where the role of a woman has been high and after the Islamic colonization, the Kurdish society turned into a strong patriarchal society where women had no place.

The Kurds have been colonized, oppressed and stripped of from their basic rights since the Islamic conquests and later on since the First World War. After the First World War, the colonizers have been the neighboring countries of Kurdistan: today they are known as Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria.

Due to Islamic colonization, the Kurdish people have been first Islamized and then Arabized. This has led to violent clashes between the Kurds and the colonizers.

After centuries has passed, major of the Kurds have become Muslims and forgotten their indigenous culture. However, some rituals such as the Kurdish clothing, festivals (Néwroz) and food are still based on the indigenous culture of the Kurdish people.

The Kurdish resistance is an on-going fight against the oppressors and it has not stopped since the Kurds have been colonized.

The women's role in the society changed in the beginning of the 80's when the Kurdish women in Bakur participated in liberating the Kurds from the oppressors in Turkey. The Kurdish women joined the PKK military unit and they were led by a Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan.

However, it was not until the Kurdish female fighters (YPJ) in Rojava hit the mainstream media that the West started to talk about a hope of a democratic nation in the midst of an Islamic World.

The Kurdish female fighters in Rojava are following the steps of the Kurds in Bakur and the PKK. The YPJ follows the teachings of Abdullah Öcalan by heart. This has led to a democratic semi-autonomous region in Syria that today is called Rojava. Rojava's political system, Democratic Confederalism, is the key factor for the phenomenon the author is researching.

In subchapter 3.4 Why Women Join the YPJ , the author introduced four different possible reasons behind the rise of the female fighters in Rojava. These reasons were: 1) The Revolution in Rojava, 2) Common Enemies, 3) Ideology and 4) Equality and Feminism. The problem with these reasons are that all of them are reasons that appeared and happened in the 21st century.

The question here is to understand why: The Revolution in Rojava happened in the first place? Why is the Syrian regime the enemy of the Kurds? How did the political system, Democratic Confederalism, get accepted in Rojava? Why and how the Kurds in Rojava have managed to change women's role in their society and, thus, secured their role in each sector? At first glance, one might say that the cause for all of this is the chaos in the Middle East and especially ISIS. However, the rise of ISIS does not automatically cause the rise of the YPJ. Cause and effect theory does not apply in this case. The Civil War in Syria and the rise of ISIS can, however, explain why the media's attention caught the female fighters (YPJ) in Rojava. The YPJ fighters are the perfect counterbalance to ISIS. Where ISIS treats women as sex slaves, the YPJ empowers women in their region despite their background.

Therefore, as commonly known, the reason behind the rise of the female fighters in Rojava is not only ISIS or the four possible points mentioned in subchapter 3.4. The reasons behind the rise of the YPJ is historical and cultural. Before the Islamic conquests, the Kurds lived in a matriarchal society where women had a role in their society. After the Islamic conquests, the Kurdish society changed into a patriarchal society and the Kurdish women lost their role in their society. However, the religious colonization did not stop after the Islamic conquests because after the First World War, the Kurds were oppressed even more by states such as Turkey and Syria. This leads to a never-ending story of religiously colonized and oppressed Kurds. It was not until the 80's that the Kurdish women gained a new role in their society. Since then the Kurdish women in Bakur and Rojava has fought to sustain their role in society. Moreover, the Kurdish women in Rojava have increased their participation, especially in combat, in society to secure their role in the society and, thus, return to the original matriarchal society the Kurds had before the Islamic conquests.

To conclude, the argument of the research paper has been proven and is as follows: Kurdish cultural identity is based around Zoroastrianism, which is a religion that is highly focused on women rights and equality. Since the colonization of Islam (Islamization), Kurds have struggled with their identity and the recent violence of ISIS reminds the Kurds of their history and true indigenous culture. Therefore, the Kurdish female fighters in Syria are fighting the Islamic World and going back to their indigenous culture by showing what it means to be truly Kurdish.

## Conclusions

This research paper is about the Kurdish female fighters in Rojava. It discusses, in particular, their fight against the common enemy who seeks to destroy what esteem and dignity that is left of them. The Syrian and ISIS regimes have for a while ravaged the fabric of the Kurds in Syria by dehumanizing and un-dignifying its women. These women, particularly in Rojava, had reached such a pent-up point that they resulted in militia warfare to protect their future and restore their sanity back. The Kurds are widely known as the largest nation without a state, and their fight against ISIS has precipitated positive attention to the Kurds, particularly the female fighters. This research, thus, researched on: How the Islamic colonization of Kurdish indigenous culture has led to Islamic radicalization and the rise of

Kurdish female fighters (YPJ) . To respond to this research, it presents the argument that: Kurdish cultural identity is based on Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrianism is a religion that has high focus on women rights and equality. Since the Islamization of the Kurds, they have had struggles with their identity, and the recent violence of ISIS serves as a reminder of their history and true indigenous culture. Therefore, the Kurdish female fighters resident in Rojava deliberately chose to fight the Islamic World and, thus, go back to their native culture by demonstrating what it means to be genuinely Kurdish.

### The methodology

This research paper included both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources included selective interfacing with recognized Kurdish women fighters, just to get their opinion on their ideology and struggles on the front line of the battle. It also included interviews, done by the YPJ press office, with objective female authorities on their comments and opinions about the issues of the Syrian regime, ISIS and more so the YPJ. The secondary sources included intensive research on literature both pre-colonial (Islamization) and post-colonial. It also included comments from credible news articles; YouTube videos, social media comments, and trending opinions.

### Reasons behind the chosen methodology

The methodology had to be such intensive to; achieve objectivity of the source subjects and contents. For a research, as critical and controversial as this, the credibility of data gathered had to be of top most priority since the matter derived from an ideological injustice against women. Another reason was to gather much influential momentum across the board as the author could. Approaching and analyzing information from high profiling societal and political figures was one of the ways the author deployed at ensuring that she did not only gather information for the research but also provoked a continuous debate on the issues of female YPJ fighters. Besides, it gave the research more academic weight if its contents are gathered from both common and influential figures in the society. Another reason was to evaluate how deep the feminism theories of the dysfunctional culture had entrenched itself among the common Kurds. The author did not manage to interview nor interface with local Kurds, and due to this one can tell from a practical point of view how sentimental the affected people felt about the matters at hand.

### Theories and concepts evaluated

In the application of those methodologies, the following theories were put in mind. The critical theory by Chandra Mohanty, reinforces the supremacy of the white culture and its beliefs in other parts of the world with different histories and cultures that are not Western culture (Mohanty, 1988, p 42). In this case, the white culture was the Islamic culture and it was forced upon Kurdish women who did not bow to the Islamic society. It was thus imperative to evaluate the impact of this subordination concept on the Kurdish women and how over time it caused them to be stripped of their dignity as women.



Another theory was the impact of the Democratic Confederalism by Abdullah Öcalan. This theory presupposes the creation of a society whose organizations and structures work towards achieving the goals of everyone in the community. It seeks to create a sort of equity and equality for both men and women in the society, creating opportunities for service and benefits for both genders. This ambitious future societal idea by Abdullah led the Kurds to awaken from their slumber and notice how Islamization has ravaged their authentic culture and dehumanized them. He is renowned for his famous comment that: "A country can't be free unless the women are free." (Abdullah Öcalan, 2016, p.7). Their reawakening (women) led to the formation of a female fighter group (YPJ) seeking to reclaim that past, and restore back the feminine dignity.

That led to the third concept under evaluation, the rise of Kurdish feminism. Islamization meant that the place of women was limited in the society and the matriarchal society was replaced with a strong patriarchal society. This new Islamic religion and culture corroded the authentic Zoroastrian values of the Kurds. With Islamization limiting the role and positioning of women in the community, they had to be awakened and reclaim their place by all means even war (YPJ). To the world, the media talks about "bad ass women", presuming that female fighters in the Kurdish community is new. This is not the case, because the Kurdish female fighters have fought alongside men since the 80's. Thus, it can be concluded that the Kurdish female resistance did not start from the creation of ISIS, but rather since the colonization of Kurds have begun. In some society's, the Kurds have been so deeply colonized that their society does not recognize women's' place in the society.

However, one can see from traditional Kurdish clothing and celebrations that the colonization of Kurds has not been rooted deep enough.

Findings

After evaluating the different theories and concepts in place, the following conclusions were arrived at. Women, due to the overwhelming effects of Islamization have deliberately subordinated their inherent rights over to men. They had deliberately denied themselves the opportunity to be heard and, thus, let men override their conscience and dignity. They have reached a point of believing that they are no better than the men and Islamic religion defines them to be. Women are also ideologically gullible to erroneous ideologies and idealism. From the interviews that were done by the YPJ press office, it was indicative that most women were apprehensive about the fact that Islam and the rise of the ISIS regimes were compromising their freedom. The women in Rojava viewed the two as ideals that came to imperfect their lives. Due to this, there is an enormous fraction of the feminine society that realizes this injustice and was not only desiring and getting justice for themselves. The intrinsic drive that led these women to militia warfare is far heart rendering. The thought that by doing nothing they will be dissolved again into the male-dominated society and, thus, reduced to animals is inconceivable. These are the women and men who share these liberating ideas and came up with the idea to create the YPJ movement. The YPJ alongside the YPG are in Rojava to liberate themselves and their communities from the oppressors that have been colonizing their people throughout history.

Goals of The Women's Protection Units or Women's

Defense Units (YPJ) movement

With the liberation agenda on air, the female militia group was founded. Its goals included the undying and unrelenting fight for female rights. With the society degenerating twice faster as had been noticed by the feminine liberation pioneers, there was the need to salvage the situation before it got out of hand. There was the need to re-sensitize on the rights of women within the society even if it meant going to war. The other goal was to build a new army culture. Women felt the need to wage war, not for the achievement of lofty Islam ideas but necessary courses (Rights). Women were no longer relegated to household chores but to taking matters into their own hands in the military to secure their future. There was also the need to unite women worldwide, the very reason as to why feminine causes were failing is the lack of female support globally. Hence the deliberate risking of these Rojava's women to war was a frontal statement that women ought to unite worldwide to support their agenda. By doing so, the YPJ was looking to create a democratic ecological society where all the genders coexisted in respect, equity and equality. The political system that currently rules Rojava is the best possible system that serves the purpose of the YPJ. Since the goals of the YPJ is to ensure freedom for women in their society, it would not be possible if the political system was against it. The environment Rojava was built on is the perfect environment for such phenomenon as the female fighters. The reason for this is that if it were not for the chaos in Syria, the Civil War and ISIS maybe Rojava would have not been built. The Kurdish female fighters do not only participate in combat but also participate in the creation of the society they live in. From this perspective, it can be concluded that the Kurdish female fighters are not only fighting against the Syrian regime or ISIS, but they are fighting to protect the

society they have created so far. The agenda of the YPJ alongside the YPG is to protect their people, their society and their ideology that will serve each woman and man equally.

### Challenges encountered

In the course of undertaking this research, several problems proved worthwhile even though they affirmed the author resolve to proceed. Finding and approaching individuals for interviews was one of the significant challenges. Most people did not want to be involved in either contributing information or pointing the author towards direction that would get credible assistance. Most of the individuals encountered both common and influential feared victimization of themselves or their families. This led to the lack of interviews done by the author. Another challenge was obtaining valid, credible information. Some sources were lies or pure propaganda, thus the sources did not provide useful factual information that would be both informative and contributive to the research. The author had to corroborate some information occasionally gathered just to evaluate their credibility. The author was able to recognize such false information due to her ability to speak and read Kurdish. Also, by being part of the community she searched on helped her to recognize which sources are reliable and which sources were not.

### Recommendations

After undertaking the research, the author noticed the following factors that would need a little more attention towards the realization of a liberated Kurdistan. The objective deconstruction of the Middle East's feminism concepts. There is need to align feminism theories to provide both inspirational roles and be objective without emphasizing on the Western cultures wholly but instead on the different cultures in Middle East. Sadly, when spoken of the Middle East, most feminism theories focus on the oppressed Muslim women but rarely on women who were colonized by Islam.

There was also the need for intensive nurturing of the nature of women in the Middle East. Women have to begin considering themselves as equal to men by all rights. Only then can men start to take them seriously and accord them the respect they deserve. In addition, the women in the Middle East are not all the same oppressed women in the Islamic World but rather women from all kinds of identity and backgrounds.

The demystification of the ethnical backgrounds, social classes, and status quos. It is vital that people can understand the rationality behind what they practice. Decolonization is very important to eradicate the erroneous understanding passed down the generations. Every element of colonization, culture, religion or given social ideology must have a reason behind it, understanding it is essential. Moreover, it is of paramount importance since such knowledge helps dispel a lot of societal ignorance and prejudices upon which the crimes of injustice take roots.

### Conclusion

It is no wonder that the Kurdish female fighters in Syria have captured the media's attention, because what they are fighting for is not just a common enemy to all of us, but rather they are fighting to change the Islamic society they live in. Many might think that the Kurdish women are just women fighting alongside men, but they are actually doing much more.

The Kurds in Syria are facing a lot: pressure from the Syrian regime and the Civil War, and at the same time trying to push back ISIS for gaining more territory. The Kurds have always been in between fights. For the first time in history, they have a great chance to win the war and gain something for themselves: freedom.

Even though the religious aspect is quite important, it still does not explain the increase of female warriors in the YPJ unit. Kurdish women are standing up for themselves and demanding to be treated as equals. In the Kurdish society women are treated as equals, but it's the Islamic society saying that women should not be in politics or in combat. Since the Arabization and Colonization, the Kurdish society has been stripped of from their indigenous culture. However, as seen throughout this research, the identity of the Kurdish people cannot be killed and buried because their identity is rooted deep down in their DNA. Through Kurdish clothing and celebrations, the identity of the Kurds will be passed on to generations and so on.

While the YPJ fighters have their hands full with ISIS and the Syrian Civil War, they are still non-stop fighting against the typical Islamic society where women are stripped of their rights. The YPJ unit wants to become one of the rarest forces that promote gender equality and so far, they have managed to do that by being equal with men in combat and having the right to make independent decisions. The YPJ fighters are one fraction of the whole picture, where a colonized nation is rising up and building a society that promotes their indigenous society. Hopefully, the false image of oppressed women in the Middle East, created by the West, has been changed after reading this research. The fight for the YPJ has not even started since demanding for equal rights in the Islamic World is not a one-day fight but rather an on-going process.

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