Political Violence in Media:
A case study of the media framing of the Kurdish female fighters in Northern Iraq and Syria
Abstract

Title: Political Violence in Media: A case study of the media framing of the Kurdish female fighters in Northern Iraq and Syria

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The aim and purpose of this study is to explore how the Western media, more precisely six British newspapers, portrays the Kurdish female fighters of the Women’s Protection Units and the Peshmerga, who today are fighting against Deash in Northern Iraq and Syria. There have been a growing media interest in the Kurdish female fighters since the rise of Daesh, and they were an often recurring subject in newspapers and other media platforms during 2014 and 2015. I have collected 32 articles from six different newspapers, and applied a framework consisting of six different frames developed by Brigitte L. Nacos together with theories of media framing and social constructivism. The methodology is conducted as a critical discourse analysis, inspired by Norman Fairclough’s three-dimensional model.

In the articles, the Kurdish female fighters are portrayed as a different phenomenon, however, the articles still describes them as brave and dignified fighters who are rational in their understanding of what they are fighting for and what they are sacrificing. They are portrayed as being motivated by issues such as equality and female liberation in contrast to Deash anti-female values. The previous research conducted by feminist scholars often focuses on that the media portray women, who conduct acts of political violence, in a negative ways, such as deviants who are lacking traditionally stereotypical feminine characteristics or that their looks are in focus instead of their motivations. However, I have drawn the conclusion that there is more to how the Kurdish female fighters are portrayed then what one would think.

Keywords: Kurdish female fighters, YPJ, Peshmerga, critical discourse analysis, media framing, political violence
# Table of contents

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................... i  
TABLE OF CONTENT ......................................................................................................... ii  
LIST OF ABBRIVATION ..................................................................................................... iii  

1.0 **Introduction** ........................................................................................................... 1  
  1.1 Research problem and relevance ............................................................................. 2  
  1.2 Theoretical and methodological framework .......................................................... 3  
  1.3 Structure ............................................................................................................... 3  

2.0 **Theoretical framework** ......................................................................................... 4  
  2.1 Previous research .................................................................................................. 4  
  2.2 Social constructivism ......................................................................................... 7  
  2.3 Theories of framing: the impact of media ............................................................ 8  
  2.4 Gender stereotypes and frames ......................................................................... 9  

3.0 **Methodological framework** .................................................................................. 13  
  3.1 Critical discourse analysis .................................................................................... 13  
    3.1.1 Fairclough’s three-dimensional model .......................................................... 16  
  3.2 Material ............................................................................................................... 17  
    3.2.1 The process pf collecting the articles ............................................................ 18  
  3.3 Considerations ..................................................................................................... 20  

4.0 **Research results and analysis** ............................................................................. 21  
  4.1 Physical appearance ............................................................................................ 21  
  4.2 Family connection and for the sake of love ......................................................... 23  
  4.3 Women’s liberation and equality ....................................................................... 25  
  4.4 Tough-as-males or tougher-than-men ................................................................. 28  
  4.5 Alternative frames ............................................................................................... 30  
    4.5.1 Rational and down to earth ......................................................................... 30  
    4.5.2 The protector ............................................................................................... 31  
  4.6 Intertextuality ..................................................................................................... 31  

5.0 **Conclusion** .......................................................................................................... 35  
  5.1 Future research and recommendations ............................................................... 36  

6.0 **References** .......................................................................................................... 38  
  6.1 Articles .................................................................................................................. 41
List of abbreviation

PKK – Kurdistan Workers’ Party

YPG - Kurdish People’s Protection Units

YPJ - Women’s Protection Units
1.0 Introduction

Political violence is nothing new, and it is something that both women and men participate in for different reasons. Paige Whaley Eager (2008) writes; “Throughout human history, both men and women have utilized political violence to achieve their political objectives. However, engaging in political violence has been largely a man’s role” (Whaley Eager 2008: 1). Women that are armed and that freely engage in fights and conflicts are challenging the traditional stereotypes of women as passive and nonviolent creatures. A female fighter is the opposite from peaceful and dependent on men (Sjoberg, Cooke & Reiter Neal 2011: 3-4). Despite of the stereotypes of womanhood, women are as capable as their male counterparts to perform acts of political violence, and are also motivated by things such as ideological beliefs, strategy and social problems (Sjoberg & Gentry 2015: 3).

Feminist scholars argue that women’s involvement in violence is seen as something different from men’s (see Moser & Clark 2005; Sjoberg 2010; Bloom 2011). Women who are committing acts of political violence are often not recognized and portrayed in the same way as their male counterparts (Sjoberg 2010: 56). Instead of being portrayed based on their motivations or actions, female fighters are often diminished to gendered stereotypes (Sjoberg, Cooke & Reiter Neal 2011: 6).

The media coverage of female fighters plays a crucial role in how the image of them is shaped. Laura Sjoberg, Grace D. Cooke and Stacy Reiter Neal (2011) points towards the issue of how female fighters often are portrayed as voiceless figures (Sjoberg, Cooke & Reiter Neal 2011: 5). They argue that there must be more research done on the subject of media and how it portrays female actors involved with political violence (Ibid: 3).

The media is a powerful and influential institute in the society as it produces and reproduces peoples’ understanding of identities, issues and events. It has the power to shape how the society view groups and issues, and also in the long run creates stereotypes that become socially accepted (Carter & Steiner 2004: 2). It has become an integrated part of most societies, and a normal part of the everyday life for most people as it has major effects on knowledge and the frames that people use to understand the world (Ross & Byerly 2004: 1).

The Western media has according to Emanuela Del Re (2015) always been interested in female fighters who are participating in conflicts in non-western countries. She argues that
the images of women who are living in what the Western world perceives as traditionally patriarchal societies is seen as a special phenomenon (Del Re 2015: 94).

A case that has a lot of coverage today in the Western media is the Kurdish female fighters (Dirik 2014a; Mustafah Raber 2014; Dirik 2014b). Ofra Bengio (2016) also points towards a growing interest towards the Kurdish women as a subject for “scholarly inquiry in the West” (Bengio 2016: 30). Since the rise of Daesh, the Kurdish female fighters are getting more attention in the ongoing conflict that is taking place in Northern Iraq and Syria (Del Re 2015: 85). These women have become a symbol for the resistance towards Daesh, and there are high numbers of women who have taken up arms to fight against them (Ibid: 86). However, there are voices that argue that the Western media is “obsessed” with the Kurdish female fighters (Mustafah Rabar 2014) and that the media is reinforcing and producing gender stereotypes of women in political violence (Hoffman 2015).

In 2012, an “all-women’s militia” called the Women’s Protection Units (or YPJ) was formed as a result of the high numbers of female fighters in the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (or YPG). More than one-third of the fighters in Kurdish forces are women. These women are today playing an important role in the fight against Daesh, and have gained much attention and support around the world because of their struggles for Kobane (Bengio 2016: 39). In addition to the female fighters of the YPJ, there are female fighters of the Kurds of Northern Iraq that are fighting for Peshmerga guerilla that is a part of the Kurdish Liberation Movement (Vice News no date).

1.1 Purpose, relevance and research questions

The purpose of this study is to explore how the Kurdish female fighters are portrayed in Western media.

The following research questions will be asked:

- How are the Kurdish female fighters from the YPJ and the Peshmerga, who are fighting against Daesh in Northern Iraq and Syria, portrayed in British newspapers?

- How are their involvement explained and described, and which type of motivations are presented by the journalists?

This study aims to contribute to the research of women, gender and political violence and how this is treated by the media by highlighting the lack of research on the case of the
Kurdish female fighters that today are trying to eliminate the terrorist organization Daesh, also known as ISIS and IS. In addition to this, this is an attempt to gain a better understanding of media framing and how women, who are challenging the traditional gender stereotypes, are described in Western media.

The research questions are relevant as the case of the Kurdish female fighters stands out from the environment they are fighting in, and as they are women who are picking up arms to fight an organization that wants to limit women’s rights. Female fighters is not a new phenomenon in the Kurdish society according to Dilar Dirik (2014b), but the media’s interest for them has grown and resulted in a “sudden coverage”.

1.2 Theoretical and methodological framework

This study is a desk study based on articles published by six different British newspapers. The theoretical foundation consists of earlier literature on the subject of women involved in traditionally male spheres, together with theories on media framing and its impact, and a framework developed by Brigitte L. Nacos concerning gender stereotypes and frames. In addition to this, the ontological point of departure is social constructivism.

The methodological foundation is a critical discourse analysis that has been inspired by Norman Fairclough’s three-dimensional model.

1.3 Structure

This study consists of five different chapters that together are creating the foundation for answering the research questions. After the first chapter, Introduction, chapter two, Theoretical framework, explores the theoretical foundation and starts with outlining previous research on the topic of women who commit acts of political violence and how they are portrayed and understood by simplified frames. After this the ontological point of departure, social constructivism, and the impact of media is explained. The last section concerns the gender stereotypes and frames that will be applied to the empirical material. Chapter three, Methodological framework, outlines the chosen design and methodological foundation. The method is inspired by Norman Fairclough’s three-dimensional model for conducting critical discourse analysis. In addition to this, material and considerations will be explained and discussed. Chapter four, Research results and analysis, presents the findings and analyzes them with the help of the earlier chapters and explores alternative frames. Chapter five, Conclusion, discusses the research and explores future research and recommendations.
2.0 Theoretical framework

This chapter will present the theoretical foundation for this thesis. It will consist of previous research and contributions on the subject of how women are framed when they are conducting acts of political violence. It will outline the ideas and arguments that have been made on the subject and most of the authors and scholars have developed their own frames and others have focused on earlier frames in a contemporary context.

As this study is a discourse analysis, it is relevant to take an ontological point of departure in social constructivism. This approach to knowledge will be presented. In addition to this, the chapter will explore the impact that the media has on knowledge as the purpose of the study is to explore media framing. The chapter will end with the different frames that I will look for when analyzing the collected articles. Those frames are developed Brigitte L. Nacos, who is an expert on issues related to mass media and terrorism (Colombia University no date). She has observed that the media often use certain recurring frames when they are portraying women who are active participants in traditionally male-dominated spheres (Nacos 2005).

2.1 Previous research

This section will present earlier research on the topic of women who commit acts of political violence, and how they are portrayed and understood by simplified frames. Political violence is a rather broad term and there is no “single accepted definition” (Whaley Eager 2008: 5). Paige Whaley Eager (2008) points towards David E. Apter, who explains political violence as something that ‘[…] disorders explicitly for a designated and reordering purpose: to overthrow a tyrannical regime; to redefine and realize justice and equality; to achieve independence or territorial autonomy; or to impose one’s religious or doctrinal beliefs’ (Apter 1997: 5 cited in Whaley Eager 2008: 5).

There is according to Caroline O.N Moser and Fiona C. Clark (2005) a wide and large selection of literature on the subject of political violence. They argue that a majority of the earlier research on the subject has been rather gender-blind (Moser & Clark 2005: 3). Laura Sjoberg, Grace D. Cooke and Stacy Reiter Neal state that there is some feminist research done on the subject. However, they believe that more should be done. They argue that there is more to learn and understand when using gender-sensitive approaches (Sjoberg, Cooke & Reiter Neal 2011: 2). Feminist scholars argue that it is problematic that female actors are portrayed as something different from male actors. They criticize both the academia and the
media for simplifying female actors’ engagement with political violence by using frames and stereotypes that produces misleading images (Sjoberg 2010; Sjoberg, Cooke & Reiter Neal 2011; Sjoberg & Gentry 2015; Bloom 2011; Nacos 2005).

Moser and Clark claims that political violence has been seen as something where men are dominating, and that this is the reason for why female actors are portrayed in contrast to male actors. The result of this is according to Moser and Clark that female actors often are portrayed as victims while male actors are portrayed as the perpetrators (Moser & Clark 2005: 3).

Laura Sjoberg, Grace D. Cooke and Stacy Reiter Neal have observed that there is a tendency to explain women’s violence as something different from men’s. They argue that the academia and the policy sphere have a tendency to describe women’s engagement with political violence as something different from regular terrorists, criminal or solders. They mean that violent women are portrayed as something different from the regular actor that is male. Based in their research, they argue that female actors are denied their agency, or that it is misrepresented. This will in the long run strengthen already existing gender stereotypes and subordination (Sjoberg, Cooke & Reiter Neal 2011: 2).

Sjoberg, Cooke and Reiter Neal points towards Miranda Alison (2004), who according to them, has observed that violent women are portrayed as abnormal. Alison claims that scholars and policy makers should focus their attention towards the context of female violence. She argues that there must be a change in how female actors are portrayed. According to Alison, women who are committing acts of political violence are often explained as lacking feminine traits or that they are abnormal, such as gender defiant or sexually deviant (Alison 2004 in Sjoberg, Cooke & Reiter Neal 2011: 2).

Sjoberg have together with Caron E. Gentry (2007) observed three recurring frames that are used when portraying and explaining violent women. They point towards the frames the “mother”, the “monster” and the “whore” that they believe to the dominating frames when describing women who are involved with political violence (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007: 29). The frame of the “mother” explains female violence by referring to characteristics that are essential to stereotypes of womanhood (Ibid: 36). Women’s motivation for engaging in political violence is according to this frame not because of ideology or a special cause. Instead, it is based in maternal and domestic disappointments (Ibid: 31-32). The frame of the “monster” explains female violence as a biological defect that disrupts femininity (Ibid: 36).
Women who commit violent acts are seen as unfeminine and this results in that they are
categorized as being “bad” or “mad”. They are portrayed as behaving in an abnormal way
and are because of this not seen to be responsible for their actions. They are portrayed as not
being real women (Ibid: 37-38). The frame of the “whore” explains violent women as being
sexually deviant (Ibid: 46). Sjoberg and Gentry argue that violent women challenge the
patriarchal structures as they are stepping into an area that is seen as traditionally male. As a
result, women are dehumanized (Ibid: 45-46).

Linda Åhäll (2012) argues that “[…] representations of female agency in political violence
involve a tension between a life-giving and life-taking identity, and that agency is only
enabled if this tension is removed or overcome” (Åhäll 2012: 287). She has observed that
there is a conflict between being a mother and being a fighter. She points towards that
motherhood, or the lack of motherhood, is central when female actors are portrayed (Ibid:
287-288).

Sjoberg (2010) has also observed a frame called the “beautiful soul” (Sjoberg 2010: 53). This
is however not a new frame, and it has been researched by other scholars before her, such as
Jean Bethke Elshtain’s who wrote the article “On beautiful souls, just warriors and feminist
consciousness” (1982). He described two archetypes, the “beautiful soul” and the “just
warrior, that have strong positions in most societies (Bethke Elshtain 1984). Sjoberg has
developed this by observing how women in the military and their roles are portrayed in a
gendered way. She argues that the “beautiful soul” and the “just warrior” frames is found in
contemporary conflicts (Ibid: 56) She focuses on how female actors often are portrayed in a
way that is untrue to the real experiences that they have as soldiers (Sjoberg 2010: 53). The
frame of the “beautiful soul” and the “just warrior” are often used when explaining and
portraying women and men’s relation to each other during conflict, and the roles they play.
He is portrayed as the protagonist as he takes the role as the hero who protects the homeland
and its women and children. She is on the other hand portrayed as an innocent creature that
must be protected from the evils of the enemy (Ibid: 55). She is characterized by traditional
feminine elements such as weak and naïve, apolitical and non-violent (Ibid: 60-61). Women
are becoming more common as fighters and as soldiers, which challenges the frame of the
“beautiful soul”. Still, women’s involvement is often seen as something different from their
male counterparts. Sjoberg argues that female actors often are explained and described by
what is seen as deficit in their femininity, maternity, sexuality or mental health (Ibid: 58).
2.2 Social constructivism

This study takes an ontological point of departure in social constructivism. It is according to Bryman (2011) important to understand which ontological outlook one has towards research and knowledge when conducting research. Social constructivism states that everything is constructed through social interaction, which means that social phenomenon and their meaning is something that is produced and reproduced when people interact with each other. Social phenomenon and categories are always changing over time (Bryman 2011: 37). Vivian Burr (1995) has tried to summarize some key premise that she argues to be the most central when defining social constructivism. She states that it is difficult to describe approaches that are based on social constructivism in a narrow way as there are many different approaches consisting of different non-static characters and elements (Burr 1995: 1; Winter Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 11). The following paragraphs will outline Burr’s key premises.

Burr explains that social constructivists take a critical approach towards “taken-for-granted” knowledge. This means that they argue that one should be critical towards how one perceives the environment and the understanding of reality (Burr 1995: 3). Instead, social constructivism focuses on the idea that knowledge is constructed and shaped by social processes. This means that knowledge is fabricated by social interaction between people (Ibid: 4). Burr argues that social action and knowledge go together as people understand the world as a result of social interactions. People understand the world by the “truths” that develop out of social interaction. Social interaction creates a negotiation of what is truer in the society (Ibid: 5-6). The negotiation process in social interaction creates the general understanding about what is right and what is wrong. When people meet and interact common truths are created on how the world should be understood. When some becomes more true than other, the others become excluded which will affect the understanding of the world. A worldview will be created or reshaped where some acts are seen as good, and other acts are seen as bad (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 12). However, this knowledge should not be seen as better as or truer than others (Burr 1995: 4).

Furthermore, this process is working in an environment affected by historical and cultural factors. Social constructivists argue that knowledge is a result of historical and cultural events and hence that human beings are historical and cultural being. Knowledge comes from a series of specific historical periods and cultural events that produce social and economic arrangements that shapes knowledge (Burr 1995: 4; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 11).
It plays a major role in how things are understood, especially how the worldview is shaped by the common understanding in a society (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 11), and knowledge that is connected to a specific culture should be seen as an artefact according to Burr (1995: 4).

Social constructivism is based on anti-essentialism. The core is that there are no “essences” inside the world or people. Essentialism states that there is a determined nature of how things should be. Social constructivism challenges this as it argues that the world and people are products of social interaction. There cannot be any pre-given “content” of the reality because of how everything is socially and discursively constructed. There are no inevitable outcomes (Burr 1995: 5; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 12).

Social constructivism argues that people understand the reality through the current view on knowledge. This is however problematic according to social constructivists as knowledge cannot be understood as an objective truth. As previously mentioned, the reality is understood through knowledge and categories and these are not real reflections of reality (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 11). Reality is the process of the knowledge and categories that come from the process of social interaction. It is created and reshaped by the use of language. Knowledge is not something that one has. Instead, it is seen as something one does when interacting with others. This creates the framework that one uses when understanding the meaning of things in everyday life. Since language creates knowledge it becomes a pre-condition for how people think (Burr 1995: 7; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 11).

2.3 Theories of framing: the impact of media

This section will outline the impact and power that the media has on the public. This study is focusing on the media as a creator of frames. Pippa Norris, Montague Kern and Marion Just (2003) have observed that women who are involved in traditionally male-dominated spheres often are “[…] understood through news ‘frames’ that simplify, prioritize, and structure the narrative flow of events” (Norris, Kern & Just 2003: 10). They have observed that the interest for studying the media and its impact on the public has grown (Ibid: 10). Social science focus on examining the media and the role it plays in a society, and the power and effect is has on the publics’ everyday life (Blomberg et al., 2004: 13).

The media have become a big part of most people’s lives, which means that it has an impact on how knowledge and the understanding of the “reality is produced or reproduced (Ibid: 13).
The media tries to make their material as understandable as possible for the public. The effect of this is that they apply different frames that are structuring the subject into a context or reference that is easily understood by the public. However, the consequence of this is that the media coverage and the language that is used are shaped in ways that only highlights some elements of an event. Some parts of the event are used at the expenses of others (Norris, Kern & Just 2003: 13). The effect of this is that patterns develop or are strengthened (Nacos & Torres-Reyna 2003: 136).

The media produces versions of the “reality” by using different frames. Articles are composed of different ways of portraying or framing to explain complex or unknown issues and events in more understandable and culturally-recognized terms. Certain patterns are produced and reproduced as a result of how the media is writing and presenting issues and events (Norris, Kern & Just 2003: 11; Hallahan 1999: 221). Some patterns and interpretations are promoted before others, consciously or unconsciously, as a consequence of that some events or facts are highlighted in the media (Norris, Kern & Just 2003: 11).

Scholars have observed that the media is setting the agenda by controlling which frames and issues that are delivered to the public. However, the media’s agenda setting is at the same time following the dominant attitudes in societies depending on context. It can be problematic when some issues get more attention than others, or are framed in a certain way, because it can in the long-run result in tensions and unrest in public ideas and opinions. Media coverage and its influence can be interesting issues to study and explore if one is interested in how streams of thoughts and ideas are produced, reproduced and spread (Blomberg et al., 2004: 13; Nacos & Torres-Reyna 2003: 136). Stereotypes are often recurring in the media and they are a result both of the public and the media. Recurrent stereotypes affect people’s understanding and attitudes towards the relevant issues that are portrayed. The media’s way of portraying different events and issues has a big impact on how people’s ideas and attitudes are shaped towards things such as religion, ethnicity and race. The media is producing and shaping patterns that carry symbols and values, that in the long-run plays an major role in the shape and content of discourses (Nacos & Torres-Reyna 2003: 136).

2.4 Gender stereotypes and frames

Brigitte L. Nacos (2005) has observed different recurring frames that she argues that the media uses when portraying female actors. Her research is based on “U.S and non-American English language print and broadcast news” (Nacos 2005: 436). The purpose in this study is
to focus on the different frames and stereotypes that Nacos framework consists of. In addition to this, I will look for alternative frames. However, those will be explored later on. This will be applied to the collected articles. Börjesson (2003) argues that people understand the world by constructing categories. This is a way for us to make our surroundings and unknown areas understandable in the context we live in (Börjesson 2003: 88). With other words, people understand the world by categorizing people, identities, events, and issues.

Nacos has observed that women that are involved as actors in politics and violence, areas that traditionally are seen as belonging to men, are portrayed by the media as being in the “wrong place” (Nacos 2005: 435). She has researched the portrayals and stereotypes that are used when treating female terrorists and female politicians in the media. She has observed that much is indicating that there are different stereotypes that are used when portraying women in male domains (Ibid: 435-436). She claims that the media is treating women who are engaged with political violence or politics in a similar way by portraying them after gender stereotypes. She states that gender stereotypes are present both in the portraying of violent and nonviolent women (Ibid: 436). Gender stereotypes is explained by the United Nation as “[…] a generalised view or precondition about attributes or characteristics that are or ought to be possessed by, or the roles that are or should be performed by women and men” (OHCHR no date)

Nacos (2005: 437) claims that other researchers have found that the media is focusing on different elements when describing and explaining male and female actors in politics and in violence. The media coverage on women is often focusing on their physical appearance, factors such as their figure, style and overall look.

Women are becoming more common in traditionally male-dominated spheres, such as politics and violence, which challenges traditional cultural norms and prejudices of what often is seen as inherently male. Nacos states that it is less difficult to portray women with a gendered lens than to try to understand them as actors (Ibid: 437).

As outlined above, this is a framework that has been developed out of research on that the media is treating female terrorist and female politicians in a similar matter. This study is not focusing on either female terrorists or female politicians, but I argue that Nacos framework is a useful tool to apply when analyzing the articles as the case of the Kurdish female fighters concerns actors of political violence. I believe that after an in-depth reading of earlier research on area of gender, framing and political violence, that the frames and stereotypes
developed by Nacos will be useful when exploring how British media is treating the Kurdish female fighters in the ongoing conflict in the Middle East.

Based on Nacos’ observations the following frames and stereotypes will be central when examining the articles:

**The physical appearance frame**: women are described and explained through the use of their physical appearance. Focus is on how they look, their style and the way they carry themselves. Nacos has observed that the media often is reflecting their material on “[…] the predominant cultural sentiments […]” (Ibid: 438). She states that “[…] when it comes to women, their appearance is deemed to be more important than their ideas, policies, and positions” (Ibid: 438). Women are treated in a different way from their male counterparts (Ibid: 438).

**The family connection frame**: female actors are often defined “[…] on their family status” (Ibid: 439-440). Nacos has observed that the media is focusing on the background of female terrorists. Questions such as why they are not engaged or married are often made. The media focuses a lot on the family background when it comes to female terrorist, but also when it is treating other types of actors that are engaged in male-dominated domains. The family connection is more in focus for female actors then for male actors. The media is often referring to women´s backgrounds (Ibid: 440).

**Terrorist for the sake of love/the love connection**: Nacos points towards how “[…] the stereotype of the women who resort to political violence in the wake of personal tragedies or disappointments” will affect female actors agency negatively. Female actor’s relationships or lack of relationship is emphasized (Ibid: 441-442). This frame is connected with the previous one concerning the family connection. This is a frame that not only applies to female terrorists, but that can be found in other cases (Ibid: 440-441).

**The women’s liberation/equality frame**: this frame was more common earlier, but is however still present in contemporary media. It frames motivations for violence on “[…] gender equality or the struggle to achieve gender equality […]” (Ibid: 442). Female actors’ participation as active actors in traditionally patriarchal societies and region is also an element that the media is focusing on (Ibid: 444).

**The as-tough-as-males/tougher-then-men frame**: women that are successful in traditionally male-dominated domains are often described as tough females. Nacos points towards the
British Prime Minister Thatcher that had the nickname “the Iron Lady”. Furthermore, when it comes to political violence, women are often described as persons who must be stronger and more dangerous, more fanatic and more deadly than their male counterparts to be “accepted” as an actor (Ibid: 444). When this happens, women are no longer feminine. She is no longer a real woman as she is choosing to engage in political violence instead of her family and children (Ibid: 445).

**The bored, naïve, out-of-touch-with-reality frame:** this frame consists of different ways that the media portray women as being, as the frame is called, bored, naïve, and out of touch with reality. This means that the motivations behind their political violence are based on not understanding what they actually are doing, or that they are clueless of the organizations goals and motives (Ibid: 446).
3.0 Methodological framework

This chapter will present the design and methodological foundation of this study. In addition to this, the process of collecting the articles will be explained, and limitations and considerations will be outlined and discussed. The shape of the study will be a qualitative case study based on the goal of gaining a deeper understanding of the issue. It will be conducted as a desk study, and is designed in a suitable way for creating good conditions for answering the research question. The methodological decisions that have been made will hopefully help me in the process of collecting literature and articles, and when conducting the analysis.

This study is taking the shape as a discourse analysis approach inspired by Norman Fairclough’s three-dimensional models for a critical discourse analysis. A critical discourse analysis is well-suited when working with articles according to Norman Fairclough (1995).

3.1 Critical discourse analysis

This thesis intends to study how women who are engaged with political violence are portrayed in the media, and to this 32 articles will be analyzed using a critical discourse approach inspired by Norman Fairclough. The aim is that the approach till create a foundation for conducting an in-depth analysis of articles.

There is no set way to perform a discourse analysis. There are different interpretations on how a discourse analysis should be designed as the approach as an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary character (Bergström & Boréus 2012: 353, 355; Winther Jørgenson & Phillips 2000: 7, 19, 152). The purpose with a discourse analysis is to study discourses systematically and with a critical eye (Winther Jørgenson & Phillips 2000: 7, 152).

However, there are different definitions on what a discourse really is, and it is rather unclear what the term actually means according to some scholars (Winther Jørgenson & Phillips 2000: 7; Bergström & Boréus 2012: 356). Norman Fairclough explains it as “spoken or written language (Fairclough 1992 in Bergström & Boréus 2012: 365). Burr on the other hand explains is as “a discourse refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, and statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events” (Burr 1995: 48).
When conducting a discourse analysis, one focuses on how language is used and the role it is playing in how people understand the reality and how their knowledge is constructed (Winther Jørgenson & Phillips: 10). This goes in the same line as social constructivism that has been outlined in the previous chapter. As previously mentioned, there are different ways to conduct a discourse analysis. Nevertheless, there are some key premises that create the foundation for the approach. The following key premises are described by Marianne Winther Jørgenson & Louise Phillips (2000), but are however built on Norman Fairclough’s interpretations of the foundation of the critical discourse analysis approach (Winther Jørgenson & Phillips 2000: 66-67).

1. Sociocultural processes and structures have a partly linguistic-discursive character: Discursive practice is about producing and consuming texts, and is a part of social practice that contributes to constitute social identities, social relations and the social world. Sociocultural reproduction and change is an effect of discursive practices (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 67).

2. Critical discourse analysts believe that discourses are both constituent and constituted, and because of this play an important role in social practice. Discourses shaped and reshape the social reality (Winther Jørgenson & Phillips 2000: 67-8)

3. Discourses are seen as a social practice that is in a dialectical relationship to other social practices. Discourses affects social structures and processes, and is at the same time an reflection of them (Winther Jørgenson & Phillips 2000: 67-8)

4. The use of language should be analyzed empirically in the social context: Critical discourses have a focus on linguistics text analysis. However, how this is conducted differs depending on tradition (Winther Jørgenson & Phillips 2000: 68).

5. Discourses as ideological effects: Discursive practices are seen to create and reproduce inequality and power dominance. This is seen as ideological effects. However, there are different opinions on how to relate to the concept of power. Some traditions in critical discourse analysis are inspired by Michel Foucault’s view on power. Yet, most view power as something that is forced on others (Winther Jørgenson & Phillips 2000: 69).
Critical research: Research and analysis that are done in traditional objectivistic social science should be politically neutral. Critical discourse analysis approaches do not follow this as they aim to contribute to social change. The purpose is to reveal the role that discursive practice plays in the creation and reproducing of uneven power relations (Winther Jørgenson & Phillips 2000: 69-70).

Language is viewed as not being a natural instrument for communication. It cannot, according to the approach, represent an objective reality because of the power it has. Language is seen to play a major role as it is a social activity and that it is active in a social context. It is also seen as having a shaping effect on the social because of how phenomenon such as relations, identities and beliefs are shaped by the use of language and through the use of language. It is connected to ideology and sociocultural change (Bergström & Boréus 2012: 378; Bryman 2008: 483-4). It affects the way people view themselves and others, and it constructs people’s relationship to the world and their understanding of it (Bergström & Boréus 2012: 379). Discourses are believed to build on each other, and to influence other discourses. They influence other discourses as they are constructed by texts such as newspaper articles and journal articles. However, they are also seen to work against each other in what could be called a dialogical struggle (Bryman 2008: 485).

Critical discourse analysis is a good approach when exploring the media and how the media construct discourses according to Fairclough. It is according to Fairclough, difficult for people to understand the connection between language and power and because of this, it is important to explore and analyze the media (Fairclough 1995: 54). Language is always contributing in one way or another. The size of the text does not matter according to Fairclough as any text contributes to the shaping of social identities, social relations, systems of knowledge and beliefs. Fairclough argue that use of language plays a major role in culture and society. When using language, it do not matter what type of text it is, there will always, according to Fairclough, be an construction of social “identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief” (Ibid: 55).

Then conducting a critical discourse analysis a three-dimensional model is often used (Bryman 2008: 485). This study will be influenced by Fairclough’s three-dimensional model.
3.1.1 Fairclough’s three-dimensional model

The purpose of Fairclough’s three-dimensional model is to systematically examine the frames that are used in collected articles. The frames are explored by analyzing what is being said or written in detail, and at the same time approach the articles as an integrated part of social practice (Bergström & Boréus 2012: 391).

Fairclough’s model consists of a variety of concepts and analytical tools (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 70). Fairclough (2010) argues that by using a three-dimensional model of analysis, one can explore discourses in an effective way. He writes that “each discursive event has three dimensions or facets: it is a spoken or written language text, it is an instance of discourse practice involving the production and interpretation of text and it is a piece of social practice”. These are the three dimensions, or levels, that one should focus on according to Fairclough when conducting a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2010: 94).

However, when conducting a discourse analysis, one does not need to use all the concepts and analytical tools. One can choose with concepts and tools to use, and how to use them depending on the research questions and the possible resources (Winther Jørgenson & Phillips 2000: 81). This study will focus on two of the three dimensions that are part of Fairclough’s model; the textual level and the discourse level (Ibid: 75).

The first dimension focuses on the textual level or more precisely on the spoken or written language. In this study, the focus will be on the written languages as I will analyze articles. Focus is on the character of the text, which means that one focuses on how language is use and on grammatical patterns. How the text is put together is also an important factor to focus on. The purpose is to study the selected material in detail and to focus on their characteristics and to explore how discourses are constructed in the material (Winther Jørgenson & Phillips 2000: 75, 87; Fairclough 2010: 94).

When focusing on the first dimension, one can apply different analytical tools such as modality, ethos, metaphors, and choice of words. Modality is a grammatical tool that can be used when highlighting the writer’s level of agreement in a statement. The media often present its material as if it were true facts. This is done by using different types of modality. Depending on the character of a statement, the receiver will interpret the meaning and produce or reproduce an understanding of reality and knowledge. This means that the construction of social relations, knowledge and the perception of the reality depends on how
texts are shaped and how people receive them (Bergström & Boréus 2012: 376; Winther Jørgenson & Phillips 2000: 87-88). Ethos is about how identities are constructed through language (Winther Jørgenson & Phillips 2000: 87).

The second dimension focuses on the processes of production or reproduction and the consumption of texts (Ibid: 75). To only analyze the textual level is not enough as it would not highlight the connection between the societal and cultural processes and structures where discourses are playing a major role (Ibid: 72). When then analyzing the selected material on the second dimension the researcher highlights how the text is produced, or reproduces, and how it is consumed (Ibid: 75). One element the research will focus on at the level of discourse practice is the intertextual chain. Fairclough argues that an intertextual analysis is a needed compliment to the first dimension and an important part of the second dimension (Fairclough 1995: 18, 30). When focusing on the intertextual chain, one focuses on which teams that are reoccurring and how this is expressed (Ibid: 202).

The third dimension puts the discourses into a broader context by highlighting the relationship between the two first two dimensions and the social practice (Bergström & Boréus 2012: 375; Winther Jørgenson & Phillips 2000: 90). This is done by exploring if the discourse practice is reproducing and/or restructuring the existing order of discourses, and what effects this would have on social practice (Winther Jørgenson & Phillips 2000: 75, 90).

I have limited the study to focus on the first and second dimension.

3.2 Material

This section will present some thoughts about the material that has been used in this study and it will also outline the process of collecting the analyzed articles.

As previously mentioned, this study is conducted as a qualitative desk study. It could however be somewhat problematic to conduct qualitative research that is based mainly on secondary material as the information has been processed by others before. However, I argue that the scholars and resources that are use can be trusted. The scholars that are mentioned throughout the study are known names in research on women, gender and political violence. Different sources are used so that the risk for biases is minimized.
The secondary textual material that has been used as the foundation for this study consists of literature from the university library, Oneseach or the internet, and the analyzed articles are collected from the homepages of different newspapers.

Since the purpose of this study is to explore how the media is portraying female actors in political violence, the empirical textual material will be articles form newspapers. I do not think that it is necessary to keep a critical position towards the articles as I am interested of what they are portraying and mediating, and not on who the journalists are.

3.2.1 The process of collecting the articles

The purposes with this study it to explore how English written newspapers that are published in Britain portray the Kurdish women of the YPJ and the Peshmerga who are fighting against the terrorist organization Daesh in Northern Iraq and Syria. I started by exploring how much that had been written on the subject during 2015. However, I came to the conclusion that there was not enough coverage. The time span was instead increased to 2014-2015. This timespan seemed to fit into the amount of articles that I would need for the empirical material. The media’s interest for the Kurdish female fighters has grown, and I argue that the articles from the selected timespan can represent the peak for the media’s coverage of the case.

I collected 32 articles that were published by six different newspapers from the 1st of January 2014 to the 31st of December 2015. The aim was to find newspapers that have a high number of readers and a wide range of readership. I claim that it is necessary for the study to have a relatively large time span with the argument that a shorter one would not cover enough articles that would be suitable for the study. To do this, a number of newspapers where been explored, and it ended up with six different British newspapers; the BBC, The Independent, The Guardian, International Business Time, The Daily Mirror and The Daily Mail. The decision to use British newspapers as the frame is based on that I wanted to focus on English written articles from Europe. American newspapers could be interesting to analyze. However, some delimitation must be taken when conducting research of this kind. I did not use a specific search engine when collecting the selection of articles; instead the newspapers own homepages was used when finding the material.

The articles have been systematically examined so that those that were not relevant could be eliminated at an early staged. Following this a more in-depth reading was made to find if
there were more articles that would not be relevant for the purpose of the study. The end selection consisted of 32 articles. However, the number of articles from the newspapers varies in numbers which could affect the quality of the study. I had hoped that there would have been a more even distribution of articles but as the aim was to find articles limited to time and that they mainly would be about the Kurdish female fighters, it was somewhat problematic to collect material. Articles where selectively collected, and those who only mentioned the group shortly where opted out. A limitation has been that many newspapers require payed membership if one wants to be able to access the articles completely. This limited my work as I could not access some newspapers that could have been more suitable for this study. The following search words have been used when collecting the articles; YPG, YPJ, female/women Peshmerga, Kurdish female fighters/soldiers/guerilla, Kurdish female brigade, PKK.

The selection of newspapers is based on their character and readership. The BBC is a very influential public service broadcaster (BBC no date: a). They are according to their homepage independent and impartial in their treatment of news and facts (BBC no date: b). The Independent stands as a center-left newspaper, and is as the name implies not associated with any political party. The Guardian is more on the left side then the Independent (BBC 2009; Guardian 2002). The Daily Mirror is a British tabloid newspaper (Mirror no date). The International Business Time has ten different country editions in five languages, and in this study the British one is used. The International Business Times is a digital global news publication that reaches over 5 million people in the U.K every month (and around 50 million people worldwide) (IBT no date). The Daily Mail is a right wing, traditionally conservative newspaper (BBC 2009). The six mentioned newspapers have large number of readers and reaches out a wide variety of people. The six selected newspapers are of different character which would cover a relatively representative picture of the media and would then be relevant for the study. This creates the foundation for strong reliability and validity.

When conducting a discourse analysis one takes another approach towards sources. Traditionally some sources are seen to be better and more credible, such as official documents from the government compared to entertainment magazines. However, when conducting a discourse analysis this difference is not made. Texts are a part of the reality. Different texts make claims in different ways and with different tools about the reality. They both construct and are constructed. Texts are an apart of the reality, and portray the reality at the same time (Börjesson 2003: 16).
3.3 Considerations

This section will feature a discussion on some of the considerations that this study has. This is done with the purpose to create a better understanding of the study and what it will be focusing on. The aim is to make the study as transparent as possible. In addition to this, the role of the research will be discussed as there are some issues that can come up when conducting research with an ontological point of departure in social constructivism.

Asbjørn Johannessen and Per Arne Tufte (2002) claims that the aim with research is in general to keep a natural and value-free approach towards the issue that is being explored, and also towards earlier literature and empirical material. However, this could be difficult to achieve throughout the whole research process (Johannessen & Tufte 2002: 16-17) and especially when conducting a discourse analysis, there is always a risk that the researcher’s own knowledge and values affect the analysis process (Winther Jørgenson & Phillips 2000: 28-29). Furthermore, social constructivism challenges the idea that it would be possible to be objective during research and when analyzing discourses (Ibid: 28-29).

If one follows the perspective of social constructivism, questions about how to relate to the research result can be problematic to answer. The perspective states, as previously mentioned in this study, that reality is socially constructed. How should the researcher relate to the “truths” that there research is producing? It is problematic to argue that one’s own representation of the world is better than other alternatives if there are no real “truths” (Ibid: 29). This means that my findings cannot be argued to be anything else then a contribution to other versions of reality (Bryman 2008: 475).

To reach a good level of reliability, it is important that the researcher is careful in the different steps of the research and that the risk of using false sources is eliminated. As previously mentioned in the earlier section, the six selected newspapers differ in character and will create a representative picture of the media. Reliability is also about how the researcher interprets the selected material. It is important that reading and analyzing of the articles is done with care (Ibid: 42).
4.0 Research results and analysis

This chapter will outline the results and analytical work of this study in the shape of a critical discourse analysis inspired by Norman Fairclough’s three-dimensional model. Nacos’ framework will structure the first part of the chapter, and after this, alternative frames will be presented and explored. In addition to this, intertextuality will be outlined and analyzed. The purpose is to explore how the Kurdish female fighters of the Peshmerga and YPJ are portrayed in the ongoing conflict in the Northern Iraq and Syria with the terrorist organization Daesh.

32 articles from six different British newspapers have been collected and analyzed. Not all of them will be highlighted in this chapter, but they will all be used when building the analysis.

4.1 Physical appearance

The analyzed articles have a tendency to portray the female fighters as something different and abnormal. They are standing out as a special phenomenon in the context that they are active in. In seven of the articles, the journalists describe the female fighters in a way that could be argued to follow what Nacos calls the “physical appearance frame”. The journalists’ way of describing them is very similar in character and separates the female fighters from their male counterparts.

The frame is not as recurring and strong as one could expect. Some journalists are using words and descriptions of the female fighters such as “happy” and “sweet”. However, the main focus is on that the female fighters are of young age, and there are more articles then the seven articles that are describing the female fighters (young) age. Words such as “girl(s)” and “young” are often used. In addition to this, the fighter age is often mentioned.

The following quotes will represent a recurring pattern in the analyzed material. These two quotes come from two different articles published from the Daily Mail;

“Clutching a battered Kalashnikov and with her hair draw back in a tight headscarf, this woman fighter leading the battle against Islamic State in Kobane” (Greenhill 2014a).

“You wouldn’t know it from her sweet smile, but the reason why Nesrin Abdi carries a rifle is in case she needs to shoot herself dead” (Greenhill 2014b).
Here, it becomes clear that the female fighter’s physical appearance, Nesrin Abdi’s smile, is placed as a contrast to the fact that she is armed and prepared to take her own life. That a woman could be armed and prepared to take her own life if necessary is something that the journalist presents as contradicting with that she is a woman with a “sweet smile”.

Another quote resembles the ones above in character.

“The troops look serious and focused despite the scorching heat of the Iraqi summer. Standing straight in their fatigues with Kalashnikovs on their shoulders, this looks no different than any other training camp. But it is the long hair tied back in a bun under caps, and the hint of make-up on some faces, that spell out the difference” (BBC 2014a).

The precious quote comes from an article published by the BBC. The journalist has spent time with one of the Kurdish female units. In the article, the journalist describes the environment and highlights that there is something different with the training camp. It looks according to the journalist as a normal one, but it is not. Instead, the ones who are fighting are women who are different from male fighters because of how they look.

As we can see from the quotes, the physical appearance of the female fighters is used somewhat discreetly. It is present in the collected material, but could go unnoticed if one would not think about it. Despite of this, it has an effect of the representation of the Kurdish female fighters. They are not fighters; they are instead female fighters with long hair, sweet smiles and makeup in a context where masculinity normally is the norm. However, at the same time, it could be possible to see it the other way around. It could be that they are challenging the stereotype of a fighter and not of womanhood. With this, I mean that the stereotype is not about women per se but about fighters who should not be wearing makeup or smiling.

“During her two years of training, Shireen would visit us. I could not believe how much her personality changed during her long embedding in the military camp in a Kobani suburb. She used to have a Barcelona flag around her neck and wore full makeup. I can’t remember her hands without rings or bracelets. Her bag, which was full of perfume and cosmetics, came to be loaded with bombs and bullets” (Mahmood 2015).
In this article a brother remembers his sister who became a martyr defending Kobane. The brother becomes a somewhat trusted source as he tells the journalist his own view and feelings towards his dead sister, who was a Kurdish female fighter. He describes his sister as someone who, before becoming a fighter, always wore makeup and other traditionally feminine attributes.

4.2 Family connection and for the sake of love

15 articles portray the Kurdish female fighters in connection to their families and their backgrounds. In most of these articles, this is only mentioned in passing. Four articles mention the female fighters’ relations and motivations connected with the frame of “for the sake of love”. These two frames are present in the articles, but most times as an element in how the Kurdish female fighters are described and how their involvement in the YPJ and Peshmerga is explained.

“Nesrin, a 20-year-old medical student, is by all accounts a happy, well-educated, middle-class young woman with an infectious joy for life. [...] But Nesrin, a doctor’s daughter who has joined an army of women battling to defend Kobane, is aware that every day could be her last” (Greenhill 2014b).

In this quote, different themes are used and one could probably argue that it focuses more on the female fighter’s appearance than on her family connection. The journalist focuses on that she, the female fighters called Nesrin, is a happy young woman who comes from a stable family background and that she is the daughter to a doctor. This is described in contrast to the life she has decided to live and the risks she is putting herself in. The following sentence is an example of how both the female fighters’ motherhood and her family is highlighted;

“She is a mother of three and says both her children and her husband are proud of what she is doing” (BBC 2014a).

When it comes to the fighters’ family connections and relations, the journalists often describes the fighters as “mother-of-two” or “daughters of”. This can be seen as a contrast to what one would think of when the word “fighter” is mentioned. When the female fighters are portrayed as having their family and loved ones support, one could see this as a way to break stereotypes of the subdued women.
“Ms Tawfiq is a divorcee and a mother of two teenaged boys. She spends two days a week at the military camp and the other four with her children. She says they know she is fighting for a good cause and are very supportive” (BBC 2014a).

Also from the same article;

“Col Rashid says families are quite supportive of the decision of their daughters and female relatives to join the force” (BBC 2014a).

“Families are supportive of the decision of the women to join […]” (BBC 2014a).

What I want to show with these quotes is how the articles frames the female fighters by highlighting that they are mothers or/and daughters, and that they have their families support in their involvement in the conflict.

‘(They) are some of the fiercest and most effective fighters. Many of them are widowed, and strongly motivated on the battlefield by their personal loss’ (Argentieri 2014).

This statement comes from David L. Phillips, who is an expert on human rights, and is quoted by the journalist. Here, the focus is placed on that the female fighters are motivated by personal loss. This is presented with a high level of modality. In addition to this, the same quote is presented in another of the analyzed articles. Both articles are published by the Daily Mail. The agent behind the statement is someone who is seen to have relevant knowledge, as he is the “director of a program on peace-building” at a well-known university. The journalist writes with his own words that the director believes that the Kurdish female fighters are “making a mark”.

The articles portray the female fighter in a way where it seems important that her family stand behind that their daughter, wife and/or mother are engaging in political violence. One could wonder if there is something deeper that the media is portraying then that the female fighters as being supported by their families. How would they be portrayed if they did not have their families’ support? The journalists present it as there is only one alternative which is that the female fighters are supported by their loved one. Some articles even highlight that families are supportive in the women’s decision to risk their lives and that they believe that the sacrifice for martyrdom is something good.
“What about a husband and children? She laughs. ‘In this situation, I don’t know. I cannot think about these things at the moment. I think that I am too young.’ […]” (Greenhill 2014b).

“I was never married; it seemed pointless to me to get married and bring a child to this world, before making it a nice place to live for children” (Platt 2014b).

As shown above, there are some references to marriage, husbands and having children, or the lack of these things, throughout those articles where I have found patterns of the family and love frame.

I came to the conclusion to intertwine two of Nacos’ frames into one, “family connection” and “love connection”. This decision is based on how the journalists are using the two frames in the analyzed articles. The two frames are often recurring together, in the same articles and in the same quotes. The female fighters’ backgrounds are mentioned mostly in passing, which at the first glance is something that the reader probably would not reflect on. However, it is still a part of how the Kurdish female fighters are portrayed, and how the public understands them as actors.

4.3 Women’s liberation and equality

Of the collected articles, 15 of them fit into the frame “women’s liberation and equality”. These articles are constructing images of the Kurdish female fighters as actors who are fighting for women’s liberation and equality in the conflict with Daesh. Their involvement in the fight against Daesh and their motivations for picking up arms seems according to how the journalists portray them to be limited to that they are women. The Kurdish female fighters struggle is treated by the media as being linked to that they are female fighters motivated by female liberation. However, it could be that the journalists are applying this frame to their articles as it is strengthened by statements from the female fighters themselves. The female fighters claim to be fighting for female liberation so one could question to what extent is a media frame. Nevertheless, they are treated as something different, something that is not following the societal norms in a society that the Western world perceives as male dominated.

There is a strong pattern in how the female fighters are portrayed in relations to Daesh. It is through the contrast to Daesh that the female fighters’ motivations are highlighted and treated as relevant. They are portrayed with words such as “strong”, “courageous” (young) women,
who would “sacrifice” everything for their sisters, both their Kurdish sisters, other women in
the Middle East and also for their sisters around the world. Other words that the journalists
are using when portraying the Kurdish female fighters are “fearless” and “brave”.

“Pointing at her weapon, Dilan says she does not favour war, but she is ready to
fight for her rights […] ‘Women are often seen and depicted as weak and
defenseless,’ Dilan says, ‘but every woman has the potential to be strong and
free.’ She smiles. ‘It’s a very difficult and long struggle. We have to take it step
by step’ (Letsch 2015).

What is interesting is what type of statements that the journalists’ decides to use from
the female fighters. This quote is a direct quote from one of the female fighters. She
states that she dislikes war and that she understands that she must fight for her and
other women’s rights. By attaching the statement, the journalists highlight that the
female fighters can, and wants to be “strong and free” and that they are motivated by a
women’s liberation movement. Nacos has observed that women who are active in
traditionally patriarchal societies often are portrayed as fighting for gender equality
(Nacos 2005: 444). However, in the case of the Kurdish female fighters it is
problematic to state that this is because of the journalists being biased and that they are
leading the fighters to talk about equality and women’s rights, or that the fighters
themselves are interested of telling the media that they are fighting because of this. At
the same time as the journalists and the media is producing stereotypes, the female
fighters are upholding and strengthening them by their own statements.

Next quote goes in the same pattern;

"IS see women as sex objects. And yes, this does motivate me when I fight
against them. This is why I know IS is scared of us women in the YPJ. They
know they treat women, and they know we are aware of what they do and can
feel our resentment and hatred of them. This is what makes us such big enemies,
our approaches to women. We have made liberation of women a central idea to
our struggle, whereas IS has made rape central to its way of life. 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 2014b).
The following quote is from a Kurdish female fighter talking about Daesh:

‘It is so, so important that it is women fighting IS […]. In their culture, women are slaves. They treat them as objects whose lives are worth nothing’ (Greenhill 2014b).

Statements are often of a dramaturgical character, which means that there are a lot of dramatic descriptions. The Kurdish female fighters are the ones who have the most room in the articles. They are the ones who explain and describe their situation. In addition to this, the journalists write about what the female fighters have said, but by recounting what the women have said in their interviews or from other media sources.

The female fighters are portrayed as actors who are sacrificing everything, even their lives. Fairclough, according by Winther Jørgensen and Phillips (2000), points towards how identities are constructed through the use of language. This could mean that when the journalists portray the Kurdish female fighters as fighting despite of the risk of meeting the horrors of Daesh, the public’s understanding of the actors identities and motivations would be linked to this (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 87). The journalists are producing images of the Kurdish female fighters as participating in a fight based on that they are women fighting for their rights against an organization that is against female liberation.

The way that the journalists frame the articles results in a focus on the oppression that they are fighting against. With this, I argue that the “women’s liberation and equality” frame is heavily used throughout the analyzed articles. This produces an understanding of them as legitimate actors of political violence by the journalists writing.

The journalists are often using ‘direct speech’ in the articles. This means that the journalists use quotes and statements from the female fighters themselves. Almost all articles use the same angle when approaching the subject of the Kurdish female fighters and are referring to them in similar ways. It is, according to Jørgensen Winther and Phillips, important to focus on whom or which voices that are allowed to be a part of the articles. This means that those who are being referred to in the articles should be mentioned when doing a discourse analysis (2000: 87-89). When highlighting this element, focus is on the relation “between the voices of the reporter and of the person reported”. By quoting the female fighters the journalists are able to “preserve the original wording”, which makes it easier to “maintain boundaries” between the journalist and the female fighters that is in focus of the articles (Fairclough 1995:
The female fighters do get a lot of room in the articles; both by ‘direct speech’ and when
the journalists are repeating what the female fighters have said but with the journalist’s own
words. There is a lack of variation as there is more or less the same type of statements that are
recurring throughout the articles.

What is constant throughout the frame is how the Kurdish female fighters’ struggle for
equality is portrayed. The modality, which means how strong the journalists’ statements are
and with which certainty it is presented, (Börjesson 2003: 96) is in these representations high.
The journalists are often presenting facts and their descriptions as if what they are writing is
the only possible version of reality (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 88). The journalists
are often presenting descriptions behind the Kurdish female fighters’ motivations as being
based in their fight against Daesh. There are no competing descriptions of the female
fighters’ motivations and struggle for women’s liberation. This could affect the construction
of the understanding of the Kurdish female fighter.

4.4 Tough-as-males or tougher-then-men

In addition to the frames explored above concerning the women’s liberation and equality
struggle, this frame is widely used by the journalists behind the analyzed articles. 16 of the 32
articles apply the frame “tough-as-males or tougher-then-men”. The female fighters are
portrayed as “brave” and “fierce” women, and as capable fighters. The journalists often use
statements from the female fighters to amplify the images of them as being as tough as their
male counterparts or even stronger. However, the Kurdish female fighters contributes to this
by claiming that that women are as capable as their male counterparts, or that they are even
better. It is problematic to argue that the journalists are bias, however they are the ones who
decide what is written and what to exclude when portraying the female fighters.

One of the main approaches that the articles are using when portraying the Kurdish female
fighters is to place them in contrast to the male members of Daesh. One article published by
the BBC highlights the Kurdish female fighters view on the members of Daesh. However,
one should count in the fact that this is self-portrayal and that it is hard to know if the
journalist have guided the conversation into the subject or if the female fighter herself
decided to focus on their view of Daesh. In addition to this, there is a cultural and religious
context which makes women into a different category based on the idea that a jihadist who is
killed by woman does not go to heaven:
‘We’re not scared of anything […] We’ll fight to the last. We’d rather blow ourselves up then be captured by IS. […] when they see a woman with a gun, they’re so afraid they begin to shake. They portray themselves as tough guys to the world. But when they see us with our guns they run away. They see a woman as just a small thing. But one of our women is worth a hundred of their men’ (Gatehouse 2014).

Another article refers to the same statement;

‘When they see a woman with a gun, they’re so afraid they begin to shake. They portray themselves as tough guys to the world. But when they see us with our guns they run away. They see a woman as just a small thing. But one of our women is worth a hundred of their man.’ (Hall and Brown 2014).

Other article refers to the same source and is using the same quotes;

‘We’re not scared of anything. We’ll fight to the last. We’d rather blow ourselves up than be captured by Isis. When they see a woman with a gun, they’re so afraid they begin to shake. They portray themselves as tough guys to the world. But when they see us with our guns they run away. They see a woman as just a small thing. But one of our women is worth a hundred of their men’ (Mezzofiore 2014b).

The fact that articles are referring to the same sources is a sign that there could be a strong intertextual chain. An intertextual chain is when texts are connected to each other (Fairclough 2010: 420). However, this will be explored deeper in the section about intertextuality. These three quotes highlight the strength that the Kurdish female fighters have against their enemy because of their gender women.

By focusing on the choice of wording that the journalists have made in the articles, both linguistic and metaphorical, one can find interesting elements (Börjesson 2003: 90). The Kurdish female fighters are described with strong words that are recurring throughout the collected articles. Words such as “courageous”, “fanatical, “defiant”, “savages” and “revenge” are used when portraying the female fighters. These words, and others, that the journalists are using point towards loaded images and ideas about both the female fighters themselves and the context they are fighting in. The reader could associate this with certain characteristics and stereotypes that are produced and reproduced throughout the media.
Journalists are using loaded words that portray the female fighters to be tough and brave despite that they are women, and that they are as good fighters as their male counterparts. One element to highlight when doing a critical discourse analysis is according to Winther Jørgensen and Phillips (2000) to explore if the writer of a text creates ethos. The journalists do this when identities are reproduced by the use of language. The journalists’ language and wording produces and shapes the female fighters identity (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips 2000: 87), this means that the media has the power to shape the public’s understanding of the Kurdish female fighters, but also for female fighters in general.

4.5 Alternative frames

After the process of reading and analyzing the collected articles I found that the frame “the bored, naïve, out-of-touch-with-reality frame” was not used by the journalists. I found through the precious research that feminist scholars often approach the framing of violent women as being portrayed in a negative way. However, I observed that there are alternative frames in the analyzed articles. It became clear that there where patterns throughout the articles that pointed towards these two frames.

4.5.1 Rational and down to earth

This frame could be seen as a critique against the “the bored, naïve, out-of-touch-with-reality frame” as it shows that the Kurdish female fighters are smart and that they know what they are doing. This frame does not portray the female fighters as more peaceful then the traditional fighter. Instead, the journalists describes them as realists, who understand what they are engaging in and that they are prepared to fight for their values and rights. The following quotes are examples of how the frame “rational and down to earth”:

“Arin hasn’t talked to her parents since she left Germany. […] ‘My life is with these brave women. They are my family’. Her loyalty to her fellow soldiers is typical of YPJ members who boast to live by a code of honesty, morals and justice, addressing each other as Haval, the Kurdish word for comrade and friend” (Argentieri 2014).

The female fighter has left her family to take part of the fighting against Daesh. The journalist is quoting her by using ‘direct speech’ and gives her the opportunity to present her feelings towards her fellow fighters. The journalist portrays the female
fighters as actors who are linked to each other by honesty and values. This portrays the fighters as having close relations, like sisters.

4.5.2 The protector

This frame could be seen as a version of the frame “family connection and for the sake of love” that Nacos have observed (Nacos 2005). There are recurring patterns throughout the articles of portraying the female fighters as the protectors of family, friends, sisterhood and homeland. The articles point towards that the female fighters motivations are based in that they want to fight, not only for their own right, but also for protecting others.

“The women are in no doubt about why they are fighting. […] She says: ‘Look at Shingal [in Iraq] where they raped the women and massacred the men. It is a matter of honour to defend ourselves first, and then out families and lands.’ Sitting next to her is Zenya, 22, who adds that she also “is fighting for myself and my family” (Cockburn 2015).

The journalist behind the quote above is presenting a statement from two female fighters. They are explaining why they decided to participate in the conflict. Focus is placed on them as protectors and defenders of themselves and others.

4.6 Intertextuality

Intertextuality is, according to Fairclough (1995), an important part of a critical discourse analysis. The intertextual analysis plays a significant role as it connects the textual level and the discourse practice level in his three-dimensional model (Fairclough 1995: 81). Intertextuality is about exploring the relationships between the different texts that are in focus of the study. The purpose of this is to focus on how the texts are connected, and if they build on each other. This means that focus should be on recurring themes and patterns in how the journalists portrays the Kurdish female fighters. The idea is that texts, and other forms of social interactions, are never isolated from each other. A text produces and reproduces other texts, and is never excluded from the influence of other texts (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000:77-78, Fairclough 1995: 81).

This study has, as mentioned earlier, analyzed 32 articles and a majority of these have been of a similar content and structure. The journalists have often focused on the same people, events
or issues when portraying the Kurdish female fighters. Some have been stronger than other, but however recurring in some way. After the process of reading and analyzing the articles, my conclusion is that there are strong similarities between the texts and a high coherence in how and what they are written about despite that the selected articles come from a wide range of newspapers.

I have examined and analyzed what kind of connections there are between the articles. I have drawn the conclusion that the intertextuality is high based on how patterns and different frames are recurring when the journalists writes about the Kurdish female fighters and when they describe them and their motivations behind their involvement in the conflict. Some frames are more recurrent, which have a higher level of intertextuality. A majority of the articles are similar in how they are put together, and how they approach the subject of the Kurdish female fighters. Those themes are produced and reproduced through a majority of the articles, which creates the foundation for the receivers to believe that the articles are presenting true facts. If the same stories, or versions of a story, are presented over and over, it becomes a true fact. People starts to think that what they are versions of what they are reading is the true version (Winter Jørgensen & Philips 2000: 87-88; Fairclough 1995: 81). Fairclough argues the following “[…] we cannot understand particular events or particular texts, or the significance of these for the participants, without exploring (and asking about) these wider intertextual chains” (Fairclough 2010: 420-21).

Many of the articles consist almost only of quotes from de female fighters’ themselves that the journalists use to frame their material. Quotes and statements are used to highlight the female fighters’ involvement, and their love for family, sisterhood and homeland. In addition to this, their struggle for equality and their courage is strengthened as all articles portray the Kurdish female fighters with the same type of approach and wording. There is no variety when it comes to the angles of approaching the female fighters and in how they are portrayed and described.

The journalists are building their articles on the same stories, and the same names are recurring throughout the analyzed material (names such as Arin Mirkan, Comander Narin Afrin, Ozalp/Diren). Journalists are using the same sources. One example of this is when they are portraying Narin Afrin; one journalist writes;

“Afrin – described as ‘beautiful, innocent and strong’ […]” (Greenhill 2014a).
In another article the same journalists writes;

“[…] Narin Afrin and described as ‘beautiful, innocent and strong’ […]”
(Greenhill 2014b).

By building on the same stories, events and issues, and by using the same images and facts repeatedly, knowledge is produced and reproduced according to social constructivism. The readers understanding and knowledge is probably shaped by how the articles treat the phenomenon of the Kurdish female fighters.

There is a red thread throughout the articles, and it becomes clear that the journalists build their material and way of writing on earlier articles on the phenomenon of the Kurdish female fighters. There is one “fact” that is frequently repeated in the analyzed material and that is that the terrorist organization Daesh is afraid of being killed by a female fighter, and especially if she is Kurdish. When this is presented in the articles, the journalists only refer to statements from the Kurdish female fighters. The idea that Daesh would be afraid of being killed by female fighters is produced and reproduced throughout the media, and is a clear example of the intertextuality of the collected articles.

The level of intertextuality has been mentioned in earlier in this chapter. However, the following quotes will represent some aspects of intertextuality in the collected articles.

“Many reports have suggested IS is terrified of the women that is fighting in Kobani, although the organisation denies this. It is true IS is scared of female fighters. In fact it tries to avoid attacking positions with women in them. Some explain this by saying: ‘If they are killed by women then they can’t go to heaven,’ but I think this has more to do with the fact that they have never come across a women” (Platt 2014b).

Here, a Kurdish female states that the fighters of Daesh are afraid of female fighters. She as an agent strengthens the validity of this information.

“ISIS jihadi fighters are ‘afraid of girls’ and fear facing female soldiers, a militia commander in the Kurdish women’s unit has said” (Malm 2015).

Here, the journalist writes with his/her own words what a Kurdish fighter with high statues have said. In addition to this, the journalists refer to a statement made by a female fighter.
‘They believe if someone from Deash [ISIS] is killed by a girl, a Kurdish girl, they won’t go to heaven. They’re afraid of girls’ (Malm 2015).

‘Isis is afraid of girls’ (Dearden 2015).

This could be seen as a central part of the articles when the journalists are portraying the female fighters. This is referred to as true “knowledge”. Sometimes, the journalists highlights that this is information that comes from the Kurdish forces, but because it is recurring over and over again, it becomes understood as the true version. The female fighters’ involvement in political violence is highlighted and one could perceive them as legitimized through the idea that they are the one of the biggest threats against Deash.

After systematically examining the discourses a conclusion can be drawn that a majority of the analyzed articles have a close relation to each other, and are too similar to not argue that the intertextual chain is strong (Fairclough 2010: 420). There are others who have observed the intertextuality in the media coverage of the Kurdish female fighters. A name that is recurring in the critics against the Western media’s treatment of the female fighters is the Kurdish scholar and activist Dilar Dirik. She argues that the Western media is fascinated with the case of the Kurdish female fighters and that they are perceived as “badass” Kurdish women. She argues that the idea that Daesh ‘[…]fears these women because they will not go to heaven, if they get killed by a woman’ is overused and ‘rather boring’ as it has been used in most articles and media outlets when it comes to portraying the Kurdish female fighters (Dirik 2014b).
5.0 Conclusion

My intention with this thesis has been to explore and analyze how the media is portraying the Kurdish female fighters of the YPJ and the Peshmerga, who are fighting against Daesh in Northern Iraq and Syria. The intention has not been to focus if the media is portraying the case in a way that is true or not. To accomplish this, I applied a critical discourse analysis inspired by Norman Fairclough’s three-dimensional model. In addition to this, a framework consisting of different frames and stereotypes developed by Brigitte L. Nacos was applied on the 32 articles together with theories on media framing. The analyzed articles where published by six British newspapers during 1st of January 2014 and 31st of December 2015.

By applying Nacos frames on the articles, I found that the frames “physical appearance”, “family connection”, “terrorist for the sake of love/the love connection”, “women’s liberation/equality” and “as-tough-as-males/tougher-than-men” where present. I decided to merge the frame “family connection” and “terrorist for the sake of love/the love connection” into one frame; “family connection and for the sake of love”. The reason to why I did this is that I found that the two frames where present in the same articles and that the themes where used in connection to each other.

However, one of the frames, “bored, naïve, out-of-touch-with-reality” was not used. Nevertheless, I found that there was a counter frame that I decided to name “rational and down to earth”. The journalists portray the female fighters as realists, who are motivated by values and morals. There was also another frame that could be seen as an alternative to the frame “family connection and for the sake of love” that I named “the protector”. Instead of being motivated by personal loss or family background, the female fighters are portrayed as fighting for family, friends, sisterhood and homeland.

After an in-depth reading of the previous research that have been made on the subject of women engaged in political violence and how they are portrayed, it became clear that feminist scholars often argue that the framing of violent women often is done in a negative way that minimizes them as actors. However, I found that the Kurdish female fighters were portrayed as dignified fighters, who are good fighters because of that they are women. They had a lot of room in the articles, and many of the articles consisted of statements and ‘direct speech’ that could be seen as a way of giving the female fighter the possibility to explain why they are engaging in political violence. Nevertheless, it is difficult for me to argue that the different recurring frames are present because of journalists’ being bias and that they
navigated the interviews into conversations about issues such as women’s liberation, or that the female fighters’ themselves have had an interest of spreading their values and motivations. It could be that there is an interest of portraying the Kurdish female fighters in a way that results in an image of them as accepted actors in a fight for the safety of the people in Northern Iraq and Syria.

My ambition with this study has been to bring light to how female fighters are portrayed in Western media. The Kurdish female fighters from YPJ and the Peshmerga are actors who have had the Western Worlds eyes on them since the rise of the terrorist organization Daesh.

5.1 Future research and recommendations

There are much more to do when it comes to the subjects of women, gender and political violence and on how female fighters are treated by the media. Future research could approach the case of the Kurdish female fighter by applying a lens of post-colonialism or post-colonial feminism. These theoretical approaches would maybe create a good foundation when approaching the subject, and I believe that other important issues and thoughts would come out this. It would be relevant to explore how Muslim female fighters are portrayed in the media, as they are not only the “other” from the male fighters but also the “other” because of their religion and where they live when analyzing the western media. This would mean that focus would be on exploring if and how the Kurdish female fighters are portrayed as the subaltern. There are patterns in the articles that I have analyzed that would be relevant to focus on for future research with a post-colonialism or post-colonial feminism. It is somewhat problematic when the Kurdish female fighters are romanticized by the media. When the journalists describe the female fighters and the context that they are active in, they are failing to explain and describe the deeper reasons for why the women are involved in the fight. This produces a lack of understanding of the Kurdish female fighter's agency. By only focusing on framing the female fighters in simplified ways, the media choose to not highlight important elements.

In addition to this, future research could go deeper into the construction of how the Kurdish female fighters are portrayed in relation to Daesh, such as the two sides are portrayed in relation to each other, and how the stereotypes of them are produced and reproduced. A possible issue to focus on would be to approach how the western media is portraying the Kurdish female fighters and the women who are willingly involved with the organization of Daesh.
Furthermore, future research could approach the subject by focusing on other types of medium, such as news reports on television and on the radio. Another alternative could be to explore how photographs and moving pictures are used, in newspapers, television and other media platforms. During the process of this thesis, it has become clear to me the effect of visual images and the role they play in the representation of the Kurdish female fighters, both as a case by it selves but also how it is used in contrast to the organization Daesh and the women who are a part of it, or those who are trying to become a part of it.

Future research could also explore how the Western media have been portraying the Kurdish female fighters over time. There is probably a correlation between the rise of Daesh and the media interest of the Kurdish female fighters.
6.0 References


39


6.1 Articles


