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## **The Kurdish Fight for Freedom: A Comparative Analysis of Kurdish Female Fighters in Iraq and Syria**

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**The Kurdish Fight for Freedom**

A Comparative Analysis of Kurdish Female Fighters in Iraq and Syria

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## **Preface**

In front of you is the thesis “The Kurdish Fight for Freedom. A Comparative Analysis of Kurdish Female Fighters in Iraq and Syria”. The research for this thesis on female fighters is focused on two regions of de facto state Kurdistan, namely Iraq and Syria. This thesis was written as a part of my graduation from the Bachelor of International Politics at Leiden University. The Bachelor Project is from February 2021 to May 2021. In the first block a course called “The Creation, Dispersion, and Recognition of States in World Politics” was set up by Dr. Shpend Kursani. And the second block was devoted to the writing process of the thesis.

The research was a whole rollercoaster of finding and answering puzzles, of which the puzzle pieces were very interesting. After extensive qualitative research, I have attempted to answer the research question. During this research, my thesis instructor, Shpend Kursani and my study friends, Dox and Sylvia, were always there for me. They always answered my questions which allowed me to continue with my research. Their wisdom and motivating words have helped me to bring this thesis to a successful conclusion. Therefore, I would like to thank them for the fine guidance and their support during this process.

## Introduction

*“My sister, Berivan and I, together with other women from all parts of Kurdistan (...), had been stationed for weeks several kilometers before Kobani, with bulldozers we had made trenches and with bags full of sand we had built protective walls on top of buildings and houses. In this way, from our high position, we could easily see the enemy of life and, if necessary, eliminate them. ISIS terrorists tried day and night to capture those positions but time after time they were defeated by us” (Kardoï & Luten, 2019, p. 65).*

Some months ago, I was reading the novel “Kurdistan, the sisters of Kobani” and I was immediately taken by the story about the Kurdish women fighting for their ideals and principles (Kardoï & Luten, 2019). A story of courage, sacrifice, and perseverance. I have always had a fascination for strong-minded women fighting in a male-dominating world. As one of the oldest ethnic societies in the Middle East, this nation of 25 million people with its own language and culture, cherishes a dream of an independent Kurdistan (Burç, 2020). This past century of unending battles has not yet delivered much to the Kurds (Mulder, 1999). Their people are spread over four different countries in the Middle East: Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran (Bengio, 2016). The Kurds were divided into different states that emerged in the Middle East with the fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War I (Mojab, 2000). They are caught between beautiful emotions expressed in the most brilliant poems and a blunt denial of their rights by neighbouring peoples (Mulder, 1999).

The Kurdish battle for self-determination is complicated. It is a fight against multiple groups which are moved by different motives. Both jihadist extremists and the autocratic, political regime of Syrian President Assad are considered as enemies to the Kurds. Besides the battle for freedom, this conflict is about underlying political goals. Rojava, a Kurdish-led autonomous entity in Northern Syria, is famous for the attempt at overcoming gender inequality and improving women’s rights (Burç, 2020). This is part of the concept of “democratic confederalism”, which focuses on societal emancipation (Burç, 2020). In the Rojava Revolution, women’s participation has achieved a lot of media attention in recent years. A lot of Kurdish women bound their power, gathered their weapons, and served in the mobile company of the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) on the front line in Syria (Aretaios, 2015). As described in the aforementioned novel, these fierce women are fearless and have set clear goals for themselves.

The Kurdish women are fighting on two fronts. As a woman from the YPJ expressed: “The greatest, the barbarian enemy is the jihadists. But we, women, are fighting on two fronts. One is here, the other is against the conservatism and the sexism of the traditional Kurdish society that does not recognize the equality of the sexes” (Aretaios, 2015, n.p.). For a long time, these interests clashed with each other, but recent years have shown that the feminist and the nationalist agendas, in certain regions, do complement one another (Bengio, 2016). This so-called “Kurdish Spring” led to the fact that Kurdish women can now rise in society. Because of this social mobility, a great number of Kurdish women managed to break through the proverbial glass ceiling and took on leadership roles (Bengio, 2016).

Kurdish female fighters have an active, combative role in both Syria and Iraq. However, after doing some research I noticed that this Kurdish Spring was not quite the case in Iraq (Öcalan, 2017b). The Kurdish women’s movement rapidly gained ground and, to a large extent, women joined several military activities (Bengio, 2016). However, despite this progressive development of gender roles in Iraqi Kurdistan women did not really fight on the frontlines, like their male comrades and the female fighters in Syria did. At the same time Kurdish women in Syria were leading in the combat tasks, the tasks for Kurdish women in Iraq were protecting women’s compounds, taking care of the border security, providing medical services, and granting communicative skills for decades (Marouf, 2018). Thus, in Iraqi Kurdistan, the role of women in the Kurdish militia remained primarily symbolic (Bengio, 2016). This issue has slightly changed since the emergence of ISIS in 2014 (Marouf, 2018). Female fighters from the Peshmerga got themselves more combat-related duties and began to fight at the frontlines (Marouf, 2018). However, this development to active combat roles for Kurdish women in Iraq took place a while later. Even though the Kurdish women have shown that they have taken on an indispensable role, in both Iraq and Syria, and that women’s rights did improve over the last decades, there are fundamental differences in the development of the revolution.

Considering the interesting case of the Kurds, fighting for self-determination, and the incredible development of gender equality by the Kurdish army I got very curious about this two-dimensional revolution. We can learn more about these ideological differences which moved the female fighters in Iraq and Syria to join combat. Are there different motives behind their combative pugnacity? In fact, what is the ideological basis behind the YPJ? All in all, my research question is: How does the development of gender equality of the Kurdish women fighters differ comparing Iraq to Syria?

The knowledge about the different developments of the Kurdish women-revolution in the Middle East is rather limited. Research is primarily done about the general involvement of women in war and the way female movements were created in Kurdistan (Begikhani, Hamelink & Weiss, 2018). Mojab (2000) stresses that research done by Kurdish political organizations and women's groups in Iraq primarily focuses on two features of women and war, namely "Women as Direct Casualties" and "Women as War Refugees" (Mojab, 2000). Naturally, this is a rather one-sided view of the situation. Further, the comparison between specifically Iraq and Syria is not yet made, with this comparative study the context of the involvement of women is significantly deepened. Thus, this research adds significantly to already existing literature about the women's revolution in Kurdistan. Besides adding significantly to the scientific debate, this research also contains social relevance. Namely, it intends to provide insights into the way women's rights revolution could develop differently and maybe be an example for other states in the Middle East in which women want to improve their rights in society.

The overall structure of this thesis takes form in of five themed chapters. This paper begins by a brief introduction to the Kurdish case in both Iraq and Syria. Then, chapter two will address the existing theory about women in war and the influence of ideology on gender-equality. In particular, the revolution of gender-equality in the Middle East, moved by leftist ideology. The third chapter is concerned with the research design and methodology used for this thesis, which is a comparative analysis of two similar cases. The fourth section contains a analysis and discussion of female fighters in the KRG and Rojava. In the last part of the thesis, the conclusion, a short summary will be given of the findings and the limitations of this research. The main conclusion of this thesis is the fact that the process of Kurdish women's equality in the KRG and Rojava differ and that this can be explained by having or lacking a guiding ideology (Morgan, 2019).

## **Introduction to the Kurdish Case**

The Kurds are the whole nation of people spread over the four states in the Middle East: Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. However, in this thesis, the focus will be on only two of these states, namely Iraq and Syria. Specific regions will be examined, in Syria the Autonomous Administration of Rojava and in Iraq the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). These parties have different and specific ideological goals: some want autonomy, and some want a state. In fact, in the KRG only the mainstream Iraqi Kurdish leadership, PUK and KDP, want an independent state (Palani, Kihidir & Dechesne, 2019). In 2017 the current Kurdish Iraqi leadership went on to organize the referendum on independence, which resulted in a overwhelming majority voting for a independent Kurdish state out of northern Iraq (Palani et al., 2019). However, the latter's prime minister vowed never to accept the Kurdish independence (Palani et al., 2019). The struggle of the Kurds for independence and recognition has been a central, political, legal, and normative issue in the Middle East for decades now.

As a matter of fact, the Kurds struggle to present themselves as a united nation (Fuller, 1993). The Kurdish society is dominated by individualistic tribes, communities, and clans. As Fuller (1993) states: "Even if the Kurds possess a strong sense of their own identity in relation to the surrounding nationalities, their sense of ethnic unity is still poorly developed" (p. 110). Indeed, the Kurds never got the opportunity to develop themselves within a private political structure and therefore were forced to develop within a bigger diverse state. Regarding their political goal, one can say that self-determination is a thing they all want, which implies "the capacity to choose and to have choices, rather than reinforcement contingencies, drives, or any other forces or pressures, to be the determinants of one's actions" (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 38). As for the concept of political ideology the following definition will be used throughout the thesis: "the package of ideas or beliefs that annunciates the grievances of a particular group, identifies a set of political or social objectives on behalf of that group, and proposes a plan of action for accomplishing those objectives" (Sanín and Wood, 2014, p. 215). This conceptual choice is suitable for the research because, because when addressing political ideology regarding the Kurds in the KRG and Rojava, the focus is on their ideals and how to accomplish those ideological goals.

To make a valid comparison between the two cases, this thesis will use the term self-determination. A complex point about the Kurdish question is whether "Kurdistan" does exist or not. However, Kurdistan will be addressed as such in this thesis, because it is in that way

much clearer that all four Kurdish regions together are meant. The concept of “female Kurdish fighters” can be defined as the combative female fighters in both Iraq and Syria. The women in Syria are bound in the YPJ and the women in the Iraqi army are called the Peshmerga. Throughout the thesis the Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria will be addressed as KRG and Rojava to be as clear as possible.

The most effective force in the battle against ISIS in Syria is the Kurdish opposition party, the Democratic Union Party (also known as the PYD) (Paasche & Gunter, 2016). The PYD is founded by Kurdish activists in Northern Syria (Aretaios, 2015). The affiliated military organizations of the PYD are the People’s Protection Units, in Kurdish “Yekîneyên Parastina Gel” (also known as the YPG) and the Women’s Protection Units, in Kurdish “Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê” (also known as the YPJ). The YPG can be seen as the National Liberation Movement and the women from the YPJ have been fighting side by side them. Both forces, YPJ and YPG, are under the control and command of PYD (Aretaios, 2015). The PYD and YPG/YPJ are associated with the PKK, which stands for the Kurdish name “Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan” (Paasche & Gunter, 2016). The PKK is the political Kurdish workers party and has been battling against Turkey since 1984. It is present in both Iraq and Syria, but more active in the latter. The PKK had been for a while the only Kurdish movement that openly advocated a separatist goal which means complete independence (Fuller, 1993). However, the PKK changed this goal eventually. Their main political ideal, democratic confederalism, is a form of autonomy and rejection of the whole state system. The state system is regarded as a capitalist creation that exploits minorities, women and workers. The PKK has Marxist-Leninist political roots and therefore abjured capitalism (Düzgün, 2016). It regards gender inequality as a great problem, which can be tackled by the “Women’s Liberation Ideology” (Nurhak, 2014).

The Peshmerga, which can be translated as “facing death”, was originally used as a general term for the Kurdish partisan fighters (Paasche & Gunter, 2016). In contemporary politics, the term peshmerga is used for the paramilitary forces of KRG, the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq (Paasche & Gunter, 2016). In Northern Iraq, there are two main political parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) (Şimşek & Jongerden, 2018).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Women in war**

Research carried out by Turpin (1998) concluded that women are being stereotyped as pacifists, but in reality, they have shown to fight bravely in wars. They now often fight for equal treatment in the armies of many different countries around the globe. Although their roles are being debated in contemporary wars, women tend to have military jobs in the lowest ranks of the defence firms (Turpin, 1998). This is the result of the existence of traditional ideas about masculinity and femininity, such as the beliefs of the feminist antimilitarists. As time has passed these traditional ideas have slightly become more flexible. There are indeed a lot of examples where women have fought in civil wars and wars of liberation, the Kurdish battle is one of them (Turpin, 1998). In the 1930s and 1940s women already fought among the Chinese communist, in the 1970s and the 1980s women were active combaters in the African National Congress in South Africa, and also in the Vietnam War female fighters were present in large numbers.

However, despite the fact the women now occupy a place in many armies around the globe, this is not a phenomenon in every military movement. There is a significant difference between non-state armies and rebel groups. In a lot of non-state armies women's participation in the military has not improved the equal right between women and men (Morgan, 2019). Besides, women often fulfil a symbolic role in rebel groups and established militaries (Morgan, 2019). And yet, even in cases where women are solely portrayed symbolically, they are still able to use their autonomy and advanced skills to influence the way their society looks at gender roles. The practice has shown that the extent to which women can influence policy is mostly dependent on the accessibility for women to policy and state-building institutions (Morgan, 2019).

### **War as a window for gender-equality**

In general, statelessness leads to a weakened position of women (Düzgün, 2016). They are in terms of politics and socio-economic status more vulnerable, must deal with gender prejudices, and are also susceptible to male suppression (Düzgün, 2016). At the same time, Dilar Dirik (2014) argues that “wartime, uprisings, social unrest often provide women with space to assert themselves and to demand representation in ways that, civilian life would not permit” (n.p.). She further states that the fact that women in contemporary Kurdistan enjoy a relatively good status is entirely due to the remarkable and combative actions of the women themselves, and not due to inherent conditions, like the Kurdish society (Dirik, 2014).

Their practices in the Kurdish war in all four states deserve acknowledgment. This achievement by women is not solely the case in Kurdistan, women have played an active role in all kinds of contexts (Dirik, 2014). Their demand for emancipation is legitimized by their engagement in social responsibilities, such as their participation in the military force. In other words, military participation by women could promote emancipation.

The argument that war can empower women is supported by a valid theoretical argument. Indeed, in times of war, a window of opportunity arises for female empowerment (Bakken & Buhaug, 2020). For example, post-war countries like Burundi, Uganda and Rwanda are all three above the worldwide average in closing those gender gaps (Bakken & Buhaug, 2020). In those cases, the ending of a civil armed conflict resulted in a better representation of women in legislative in Africa (Hughes & Tripp, 2015). This can be explained also by the fact that the ending of civil wars offers the opportunity for swift and transformational political change. The relation between war and gender-equality is not only detected in these unique cases stated above but is also demonstrated in recent comparative research (Bakken & Buhaug, 2020). That the position of women can be strengthened as a process during and after the war is indeed convincing (Anderson, 2016; Hughes, 2009; Tripp, 2015).

Political conflict can indeed lead to social change, along with opportunities for women (Moghadam, 2003). The recent study of Webster, Chen, and Beardsley's (2019) added with their global analysis of the correlation of conflict and female empowerment that war promotes a dramatic change for the role women have in society. The process which stirs up existing gender roles, exists out of three ways. First, war and political conflict can radically transform the female position in the workforce (Moghadam, 2003). By destructing the traditional gender norms of labour, space opens up for women to take on jobs which were traditionally male-dominated professions (Bakken & Buhaug, 2020). In terms of social change for women World War II is especially analysed (Moghadam, 2003). German women during that war took over traditional man's jobs when most of the men left to the front. Additionally, in the United Kingdom there was also question of women's employment during World War I and World War II (Anitha & Pearson, 2013). Women's employment in wartime industries was a great success during World War I, consequently the need for women's wartime work during World War II emerged again (Anitha & Pearson, 2013). British government figures reveal that the women's employment, during World War II, expanded from 5,1 million in 1939 to over 7,2 million in 1943 (HM Government, 1943). Second, war advances women's social behaviour

and mobilization (Bakken & Buhaug, 2020). This creates a push for extended mobilization. Third, normative changes arise in the notions toward women because of women's entrance into new jobs. All in all, these processes have shown to result in increased political, female empowerment (Bakken & Buhaug, 2020).

In a study on social change in the Middle East, Moghadam (2003) also states that numerous wars have led to employment opportunities for women in higher education. She examined women's employment in Iran after the Islamic revolution in 1979 and discovered that women's working conditions had not been compromised. They had not been forced out of the workforce and their share in decision-making in government institutions increased even to a small amount (Moghadam, 2003). In a like manner, the mobilization of female labour increased in Iraq during their war with Iran (Moghadam, 2003). Furthermore, some authors have even argued that the participation of women in World War II led to the second-wave feminism (Moghadam, 2003). Clearly, previous studies have shown that the claim that war contributes positively to female empowerment is convincing.

### **Ideology as game-changer**

Brooks and Bolzendahl (2004) find in their research that the ideological climate matters as well. Gender trends are part of a bigger ideological shift, instead of particularly gender-based transitions. They have investigated the liberalizing gender trend in the 1990s in the United States and have come to the conclusion that with greater support of a rights-based ideology the gender attitudes moved more toward a liberal gender attitude (Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004). The liberal rights ideology has been measured by a scale based on different views about civil rights, civil liberties, and sexual tolerance. These factors have become more conservative in that decade. Thus, the turnaround in the 1990s in gender attitudes was part of a greater context, namely the transition in the American ideology that appeared at that same time (Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004).

Moreover, regarding the relationship between ideology and gender equality, other research has shown that there is a positive correlation between gender economic inequality and gender role ideologies (Mandel, 2009). Mandel (2009) distinguishes two kinds of states: the progressive liberal states and the more conservative states. The liberal minded states happen to be the most developed in terms of women's labour participation, and therefore score the best on women's economic independency, while other more conservative states disagree with the idea that female competition on the labour market is necessary to attain social recognition and equal rights (Mandel, 2009).

This second ideology assumes that social rights come with motherhood and therefore can be seen as a substitute mechanism for economic independence for women (Mandel, 2009).

Ideology does not only play a part in war in general but has also significant influence on particular movements in war. Feminist studies point out that ideologies which are gender-inclusive are likely to be more peaceful (Warren & Cady, 1994). Enloe (2007) adds to this that patriarchal values within an organization encourages violence and stimulates militarism in the society. A survey research in four states in the Middle East supports this by concluding that, an overarching attitude about gender inclusiveness, has a positive effect on people's perspectives regarding the use of violence, instead of an individual's own gender (Tessler & Warriner, 1997). Asal, Szekely & Wilkenfield (2013) argue in their article that different perspectives on gender should be considered as a particular ideology that is different from the presence of women in the organization or movement, likewise from other ideologies. They have used the MAROB (Minorities at Risk Organizational Behaviour) dataset to test gender-inclusiveness in movements (Asal et al., 2013). Their research has shown that that the organizations which have any kind of inclusive statement in their declaration, are more likely to explicitly promote the inclusion of women.

In fact, a lot of movements in the Middle East do so for a couple of reasons. This may include a sincere desire to boost female influence in politics (Asal et al., 2013). Military movements are unique in their adherence of dominant political ideologies. The degree of repression against them, the kind of regime in which they act and most importantly their ideology of gender inclusion all differ (Asal et al., 2013). These cited factors have direct consequences for the strategic choices the movements and organizations make as they pursue to stimulate their movements ideals and goals (Asal et al., 2013). The authors of this study point out four inevitable conclusions regarding the spread of revolutionary sincerity in the Middle East (Asal et al., 2013). First, repressive behaviour by government is likely to intensify the negative feelings of the resistance. Second, movements with solid ties to foreign ethnic kin tend to adopt a more violent strategy. Third, the choice to profess a more violent strategy is less likely in case of a democratic ideology. At last, ideologies promoting gender equality on their political agenda tend to employ a more peaceful approach (Asal et al., 2013).

The fact that ideology has a key role in the organization of movements is also the main conclusion in the study of Sanín and Wood (2014). Ideology is significant in two ways. First, it has a socializing function among combatants with diverse motivations, and therefore has an indispensable instrumental value. Ideologies distinguish themselves in the kind of strategies

and institutions they impose for facing these challenges and in the scope to which they do so (Sanín and Wood, 2014). Still, this approach is regarded as incomplete, as political ideologies manifest themselves as more than just instrumental value. Some armed groups limit their strategic judgement because of normative concerns sequent from ideological beliefs (Sanín and Wood, 2014).

More specifically, Wood and Thomas (2017) argue that the adopted ideology by a movement plays a key role in the determining in which degree women participate, especially in terms of combative participation. More precisely, the authors link the different kind of women's roles in those military movements to variations in views of gender roles and inherently gender-based labour divisions (Wood & Thomas, 2017). To examine female military participation in rebel organisations around the globe, they used a cross-sectional dataset, measured between 1979 and 2009. One of their more important findings is the causal relationship between the existence of a leftist Marxist-orientated ideology and the increase of female fighters at the front (Wood & Thomas, 2017). The case of Rojava is also evidence for this theory. The theoretical argument is that the revolution in Syria is mainly caused by the underlying dominant ideology, namely the secular egalitarian ideology (Bensen, Cullen & Haner, 2019).

This is supported by other studies that examined the crucial role of group ideology in female recruitment. For instance, research on female military participation in Central America has shown the impact of a Marxist ideology of Sandinista, FMLN and Zapatista movements on female combatants (Kampwirth, 2002; Mason, 1992; Reif, 1986; Viterna, 2013). By way of contrast, Islamic ideologies show the opposite relation (Wood & Thomas, 2017). Regarding cited literature about the influence of ideology on Middle East movements, one could argue that an ideology which includes an active fight for gender-equality results in a more equal treatment towards women -also in the military.

## **Research design and Methodology**

In the search for the differences between the Kurdish pathways in gender equality, in Iraqi and Syrian society, qualitative data has been gathered. Qualitative data suits the best if one wants to research processes and meanings that are not yet examined (Anderson, 2010). Further, this approach generates rich, detailed data and provides multiple social contexts to understand the phenomenon (Anderson, 2010). The research only focuses on the two nation-states Syria and Iraq, because a small-N study provides a complete and more detailed picture. Furthermore, Iraq and Syria exhibit many differences. The states both show a difference in gender-equality in terms of employment in the Kurdish army. However, this is justified by the fact that the two regions, the KRG and Rojava, also have many similarities. In fact, in these two regions the Kurdish female fighters from the YPJ and the Peshmerga are the most active and is the fight against the military force of ISIS proven to be the most effective (Öcalan, 2017b). In addition to their similarity in efficacy on the battlefield, the two movements do have the same general cultural background and are both active in the same area in the Middle East. Because of these similarities the cases above are excellent to compare. A comparative case study is the best applicable way to compare these two regions.

For this thesis secondary material, like books, articles, biographical work, and documentaries have been used as resources. Scholars about war, gender revolution, the Kurds and political ideology have been selected as they have been carefully read, selected, and singled out for usability. Besides, they provide analysis, interpretations, or commentary (University of Southern California, 2021). This kind of material is necessary, because primary sources only provide the artifacts which research is based on. And “to do research, you must cite research” (University of Southern California, 2021). Thus, the resources are sufficient, because a broad range of acknowledged literature is used, which gives a broad and in-depth insight on the main elements of this study, namely war and ideology.

Ideally, the research should be examined on a bigger scale. However, that would be too ambitious for the scope of this bachelor thesis. For that reason, I primarily focused on the military aspect within the gender-equality revolution in the Middle East. Comparing the female fighters of the KRG and Rojava provides, with the time and means available for the thesis, a reasonable way to examine my research question. The practice of the two movements, the YPJ in Rojava and the Peshmerga in the KRG, affirms the theoretical expectations.

## Analysis and Discussion

### The case of Rojava

#### *War as an influential factor*

Since the 1950s, Kurdish organizations in Rojava have already had so-called women's organizations. First, this was focused on tasks as rallying support for the men who were in charge (Düzgün, 2016). Later, in the 1980s, political organizations began recruiting women for their political and military ranks. An example of such political organization was the Kurdish Workers Party, the PKK (Düzgün, 2016). Indeed, the extent to which women participate in the PKK and the YPG demonstrates the outstanding roles they have had in the battle with ISIS (Tavakolian, 2015). Within the Kurdish forces, and especially regarding its leadership task, there is an unprecedented high prevalence of female fighters (Wood & Thomas, 2016). The YPJ is a unique case where women embody a substantial part of the overall military force. The traditional belief, that combat is a male-dominated area and women simply are victims of that fact, is thereby invalidated (Wood & Thomas, 2016).

To illustrate, one female fighter from Kobani, a city under fire in Rojava, stated in an interview that, "the success of women in Kurdistan is the success of all women against the patriarchal system in the world and this makes me very happy. In this sense, I am proud of all women. We even have female fighters from other countries" (Platt, 2014, n.p.). This woman, Bejan Ciyayi, has played a crucial role in the Kurdish armed conflict since the outset. She implies in her statement that the female participation and its subsequent success had an enormous impact on the existing inequalities between women and men, namely a strike against patriarchy. Aside from the military victories, Rojava is witness of a legal revolution. Since the war broke out there have been multiple legal changes regarding women's right (Aretaios, 2015). For instance, the authority of Rojava has come with a initiative to install a 40% quote of representation of women in every organization and institution (Aretaios, 2015). This has the consequence that in every layer of government, from a local organization to the parliament, women must be assigned as vice-presidents or co-presidents. Accordingly, in the case of the Kurds in Rojava, war had a major impact on female empowerment by creating job opportunities in the Kurdish military (Aretaios, 2015).

### *The ideology of Öcalan: active fight for gender-equality*

As mentioned, the women in Syrian Kurdistan are experiencing a huge gender equality-revolution. The Kurdish worker's party, the PKK, is committed to encourage gender equality in all aspects in their organization: in the way the women are recruited, trained and chosen for military missions and leadership positions. A possible consequence is that the gender equality in the PKK will have a positive effect in the rest of the Kurdish society, where the patriarchal values still are prevailing (Bensen, Cullen & Haner, 2019). This ideology is unveiled by Abdullah Öcalan, political activist and founder of the PKK. He has the belief that a society needs to make decisions collectively, so with consent from all members (Öcalan, 2017b). A nation should be based on this kind of democracy, as well as ecology and women's freedom (Öcalan, 2017b). Öcalan brought the new concept "democratic federalism" to life, this concept must encourage a move away from its patriarchal nationalism (Düzgün, 2016).

In his work Öcalan (2013) writes: "The level of women's freedom and equality determines the freedom of all sections of society. For a democratic nation, women's freedom is of great importance, as liberated women constitute liberated society. Liberated society in turn constitutes democratic nation. Moreover, the need to reserve the role of the man is of revolutionary importance" (p. 57). Democratic Autonomy provides, according to Öcalan, a substantial ground of possibilities for women (Burç, 2020). As these women are considered a social group, they hereby can organize themselves. They have distinct demands and social realities, which cannot be handled by centralized, decision-making institutions. The implementation of Democratic Autonomy leads to the opportunity for women to establish women's political parties and movements, and other forms of organizations (Burç, 2020).

The YPG/YPJ operates under the flag of the PKK, and thus supports the ideology of Öcalan. Their combaters are trained both militarily and educationally, as they are being introduced to the political thought of the PYD (Öğür & Baykal, 2018). The PYD has ties to Kurdish movements as well as non-Kurdish groups and obey a leftist ideology (Öğür & Baykal, 2018). When reading statements of female fighters in the YPJ it becomes clear that Öcalan has had an influential role. In fact, Narin Afrin, the co-commander of the YPJ, has a long history in the organization and therefore has stayed with their political leader Öcalan to get an ideological training (Platt, 2014).

Bejan Ciyayi, the female fighter from Kobani, writes in her testimonial that, “there are ideological, political and sociological reasons behind my desire to fight against ISIS. I have sworn to defend the Kurdish people against all evil” (Platt, 2014, n.p.). The ideological reason Ciyayi refers to, is pursuing gender equality in society and in particular the Kurdish army. After all, it is evident that the ideas of Öcalan have had a strong shock on the Kurdish nationalism in Syria and the inherent political interests (Morgan, 2019).

### *Democratic Autonomy*

The Democratic Autonomy-concept as described above has been modified to the ongoing conflict in Syria (Burç, 2020). Viewed from a scholarly perspective, implementation is not that easy to carry out. Besides, you have to keep in mind that this process of democratic autonomy in Rojava only took place in less than a decade but was constantly attacked by enemies of the Syrian Kurds, such as the Islamic State and other jihadist militias employed by regional powers in that area, and a strict embargo by neighbouring states, the KRI included (Burç, 2020).

The model itself exists out of three institutional parts, which work both integrative and independently: The Autonomous Administration, the Syrian Democratic Council and TEV-DEM (Burç, 2020). Besides these institutional building blocks, Democratic Autonomy also provides social structures to organize outside and parallel to the communes. With this whole implementation of the Democratic Autonomy ideology the main goal of more women’s visibility in governing institutions has been achieved (Burç, 2020). The Rojava Model perceives women as revolutionary operators which fight for improving democratic values. Women not only stimulate emancipation in society but further tackle the system which allows men to have internalized hegemony over women (Burç, 2020). Women are therefore visible as female fighters in the YPJ against ISIS. Besides that, to foster gender equality and women’s rights there were built civilian structures through the establishment of female autonomous structures (Burç, 2020). Therefore, in the case of the Kurds in Rojava, a strong political ideology, namely the Democratic Autonomy-concept of Öcalan, has had a major impact on female empowerment.

## **The case of the KRG**

### *War contributing to female empowerment*

Iraqi Kurdistan is, as well as the region of Rojava, an example where military movements proved to be successful in improving women's position in the military force, and thereby women's rights in general. In the region governed by the KRG there are clear signs that women's role and standing in the society have clearly improved over the decades (Bengio, 2016). Besides, in terms of combative participation women in Iraqi Kurdistan have been quite fierce. The Iraqi-Kurdish women's movement came up at the same time the Kurdish national movement was developed (Bengio, 2016). This was only in the aftermath of the Gulf war, which took place in 1991. From that moment on you can speak of a women's movement in the Iraqi part of Kurdistan (Bengio, 2016). Since then, women have also joined military activities. Colonel Nahida Rashid created the first women's Peshmerga unit in 1995 (Nilsson, 2017). She once told that, "in 1995, it was just me and four other women who fought against the Iraqi army in Chamchamal" (Nilsson, 2017, p. 265). Female warriors were back then, in the conservative Kurdish society, a challenge for the existing perspective on women's roles in society (Nilsson, 2017). However, already in 1996, the second Peshmerga Battalion was established and then over 500 women signed up (Bengio, 2016).

Clearly, women in the Peshmerga have actively contributed to the armed conflict against IS. The Iraqi constitution even recognizes the Kurdish women fighting in the Peshmerga, which is active in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq, as the legitimate security forces (Nilsson, 2017). Also has the widespread resistance of Kurdish families declined over time. In contrast to the older generation, the younger generation of women has gotten more support from their family members to join the Peshmerga forces (Nilsson, 2017). And yet, despite more acceptance from their families, Kurdish women in Iraq struggle with persistent social norms (Nilsson, 2017). To illustrate, when a female warrior dies in combat that is considered as a pity, whereas it is a tragedy for men. And that because women, according to the traditional norms, have duties at home (Nilsson, 2017). Social norms and gender roles are not easy to change in this matter.

Joining the Peshmerga was a point of pride for these Kurdish women. In August 2014, thousands of Yazidis were abducted and killed by the combaters of IS. After this horrible event Yazidi women voluntarily joined the forces of the Peshmerga in Iraq (Marouf, 2018). But above all, Kurdish women in KRG were moved to join the Peshmerga because of a urgent necessity, a lot of military help was needed (Marouf, 2018). In this sense, war created the possibility for women to grab their weapons and fight in the Kurdish military. Therefore, in the case of the Kurds in the KRG, war has had a significant impact on female empowerment.

### *The dominating ideology in Iraqi Kurdistan*

In contrast to significant influence of Öcalan and the left-wing YPG in Syria, Iraqi Kurdistan does not have that kind of ideological stimulation. In fact, regarding ideology, secular Kurdish nationalism have been flourishing for decades (Leezenberg, 2015). Prior to 2003, the Iraqi Kurdish nationalism had placed itself against the Ba’thist Arab nationalism (Leezenberg, 2003). Baathism, meaning resurrection, is an Arab ideology which promotes the creation of a consolidated Arab state. The relationship with the Ba’thist regimes in Iraq and Syria is quite different, as well as their leaderships’ guiding philosophies (Paasche & Gunter, 2016). Instead of working together the Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria do not seem to work together as a unified front. The KRG in Iraq performs a Western-style democracy, in contrast to the above-mentioned ideology of Abdullah Öcalan which is adhered to by the Kurdish people in Rojava, Syria (Paasche & Gunter, 2016). Although secular nationalism remains the biggest ideology in the Kurdish region, times have slightly changed, and Arab nationalism has gain ground over the past decade in Iraq (Leezenberg, 2015).

Female organisations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq have to deal with conservative gender norms, these conservative ideas are widely promoted by their political authorities (Öcalan, 2017b). A potential explanation is that the link between women serving in the Iraqi-Kurdish army and the development in gender equality in Iraqi Kurdistan is not easily made (Morgan, 2019). Iraqi Kurdistan has, compared to the Kurds in Northern Syria, not made much effort to ensure women’s equality (Morgan, 2019). A lack of their dominating secular, egalitarian ideology could be an explanation for this issue. Further, research implies that the Iraqi Kurdish society holds on to more traditional values than the Syrian civilization (Düzgün, 2016). In Iraq there never was such overarching ideology which could lead the women’s movement and push for revolutionary changes (Düzgün, 2016).

Thus, the lack of an overarching political ideology had a significant impact on female empowerment. The KRG therefore did not promote gender-equality as much as it could have.

The main issue for bringing the KDP and the PUK to power in Northern Iraq was to improve women's lives (Şimşek & Jongerden, 2018). In the run-up to the election of these Kurdish parties so-called honour killings and other crimes against women had increased, female violence even took genocidal proportions (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2011). That is why these terroristic acts have been referred to as "gendercide" (Mojab, 2003). This significant issue for many female activists moved them to take action.

## Conclusion

Studying female fighters in Rojava (Syria) and in the KRG (Iraq) offers clear insights into the different pathways of gender-equality in Kurdish society. The Kurds present a remarkable story of female empowerment regarding women's participation in the Kurdish army. Analysing the Kurds in Iraq and Syria, it is clear that war is a factor which promotes female empowerment. Indeed, wars can bring great destruction, but are also the driving force behind social change, like female empowerment (Nillson, 2017). This claim can be supported by the empirical findings from this research. In both cases, women organized themselves to take on an active role in the battle against ISIS. Female fighters are recruited and trained for military missions and leadership positions (Bensen et al., 2019). However, research has shown that the process of women's equality is slightly different between the Iraqi Kurds and the Syrian Kurds. The women in the Peshmerga were not as fast included in the military as the women of the YPJ in Northern Syria: the roles of women in Rojava changed more rapidly. In fact, the Kurdish women in the KRG are caught between tradition and revolution (Düzgün, 2016). They have to deal with conservative gender norms, more than their Syrian colleagues, as these conservative ideas are widely promoted by their political authorities (Öcalan, 2017b). The support for the claim, that the women's revolution in Rojava has more success, compared to the KRG, is therefore plausible.

The different pathways can mainly be explained by the factor ideology. In fact, Iraq and Syria differ in terms of political ideology, which has direct consequences for the position of women in the Kurdish army -and therefore in society. The main reason Kurdish women in Syria join the YPJ is because they want to pursue freedom and gender-equality (Platt, 2014). Influenced by the ideology of Öcalan, women have taken up arms and waging toward a liberated Kurdistan. All in the name of their nation and related ideology. Ideologies which include an active fight for gender-equality lead to equal inclusion of women on military positions. The leftist YPJ confirms with its progressive view on women's rights that a Marxist-orientated left-wing ideology is more likely to provide women with active, combative tasks. On the contrary, the case of the Kurds in Iraq shows, that a lack of a strong ideology results in the fact that gender-equality is less pursued. Women still are very present in the military, but this development commenced later on and equal rights do not play as much a role as in Rojava. The fact that the Kurds in the KRG struggle with female empowerment can be explained by the lack of an overarching political ideology that promotes gender-equality.

All in all, to answer the research question based on the literature and analysis, there can be concluded that war can contribute to female empowerment, in both Syria and Iraq. However, in the case of Rojava ideology played a way bigger role which has resulted in a more gender-equality approach.

In regard to the validity, one could argue that there are some improvements up for discussion. Although this research measured what had to be measured, namely the differences between female fighters in Syria and Iraq, other scholars could result in different explanations. Using other variables than ideology could also come up with a possible explanation. Further, this research is to some extent generalizable because of its substantiation by general theories about the influence of leftist ideologies on the abundance of women on military positions. However, the examined cases have arisen from specific conditions and therefore conclusions cannot be simply adopted for general theories.

Research on gender revolutions in militaries, and in particular underlying mechanisms of these revolutions, can be extremely useful to understand different processes of gender-equality in general. Further research may have far-reaching consequences for understanding social mechanism in the Middle East. Optimistically, the Kurdish model with its ideological aspects may even provide as a role model for neighbouring states with gender issues. Although this might be possible because of the successful performance and development of the YPJ, it is quite difficult to make a realistic forecast of the future. Moreover, future research could examine whether the Kurdish Question is about more than independence and equality for women, because it would be an exaggeration if the factor ideology would be appointed as the one and only instigator of the women's revolution in Kurdistan (Morgan, 2019). At last, this research is limited to only two cases in the Middle East, namely Syria and Iraq. In fact, there are a lot more parties involved in armed conflicts where women occupy an active position in combat. In that sense, not only the Kurdish fight for freedom continues, but also the general fight for gender-equality.

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