

**Good or Bad Agents? Western Fascination with Women and the  
Construction of Female Objects during the ISIS Crisis**

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## Abstract

Female fighters and women engaging in violence are frequently seen as something un-natural and extraordinary. The Western media are often fascinated by women in military or terrorist organizations trying to further account for this phenomenon. However, when analysing such trends it becomes apparent that not all women are described in the same manner and while some female fighters are perceived as victims of male oppression or mad women, others are labelled as “beautiful souls.” Looking at examples of Western representation of Muslim women it becomes clear that Orientalism often plays a significant role within the overall construction of the images, assigning different notions of agency to various groups of women, creating strict binaries between emancipated, Western women and oppressed or monstrous Muslim female fighters, further justifying Western policies in the Middle East. The recent media coverage of the emergence of Islamic State have been also in many ways defined through different images of female violence, however in this case Kurdish, Muslim women have become the heroines of the West, whereas Western women migrating to ISIS are perceived as brainwashed victims. Nevertheless despite such shifts in images it could be argued that the Orientalist politics of representation play a significant role within the Western reports of the ISIS crisis. In order to better understand how the bodies of female fighters are objectified and politicized and how female agency is constructed and assigned to these women it is hence important to look at the cases of Kurdish and ISIS women in greater depth.

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## Introduction

The traditional position of women within international politics is frequently associated with the binary divisions between the private, feminine sphere and the masculine, public international area, where women are perceived as representatives of nation states and thus always in need of protection by their male counterparts.<sup>1</sup> However, the emergence of female guerrilla fighters, brave military women as well as the veiled Chechen and Palestine female suicide bombers have significantly challenged these traditional assumptions and the images of female fighters quickly gained widespread attention within academia and especially Western media. The Western fascination with women and their combatant roles became quite apparent, further resulting in widespread reports and stories about women who do not fit their traditional feminine roles as peaceful mothers in need of protection, but instead engaged in something “un-lady like.”<sup>2</sup> Challenging the traditional discourse of seeing women as vulnerable objects in need of protection, women in combat have hence been perceived as something extraordinary, in many cases even more dangerous than men,<sup>3</sup> who need to be examined and further correctly labelled for the Western public to understand their motivations and possible notions of agency. Nevertheless not all women engaging in armed struggles have been described by Western media in the same manner. In fact such patterns have become especially clear in post 9/11 conflicts in the Middle Eastern region, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq, where Muslim women were mostly referred to as “victims of terrorism,” or mad if engaging in anti-democratic and violent strategies<sup>4</sup> while the US female military members were perceived as strong and brave agents, liberating their female counterparts from horrific,

<sup>1</sup> Tickner, J. A. And Sjoberg, L. ‘Feminism,’ in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, edited by Tim Dunne et al., (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 185-202.

<sup>2</sup> Nacos, B. L. ‘The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media: Similar Framing Patterns in the News Coverage of Women in Politics and in Terrorism,’ *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 28:5 (2005), p. 437.

<sup>3</sup> Al-monitor, ‘Using Women to Win in Syria,’ 29. September 2013, Available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/women-fighters-syria-rebels-regime.html#> [Accessed 24. April 2015]

<sup>4</sup> New York Times, ‘Despair Drives Suicide Attacks by Iraqi Women,’ 5. July 2008, Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/05/world/middleeast/05diyala.html?n=Top%2FNews%2FWorld%2FCountries%20and%20Territories%2FIraq> [Accessed 10. May 2015]

patriarchal culture. It could thus be argued that the conflicts were on many occasions defined through contrasting images of women, such as female victims, Muslim female terrorists and Western women in military, seemingly reinforcing Orientalist perceptions between the traditional, victimized or bad Muslim “others” and the developed, good “West,”<sup>5</sup> further justifying the Western strategies within the Middle Eastern region.

Likewise, the recent conflict in Syria, Iraq and also partly in Libya and the following emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL)<sup>6</sup> has been defined in similar manner, through images of women with contrasting notions of agency and characteristic traits. However what is interesting to notice in this case is that alongside the images of Yazidi women who have been sexually harassed, enslaved and victimized by cruel, oppressive ISIS terrorists, the Western media frequently report on Muslim, Kurdish female heroes from the region, who according to many reports did not have a choice only to take up weapons and fight against the ISIS barbarity.<sup>78</sup> Stories of beautiful, strong and, as some journalists call them, “badass” women apparently killing more ISIS fighters than any of their male counterparts,<sup>9</sup> only to be killed later themselves have been a significant feature within the Western reports on the conflict in Iraq and Syria. Many of the observers frequently claimed that ISIS men are terrified of Kurdish women,<sup>10</sup> hence further emphasizing the extraordinary agency and strength of these female fighters. At this point it could be argued that Muslim women and

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<sup>5</sup> Naaman, D. ‘Brides of Palestine/ Angels of Death: Media, Gender and Performance in case of the Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers,’ *Signs*, 32:4 (2007), p. 942.

<sup>6</sup> More specifically it is known as The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS)

<sup>7</sup> Kurdish Question, ‘Stateless Democracy: How the Kurdish Women Movement Liberated Democracy from the State,’ Available at: <http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/woman/stateless-democracy-how-the-kurdish-women-movement-liberated-democracy-from-the-state.html> [Accessed 15. March 2015]

<sup>8</sup> Eager, P. W. ‘From Freedom Fighters to Terrorists: Exploring Women and Political Violence,’ *Women’s Rights Law Reporter*, Winter/Spring 2010, p. 278.

<sup>9</sup> Foreign Policy, ‘Meet the Badass Women Fighting the Islamic State,’ 12. September 2014, Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/12/meet-the-badass-women-fighting-the-islamic-state/> [Accessed 5. April 2015]

<sup>10</sup> International Business Times, ‘ISIS Jihadis Terrified of Fanatical Kurdish Women Soldiers who will Deny Them Place in Paradise,’ 7. October 2014, Available at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/syria-isis-jihadis-terrified-fanatical-kurdish-women-soldiers-who-will-deny-them-place-paradise-1468887> [Accessed 5. April 2015]

their agency have suddenly become defined in similar terms as previously in case of the US female military soldiers, what has been seen by many observers as transcending Western, Orientalist perceptions of the Middle East.<sup>11</sup>

In addition another important point arises when looking at the role of Western women in the Syrian, ISIS conflict, again bringing in the question about Orientalist politics of representation. In contrast to Kurdish, Muslim women who are willing to fight for their freedom and emancipation, Western, Muslim female migrants joining ISIS, have been described as surrendering their liberties and betraying their democratic Western communities for the oppression of Islamic State. While Kurdish women are mostly perceived as beautiful and even stylish agents,<sup>12</sup> the women joining ISIS are presented as ghost-like creatures in black, full-body burqas,<sup>13</sup> without any sense of agency, only being manipulated by ISIS propaganda. The political motivation and agency of the ‘jihadi brides,’ as the Western women joining ISIS are frequently referred to, are on many occasions hidden behind simplified and universalized media images of ISIS propaganda and women’s irrationality. Therefore when taking the established images of women involved in Syrian conflict together it can be acknowledged that the images of Kurdish and ISIS women result in binary representations, creating strict divisions between the “good” fighters and the “bad” women, ‘whores’ with no or even wrong notions of agency.<sup>14</sup> However in this case the Muslim women seem to be

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<sup>11</sup> International Business Times, ‘Female Fighters Battling Isis in Kobani Turned into Sex Objects by Scared West,’ 30. October 2014 Available at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/female-fighters-battling-isis-kobani-turned-into-sex-objects-by-scared-west-1472471> [Accessed 5. April 2015], Reuters, ‘Female fighters battle for freedom and equality in Syria: TRFN,’ 16 December 2014, Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/12/16/us-syria-women-idUSKBN0JU0D020141216> [Accessed 20. March 2015]

<sup>12</sup> Huffington Post, ‘H&M apologizes For Kurdish Uniform- Inspired Jumpsuits,’ 10. August 2014 Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2014/10/08/hm-kurdish-uniform\\_n\\_5951316.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2014/10/08/hm-kurdish-uniform_n_5951316.html) [Accessed 5. April 2015]

<sup>13</sup> Guardian, ‘Double-layered veils and despair...women describe life under ISIS,’ 17 February 2015 Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/17/isis-orders-women-iraq-syria-veils-gloves> [Accessed 18. February 2015]

<sup>14</sup> Sjoberg, L. and Gentry, C. E. ‘Reduced to Bad Sex: Narratives of Violent Women from the Bible to the War on Terror,’ *International Relations*, 22:1 (2008), p. 10.

awarded more agency than their female counterparts migrating to Syria from the West, what further poses an interesting point for analyses.

Therefore the main question of this research is tightly connected with the issue of women's representation and female agency. The thesis aims to examine and elaborate in greater depth on the way different images of women involved in conflict as well as their agency are being constructed within Western media and whether the same notions of Orientalism, as seen in previous cases of Western strategies in the Middle East, can also be observed in connection to representation of Kurdish and ISIS women. More specifically the purpose is to ask what potential implications, if any, does the representation of women in Syria and Iraq have for our understanding of women's agency and what important insights can this case study bring to our perception of female violence and women's overall involvement within political conflicts?

As a response to this question, my argument will be that the case of Kurdish and ISIS women has not in fact transcended the Orientalist representation of Muslim and Western women but rather is strongly affected by such power politics, where Western values and agency are highlighted over different political ideologies further justifying various strategies of Western states and pro-Western groups in the Middle Eastern region. When connecting the already published feminist literature dealing with female violence as well as the Orientalist politics of representation, and the current case studies of women involved in Syrian conflict it can be hence observed that despite some minor amendments, the very divisions between "us" and "the others," "our" values and agency in contrast to "their" wrong, challenging values and agency still strongly define Western media and the construction of their reports. In fact, while Kurdish women and 'jihadi brides' frequently describe their membership in given groups as



expressions of their political determination and activity,<sup>15</sup> international media usually overlook such notions of women's agency, emphasizing different characteristics of these women, further preserving clear boundaries between the two. ISIS female recruits, mostly described as either irrational, brainwashed girls in search of romantic love<sup>16</sup> or as 'whores' enjoying violence<sup>17</sup> are only rarely presented as active political agents whereas, the Kurdish women perceived as brave and emancipated women fighting for their freedoms are often associated with notions of western liberal agency and their connections to the former terrorist PKK organization are hidden.<sup>18</sup> As many critical feminist scholars argue, the problem with the established notions of agency is that "participation in the category is limited"<sup>19</sup> leaving out actors and the values not fulfilling criteria of the dominant, Western discourse. In order to get a better understanding of the female agency and the features of categorization and objectification of female bodies in Western media, the current coverage of the Syrian conflict thus presents a significant point for analyses.

To examine and elaborate on how ISIS and Kurdish women and their agencies are depicted within Western media in greater depth, this research will therefore engage in discourse analyses of the media reports, articles and political speeches dealing with the issue of women's involvement within the ISIS crisis. The empirical data for this thesis mostly comprises of online material, news reports and bulletins published by Western media and research groups from the beginning of the conflict against the Islamic State, in 2014 until

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<sup>15</sup> Al Jazeera, 'Western Fascination with 'badass' Kurdish women,' 29. October 2014 Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/10/western-fascination-with-badas-2014102112410527736.html> [Accessed 2. November 2014], Hoyle, C. et al, 'Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS,' *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, pp. 11-14.

<sup>16</sup> Independent, 'The Jihadi Girls are Just Part of a Long Line Attracted to Mad, Bad Men' 22. February 2015 Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/the-jihadi-girls-are-just-part-of-a-long-line-attracted-to-mad-bad-men-10062909.html> [Accessed 5. March 2015]

<sup>17</sup> Alarabiya, 'UK Female Jihadists run ISIS sex-slave brothels,' 12. September 2014 Available at: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/variety/2014/09/12/UK-female-jihadists-run-ISIS-sex-slave-brothels.html> [Accessed 15. September 2014]

<sup>18</sup> Al Jazeera, 'American Freedom Fighters are Turkey's Terrorists,' 16. February 2015 Available at: <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/2/americas-freedom-fighters-are-turkeys-terrorists.html> [Accessed 10. March 2015]

<sup>19</sup> Auchter, J. 'Gendering terror,' *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 14:1 (2012), p.125.

present. Since media is one of the most powerful tools for creating and defining mainstream political discourses,<sup>20</sup> the reports from CNN, Daily Mail, Guardian, Independent as well as other news websites will be used as the main methodological resource for this research on women's representation and agency. By using discourse analyses of media articles, the purpose of this thesis is to get better understanding of how various images of women are constructed in accordance to the dominant discourses and what potential implications such practices have for future conflicts and our responses to them.

In order to develop the main argument and thus answer the research question in more detail, the first chapter of the thesis will be devoted to the literature review of feminist articles and publications, mapping out the most often described images of female fighters, how they are usually perceived and what overall implications such images of gender violence have for further analyses of this thesis. Furthermore, the main purpose of the second chapter will be to elaborate in greater depth on the images of gender violence produced within feminist scholarship and to examine how and why certain images are constructed. By looking at the ways images of Muslim women and their agency are established within Western media and how they are further contrasted with views on Western female soldiers it will be argued that Orientalist power politics significantly shape the overall practice of representation, awarding certain notions of agency to some women while denying it to others. To analyse whether such practices are also present within the current reports of Western media when describing the women involved in the ISIS conflict the next two chapters will primarily be dealing with the issue of Kurdish female fighters battling ISIS and later on with Western female migrants to ISIS. The purpose of these two chapters will be to discuss and deconstruct various media images of Kurdish and ISIS women, in order to get better perceptions on what pictures are being painted, what are the notions of agency as well as what potential implications the

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<sup>20</sup> Hall, L. 'Erasing Agency: Representations of Women Terrorists and the Intersection of Gender, Race and Ethnicity,' *Amsterdam Social Science*, 4:1 (2012), p.10.

specific representation has for our understanding of the conflict. The final concluding chapter will be further devoted to comparative analyses of the two case-studies, bringing together the final observations and conclusions on questions of representation of female violence and women's agency.

## 1 Feminist Literature and Gender Violence in International Relations

The role of women is only rarely discussed and examined within the field of international relations. As Anne Tickner observes, women are usually associated with the domestic sphere and statehood that need to be protected by their male counterparts.<sup>21</sup> Hence there are strong binary divisions created within our understanding of the international relations, where women are seen as the protected, private objects and men are labelled as the protectors and actors engaging in solving international crisis. Nevertheless, the more recent presence of women in military and the female activity in terrorist organizations has in many ways challenged such dichotomous imaginaries and the increased number of feminist scholars as well as Western media reporters started examining such phenomenon in order to find out what motivates women to move away from gender stereotypes and participate in violence. However, there are various images of gender violence and female fighters being presented across the scholarship assigning women different characteristics, attributes and motivations. To get a better understanding of the importance of women within international relations as well as the way gender is being connected with the notions of international security and violence the first chapter of this thesis will be dealing with feminist literature in greater depth. By examining and highlighting the main motives and images used across the literature one can gain a better perception about the established discourses, how they develop and further change in different directions.

### 1.1 Gender Security in International Relations

A number of analysts and feminist scholars have recently noticed how gender relations, the construction of national as well as international security frequently intermingle and further

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<sup>21</sup> Tickner, J. A. *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspective on Achieving Global Security*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1992), p. 7.

shape the nature of international relations.<sup>22</sup> Although many IR researchers claim that the discipline of international politics is rather gender neutral,<sup>23</sup> others argue that the very definition of security and violence is in many ways gendered affecting the overall nature and functioning of the international system. As Tickner states, nowhere are the gender binaries more apparent than in the field of international politics. According to such claims, the international environment continues to be defined in terms of “hegemonic masculinities,”<sup>24</sup> establishing the boundaries and power relations between the feminine, the private and masculine, the public and international. It could be thus stated that gender, international relations and the notions of security are tightly connected with each other, forming fixed discourses and practices that are further utilized within international politics. For Shepherd, the notions of international security are indeed performative and inherently gendered. The violence performs an ordering function through which the international and gendered subjects are reproduced and made irreducible.<sup>25</sup> Gendered hierarchies where women are labelled as the mothers of nation in need of security<sup>26</sup>, while men are perceived as international actors, protecting their state and hence also women thus create binaries within the international system and its overall definitions. In fact Cynthia Cockburn argues that gender is being utilized as a governing principle, idealized quality and symbol within the international relations,<sup>27</sup> giving specific meaning to the objects of international politics and so justifying certain policy actions. It thus becomes clear that there are certain established hierarchies

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<sup>22</sup> Enloe, C. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, (The University of California Press, Berkeley, 1990), Tickner, J. A. And Sjoberg, L. (2007), pp. 185-202.

<sup>23</sup> Halliday, F. ‘Hidden from international relations: women and the international arena’ p.159, cited in Tickner, J.A. ‘Feminist Perspectives on International Relations’ in *Handbook of International Relations*, edited by Walter Carlsnaes et al. (London, SAGE Publications, 2002), p.275

<sup>24</sup> Tickner, J. A., (1992), p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Shepherd, L.J. ‘Victims, Perpetrators and Actors’ Revisited: Exploring the Potential for a Feminist Reconceptualisation of (International) Security and (Gender) Violence,’ *BJPIR*, 9 (2007), p. 250.

<sup>26</sup> Enloe, C. (1990), p. 44.

<sup>27</sup> Cockburn, C. ‘The Gendered Dynamics of Armed Conflict and Political Violence,’ in *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors: Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*, edited by Caroline Moser and Fiona Clark, (Zed Books, 2001), p. 16.

placing gendered objects in contrast to each other while creating an almost naturalized image of international politics and political activities.

Therefore when taking into account the more recent cases of female violence and women's presence in military, they can be in many ways seen as challenging the dominant political hierarchies between the peaceful, protected women and the fighting, male protectors,<sup>28</sup> posing an important question about the construction of the world system and the overall place of gender in it. Many feminist scholars and political analysts hence started examining why women engage in violent actions as well as how female violence is further presented within the media and policy reports. Therefore, in order to better understand the role of gender within the international relations it is important to look closer at the literature dealing specifically with the phenomenon of female violence and observe whether and in what way does the dominant narratives of protected women and male protectors construct our perceptions of violence.

## 1.2 The Image of Female Violence

The increased number of women engaging in terrorism has been one of the most often analysed cases of female violence, challenging not only the dominant discourse of the international relations but, as also often believed, threatening the overall international security.<sup>29</sup> Feminist literature focusing on female terrorism therefore poses an interesting point of analyses for outlining images of female combatants and their further positioning within the international politics. The following section of the thesis will thus deal with

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<sup>28</sup> Sjoberg, L., and Gentry, C. E. *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics*, (London, Zed Books, 2007), pp. 5-8 and Enloe, C. *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War*, (University of California Press, 1993), p. 203.

<sup>29</sup> Center for American Progress, 'The Unaddressed Threat of Female Suicide Bombers,' 5. January 2012 Available at: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/news/2012/01/05/10992/the-unaddressed-threat-of-female-suicide-bombers/> [Accessed 15. April 2015]

feminist literature in greater depth and analyse how various perceptions of female fighters interact and further create specific narratives and categorizations.

Women engaging in political activities and especially in political violence, undermining the established frontiers of the international security, are frequently labelled by Western media and policy makers as unnatural and deviant in comparison to the traditional gender stereotypes, where women are always seen as in need of saving.<sup>30</sup> Since war and the conflict are mostly perceived as the male domain, female fighters and particularly female terrorists, as something extraordinary, consequently gain more media and public attention.<sup>31</sup> Many feminists, such as Mia Bloom<sup>32</sup> and Laura Sjoberg<sup>33</sup> hence state that the relations between women, gender and terrorism cannot be ignored within the current analyses of the international politics and that in order to understand the overall complexity of the issue, the feminine presence in terrorism has to be analysed in more detail. However when analysing the feminist literature it becomes clear that many of these authors diverge on their points of describing female motivations for joining the radical, terrorist organizations as well as how they should be perceived by general public.

When examining the broader body of feminist literature it quickly becomes apparent that one of the most cited explanations of women's violence is still connected with the dominant discourse of women's peacefulness and passivity. Some feminist scholars, such as Mia Bloom,<sup>34</sup> claim that in order to fully comprehend the rising phenomenon of female terrorism it is necessary to take into account women's personal experience, family relations, economic and cultural pressures. She believes that especially "revenge, redemption,

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<sup>30</sup> Åhäll, L. 'The Writting of Heroines: Motherhood and Female Agency in Political Violence,' *Security Dialogue*, 43:4 (2012), p. 112.

<sup>31</sup> Nacos, B. L., (2005), p. 437.

<sup>32</sup> Bloom, M. *Bombshell: The many faces of women terrorists*, (C. Hurst and Co. (Publishers) Ltd., London, 2011).

<sup>33</sup> Sjoberg, L. et al., 'Introduction' in *Women, Gender and Terrorism*, edited by Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry (Routledge, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Bloom, M. *Bombshell* (2011).

relationship, respect” as well as previous experience of sexual violence and rape are the main push factors for the female recruits.<sup>35</sup> In most of these cases, women in the service of terrorism are hence characterized as victims of patriarchy, forced to exchange their natural peacefulness for violence due to their horrific experiences and suppression. Many counter-terrorist analysts thus state that in order to deter female terrorism, the international community, especially the Western societies, should provide greater economic resources, education and social support to these women, making them less vulnerable to the propaganda and pressures of their male companions.<sup>36</sup> According to such claims women will always choose peacefulness over violence when given sufficient resources for freeing themselves from patriarchal oppression. In this case women are perceived as passive actors in need of support and guidance due to their feminine vulnerability. The feminists’ perceptions as well as anti-radicalization strategies hence again construct women and the gender relations through the binary divisions, defining terror as a significant threat not only to the overall international community and individual states but primarily to the women themselves, due to their vulnerabilities and dependencies on men.

On the other hand, in contrast to such claims feminists, such as Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry,<sup>37</sup> Cristina Masters<sup>38</sup> and others criticize the tendency to automatically see women as victims, engaging in violence simply due to personal reasons. As Dorit Naaman acknowledges, when looking at the representation of women and terrorism, the problem is that both terms present certain ideological expectations of performance rather than represent the actual events and actions,<sup>39</sup> further leading towards re-creation of traditional gender

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 235-236.

<sup>36</sup> Suttan, M. L. ‘The Rising Importance of Women in Terrorism and the Need to Reform Counterterrorism Strategy,’ *School of Advanced Military Studies*, (2009). p.51. and OSCE, ‘Women and Terrorist Radicalization Final Report,’ *Preventing Women Terrorist Radicalization*, Vienna (2013), pp.3-9.

<sup>37</sup> Sjoberg, L. and Gentry, C. E., (2007).

<sup>38</sup> Masters, C. ‘Femina Sacra: The War on/of Terror, Women and the Feminine,’ *Security Dialogue*, 40:1 (2009), pp. 29-49.

<sup>39</sup> Naaman, D., (2007), p. 934.



boundaries. In fact as Gentry states, by describing women purely as peaceful and non-violent, manipulated by men or misfortunate events into committing crimes, one fails to account for women's political, religious or broader societal convictions.<sup>40</sup> According to her analysis of Palestinian women, the female actions often arise from the commitment to communal solidarity and certain political goals, what makes female motivation to join terrorist organizations similar to their male counterparts. In contrast to general perceptions of failed maternalism and the personal stories of female love and sexual harassment, Palestine women join terrorist organizations due to their desires to be political figures in their own right.<sup>41</sup> Ignoring the female political activities by overemphasizing their personal experience and suffering may be thus quite problematic and identifying women with peacefulness and oppression simply contributes towards re-establishment of women's inferiority within the international system. As Gentry and Sjoberg observe, women who engage in political violence are frequently depicted as victims or sexual deviants, challenging the gender and social norms, only to be further robbed of their agency and placed into conformity with more general understanding of international politics and international relations.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, for these feminists it is important to analyse and further deconstruct the established images of female terrorism and so account for the broader complexity of the issue and motivations behind women's violence, rather than construct images to fit in the dominant discourse.

In fact, when striving to transcend and unpack the gender discourse created within the international relations many of the above mentioned critical feminists observe that there are various images of female violence being created and outlined within the media and scholarship, however all of the images are still in many ways resembling parts of the

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<sup>40</sup> Gentry, C. E. 'Twisted Materialism,' *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 11:2 (2009), p. 244.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>42</sup> Sjoberg, L. and Gentry, C. E., (2008), pp. 5-6.

dominant discourse of women's peacefulness and non-violence.<sup>43</sup> While, some of the female terrorists are depicted as victims, others are frequently labelled as "whores" and mad women and in contrast to all of these images there is also a category of women in military who are awarded agency, but only if not significantly challenging the binary gendered nature of the international system. Accounting for the differences in the representations of female fighters can thus uncover how various images are constructed and justified within media as well as the broader scholarship focusing on women's violence and terrorism, in accordance to their linkages with the dominant discourse of international relations.

### ***1.2.1 Victims, Heroes or Whores?***

Therefore, when examining the feminist literature in greater depth and when trying to get better understanding of not only the very nature of female terrorism but also of the overall international system and the dominant perceptions it is necessary to account for the various differences but also similarities between the three main images of female violence, such as victims, whores and heroes. Despite the fact that women in combat are still perceived as something extraordinary and atypical the different notions of agency assigned to different groups of women represent an important point for analysing female violence.

While as already discussed in more detail in the previous section, the idea of female terrorism remains mostly intertwined with notions of women's personal lives, oppressive patriarchal culture and religious radicalization,<sup>44</sup> there are also women who are seen as diverging from such narratives of peaceful but victimized women. In comparison to "good victims" in need of saving, women not fitting the image of vulnerable victims, challenging the general idea of gender security, are often labelled as "bad", monstrous women, unnaturally

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<sup>43</sup> Sjober, L. and Gentry, C. E. (2007), pp. 30-49.

<sup>44</sup> Suttan, M. L., p. 43.

remaking the relationship between sexuality and power.<sup>45</sup> As Eileen Macdonald acknowledges, women refusing to fit into the traditional discourse of gender violence are on many occasions regarded within the Western media as sexually loose, overly violent and rebellious fighters, often more dangerous than men.<sup>46</sup> Female fighters not fitting the idea of victimization are thus immediately described as mad or crazy monsters, refusing to accept their traditional roles as mothers of the nations, the protected and peaceful objects. Sjoberg and Gentry indeed observe that women engaging in violence are in many cases simply reduced to their sexuality, stripped of any responsibility for their action, labelled as mad “whores” not capable of clear thinking and agency.<sup>47</sup> International media thus often pay increased attention to the women enjoying violence as something extraordinary, and unnatural that cannot be accepted by rational international community, but rather have to be treated accordingly. Such notions are especially visible when dealing with female terrorists, such as the members of Basque ETA organization, refusing to accept the image of vulnerable victims and in many ways challenging the existence of the established political system. As many of the women accused of the anti-Spanish terrorist activities claimed, they were usually treated by policy makers and also media representatives as insane or “whores”<sup>48</sup> without any rationality or sense of political agency. Their political strategies for independence were simply presented as acts of illogical women who do not aim to achieve anything, just destruction and despair of the peaceful and ordered society.<sup>49</sup>

On the other hand, in contrast to the “whores,” and victims narrative there is another, idealized standard of “beautiful souls,” women who are still in need of protection, as in both

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<sup>45</sup> Nayak, M. ‘Orientalism and ‘Saving’ US State Identity after 9/11,’ *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 8:1 (2006), p.55.

<sup>46</sup> Macdonald, E. *Shoot the Women First*, (Fourth Estate Limited, London, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> Sjoberg, L. and Gentry, C. E. (2007), pp. 40-46.

<sup>48</sup> Hamilton, C. *Women and ETA: The Gender Politics of Radical Basque Nationalism*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2007), p.136.

<sup>49</sup> The New Zealand Herald, ‘ETA’s new generation of female fighters,’ 1. August 2009 Available at: [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/terrorism/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=340&objectid=10587920](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/terrorism/news/article.cfm?c_id=340&objectid=10587920) [Accessed 15. March 2015]

previous cases, but they are also heroic, rational and violent only when protecting Western societies and the established system of international politics. As Laura Sjoberg notices these female fighters are usually military women who are believed to be brave beyond femininity whilst constantly fulfilling the criteria of the naturalized political discourse.<sup>50</sup> These female military soldiers are usually seen as free, self-sacrificing and attractive agents standing in opposition to the terrorist women. The media's fascination with the strong US women fighting for the liberation of the whole international community during the 2003 Iraq war<sup>51</sup> as well as the newly trained female soldiers fighting against Taliban in Afghanistan<sup>52</sup> shows how certain cases of female violence are being praised over the others, while still being presented as something unnatural and extraordinary.

To understand the overall complexity of the female objectification it is hence important to take into account all three main images of women's violence outlined by feminist scholars and media. Analysing how various notions of gender violence and international security interact, how they are explained and further described in connection to the dominant gender discourse can in fact uncover many new insights not only about the feminist scholarship but also about the broader field of international relations. As Cristina Masters rightly points out, when looking at the images of female violence and women in combat, it is important to examine how sovereign power affects women's bodies and lives and thus also uncover particular masculine and racist biopolitics functioning within the wider political sphere.<sup>53</sup> Therefore in order to better comprehend how and why female combatants are represented in a certain manner it is important to analyse the role of various images and perceptions in greater depth. Only after unpacking the relationships and connections between the images as well as

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<sup>50</sup> Sjoberg, L. 'Agency, Militarized Femininity and Enemy Others: Observations from the War in Iraq,' *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 9:1 (2007), pp. 84-85.

<sup>51</sup> People, 'The Long Road Home,' 4. August 2003 Available at: <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20140685,00.html> [Accessed 5. April 2015]

<sup>52</sup> Fox News, 'America's Female Soldiers: Bravely Serving and Dying in the Line of Duty,' 27. May 2013 Available at: <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2013/05/27/america-female-soldiers-bravely-serving-and-dying-in-line-duty/> [Accessed 5. March 2015]

<sup>53</sup> Masters, C. (2009), pp. 32-33.

the power politics behind their construction, one can better understand the female violence, agency and the very nature of international politics.

## 2 Muslim Women and Female Violence

When dealing with feminists' literature concerning the issue of international relations and female violence it becomes clear that there are various images of women constructed in connection to the dominant international relation discourse. As it has been observed throughout the previous chapter, not all female fighters are perceived in the same manner and there are significant hierarchies established not only between men and women but also within the group of female fighters itself, posing an important question about representation of women and female violence. When asking why some groups of women in combat are presented as victims or even "whores" while others as brave heroes, post-colonial feminists argue that our perceptions of women are not simply categorized through the gender discourse, but women engaging in violence are also defined in accordance to their race, cultural belonging and the strict Orientalist distinction between "us" and "the others"<sup>54</sup> what locks women and the notions of female violence into more complex process of power politics. In fact it could be argued that especially the case of Muslim and Western women whose images are frequently placed in contrast to each other,<sup>55</sup> represents one of the clearest examples of such multiplicity. When referring to the Middle East, women and female bodies have been almost always at the centre of Western politics and desires through which certain policy actions and strategies against Muslim communities were justified. By describing Muslim women as either veiled, oppressed victims or irrational actors, while the Western women remain to be labelled as emancipated, 'beautiful souls' and role models challenging the patriarchal Muslim societies, the Western actors have been able to preserve their position in the region without being significantly questioned or challenged.<sup>56</sup> It can be thus claimed that

<sup>54</sup> Moallem, M. 'Muslim Women and the Politics of Representation,' *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 24:1 (2008), Nayak, M. (2006) p. 47.

<sup>55</sup> Hoodfar, H. 'The Veil in Their Minds and On Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women,' *Resources for Feminist Research*, 22:3/4 (1993), p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> Cunningham, K. J. 'Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism,' *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 26:3 (2003), p. 172.

the media's hierarchical representation of women, as good Western and bad Muslim women, is meant to keep the Western politics, values and identity in place, re-establishing the Western dominant position in contrast to the "other" and their different notions of agency.<sup>57</sup> Western observers describing Muslim female violence thus frequently avoid taking into account multiple motivations of women to engage in political activities and by creating homogenized and simplified images they further aim to reduce their female agency in accordance with Western, Orientalist standards. Therefore, the main purpose of this chapter is to analyse the issue of female political violence in the Middle East through more complex Orientalist narratives and further examine how power relations interact, assigning specific characteristics to different groups of women, constructing particular vision of the world and primarily of female violence. It will be argued that by asking who gets represented, in what way and under what conditions it is possible to uncover the notions behind the Orientalist politics of representation and to get a better understanding of objectification of women within the system of international relations.

## 2.1 Orientalist Representation of Women and the Politics of Middle East

Even though Muslim women were often at the centre of Western fascination, it can be claimed that after the 9/11 attacks and the following US intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, women from the Middle East gained once again increased attention within the media and policy reports. While Laura Bush argued that the US military action in these countries was simply a '*mission civilisatrice*' to rescue veiled Muslim women from patriarchal oppression<sup>58</sup>, according to Kevin Ayotte and Mary Husain, the Western invasion was rather an expression

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<sup>57</sup> Nayak, M. (2006), pp.44-46.

<sup>58</sup> Washington Post, 'Laura Bush on Taliban Oppression of Women,' 17. November 2001 Available from: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/laurabushtext\\_111701.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/laurabushtext_111701.html) [Accessed 5. September 2013]

of Orientalist policies that were far away from the humanitarian intervention. For them the presentation of Muslim women as victims in need of saving standing in opposition to the emancipated and strong women, such as the US first lady, Laura Bush, was tightly connected with the Western notions of power politics, highlighting the tight relations between women and Orientalism.<sup>59</sup> Women in these troubled countries hence quickly became affected not only by local gender relations but also by Orientalist divisions between the West and the Muslim “other.”

In fact as Meyda Yegenoglu argues, women are usually at the very centre of Orientalism.<sup>60</sup> The Orientalist notions of differences, where the positive images of the developed, Western “Self” are constructed and presented in contrast to negative images of the traditional “other,” further creating specific, imaginary space of Orient,<sup>61</sup> have to be thus further translated into our understanding of female representation in Western media and policy making. When analysing the positioning of Muslim women in media it hence often becomes clear that they are mostly presented as veiled passive ‘ghosts,’<sup>62</sup> universal and ahistorical category that are in all ways oppressed and sometimes even brainwashed by strong, dominant men and Islamic religion. As a reporter describing the “Liberation Day” in Afghanistan after the US intervention claims, the only possible explanation for the missing “burqa-burning revolution” which was automatically expected by the Western liberators could be the fact that the years of patriarchal oppression left a great mark and stigma on Afghan women.<sup>63</sup> Muslim women are thus described as not being able to fully understand their humiliation due to ahistorical traditions and long-lasting patriarchy and manipulation.

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<sup>59</sup> Ayotte, K. J. and Husain, M. E. ‘Securing Afghan Women: Neocolonialism, Epistemic Violence and the Rhetoric of the Veil,’ *NWSA Journal*, 17:3 (2005), p. 113.

<sup>60</sup> Yegenoglu, M. *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998), pp. 1-4.

<sup>61</sup> Said, E. *Orientalism* (London, Penguin Books Ltd., 2003).

<sup>62</sup> The term used by Ilana Ozerney when referring to Afghan women in their burqas, Ozerney, I. ‘The Liberation Day,’ 26. November 2001, Available at: [http://www.ilanaozernoy.com/writer/Liberation\\_Day.html](http://www.ilanaozernoy.com/writer/Liberation_Day.html) [Accessed 5. March 2015]

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.



However in contrast, Western women, such as Laura Bush giving the speech on Taliban's patriarchal cruelties, are seen as emancipated, smiling agents, knowledgeable about the oppression of Muslim women and eager to offer assistance to their helpless sisters.<sup>64</sup> Women from Western societies are therefore often labelled within media and politics as superior to Muslim women, creating idealized narratives of femininity and freedom. It could be therefore argued that examining the way images of women from different social backgrounds are being created and re-created in position to each other can uncover a lot about the current dominant political discourse and the structure of power relations between "us" and "the other." Looking at women, their agency and female violence through the Orientalist lens can bring in many new perspectives about the Western policy making as well as the media reporting. To get a better understanding of such practices, the more detailed deconstruction of images of Muslim and Western women engaging in violence is thus necessary and will be discussed in greater depth throughout the following sections of this chapter.

### ***2.1.1 Female Fighters and the Islamic Monstrous Societies***

Looking at the ways Muslim women are presented within Western media and policy strategies it quickly becomes clear that the Orientalist narratives play an important role. As it has been already argued in the previous part of the chapter, the main aim behind the victimization of Afghan and Iraqi women was to create a homogenized category of objects through which the US military attacks could be justified and legitimized. Western societies have thus frequently regarded Muslim women as one coherent group in need of liberal emancipation without taking into account the broader complexity and multiplicities of the issues. In fact the Afghan and Iraqi women resisting the US presence in the region as well as

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<sup>64</sup> Dubriwny, T. N. 'First Ladies and Feminism: Laura Bush as Advocate for Women's and Children's Rights,' *Women's Studies in Communication*, 28:1 (2005), pp. 84-85.

the emancipatory policies of unveiling were often either not given enough publicity or they were further labelled as brainwashed, manipulated women, still under the pressure of their male companions or Islamic religion,<sup>65</sup> what in many ways reduced their political agency to the established and naturalized image of Muslim women as uneducated victims.

Furthermore it could be argued that the strict Orientalist divisions between civilized “West” and the barbaric Muslim “other” are even more apparent when examining the images of women engaging in political violence. As analysts dealing more specifically with the question of Palestinian or Al-Qaeda female terrorists notice, Western communities constantly reinforce the image of victims and patriarchal structures upon violent Muslim women,<sup>66</sup> further regarding them as tools in hands of their male counterparts. While many of the Palestinian women fighting within terrorist organizations view themselves as legitimate militant and political actors, trying to contribute towards the liberation of their country as well as the broader Muslim community from foreign occupation,<sup>67</sup> their political activities are only rarely recognized as expressions of female agency and rather overshadowed by reports about personal, horrific life events, such as sexual humiliation, and manipulation of these women by their male companions. As Gentry observes in the case of Palestinian female suicide bombers their childlessness, unfulfilled maternal role and family honour were described as the main motivations for women to join a terrorist organization whereas their political experience of the long-lasting Palestine-Israeli conflict were often not taken into account.<sup>68</sup> It could be therefore argued that the agency of Muslim women that does not fulfil the Orientalist standards of women’s victimization, is in many ways re-created through images of sexualized and

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<sup>65</sup> Abu-Lughod, L. ‘Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others,’ *American Anthropologist*, 104:3 (2002), p.785.

<sup>66</sup> Naam, D. (2007), Hasso, F. S. ‘Discursive and Political Deployment by/of the Palestine Women Suicide Bombers/Martyrs,’ *Feminist Review*, 81, (2005), pp. 23-51. and Gentry, C. E. ‘The Neo-Orientalist Narratives of Women’s Involvement in Al-Qaeda,’ in *Women, Gender and Terrorism*, edited by Laura Sjoborg and Caron E. Gentry, (University of Georgia Press, 2011), pp. 176-193.

<sup>67</sup> Macdonald, E. (1991), p. 132.

<sup>68</sup> Gentry, (2009), pp. 244-245.

irrational women who are incapable of governing their violent activities. Female suicide attacks and other terrorists' acts are hence mostly associated with monstrous Islamic societies which either push women to such horrific action or on some occasions even create such unnatural 'female monsters.'<sup>69</sup> When analysing the Western perceptions of Muslim women it thus becomes clear that the images of mad women are tightly connected with the images of victims in need of saving, reproducing the Orientalist power divisions as well as further legitimizing the Western politics within the Middle Eastern region.

### 2.1.2 Western "*Beautiful Souls*"

On the other hand, in order to better account for the Western Orientalist power politics and practices it is also important to study how Western women or even the pro-Western Muslim women engaging in fights within the Middle Eastern regions are presented by Western media. In fact it could be argued that when looking at news articles about the conflicts occurring in the Middle East, images of veiled Muslim women are quite often accompanied by contrasting images of pretty, smiling and brave Western women. As already stated in the first chapter of this thesis, when describing the three main images of female fighters, Western women in military are usually referred to as "beautiful souls," who despite being engaged in war and violence still remain feminine, maternal, caring.<sup>70</sup> When analysing the Western newspaper articles informing about the US women in military it is indeed not difficult to find statements about their "contagious passion for helping and protecting those less fortunate" than them, bravely sacrificing their perfect Western lives and loving families.<sup>71</sup> The Western woman thus serves as a prototype of perfect woman, representing true values

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<sup>69</sup> Naam, D.,(2007), p.937.

<sup>70</sup> Sjoberg, L. (2007), p. 93.

<sup>71</sup> FoxNews, 'America's Female Soldiers: Bravely serving and dying in the line of duty,' 27. May 2013

Available at: <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2013/05/27/america-female-soldiers-bravely-serving-and-dying-in-line-duty/>

and engaging in the right type of violence without challenging the established structures of the US military.

One of the US soldiers, Jessica Lynch, serving and even being kidnapped in Iraq was described as the clear example of the “beautiful soul.” The image of pretty, white and exceptionally brave woman, fighting the Iraqi male terrorists gained widespread attention of Western media when captured during one of the violent attacks,<sup>72</sup> immediately becoming the symbol of all American values and freedoms. As Deepa Kumar states, the media reports about Lynch, quickly associated this female army representative with all the Western “enlightened attitudes” and values further emphasizing the argument that the US was the only legitimate actor able to save the Iraqi people from their oppression.<sup>73</sup> It could be hence argued that by placing Lynch into direct opposition not only to the Iraqi terrorists but especially to the victimized Iraqi women, the Western media reinforced the Orientalist hierarchies establishing clear boundaries between our advanced and their traditional gender values. In addition, the more recent example of the female pilot from UAE fighting alongside the Western forces against the Islamic State in Syria also shows how the notion of Western values and pro-Western activities shape and affect the overall representation of female fighters. As Jessica Lynch, the female pilot Al Mansouri also got praised by Western media for her emancipation and bravery when resisting the patriarchal ISIS cruelties, being accepted as one of the strong female agents and heroines.<sup>74</sup>

When looking at these examples it can be noticed that Western female soldiers accompanying their male army counterparts, are frequently objectified and presented in a way to create perfect image of Western values and principles. Compared to Muslim female

<sup>72</sup> Pin-Fat, V. and Stern, M, ‘The Scripting of Private Jessica Lynch: Biopolitics, Gender and the Feminization of the US Military,’ *Alternatives*, 30 (2005).

<sup>73</sup> Kumar, D., ‘War Propaganda and (Ab)uses of Women,’ *Feminist Media Studies*, 4:3 (2004), p. 297.

<sup>74</sup> CNN, ‘UAE’s first female fighter pilot led airstrike against ISIS,’ 9. October 2014 Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/25/world/meast/uae-female-fighter-pilot/> [5. March 2015]

terrorists, Western women are perceived as active agents, protecting the less fortunate, irrational Muslim women that in many ways justify their female violence and political participation, further demonizing the patriarchal culture of local communities. The notion of agency and their political determination of spreading liberal Western values are thus highlighted above all other activities and motivations which might be also leading these women in their fights, putting the US women in direct opposition to Muslim female terrorists.

## 2.2 Defining Female Agency

When taking both of the above examined images of female fighters together it indeed becomes clear that the issue of female agency comes quite often to the foreground of the analyses. As it has been already stated at the beginning of this chapter, Orientalist narratives frequently assign agency to Western female fighters while denying agency to Muslim female terrorists, in a way establishing naturalized principles and homogenized definition of agency. As Jessica Auchter states, when dealing with the images of gender violence and female fighters we often act as “if agency is a matter of common sense,” rather than further questioning the way such definitions come into being.<sup>75</sup> The divisions between Muslim victims and Western brave women are thus often taken for granted without examining the impact of the Orientalist strategies and politics of representations.

However when studying female violence in connection to the Middle East it has to be acknowledged that agency is a twofold concept, which is not given but rather constructed by power relations, further shaping our understanding of women and the world around us in specific directions.<sup>76</sup> Therefore as well as the contrasting images of women engaging in

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<sup>75</sup> Auchter, J. (2012), p. 121.

<sup>76</sup> Butler, J. ‘Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the question of postmodernism,’ (1992), p.13. cited in Åhäll, L. ‘Motherhood, Myth and Gendered Agency in Political Violence,’ *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 14:1 (2012), p. 106.

violence which are affected by the Orientalist narratives, also the female agency is being created in accordance to dominant discourses and further assigned accordingly. As Chandra Mohanty argues, the construction of monolithic female agency purely based on Western feminist experience, subjectivity and politics, in many ways overlooks and overshadows different types of agency developed by “the other” women in diverse contexts and situations.<sup>77</sup> The women with different types of agency, engaging in different activities to their Western counterparts thus cannot be perceived as fully-fledged agents without destroying the mainstream conceptions. Rather it is often the case that the agency of Muslim women is re-defined to fit the already established perceptions. As it has been observed when discussing Palestinian female terrorists, despite their claims of political agency and emancipation, their membership in terrorist organization has been simply regarded by Western media as “another example of their traditional, subordinate role in society.”<sup>78</sup> By denying their agency and labelling these women as victims, the media reports hence in a way re-established the hierarchical divisions between Palestinian communities and Western ideas of emancipation, further preserving the homogenized Orientalist definition of agency. In fact, when analysing the similar issue of Afghan women, Ayotte and Husain argue that the agency of Afghan women during the US self-proclaimed “*mission civilisatrice*” was often reduced by media and policy makers to the “conformity to popular US notions of feminist liberation”<sup>79</sup> legitimating the Western intervention and political strategies.

In addition to such claims it could be argued, that when taking into account the previously mentioned cases of Muslim women fighting along the Western troops either in Syria or other troubled Middle Eastern countries, the Western standards of agency have been once again reinforced and pushed upon these women. The images of young, smiling woman

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<sup>77</sup> Mohanty, C. T., *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, (Duke University Press, 2004), p. 31.

<sup>78</sup> Sjoberg, L. and Gentry, C. E. (2007), p. 212.

<sup>79</sup> Ayotte, K. J. and Husain, M. E. (2005), p. 121.

from the United Arab Emirates joining fights against the oppressive ISIS regime were quickly distributed around mass media, praising her bravery and emphasizing her extensive desire for emancipation despite the disagreement of her strongly traditional and religious family.<sup>80</sup> At this point it thus becomes clear that the notions of agency are often politicized and can be awarded to Muslim female actors only when in accordance with already set Western principles. The Western idea of female emancipation from traditional Muslim culture and practices is therefore often used as the universalized model for recognizing the agency of female fighters and further accepting them within the political community.

By looking at the construction of female agency and the way it is assigned to different groups of women at different times it hence becomes clear that agency is not an objective concept but rather shaped and influenced by Orientalist narratives and dichotomous divisions between “us” and “the other.” While the Muslim female fighters resisting Western values, fighting for their own political ideals, further posing a threat to Western communities and principles are either denied their agency or even demonized,<sup>81</sup> the women sharing liberal beliefs and the common goals with Western states, such as the US military women or Muslim women fighting against the Islamic terrorists, are immediately accepted as active and rational agents who have to be supported and praised for their brave actions. Similarly it can be argued, that the current ISIS crisis has been also in many ways defined through the contrasting images of female bodies. However, at this point the Western female migrants to ISIS have been victimized and stripped of their female agency, whereas the pro-Western Kurdish female fighters battling Islamic terrorists have been labelled as brave and emancipated heroes of the Middle East, further presenting an important point for analyzing

<sup>80</sup> BBC, ‘Islamic State crisis: UAE female pilot in air strikes,’ 25. September 2014 Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29367214> [Accessed 20. April 2015], Daily Mail, ‘Arab woman pilot who is poster girl for Gulf states blitz on ISIS is disowned by her family for bombing Sunni heroes of Iraq and Levant,’ 28. September 2014, Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2771731/Family-UAE-s-female-fighter-pilot-spearheaded-attacks-against-ISIS-publicly-disown-taking-brutal-international-aggression-against-Syria.html> [Accessed 20. April 2015]

<sup>81</sup> Gentry, C. E. (2011), p. 186.

and examining the Orientalist narratives in new dimensions. The purpose of this thesis is thus to adopt the Orientalist framework of representation as well as the theories of female violence and examine their validity in connection to the conflict in Iraq and Syria. Therefore the next two chapters will be devoted to the discourse analyses of media articles dealing with the ISIS crisis, deconstructing the images of ISIS and Kurdish women in order to analyse how Orientalist power politics function, objectify and further shift the notions of female agency in accordance to the dominant political strategies.



### 3 Kurdish Women Battling ISIS

With the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the female Kurdish fighters have gained increased attention within Western media. As previously in case of the US female soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, the news about beautiful, young girls, fighting against the cultural oppression of women, have quickly secured the interest of Western public. In fact, many media articles stating that the ISIS fighters fear being killed by Kurdish women and thus “losing 72 virgins for martyrdom,” started emphasizing the extraordinary strength of these female fighters<sup>82</sup> while at the same time demasculinizing ISIS terrorists and their actions in the region. In addition to this, the journalists have often published interviews with individual female fighters, especially highlighting the numbers of Islamic terrorists killed by each one of these Kurdish women<sup>83</sup> while also later on updating the articles with information about their tragic but heroic death during the struggle against ISIS violence.<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless as many of the analysts notice, the media tend to paint a rather rosy picture of these Kurdish heroines.<sup>85</sup> The ongoing inequalities within Kurdish societies and the previous labelling of Kurdish political groups as terrorists usually remain hidden or re-structured by the media’s attempts to create idealized images of women, promoting the pro-Western, liberal values. In order to better understand the objectification of the women’s bodies during the ISIS crisis it is therefore important to examine the case of the Kurdish female fighters in greater depth, further accounting for the construction of various images as well as for the Orientalist politics of representation within Western media.

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<sup>82</sup> Christian Post, ‘ISIS Militants Fear Being Killed by Woman and Losing 72 Virgins for Martyrdom; Kurdish Co-Commander Defending Kobane is Female,’ 15. October 2014, Available at: <http://www.christianpost.com/news/isis-militants-fear-being-killed-by-woman-and-losing-72-virgins-for-martyrdom-kurdish-co-commander-defending-kobane-is-female-128058/> [Accessed 20. November 2014]

<sup>83</sup> International Business Times, ‘Kurdish Female Fighter Rehana Kills 100 ISIS Jihadis Single-handedly,’ 14. October 2014 Available at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/heroine-kobani-kurdish-female-fighter-rehana-kills-100-isis-jihadis-single-handedly-1469989> [Accessed 5. March 2015]

<sup>84</sup> Foreign Policy, ‘Meet the Badass Women Fighting the Islamic State,’ Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/12/meet-the-badass-women-fighting-the-islamic-state/>

<sup>85</sup> Ruwaydah Mustafa in Aljazeera, Stream, 11 March 2015, Available at: <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201503111528-0024619> [Accessed 11. March 2015]

### 3.1 Kurdish Female Fighters and Western Media

Since the very beginning of Syrian Civil War and the ISIS crisis Kurdish women have fought alongside their male counterparts, joining the People's Defence Forces (YPG) and later on even establishing their own independent and autonomous female organization, the Women's Defence Unit (YPJ). It is estimated that currently 35% of the overall Kurdish forces are women, accounting for almost 15 000 fighters operating in Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan,<sup>86</sup> what many Western observers perceive as a rather significant number for such traditional, Middle Eastern societies. However alongside the statistics about the large number of women fighting within the military forces, with the emergence of ISIS many reporters increasingly started reporting on the extraordinary female military leadership. The reports about women serving as co-commanders cooperating and even giving orders to their male comrades, such as brave Colonel Nahida Ahmed Rashid leading the peshmerga female as well as male fighters against ISIS, have been frequently emphasized by Western media when referring to the Kurdish units.<sup>87</sup> The idea that Kurdish women are not only affected by but also govern and further influence the overall developments of the war have quickly become a central feature of the reports about the struggles of Kurdish populations and ISIS cruel practices against the people from the region.

The media thus often highlighted the strength of these women, describing them as “incredibly brave” and “inspirational” women rather than passive victims of the war, heroines willing to fight for not only their women's rights, families but also for women from other

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<sup>86</sup> Kurdish Question, 'Beyond the Battlefield: The Kurdish Women's Radical Struggle,' Available at: <http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/woman/beyond-the-battlefield-the-kurdish-women-s-radical-struggle/380-beyond-the-battlefield-the-kurdish-women-s-radical-struggle.html> [Accessed 5. March 2015]

<sup>87</sup> PRI, 'Meet the female colonel leading Kurdish forces into battle against ISIS,' 7. August 2014 Available at: <http://www.pri.org/stories/2014-08-07/meet-female-colonel-leading-kurdish-forces-battle-against-isis> [Accessed 5. May 2015]

ethnic groups.<sup>88</sup> According to such claims, the Kurdish women have “more to lose than anyone else,” due to the threat of the sexual enslavement and oppression,<sup>89</sup> however they are still bravely engaging into fights and even sacrificing their lives either during the suicide attacks<sup>90</sup> or when captured by ISIS fighters.<sup>91</sup> In this case women are perceived as strong and sometimes even more powerful and determined than their male counterparts,<sup>92</sup> joining armed groups in order to protect their purity, rights and their children from the evils of ISIS terrorism. Such exceptional images of female agency have thus further demonized the overall organization of the Islamic State, suggesting that the practices of the group are indeed more horrific than ever, making even women take up arms in order to resist harsh male oppressions. As the media reports often highlight, Kurdish women never wanted to kill, however ISIS are “vile human beings,” killing children and raping women and therefore they have no other choice but to exchange their peacefulness and purity for violence.<sup>93</sup>

In this case Kurdish women can be seen as ideal women, ‘beautiful souls’ for Western communities, fighting for their rights and equalities against the radical Islamic group which kills and harasses people in the name of religion. In fact, in 2014 the Kurdish female fighters were even chosen by CNN as the most inspiring women of the year, for their “courageous role in the war against the Islamic state”<sup>94</sup> and increasingly more and more journalists have

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<sup>88</sup> Daily Mail, ‘We ask women all over the world not to underestimate themselves,’ 23. October 2014 Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2802992/We-ask-women-world-not-underestimate-Meet-inspirational-Kurdish-women-given-fight-ISIS-militants.html> [Accessed 5. April 2015]

<sup>89</sup> CNN, ‘Why Women Fight Against ISIS,’ 30. October 2014, Available at:

<http://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/14/opinion/ghitis-isis-women-slavery/> [Accessed 5. April 2015]

<sup>90</sup> The Times, ‘Mother is Hailed a heroine for suicide attack on jihadists,’ 7. October 2014, Available at: <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article4228864.ece> [Accessed 4. April 2015]

<sup>91</sup> International Business Times, ‘19-Year-Old Kurdish Woman Kills Herself Rather Than Falling into ISIS Hands,’ 3. October 2014, Available at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/syria-19-year-old-kurdish-woman-fighter-kills-herself-rather-falling-into-isis-hands-1468420> [Accessed 5. April 2015]

<sup>92</sup> World Policy Blog, ‘Kurdish Female Fighters Take Stand Against ISIS,’ 12. August 2014, Available at: <http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2014/08/12/kurdish-female-fighters-take-stand-against-isis> [Accessed 4. April 2015]

<sup>93</sup> International Business Times, ‘A Kurdish Female Fighter’s War Story,’ 23. October 2014, Available at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/kurdish-female-fighters-war-story-i-dont-know-how-many-ive-killed-kobani-i-dont-see-1471412> [5. April 2015]

<sup>94</sup> CNN, ‘Leading Women’s most inspiring women of 2014,’ 27. January 2015, Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/12/22/business/leading-women-2014/> [Accessed 28. January 2015]

enthusiastically claimed that the extraordinary strength of these women represents a slap in the face of ISIS “on behalf of progressives everywhere.”<sup>95</sup> In this way they further depict Kurdish bravery and determination as a perfect example to all women in the broader Middle East, whose freedoms are being violated by oppressive, cultural and religious traditions.<sup>96</sup> When analysing the Western reports and articles it hence becomes clear that the media in many ways construct idealized images of women’s motivation and their female agency while overshadowing their male counterparts, who are mentioned within reports only rarely, mostly in connection to the recruits from the West,<sup>97</sup> as well as the different problems these Kurdish women have to face on an everyday basis. However, while some commentators celebrate such images of emancipated Kurdish women as a success in transcending the typical Orientalist pictures of Muslim women as victims and backward,<sup>98</sup> it could be claimed that the images of Kurds and the reports about women’s emancipation are often very romanticised, not credibly describing the whole situation, even misrepresenting the political agency of these women, leaving important features and strategies out of the overall picture.

### **3.1.2 Kurdish Women as Terrorists?**

In order to better understand how the Western media operate, create and even re-shape certain images according to frameworks that fit their reports and especially the dominant political discourses, it is necessary to examine the case of Kurdish female fighters in more

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<sup>95</sup> International Business Times, ‘Rehana the angel of Kobani: Social Media Myths in the War against Isis Terror,’ 28. October 2014, Available at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/rehana-angel-kobani-social-media-myths-war-against-isis-terror-1472167> [Accessed 3. April 2015]

<sup>96</sup> International Business Times, ‘The Real Story of Narin Afrini and the Kurdish Female Lions Terrorising Islamic State,’ 15. October 2014, Available at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/frontline-isis-real-story-narin-afrini-kurdish-female-lions-terrorising-islamic-front-1470119> [Accessed 5. March 2015]

<sup>97</sup> Daily Mail, ‘Meet the Peshmerga’s International Brigade,’ 21. April 2015, Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3049019/Peshmerga-s-foreign-legion-fighting-alongside-defeat-ISIS-workers-ex-soldiers-brave-men-world-teaming-Kurdish-forces.html> [Accessed 29. May 2015]

<sup>98</sup> International Business Times, ‘Female Fighters Battling Isis in Kobani Turned into Sex Objects by Scared West,’ Available at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/female-fighters-battling-isis-kobani-turned-into-sex-objects-by-scared-west-1472471>

detail. In fact it is interesting to notice that before the Syrian conflict and the emergence of the Islamic State, the female fighting units of the PKK Kurdish organization enjoyed only scarce publicity of international media. Rather the reports about brutal honour killings and female genital mutilations in the Iraqi Kurdistan<sup>99</sup> as well as the victimization of the female Kurdish suicide terrorists have been more widespread phenomena. In fact, it is also not such a long time ago that the Kurdish organizations with their female combatants were included within the international list of terrorist organizations,<sup>100</sup> being partially deleted from the database only after their battles against the Islamic State and their cooperation with Western communities were recognized.<sup>101</sup> The media images of not only Kurds in general but primarily of Kurdish female fighters were hence described in a different manner than they are in connection to the ISIS crisis.

In contrast to more recent claims that Kurdish women are the “most emancipated women of the Middle East,” protecting not only their regional communities but also the general Western public from the evils of the Islamic State,<sup>102</sup> Western observers and media often argued in their pre-ISIS reports that almost 76% of Kurdish attacks were committed by women and hence they were posing a serious threat to the overall international security.<sup>103</sup> Due to their armed struggles against Turkey and other states with Kurdish minorities, Kurdish

<sup>99</sup> Radio Free Europe, ‘Female Genital Mutilation Said to be Widespread in Iraq’s, Iran’s Kurdistan,’ 10. March 2009, Available at:

[http://www.rferl.org/content/Female\\_Genital\\_Mutilation\\_Said\\_To\\_Be\\_Widespread\\_In\\_Iraqs\\_Irans\\_Kurdistan/1507621.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Female_Genital_Mutilation_Said_To_Be_Widespread_In_Iraqs_Irans_Kurdistan/1507621.html) [Accessed 5. April 2015], Huffington Post, ‘Kurdish Teenager’s Honor Killing Fades to Memory as Iraq Violence Swells,’ 17. July 2014, Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/the-groundtruth-project/kurdish-teenagers-honor-k\\_b\\_5596318.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/the-groundtruth-project/kurdish-teenagers-honor-k_b_5596318.html) [Accessed 5. April 2015]

<sup>100</sup> Kurdish Question, ‘Beyond the Battlefield: The Kurdish Women’s Radical Struggle,’ Available at: <http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/woman/beyond-the-battlefield-the-kurdish-women-s-radical-struggle.html>

<sup>101</sup> Aljazeera, ‘Western fascination with badass Kurdish women,’ Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/10/western-fascination-with-badas-2014102112410527736.html>

<sup>102</sup> International Business Times, ‘Frontline ISIS,’ Available at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/frontline-isis-real-story-narin-afrini-kurdish-female-lions-terrorising-islamic-front-1470119>

<sup>103</sup> Center for American Progress, ‘The Unaddressed Threat of Female Suicide Bombers,’ Available at: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/news/2012/01/05/10992/the-unaddressed-threat-of-female-suicide-bombers/>, Stratfor Global Intelligence, ‘On the Cusp: The Next Wave of Female Suicide Bombers?’ 19. September 2009, Available at: [https://www.stratfor.com/cusp\\_next\\_wave\\_female\\_suicide\\_bombers](https://www.stratfor.com/cusp_next_wave_female_suicide_bombers) [Accessed 25. February 2015]

female terrorists diverging from their traditional female roles as mothers and peaceful individuals used to be looked at with horror, aversion and sometimes even pity. To emphasize their gender and overall brutality of the whole Kurdish society after one of the unsuccessful suicide attacks in Turkey, the media started labelling these women as “murderers with highlights,”<sup>104</sup> describing them as inhuman women trying to invade and destroy modern societies.

Furthermore, in connection to such claims, the victimisation of Kurdish female members of the terrorist organization also played a crucial role within media. Although it has been rarely acknowledged by the journalists that Kurdish women were important members of the PKK’s struggles for the Kurdish independence, enjoying the same training and conditions as their male counterparts,<sup>105</sup> there were also reports informing about the cruel methods, such as women’s kidnapping, used by male leaders to force these women into joining the organization.<sup>106</sup> The often described cases of unfortunate family situations, the death of relatives<sup>107</sup> and the cultural oppression of women with the societies as well as the sexual harassment and humiliation by Turks and their own male comrades<sup>108</sup> also strongly contributed towards victimization and partial demonization of female political activities. Kurdish societies were thus frequently presented to the Western public through mixed images of their violent terrorist acts, women’s oppression as well as their consequent radicalization. However, as one of the female Kurdish activists, Dilar Dirik, notices, after the emergence of ISIS and its significant threat to the West, the previous images of female terrorists have been

<sup>104</sup> Altınay, E. ‘The Terrorists with Highlights: Kurdish Female Suicide Bombers in Mainstream Turkish Media,’ in *Controversial Images: Media Representations on the Edge*, edited by Feona Attwood et al. (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), p. 85.

<sup>105</sup> International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, ‘Messengers of Death- Female Suicide Bombers,’ 12. February 2003, Available at: <http://www.ict.org.il/Article.aspx?ID=854> [Accessed 20. January 2015]

<sup>106</sup> The Jamestown Foundation, ‘PKK recruitment of female operatives,’ 11. September 2007, Available at: [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=4394#.VU-d9Pntmkp](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4394#.VU-d9Pntmkp) [Accessed 5. February 2015]

<sup>107</sup> BBC, ‘Turkey and the PKK: The Kurdish Women who Take Up Arms,’ 15. February 2013, Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-21026273> [Accessed 5. May 2015]

<sup>108</sup> Rajan, V. G. Julie, *Women Suicide Bombers: Narratives of Violence*, (Oxon, Routledge, 2011), p.104.

quickly overlooked by Western media and policy makers, further being replaced by new sensational images of brave, emancipated Kurdish female fighters.<sup>109</sup> It can be indeed observed, that while previously the female suicide bombers struggling for Kurdish issue were seen as brutal women or victims of male oppression, the more recent female suicide mission against ISIS was described as “martyrdom” and heroic act, defeating the evils of ISIS.<sup>110</sup> The more complex picture of Kurdish female political agency thus remains to be currently overlooked and even ignored within the Western media, simplifying the struggles of Kurdish women by connecting their agency purely with struggles against the Islamic State and overshadowing their calls for Kurdish independence and broader equality. By taking into account the different images of Kurdish female fighters and the notions of their agency presented within Western media one can hence uncover important insights into practices of Western objectification and Orientalist representation.

### 3.2 Western Orientalism and the Politics of Representation

Looking at the Kurdish case it is thus important to acknowledge how various images of female fighters are created, re-created and utilized at different times and within different situations. Although many of the commentators saw the current coverage of Kurdish female fighters as active agents as a crucial step away from Western Orientalism,<sup>111</sup> it could be argued that after more detailed examination it becomes clear that female bodies still play an important role within Western policy making and mass media.

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<sup>109</sup> Aljazeera, ‘Western fascination With Badass Kurdish Women,’ Available at:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/10/western-fascination-with-badas-2014102112410527736.html>

<sup>110</sup> Daily Mail, ‘Kurdish Mother-of-Two launches suicide attack to slow Islamic State advance in desperate battle for Kobane,’ 6. October 2014, Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2782092/Mystery-surrounds-fate-Kurdish-female-fighter-poster-girl-reports-emerge-killed-bullet-avoid-taken-hostage-ISIS.html> [Accessed 5. March 2015]

<sup>111</sup> International Business Times, ‘Female fighters battling Isis in Kobani turned into sex objects by scared West,’ Available at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/female-fighters-battling-isis-kobani-turned-into-sex-objects-by-scared-west-1472471>

As Chandra Mohanty claims, women and gender are crucial parts of Orientalism, that further need to be defined as the construction of knowledge about the Third-World, Muslim women by Western feminists and observers.<sup>112</sup> Therefore the very fact that Kurdish female fighters immediately gained such extensive attention within Western media when reporting on the Islamic State and the Middle East, can be seen as an Orientalist act.<sup>113</sup> The very connection of both, the fascination with women from Muslim communities and the media presentation of certain types of female's agency can thus be accepted as examples of long-lasting political objectification and Orientalization of non-Western, Muslim communities. Therefore the current shift in media description of Kurdish women from oppressed or mad terrorists to emancipated and brave women cannot be perceived as challenging the Western, Orientalist power politics. As Judith Butler claims, the representation and political aspects go hand in hand, as representation is an "operative term within a political process" which seeks to gain visibility and legitimacy, creating new political narratives and discourses.<sup>114</sup> In this case, the media and policy makers are able to shape and establish new attitudes by emphasizing certain issues and traits about the objects they are using for their policy purposes.<sup>115</sup> It could be hence argued that Western Orientalism and objectification of female bodies is quite influential when dealing with the issue of Kurdish female fighters. Although Western policy makers frequently ignored the Kurdish pro-Western sentiments when refusing to support their independence movements,<sup>116</sup> with the rise of ISIS terrorism there have been new pictures being presented. However, as many Kurdish female activists argue, the recent "white-washing of the Kurdish women's resistance" still remain to suit predominantly the

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<sup>112</sup> Mohanty, C. T. 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', *Feminist Review*, 30 (1998), p. 61.

<sup>113</sup> Daniels, J. L. 'Veil: Meaning and Failure of a Political System,' in *International Relations and Islam*, edited by Nassef Manabilang Adiong, p.13.

<sup>114</sup> Butler, J. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, cited in Rajan, V. G. Julie, (2011), p. 9.

<sup>115</sup> Haque, F. 'Global Media, Islamophobia, and its Impact on Conflict Resolution,' *Institute of Hazrat Mohamamad*, Working Group: Islam and Media, p. 4.

<sup>116</sup> CNN, 'The Kurdish Women Fighting ISIS,' Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/03/12/world/cnnphotos-female-peshmerga-fighters/>



perceptions of Western audience,<sup>117</sup> extending the political agency to Kurdish populations only when it relates to Western interests, in this case the onslaught of ISIS militiamen.<sup>118</sup> The real agency and political goals of Kurdish female fighters are hidden, shaped according to Western standards and ideas about the female emancipation. Kurdish women seem to be awarded political agency only as far as it serves the Western benefits and interests.

In addition, the overall simplification, reductionism and even homogenization of Kurdish women and their political agency can be also in many ways connected with the Orientalist politics of representation<sup>119</sup> where the general complexity of the issue is reduced to the single image fitting the dominant Western discourse. As many of the Kurdish female activists argued, the West constructs rather idealized picture of Kurdish female fighters and the Kurdish communities, failing to account for the broader multiplicity of the issues and problems Kurds have to face within different countries, such as Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria, where they form a minority. In fact as it has been recently observed by few analysts, while Western media are fascinated by the fights of Kurdish women against ISIS in Iraq, Turkey and Syria, the struggles of their Iranian female counterparts against the Iranian oppression go largely unnoticed.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore it is also important to acknowledge that although Kurds in Turkey and Syria can be seen as more liberal, the Iraqi Kurds still remain quite traditional and patriarchal,<sup>121</sup> that indeed does not fully reflect the images of emancipated and strong Kurdish women painted by media. Therefore when analysing the current cases of Kurdish female fighters it is necessary to realize that the Orientalist practices of Western media frequently

<sup>117</sup> Kurdish Question, 'Beyond the Battlefield: The Kurdish Women's Radical Struggle,' Available at:

<http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/woman/beyond-the-battlefield-the-kurdish-women-s-radical-struggle.html>

<sup>118</sup> Huffington Post, 'Foreign Media Coverage of Kurdish Conflicts must Change,' 2. December 2014, Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ruwayda-mustafah/kurdistan\\_b\\_6245446.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ruwayda-mustafah/kurdistan_b_6245446.html) [Accessed 5. May 2015]

<sup>119</sup> Zine, J. 'Between Orientalism and Fundamentalism: The Politics of Muslim Women's Feminist Engagement,' *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights*, 3:1 (2006), p. 9.

<sup>120</sup> Al-Monitor, 'Iran's Kurds rise up as their leaders remain divided,' 11. May 2015, Available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/iran-turkey-syria-kurds-iranian-kurds-rise-up.html#> [Accessed 28. May 2015]

<sup>121</sup> Aljazeera, Stream, 11 March 2015 Available at: <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201503111528-0024619>, and Aljazeera, 'Western fascination with 'badass' Kurdish women,' Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/10/western-fascination-with-badas-2014102112410527736.html>

simplify the situation of these women, leaving out important features of their lives while over-emphasizing their fights against the Islamic State. By highlighting the struggles against the ISIS oppression and reducing the complexity of the issues, the media thus further demonize Islamic terrorism and also in a way justify the Western position and strategies within this crisis.

## 4 Women of the Islamic State

Analysing the current war in Syria and Iraq it quickly becomes apparent that images of women have a much more central role than during other previous conflicts in the Middle East. The Western fascination with Kurdish ‘badass’ women has been in many ways accompanied by reports about Western female migrants to ISIS. The widespread news about young women from Western countries joining the cruelties in Syria and Iraq have been a great shock to liberal societies, who immediately labelled these women as either monsters who enjoy violence<sup>122</sup> or as vulnerable teenage girls confused by influential ISIS propaganda.<sup>123</sup> While Kurdish women are perceived as active, emancipated agents joining the West against the Islamic terrorism, ‘the jihadi brides’ are an unexplainable phenomenon that have received an increased attention from Western journalists trying to offer and create the most appropriate explanation to their readers. Therefore, to better understand not only the nature of the current Syrian and Iraqi conflict but also the overall objectification of female bodies, gender violence and female agency, it is important to examine how also ISIS women are presented to the Western public.

### 4.1 Female Migrants to ISIS

The issue of female foreign migrants joining terrorist organizations is currently more serious than ever before. Although there have been previous cases of Western women migrating to foreign regions to join terrorist organizations, such as that of Malika El-Aroud from Belgium, who moved with her husband to Afghanistan and even actively assisted with

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<sup>122</sup> Telegraph, ‘Hipster jihadis, cheesecake and miscarriages: Life inside ISIL for Western women,’ 28. January 2015, Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-politics/11374818/Isil-for-women-Hipster-jihadis-cheesecake-and-miscarriages.html> [Accessed 4. March 2015]

<sup>123</sup> Guardian, ‘Lured by ISIS: How the young girls who revel in brutality are offered cause,’ 21. February 2015, Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/20/push-pull-lure-western-women-isis> [Accessed 5. March 2015]

Al-Qaeda attacks against the European countries,<sup>124</sup> Western women have never joined Islamic terrorists groups in such large numbers.<sup>125</sup> It is estimated that currently there are over 550 Western women from Europe, United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand who have willingly joined ISIS fighters in Syria,<sup>126</sup> and the number might be still rising. To the surprise of many analysts and scholars, these female recruits are mostly young, intelligent and well-educated second or third generation Muslim migrants who grew up and lived most of their lives in democratic societies, showing no previous signs of radicalization or Islamization.<sup>127</sup> It therefore often remains unclear to the Western media why these women leave their liberal lives in exchange for a foreign, conflict driven country and the ISIS restrictive rules on female clothing and behaviour. The media reports thus often emphasize that the strict Islamic traditions re-established by the Islamic State do not allow women to engage in fighting, as seen in the case of Kurdish female fighters, but rather as ‘jihadi brides’ they are expected to participate in the indirect state-building process or in creating the female brigades that control the behaviour of women from the broader community.<sup>128</sup> According to Mia Bloom, rather than becoming “Mulan” as many of the ‘jihadi brides’ talk about on their internet accounts, these women are in fact expected to “get pregnant soon” and have many children in order to create a growing Islamic State.<sup>129</sup> Many reports hence emphasize that

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<sup>124</sup> Bloom, M. (2011), pp. 200-201.

<sup>125</sup> Economist, ‘It ain’t half hot here, mum,’ 30. August 2014, Available at: <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21614226-why-and-how-westerners-go-fight-syria-and-iraq-it-aint-half-hot-here-mum> [Accessed 5. April 2015]

<sup>126</sup> Hoyle, C. et al, p. 9.

<sup>127</sup> Telegraph, ‘British girls join Islamic State and we dismiss them as jihadi brides,’ 22. January 2015, Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11360581/Islamic-State-British-girls-join.-We-dismiss-them-as-jihadi-brides.html> [Accessed 5. April 2015]

<sup>128</sup> Daily Mail, ‘Married at NINE and brainwashed into thinking beauty parlours are the work of the devil,’ 5. February 2015, Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2940732/The-REAL-life-female-ISIS-jihadist-married-NINE-banned-leaving-home-told-beauty-parlours-work-devil-Western-girls-lie-exciting-lifestyle-entice-women-report-finds.html> [Accessed 4. March 2015]

<sup>129</sup> Huffington Post, ‘How ISIS is Using Marriage as a Trap,’ 3. February 2015, Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mia-bloom/isis-marriage-trap\\_b\\_6773576.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mia-bloom/isis-marriage-trap_b_6773576.html) [Accessed 5. May 2015]

women migrating to ISIS are expected to live like “1950s housewives in the West,”<sup>130</sup> passively obeying their terrorist husbands. Although it is quite difficult to get any objective data about the lives of these Western women under ISIS, the Western media constantly highlight the “misery” the new ‘jihadi brides’ endure, such as the black burqas covering every part of female’s bodies, the complete submission to their husbands as well as hunger and the poor medical healthcare.<sup>131</sup> Various stories and theories of women’s radicalization have thus become central to most of the reports informing about the large number of female migrants to the Islamic State, trying to find an acceptable explanation as to why Western women enjoying freedom and liberties decide to join one of the most oppressive organizations that treats women like “cattle.”<sup>132</sup> By engaging in such interpretations and assumptions Western media thus create various images of women, their female agency and the nature of female violence.

#### ***4.1.1 Romantic Love and ISIS Propaganda***

As Karla Cunningham notes, there are various reasons why women join radical terrorist organizations however, in contrast to male recruits who are perceived as political agents resisting the politics and Western strategies in the region, women’s personal problems, family and the idea of romantic love remain the most often cited motives within the Western media.<sup>133</sup> Reports about women’s problematic past, unexpected pregnancy and the subsequent search for honour and love have been frequently mentioned when discussing female

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<sup>130</sup> Telegraph, ‘Hipster jihadis, cheesecake and miscarriages: Life inside ISIL for Western women,’ Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-politics/11374818/Isil-for-women-Hipster-jihadis-cheesecake-and-miscarriages.html>

<sup>131</sup> Daily Mail, ‘Married at NINE and brainwashed into thinking beauty parlours are the work of the devil,’ Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2940732/The-REAL-life-female-ISIS-jihadist-married-NINE-banned-leaving-home-told-beauty-parlours-work-devil-Western-girls-lie-exciting-lifestyle-entice-women-report-finds.html>

<sup>132</sup> Independent, ‘ISIS releases abhorrent sex slave pamphlet with 27 tips for militants on taking, punishing and raping female captives,’ 10. December 2014, Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-releases-abhorrent-sex-slaves-pamphlet-with-27-tips-for-militants-on-taking-punishing-and-raping-female-captives-9915913.html> [Accessed 5. April 2015]

<sup>133</sup> Cunningham, K. J. (2003), p. 186.

radicalization and potential migration to the conflicting regions. As Mia Bloom claims in connection to her analysis of Malika El-Aroud, Western women usually join their newly found husbands or partners, who introduced them to religious and honourable lives, on their journey to enter terrorist organizations.<sup>134</sup> Female recruits to terrorist organizations are thus often seen as emotionally vulnerable and easily manipulated by men from their surroundings.

Similarly, in the case of female migrants to ISIS, most Western media and opinion articles quickly focused on the women's long-lasting attraction to "mad, bad men," stating that young girls with a more "sheltered upbringing" are often attracted to abusive partners and dangerous criminals.<sup>135</sup> According to these analysts, "the pull factors have never been stronger,"<sup>136</sup> and the highly romanticized, influential and quite impressive ISIS social media campaign leaves young Western women unaware of the "massacres, genocidal campaigns, sexual slavery and horrific crimes" committed by ISIS.<sup>137</sup> Such media reports about women's attraction to strong, masculine, fighting men thus frequently turn women into sexual deviants who are betraying their Western freedoms and liberties, due to their obsession with men and the overall psychological inadequacy to resist.<sup>138</sup> Many of the observers therefore go on to claim that in order to prevent the radicalization of young Western women there is a need for better education and information about the horrors happening in the Middle East. According to them, schools and parents should teach their children from an early age about oppressive Islamic practices and the freedoms they can enjoy in the West, dissuading girls from any

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<sup>134</sup> Bloom, M., (2011) pp. 198- 199.

<sup>135</sup> Independent, 'The jihadi girls are just part of a long line attracted to mad, bad men,' Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/the-jihadi-girls-are-just-part-of-a-long-line-attracted-to-mad-bad-men-10062909.html>

<sup>136</sup> Guardian, 'Lured by ISIS: how the young girls who revel in brutality are offered cause,' Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/20/push-pull-lure-western-women-isis>

<sup>137</sup> Huffington Post, 'Teenage Rebellion or Radicalisation of Schoolgirls in UK?' 24. February 2015, Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ruwayda-mustafah/isis-girls\\_b\\_6732326.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ruwayda-mustafah/isis-girls_b_6732326.html) [Accessed 5. April 2015], Independent, 'Girls in the West must be taught that there's nothing romantic about life in Islamic State's caliphate,' 30. May 2015, Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/the-phenomenon-of-teenage-girls-lured-by-the-prospect-of-meals-by-candlelight-and-bathing-in-the-euphrates-10286773.html> [Accessed 31. May 2015]

<sup>138</sup> Sjoberg, L. and Gentry, C. E. (2008), p. 13.

rebellious behaviour.<sup>139</sup> Despite the fact that many ‘jihadi brides’ are educated women with degrees or some level of education, media reports keep describing these women as easily manipulated, in need of saving and greater liberal emancipation in order to comprehend the dangers of Islamic radicalization.

In contrast, other journalists state that many of these young women know about the cruelties of ISIS terrorists and that their migration to Syria is not simply teenage rebellion. They are not vulnerable “princesses” confused by ISIS romantic propaganda but rather have to be seen as cool-headed and determined “horror-movie ghouls” enjoying violence and suffering.<sup>140</sup> Analysts assessing the women’s posts on social networks after the ISIS beheadings claim that “it’s a bizarre mix of western teenage speak with a massive amount of brutality.”<sup>141</sup> In this case, ‘jihadi brides’ are presented as crazy, un-natural women who are in need of “therapy or rehabilitation program.”<sup>142</sup> Female migrants to ISIS are once again deprived of their agency and they are perceived as irrational, even insane actors, not capable of clear thinking. The media’s attention to ISIS propaganda, the claims of female’s vulnerability and mental problems thus seem to even more demonize the monstrous terrorist organization without further considering any other potential motives of these women.

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<sup>139</sup> Guardian, ‘Missing Yusra Hussein showed no sign of radicalization, family and friends say,’ 3. October 2014, Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/oct/03/yusra-hussein-teenager-uk-missing-bristol-syria> [Accessed 20. March 2015]

<sup>140</sup> Independent, ‘If teenage girls want to join ISIS in the face of all its atrocities, then they should leave and never come back,’ 23. February 2015, Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/if-teenage-girls-want-to-join-isis-in-the-face-of-all-its-atrocities-then-they-should-leave-and-never-return-10065516.html> [Accessed 5. March 2015]

<sup>141</sup> Telegraph, ‘Hipster jihadis, cheesecake and miscarriages: Life inside Isil for Western women,’ Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-politics/11374818/Isil-for-women-Hipster-jihadis-cheesecake-and-miscarriages.html>

<sup>142</sup> Huffington Post, ‘Teenage Rebellion or Radicalisation of Schoolgirls in UK?’ Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ruwayda-mustafah/isis-girls\\_b\\_6732326.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ruwayda-mustafah/isis-girls_b_6732326.html)

#### 4.1.2 ISIS women as Political Agents?

However, while many feminists and journalists believe that women join radical organizations due to their personal problems and romantic desires, there are also scholars who claim that women join terrorist groups for the same reasons as men do and it is therefore misleading to simply describe women as vulnerable or even insane, whereas men remain defined in terms of their political activities.<sup>143</sup> In order to account for the overall complexity of the female violence and its representation within the Western media it is therefore important to focus on the multiple factors affecting women's motivation to join radical organizations and examine how they are further presented throughout the media in comparison to their male counterparts.

When looking at the reports and articles dealing with the foreign migrants to ISIS it becomes clear that men are mostly described as political actors motivated in their decisions to join Islamic State by their desires to protect "Muslim lands and blood of Muslims" in their fights against infidels, America and other foreign interventions.<sup>144</sup> Many analysts state that these men joining ISIS are often resisting the discrimination of Sunni population and the oppressive Western strategies in the region.<sup>145</sup> Even though there have recently been some references within the media to personal and family stories of the male migrants to ISIS, their political activities and determination are discussed more frequently. As in case of the 'Jihadi John,' the Kuwait-born British man, who became known for his beheadings of Western hostages in Syria, the personal stories of him being bullied at the secondary school and his failed engagements to women<sup>146</sup> have been often overshadowed by stories of his political

<sup>143</sup> Cunningham, K. J. (2003), p. 186.

<sup>144</sup> Barrett, R. *Foreign Fighters in Syria*, The Soufan Group, June 2014, p. 20.

<sup>145</sup> RT, 'Iraq Diary, Day 3: Face to face with ISIS,' 20. May 2015, Available at: <http://rt.com/op-edge/260465-iraq-day-isis-militants-detention/> [Accessed 20. May 2015]

<sup>146</sup> Daily Mail, 'When I am 30 I will be in a football team and scoring a goal,' 27. February 2015, Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2972146/When-30-football-team-scoring-goal-dream-cheeky-10-year-old-loved-Simpsons-Sky-Sports-chips-grew-Jihadi-John.html> [Accessed 25. May 2015], CNN, 'Jihadi John was



activities, religious determination and his great disillusion with Western societies.<sup>147</sup> By analysing the mass media it thus quickly becomes clear that the depicted motivations of male migrants to ISIS are significantly different from the images of the women escaping to Iraq and Syria, who remain to be presented as manipulated by the idea of romantic relationships.

However, as the Institute for Strategic Dialogue found after detailed analyses of the Twitter and Facebook accounts of the Western female migrants to ISIS, the reasons why these women travel to Syria are very similar to those of men.<sup>148</sup> According to their research, there are especially three motives influencing the ISIS female migrant, the security threat to Muslim ‘Ummah’ caused by Western attacks and invasions, the construction of the Islamic caliphate, and especially the search for identity,<sup>149</sup> which are almost identical to men’s motivations. In fact, when examining the issue in greater depth it indeed becomes clear that the alienation and the identity challenges these women have to face are often quite emphasized within their posts on social media. As one Muslim woman from Britain admitted, “feeling marginalised does not of course justify acts of terrorism,” but she fully understand the motivation of the young women to search for a place where they belong and are not restricted in their religious and cultural practices.<sup>150</sup> Many of the ‘jihadi brides’ claim that they are harassed “in the street in the West” and that they finally feel free under ISIS, where they can freely cover themselves without restrictions.<sup>151</sup> Hayate Boumeddiene who escaped

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a quiet kid, got bullied a little,’ 3. March 2015, Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/03/03/europe/uk-mohammed-emwazi-teacher/> [Accessed 5. May 2015]

<sup>147</sup> Business Insider, ‘Questions Surround British ISIS Executioner Jihadi John’s Path to Radicalization,’ 26. February 2015, Available at: <http://www.businessinsider.com/british-isis-executioner-jihadi-johns-path-to-radicalization-2015-2> [Accessed 4. April 2015]

<sup>148</sup> Hoyle, C. et al., p. 38.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-14.

<sup>150</sup> Telegraph, ‘British girls join Islamic State and we dismiss them as jihadi brides,’ Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11360581/Islamic-State-British-girls-join.-We-dismiss-them-as-jihadi-brides.html>

<sup>151</sup> Radio Free Europe, ‘Why Young Western Women Go To Syria,’ 17. March 2015, Available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/why-young-women-go-to-syria/26906089.html> [Accessed 5. April 2015]

to Syria also claimed that after losing her job as a cashier for wearing the niqab in France, she finally felt free in the country “governed by the laws of God.”<sup>152</sup>

Nevertheless, these statements by women are only rarely mentioned within the Western media, or further accompanied by stories of romantic love and male’s influence as also in case of Ms. Boumeddiene, who was described as becoming more religious and radicalized after meeting her husband.<sup>153</sup> The media thus often create differences between male and female terrorists, objectifying female’s bodies and simplifying the multiplicity of their actions into stories of their vulnerability and naivety, without acknowledging their political consciousness and determination.

## 4.2 ISIS Women and the Notions of Agency

Although it is often very difficult to say what exactly motivates Western women to join the ranks of ISIS, as well as that different women can be driven by different motives<sup>154</sup> and it can be hence quite difficult to generalize, this chapter has shown how the motivations of female migrants are often reduced to specific images of vulnerability, further taking away women’s agency and the possibility of political action.

As Auchter states, the recognition of “political subjects as agents” always depends on our ability to rationalize their action. If a certain person, or a group, does not fulfil the criteria of liberal democracies, their agency cannot be recognized or has to be further reduced to the conformity of the Western standards.<sup>155</sup> The Western women migrating to ISIS, further challenging the liberal ideals of women’s emancipation and liberties by claiming that in fact,

<sup>152</sup> Huffington Post, ‘ISIS Claims it Interviewed Hayat Boumeddiene, French Widow of Paris Gunman,’ 2. February 2015, Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/12/hayat-boumeddiene-isis-interview\\_n\\_6667166.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/12/hayat-boumeddiene-isis-interview_n_6667166.html) [Accessed 5. April 2015]

<sup>153</sup> France 24, ‘Manhunt on for female accomplice in French attacks,’ 12. January 2015, Available at: <http://www.france24.com/en/20150112-manhunt-female-accomplice-french-attacks> [Accessed 5. March 2015]

<sup>154</sup> Suttin, M. L., (2009), p. 27.

<sup>155</sup> Auchter, J., (2010), p. 125.

they felt much more oppressed within democratic societies than under the rule of Islamic terrorists,<sup>156</sup> have been therefore seen by the media as irrational and “possibly under pressure from a group’s leadership” who want these female migrants to attract new women to further marry male fighters.<sup>157</sup> Similarly, as Sjoberg observes in the case of US female soldiers torturing the Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib, the Western public cannot hear stories of European or US women challenging liberal ideals and strategies, engaging in violent and oppressive action in contrast to Western emancipatory principles. The very nature of their actions thus has to be controlled and shaped in a way that can be further used as a weapon against the narratives of “enemy masculinities.”<sup>158</sup> The agency of these Western women is hence often taken away and replaced by stories which further demonize the enemy “others” by stating that ISIS propaganda and brainwashing are the most threatening forces for young women. According to such claims, the ISIS campaign on social media has to be stopped in order to prevent more girls from joining ISIS, as well as to preclude more serious consequences, such as female suicide attacks, where girls are especially picked and pushed into such actions by their male counterparts.<sup>159</sup>

The simplifications of women’s motives and the subsequent victimization or on some occasions even demonization of these young, Western girls has significant implications for our understanding of the conflict in Iraq and Syria, further constructing certain images and characteristics of the Islamic State in comparison to Western societies. While these women’s disillusion and dissatisfaction with their political rights in Western countries are described by

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<sup>156</sup> Radio Free Europe, ‘Why Young Western Women Go To Syria,’ Available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/why-young-women-go-to-syria/26906089.html>

<sup>157</sup> Daily Mail, ‘Married at NINE and brainwashed into thinking beauty parlours are the work of the devil,’ Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2940732/The-REAL-life-female-ISIS-jihadist-married-NINE-banned-leaving-home-told-beauty-parlours-work-devil-Western-girls-lie-exciting-lifestyle-entice-women-report-finds.html>

<sup>158</sup> Sjoberg, L. (2007), p. 98.

<sup>159</sup> International Business Times, ‘ISIS black widows: Young women will become new jihadists if propaganda is not stopped,’ 30. January 2015, Available at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-black-widows-young-women-will-become-new-jihadists-if-propaganda-not-stopped-1485947> [Accessed 5. May 2015]

the media only very rarely, the strong pull factors and dangers of ISIS propaganda are emphasized much more frequently, labelling women as vulnerable victims who are tricked and confused by the idea of romantic love.

## Discussion and Conclusion

To conclude this research dealing with the comparative analyses of the media coverage of Kurdish female fighters and Western ‘jihadi brides’ during the ISIS crisis it is important to finally bring together and discuss both of the case studies in connection to each other. By comparing the two cases, further accounting for their differences as well as similarities one gets a better perception of the Orientalist politics of representation and the consequent politicization and objectification of female bodies within media.

First of all, when looking at both descriptions of Kurdish and ISIS women simultaneously it quickly becomes apparent that the visual images play a crucial role within the overall representation of the ISIS conflict by Western media. The photographs of pretty, “badass” Kurdish women, with uncovered heads and big smiles on their faces, who in many ways resemble the images of emancipated Western women despite their Muslim cultural backgrounds, have been broadly presented on websites of the mainstream newspapers and even Western fashion magazines.<sup>160</sup> On the other hand, the pictures of black full-body burqas have played a more negative role, when many Western analysts with horror referred to cruel ISIS restrictions on female clothing which aims to hide away women from the public and reduce their position to ghost-like creatures with no voice or agency.<sup>161</sup> The Muslim veiling, as previously in the case of Afghanistan and Iraq, thus again becomes the Orientalist symbol of female’s oppression, ignoring the claims of ISIS women who perceive the burqa as part of their religious rights as well as the other more significant problems these women have to face

<sup>160</sup> RT, ‘Rebel Sell: H&M apologizes for Kurdish female fighter-inspired jumpsuits,’ 7. October 2014, Available at: <http://rt.com/news/193764-hm-apologizes-kurdish-outfit/> [Accessed 5. April 2015], Marie Claire, ‘These Remarkable Women Are Fighting ISIS. It’s Time You Know Who They Are,’ 30. September 2014, Available at: <http://www.marieclaire.com/culture/news/a6643/these-are-the-women-battling-isis/> [Accessed 5. April 2015]

<sup>161</sup> News Everyday, ‘ISIS women: Forced to Live Behind Blinding Black Veils, Punished if Eyes are too Exposed,’ 19. February 2015, Available at: <http://www.newseveryday.com/articles/9219/20150219/http-www-dailymail-co-uk-news-article-2958076-isis-morality-police-arrest-woman-wearing-burkha-eyes-exposed-html-ixzz3xngij4hz.htm> [Accessed 5. May 2015], BBC, ‘Sarkozy speaks out against Burqa,’ 22 June 2009, Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8112821.stm> [Accessed 4. April 2015]

within their communities.<sup>162</sup> The pictures of unveiled Kurdish female fighters have hence immediately become associated with female emancipation whereas the images of Western ISIS women adopting black burqas remain to be seen as an unexplainable phenomenon and an expression of cruel ISIS rule and brainwashing.

Moreover, in tight connection with the visual representation of women within Western media, the overall simplification of images as well as of female activities can be seen as another important motive, connecting both case studies together. In fact while Kurdish women have been simply described as active fighters against oppressions of the Islamic State, without being recognized as members of the terrorist organizations fighting for Kurdish independence, the female migrants to ISIS have been also reduced to the single image of naïve, brainwashed teenagers, without taking into account the alienation and oppression they have to face within Western communities.<sup>163</sup> As Ilija Trivundza observes, journalists and policy makers indeed often result in Orientalist notions of framing, highlighting and selecting some features while omitting the others and thus reducing the complexity of social relations to sets of simplified images between “us” and “them” further creating ‘imaginative geography’ based on the articulation of differences and inequality.<sup>164</sup> In this case, the pro-Kurdish female fighters have hence been placed above the images of Western female migrants to ISIS, further contributing towards the hierarchical divisions between “good” agents and “bad” women or victims, who are in need of saving and liberal intervention. Women affected by the ISIS crisis are therefore not only presented through contrasting visual images, but their motivations, actions and especially agency are further politicized and defined through established binary relations.

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<sup>162</sup> Shepherd, L. J. ‘Veiled References: Constructions of Gender in the Bush Administration Discourse on the Attacks on Afghanistan post-9/11,’ *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 8:1 (2006), p.26.

<sup>163</sup> Women Under Siege, ‘Pushed and Pulled: What is the lure for Western women to join ISIS?’ 5. March 2015, Available at: <http://www.womenundersiegeproject.org/blog/entry/pushed-and-pulled-what-is-the-lure-for-western-women-to-join-isis> [Accessed 4. April 2015]

<sup>164</sup> Trivundza, I. T. ‘Orientalism as News: Pictorial Representation of the US Attack on Iraq in Delo,’ *Journalism*, 5:4 (2004), pp. 481-482.

When deconstructing both images of ISIS and Kurdish women it thus becomes apparent that agency is indeed not an objective concept but rather constructed and assigned in accordance to the dominant political narratives. Jessica Auchter observes that agency is very much defined in binary terms, where there is “only room for one presupposed, defined status” and women can be either defined as agents or non-agents/victims, sometimes even insane women. In this case, having agency is seen as good, giving women legitimacy to participate in politics and not having agency is perceived as bad, when female actions cannot be accepted as legitimate expressions of political beliefs.<sup>165</sup> Therefore, while Kurdish women have been currently accepted as active political agents fighting for the liberation of Iraqi and Syrian region from the cruel oppressions of the Islamic terrorism, the ‘jihadi brides’ were almost automatically placed in contrast, being described as un-natural and irrational women, without any political motivations of their own.<sup>166</sup> Agency thus has to be seen as a politicized concept that is awarded and taken away, if challenging the established power relations, by Western media and their creation of specific images.

In sum it is thus clear that female bodies play a crucial role within the media description and definitions of the conflict, caught between the Orientalist notions of representation and power politics. In fact the ISIS conflict has been in many ways approached and further explained through the images of Kurdish and ISIS women creating clear boundaries between the “good” pro-Western agents, fighting for women’s emancipation and freedom, and the “bad” Islamic others, who through religious and romantic brainwashing attracted the Western vulnerable teenagers. Through such process of binary divisions, the presence and activities of the Islamic State have been even more demonized and its political strategies and motives were

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<sup>165</sup> Auchter, J. (2012), pp. 122-123.

<sup>166</sup> Huffington Post, ‘Teenage Rebellion or Radicalization of Schoolgirls in UK?’ Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ruwayda-mustafah/isis-girls\\_b\\_6732326.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ruwayda-mustafah/isis-girls_b_6732326.html), Deutsche Welle, ‘Experts fear increase of German female fighters in Syria,’ 13. March 2014, Available at: <http://www.dw.de/experts-fear-increase-of-german-female-fighters-in-syria/a-17495301> [Accessed 4. April 2015]

hidden behind the stories of the ISIS female victims or monstrous women enjoying violence, further justifying the Western strategies and measures within the Middle Eastern region. Therefore, as Caron Gentry rightly points out, it is important to realize that the media images of female violence and political agency tell us much more about the “story-teller,” who is producing such perceptions and pictures, than of actual women’s agency<sup>167</sup> and the overall reality of the conflict. In order to understand female agency and the female violence in greater depth, it is hence always important to ask who and whose agency gets represented, at what time as well as in connection to what situations.

It is thus apparent, that studying the images of Kurdish female fighters and ISIS ‘jihadi brides’ within the Western media, reveals much more about the nature of Western politics than about the real lives of the women they aim to describe. Therefore when looking at cases of female violence and female fighters, not only in connection to the ISIS crisis, but also more generally, one has to account for the overall Orientalist power politics shaping and constructing the often seemingly naturalized and universalized images of women. As many observers argue only through deconstructing the Orientalist representation of female fighters and transcending the categorization and objectification of women as victims, “whores” or “beautiful souls” can one fully understand the motivations of these women and further deal with the issue of radicalization and women in combat in much more effective manner.<sup>168</sup> Therefore, the more detailed deconstruction of the images of female fighters and the notions of female agency is important not only for our understanding of Western power politics but also for future strategies dealing with women’s radicalization and our responses to it. Accounting for the wider complexity of the issue and accepting the multiplicity of women’s

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<sup>167</sup> Gentry, C. E. (2009), p. 247.

<sup>168</sup> Foreign Affairs, ‘The Women of ISIS,’ 21. August 2014, Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2014-08-21/women-isis> [Accessed 25. September 2015], Abu-Lughod, L. (2002), pp. 789-790.



agency, rather than seeing it as a twofold concept, can in fact bring new perspectives to the studies of female violence as well as the consequent anti-radicalization measures.

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