

Women at War in the Middle East: Gendered Dynamics of ISIS and the Kurdish YPJ

Written by Kristin Thue

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KRISTIN THUE, SEP 21 2020

The Syrian conflict saw the clash of two state-building groups with starkly contrasting ideologies. The Islamic State (ISIS) sought to build a global theocratic state underpinned by strict gender segregation under Sharia Law (Khelghat-Doost 2017: 25). ISIS not only conquered a vast territorial base, but also saw the unprecedented recruitment of foreign fighters – as many as 5000 of which were women (Cook 2019: 10). Women were central to ISIS' state-building vision and performed diverse roles under Caliphate rule. Opposing ISIS is the Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (YPJ), an all-female Kurdish militia branching out from Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD), The Democratic Union Party. It espouses ideas central to traditional Western leftist movements such as democratic participation and egalitarian social structures. The significance of women's participation in the YPJ should be understood in the wider geopolitical context of the Kurdish state-building project in the Middle East. Kurdistan has, after decades of activism, yet to become a sovereign state, with its current territories overlapping Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, and Kurdish women have campaigned for political rights since the 1980s (Al-Ali and Tas 2017: 5).

Women's participation in armed conflict is not specific to the Middle East, but the gender politics of the region give rise to a degree of sensationalism around highly politicised imagery of female ISIS recruits and YPJ militants. The objective of this essay is to move beyond an empiricist epistemology, and in doing so, it builds on a conceptual framework of critical feminist theory. Feminist theory conceptualises contested narratives of essentialist gendered subjects and how they are represented, focusing on perceptions of agency relative to femininity and motherhood. Following on, it will explore women's positions within the ISIS Caliphate and their militarisation in the YPJ. The two cases will be compared and evaluated against the theoretical framework with emphasis on problematising the gendered perceptions of women as agents in conflict. More specifically, it will evaluate the practical and normative significance of women's participation in ISIS and the YPJ – both in a Middle Eastern and broader international context. Overall, the main argument of the essay is that a gendered lens on women's participation in the Syrian conflict highlights factors crucial to understanding the full scope of Middle Eastern violent politics. However, this gives rise to a normative challenge: in understanding women actors *specifically as women*, there is a risk of cementing the gendered structures of conflict rather than looking beyond them.

Feminist theory: Conceptualising the female agent

There is a vast body of feminist IR theory focusing on the gendered dimensions of conflict. The juxtaposition of inherently violent masculinity and pacifist/nurturing femininity provides an essentialist understanding of gendered roles in conflict and determine actors' violent capabilities (Steans 2006: 63; Youngs 2004: 76). As phrased by leading feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe, the dominant expectation is that "Men are just naturally those who wield violence" (Enloe 2006: viii). Situating men and masculinities in the public realm of warfare and violence and women in the private/domestic realm, only one is presented as having political agency whilst the other is by nature acted *upon* (Tervooren 2016: 9; Tickner 1992: 3). Feminist theory addresses the normative balancing act between highlighting gendered oppression and violence against women against discourses that effectively render women as passive victims defined by their violability (Shepherd 2007: 10). A singular focus on women as exclusively victims of conflicts obscures women's diverse roles, including that of perpetrators (Ibid).

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The question of agency is central to feminist theory and will be critically employed throughout this essay. Feminist theory engages continuously with discourses framing agency as emancipatory, which renders the determination of agency as the standard against which degrees of liberation and participation are judged (Benhabib 1995: 21). Auchter contests this binary focus on agency as constitutive of subject identities, claiming that this obscures the multiple and even conflicting roles women inhabit (Auchter 2012: 120). This conceptualisation will be employed to analyse contrasts between perceptions of ISIS and YPJ women in public discourse where women are, as Auchter elucidates, either “a either victim of a patriarchal system or agent enabled with a takeover of that patriarchal system” (ibid). This particularly relates to the women of ISIS as mothers, where agency is constructed in opposition to motherhood (Åhall 2012: 288).

ISIS' pearls: The female face of the Caliphate

ISIS differs markedly from other Islamist terrorist groups in its state-building vision. A theocratic state with a variety of public functions necessitated the recruitment of not just combatants, but people to fill diverse societal roles (Khelghaat-Doost 2019: 856). Whereas Western media representations of female ISIS recruits initially referred to them as “jihadi brides” and “domestic servants”, in reality women were involved in activities ranging from online propaganda to military intelligence-gathering (Hoyle et al. 2016: 10; Martini 2018: 459). Similarly to YPJ militants as explored below, international media sensationalised women’s participation in ISIS as a clear violation of gendered expectations (Nacos 2006: 437). Whereas the initial focus exhibited a clear tendency to trivialise women’s political motivations, over time as the extent of women’s participation in ISIS activities became evident, their endorsement of Islamic fundamentalism was increasingly positioned as a “betrayal of womenkind” (*Dagbladet* 2019). The feminine ideals of a Sharia-based Islamist state embrace the gendered essentialism which in the West has largely become synonymous with oppression.

A comprehensive report by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) established that the main so-called “pull” factor leading women to join the Caliphate was the notion that there was a designated place for them in ISIS’ ideal society (Saltman, Smith 2015: 19). Whereas many had faced discrimination and cultural barriers to societal participation in liberal Western societies, the promise of an alternative state where women *by virtue of being women* constituted an explicit asset was alluring to particularly young women lacking a sense of community (Shorer 2018: 100; Klausen 2015: 3). Conformity to such rigid gender roles can appear unfathomable in light of the aforementioned feminist logic that characterises political agency by its transgression of oppressive power structures. It would therefore be easy to conclude as many have done, that female ISIS recruits were oppressed and coerced into submission to a patriarchal state order. However, this excludes the possibility of agency when the roles taken on do not conform to a set normative standard. It could indeed be argued that female ISIS recruits have displayed higher levels of agency and political convictions in joining the Caliphate than male foreign fighters, because they face higher societal barriers to leave their families for an extremist organisation (Davis 2008: 50).

In addition, by equating women’s participation in the domestic sphere with a renunciation of agency and therefore power, women’s authority over new generations of radicalised youth are obscured (Vale 2019: 6). As mothers the women were responsible for the ideological education of future ISIS fighters. Fostering ideological convictions amongst women recruits translated into an increased recruitment-base due to the inter-generational character of the Caliphate. Hence, a reductionist understanding of motherhood and agency/power as oppositional neglects the violent political potential inherent to familial relationships (Seierstad 2016: 376).

Consequently, it is essential to analyse ISIS strategic vision for women’s participation to understand the gendered dynamics of the Caliphate. Due to women’s role as not only mothers in the literal sense, but their symbolic value as mothers of the nation, ISIS crafted their recruitment propaganda as intentionally women-centric (Hoyle et al. 2015: 10). Whereas other well-known terrorist organisations of the Middle East mainly utilised women in tactical operations due to their inconspicuousness as agents of violence, ISIS strategically employed women in their extensive online recruitment process in order to attract other women (Spencer 2016: 90; Pearson 2018: 855). Owing to women’s traditional societal roles, female recruits were strategically employed to enhance the credibility of ISIS’ state-building project, seeing as the heavily circulated news stories of men conquering territory and committing sexual violence against enemy populations was considered to be of limited value in enhancing female recruitment (Shorer 2018: 90).

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ISIS' gender ideology was strategically communicated by the group's top leadership. As women were, predictably, deemed unfit for combat, they were instead posited as the Caliphate's source of spiritual legitimacy (Vale 2019: 4). There are few testimonies from female ISIS recruits available, but those that exist underline a desire for creating a new society which placed essentialist femininity at its ideological core (Peresin, Cervone 2015: 499). Women were represented as the carriers of the religious-national identity. ISIS positioned women as faces of a gendered Middle Eastern order, in direct opposition to the narrative of Muslim women facing marginalisation in the West (ibid).

However, the rigid gender hierarchy and gender-segregated spaces under ISIS' rule was also a source of internal tension. Women were required to be veiled in a niqab showing only their eyes, thus removing their personal presence from public life (Yilmaz 2017: 27). Whilst this was ideologically rationalised to preserve spiritual purity and adhere to Sharia law's strict honour code, externally the removal of feminine bodies from the political scene carried a heavy symbolism for what constituted a woman's place in the Middle East (Winter 2015: 17; Ingram et al 2020: 199). Whereas ISIS required women to perform diverse roles to sustain its operations, gendered politics required that this be balanced against religious purity – resulting in disillusionment amongst female recruits who had imagined a more participatory model of societal interaction between the genders (Huey, Witmer 2016: 2). A compromise to quell the rising internal dissent was achieved by the establishment of the Al-Khansaa brigade, an all-women's police force whose main responsibility was ensuring adherence to gendered rules of modesty and public morality (Almohammad and Speckhard 2017: 6; Winter 2015: 22). Offenders would receive punishment in the form of torture or even death (ibid).

Yet, as the anti-ISIS coalition gained ground and ISIS' territorial base increasingly weakened, women's participation grew more militant out of necessity. Historically, violent groups have increased their recruitment of women when ranks of male combatants grew thin (Davis 2008: 85). In the case of ISIS, women were already active in non-military roles, but as stated above, this pacification was not unchallenged. The territorial weakening of ISIS thus enabled women to claim more militarised roles – which should serve as a reminder of their capacity for violence, a factor that has been consistently undermined in public debates following the Caliphate's fall (Khelghaat-Doost 2019: 870). Furthermore, after the fall of the Caliphate, ISIS women detained in refugee camps have committed violence such as stoning or even murder against those they perceive to transgress Sharia moral code (*Washington Post* 2019). In fact, some researchers predict that the likelihood of women committing violent acts has increased following the collapse of the gender-policing restrictions under ISIS rule (Peresin and Cervone 2015: 499).

To summarise, women's roles in the ISIS Caliphate did not see them attaining positions of power in the organisation's upper leadership structures. They were simultaneously featured heavily in ISIS propaganda and barred from participating as political actors outside of strictly ascribed roles. Women recruits negotiated new roles as the internal and external dynamics of the Syrian conflict evolved. However, the glorified imagery of "pure" women's lives in the Caliphate stand in stark contrast to the mass atrocities committed against women of enemy populations such as the Yezidis and Kurdish women during the ISIS offensive (Enloe 2000: 190; Yilmaz 2017: 20)

YPJ: The feminist militia of the Middle East?

In contrast to violent religious groups, nationalist movements historically have seen a much larger proportion of female participants (Davis 2008: 17). Women combatants are estimated to constitute over a third of Kurdish armed forces (Bengio 2016: 39). In addition to the almost 10 000 Kurdish women from the Middle East engaged in combat and supporting roles, hundreds of women from the Kurdish diaspora have travelled to the conflict zone to join the Western-backed anti-ISIS coalition through the YPJ (Knapp et al. 2016: 107). After Assad's regime withdrew from northern Syria – Kuridish Rojava – in 2012, the Kurdish forces established an autonomous local authority which would later become a key feature in the fight against ISIS (ibid).

The YPJ's ideological rationale is based upon Jineology, a distinctly Kurdish feminism that establishes the liberation of women and men from dichotomous gender structures as the cornerstone of a democratic confederalist society (Düzgün 2016: 285). Unlike much of "mainstream" feminist theory which emphasise the universalist structures affecting women as a group, Jineology places women's local experience at its ideological centre. Thus, Jineology is more closely related to postcolonial feminism in its emphasis on intersectionality – defined as "the recognition of

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overlapping marginal identities” such as ethnicity and class, contextualising women’s participation the historical Kurdish struggle for independence (Crenshaw 1991: 1242; Dirik 2015: 63). Its aim however, is similarly emancipatory to critical feminist theory, in that it seeks to dismantle oppressive social structures and defines its subjects in opposition to a patriarchal, colonialist, and capitalist world order (ibid). It is, however, unclear how the deconstruction of gendered identities will manifest, and critical voices problematise the prospect of a further militarisation of Kurdish society (Morgan 2019: vi).

The YPJ fighters gained widespread international attention for successfully countering ISIS’ attempted siege of the city Kobanî in Rojava. The potent symbolism of female guerrilla fighters taking up arms against ISIS positioned them as feminist warriors fighting the embodiment of patriarchy (Dean 2019: 5). Indeed, YPJ banners in local strongholds proclaim: “we will defeat the attacks of ISIS by guaranteeing the freedom of women in the Middle East” (Dirik 2015: 66). This dynamic has been widely represented in international media as a clash of not just sectarian groups on a battlefield, but as an ideological struggle with potentially significant repercussions across the Middle East (Begikhani et al. 2018: 15). Cultural factors have been highlighted to exacerbate the ideological tension – a frequently-cited example is the belief held by militant Islamist groups like ISIS that fighters killed by women will not go to paradise nor receive their promised virgins (*The Independent* 2016; *The Telegraph* 2014). Thus, the “feminine essence” of YPJ militants represents what can only be characterised as an irony-laden feminist revenge. As phrased by Dirik: “The YPJ are not only fighting against ISIS, they are fighting for feminism and gender equality – and they’re doing it with ideas and bullets alike” (Dirik 2015: 69).

The sensationalised broadcast of YPJ militants stands in contrast to many Western government positions on the Kurdish issue. In fact, the Kurdish Worker’s Party (PKK), which YPJ is loosely affiliated with, has been labelled a terrorist group by the US and several European states (Haner et al. 2019: 16). However, in the context of the Middle East where women are largely assumed to be oppressed and barred from meaningful political engagement, YPJ represents a striking new image. Their militaristic anti-ISIS stance is deducted from a multifaceted Kurdish women’s activist movement, of which active combat constitutes only one part (Dean 2019: 4). YPJ fight not only to liberate women from the patriarchy, but to liberate all Kurdish people from ethnic oppression and fulfil the nationalist vision (Çaha 2011: 435). This angle is underexplored in the cited media articles, suggesting that while the YPJ may enjoy Western backing as feminist fighters against Islamic fundamentalism, this endorsement does not extend beyond the anti-ISIS coalition. Thus, the gendered spectacle of female militarism overshadows, and in some cases depoliticises the ideologically motivated participation of Kurdish women in their struggle for political revolution (Ibid).

Furthermore, the YPJ’s efforts to free Yezidi slaves from ISIS adds another layer of complexity to the gendered dynamics of the group. The mass-scale of sexual violence committed against the Yezidi population is emphasised as being both an individual motivation for women to join the YPJ, and on a structural level it underlined a necessity for an all-female armed group (Küçük and Özselçuk 2016: 184). In this regard, YPJ represents a departure from the oft-cited and heavily criticised Orientalist discourse of Western saviourism: “White men saving brown women from brown men” in that women are central agents shaping the conflict (Spivak 1994: 107; Shahvisi 2018: 4). However, the discussion of victimhood and liberation from oppressive structures can be ambiguous. The term “victim” is increasingly associated with passivity and has been replaced by “survivor” in discourses on sexual violence to foster more empowering connotations. Yet, utilising victimhood to influence policy and achieve justice can arguably be a display of agency, as evident in the international recognition of ISIS’ genocidal war against Yezidis (Murad 2017). The Kurdish and Yezidi women of the YPJ can thus be seen as not only saving themselves from violence – but establishing new societal positions for women altogether.

In this regard, the YPJ are fighting a two-front battle. The YPJ’s stated aim is institutionalising women’s self-defence against male violence, not just in the extreme form of ISIS, but also the domestic and structural violence they face during times of “peace” (Dean 2019: 7). This reflects Cockburn’s claim that men’s violence against women in war only exacerbates the violence committed at all times in society, thus situating violence on a continuum (Cockburn 2001: 13). The role of women in traditionalist Kurdish society has been heavily problematised. For instance, the prevalence of sexual violence, social and economic repression of women and harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) (Al-Ali and Tas 2017: 3; Yasin et al. 2013).

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In other words, the ascendance of the YPJ within a nationalist movement with highly contradictory ideology and societal practice highlights the contesting dynamics that influence women's participation – and in turn is influenced by the role women claim across political spaces. Unlike the case of ISIS, where the internal gender hierarchies are almost caricaturesque in their extremity, the gendered dynamics of the YPJ are more ambiguous. However, one could argue that it is precisely these internal contestations that has led to the emergence of diverse women's activism and participation, not least on the battlefield (Begikhani et al. 2018: 6).

Synthesis: Gendered agency and representation of women in war

A distinctly normative analytical pattern appears when evaluating the significance of women's participation in armed conflict, in the Middle East and beyond. Women's roles are positioned on a spectrum of oppression and emancipation. This is perhaps unsurprising given the explicitly stated emancipatory agenda elucidated by the majority of feminist IR theorists – whose research constitute the bulk of academic work on gender issues (Tickner 1992: 10; Enloe 2006: vii). However, it is imperative to explore what implications may arise from viewing the conformity toward/transgression of stereotypical roles as the defining lens through which to understand the dynamics of women's participating in Middle Eastern conflicts. By attaching a positive agential value to certain roles there is a risk of obscuring more subtle structures of violence. In gendering agency, there are implications for which representations of women are considered political – and thereby covetable.

At the core of some of these emancipatory discourses lies an implicit assumption that women who transgress the assumed limitations of their gender and take on more masculine roles are the most “free”, and by extension, more politically relevant. Following this, one could question whether these discourses in fact reinforce hierarchical gender structures, where traditional feminine attributes and societal roles are viewed as lesser than the masculine. As quoted by an informant of the CNN in a portrait interview with YPJ fighters: “The female Kurdish fighters have had a “definite impact on the male part of Kurdish society (...) When they see women with weapons and fighting, they learn to respect them.” (CNN 2019) By stating that women must effectively take on traditionally masculine roles – and accepting these as unproblematic and undeserving of analytical scrutiny in a way that feminine roles are not – the crux of the debate then becomes: are women considered most agential, most dangerous, most *political*, when they take up arms and hence seem more like men?

The public debate surrounding female ISIS returnees is an illustrative example of similar patterns of gendered agential inscriptions. The public/private dichotomy that feminist academics have disputed for decades appears to carry significant weight when determining which women constitute security threats and which do not (Stears 2003: 60). Ranging from NGOs to family members of the foreign fighters, those who downplay the women's agency actively use essentialist femininity to de-politicise and de-securitise the women's participation (*Dagbladet* 2019b; Hansen 2006: 37). The women are described as non-threatening *because* they are mothers – the conceptual dissonance between motherhood to terrorism appears to make the two identities impossible to reconcile (Åhall 2012: 290). Furthermore, these discourses downplay the political aspects of women's motivation to join ISIS, instead characterising them in personal terms as “brainwashed”, “exploited” and “in search of love” (Pearson 2018: 860). Interestingly, and perhaps concerningly, this view is also expressed by civil society actors working with grassroots de-radicalisation efforts specifically aimed at women (JAN Trust 2019).

The absence of a corresponding discussion over the political agency and threat potential of *male* fighters reinforces the point that women are continuously subjected to a process of “gendering” vis-à-vis a masculine normative standard, through which their actions are understood and judged (Shepherd 2007 143). Whereas women's participation is evaluated against their femininity and status as mothers, men's agency is assumed as a political fact unrelated to gendered factors. In other words, the discursive construction of gendered identities has profound implications for how women's participation in violent conflict is understood. The issue of agency ultimately becomes an issue of responsibility, which will be highly relevant in criminal prosecutions under anti-terrorism legislation.

However, even discourses of empowerment through violence risks representing women in a similar hierarchical agential order as noted above. Whilst women guerrilla fighters are naturally assumed to be liberated, women represented as victims of war are assumed to be oppressed and in need of liberation. These singular depictions of

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women's lived experience neglect the multifaceted identities women inhabit that are continuously produced and reproduced (Shepherd 2007: 151). In attaching less determinism to the link between representation and perceived agency, the full diversity of women's participation may inform nuanced academic analysis – and by extension, foreign and security policy.

Conclusion

It remains to be seen which roles women of ISIS and the YPJ sustain post-conflict. Historically, women who transgress gender-stereotypical roles during times of conflict are often “re-traditionalised” when peace resumes (Al-Ali and Pratt 2009: 177). Following Turkey's invasion of Syria, the political fate of both detained ISIS fighters and Kurdish forces is highly uncertain. Interestingly, and as many would claim, unjustly; women of both ISIS *and* the YPJ are classified as foreign fighters under the same anti-terrorism legislation. In leaving Western countries to join an *armed group overseas*, also YPJ recruits could be prosecuted upon their return instead of celebrated – as they were in Western media throughout the conflict – for their counterinsurgency efforts (Palani 2019: 253; UNSCR 2178). Their feminist rationale for fighting in the anti-ISIS coalition paradoxically offers less defence than female ISIS returnees claiming their innocence as mere mothers and wives.

This essay has explored how gendered dynamics of women's participation in conflict manifests in the cases of ISIS and the YPJ. Crucially, it challenges the binary conception of victimhood and agency/liberation. Moreover, it has analysed how women negotiate their positions through combat and other societal roles, asserting that the singular focus on militarism obscures important political structures – which in turn hampers nuanced analyses (Morgan 2019: ii). In conclusion, Begikhani offers a compelling perspective in light of the Middle Eastern context: in contrast to discourses that defines agency as transgressing obstacles, “Social and gender norms, as well as power structures, are appropriated, negotiated and embraced as much as they are openly resisted.” (Begikhani et al. 2019: 15). These dynamics remain central to women's participation in violent conflict throughout the Middle East and beyond.

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