ARE FEMALE COUNTERINSURGENCY UNITS EFFECTIVE?
A CASE STUDY OF THE FEMALE KURDISH MILITIAS OF IRAQ AND SYRIA

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ABSTRACT

The Islamic State (IS) is an increasing threat to the Middle East. Their repressive nature and twisted view of the Muslim religion have made them culturally and geopolitically dangerous. As of early 2017, some of the most successful efforts toward defeating IS, halting their advance, and forcing them to retreat have been the operations of Syrian Kurdish counterinsurgent units. Within these Syrian Kurdish counterinsurgent units are women. Although underutilized, they face the same threats as their male counterparts and have the same desires to fight. Terrorism, insurgencies, and counterinsurgencies are not gender-biased, and the women of the YPJ have proven themselves on the battlefield. Likewise, the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga have their own female counterinsurgent units that have been around since the 1990’s, and have proven themselves against IS. What can we learn from the culture of the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds and what can we take away from the women within these units that we can use to mobilize and strengthen other groups of females to become successful counterinsurgents to brutal and repressive regimes?

The use of women in military operations, especially insurgency, is growing, and we are currently witnessing how this provides advantages on the battlefield and options for policy makers. Iraq, Syria, and the all-female Kurdish battalions demonstrate this.
The Kurds have integrated women into their ranks for decades -- in a region where women are traditionally placed second or overlooked all together, Kurdish women are culturally equal to men, and given the same military opportunities as their male counterparts. Why did this happen? Why is there an underlying feminist tone to the Kurdish culture to help make these units available and successful?

True change comes with time and with connection; the Kurds offer a bridge for the West to better understand Islamic culture and Middle Eastern history. Rarely has there been a group so ignored and yet persecuted at the same time. Despite the betrayals since the end of World War I, the Kurds are western-thinking and underutilized allies in a region where the United States is rapidly losing them.

Furthermore, just as the Kurds have begun to utilize women to protect their homeland and culture, extremist groups have evolved to match them. Extremist groups do not just recruit women for suicide bombers alone any more, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS/ISIL), or as they call themselves, the Islamic State (IS) have also recruited their own female wing called the Al-Khansaa Brigade. Little is known about this group, except that they are just as ruthless and brutal as their male counterparts. The West needs to understand these women, and the many and evolving roles women play in terrorist groups and acts; we cannot ignore them or their deadly consequences.
DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, John and Nancy Gorman, without whose love and support this couldn’t have happened. They are pivotal and integral figures in my life, and I thank them for everything they have done and provided. I would also like to dedicate this to the women of the United States Armed Forces, and the Central Intelligence Agency; and the Kurdish female militias – ladies, you are inspirations and models for the future, never stop kicking ass.

I would like to acknowledge my thesis mentor, R. Nick Palarino, the late John Gresham, Michael Markowitz, Susan Hess, and Greg Davis. Your support has been crucial in the development of this thesis, and my time at Georgetown, and I thank you from the very bottom of my heart.
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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a case study of female Kurdish counterinsurgents in Iraq and Syria. I will begin with brief definitions of insurgency, and counterinsurgency and how they compare to terrorism and counterterrorism. Next I will examine the long history of women in war. I will argue that women combatants are not a unique or modern concept, and that women have fought on battlefields throughout history. After laying this foundation, I consider case studies of specific female militia Kurdish and their roles in combat against the Islamic State, as well as analyzing the success or failures of the brigades and battalions themselves – Are these women effective both from a security point of view and a cultural one? Does success on the battlefield translate to gender equality in society? I also examine how the Kurdish model has been duplicated in Syria and Iraq. Two groups that are examined are the Yazidi female militia known as the ‘The Force of the Sun Ladies’ being trained by the female Iraqi Peshmerga, and the Assyrian female militias being trained by the Kurds in Syria.

Next, I will examine the opposition and their use of women, especially terrorist acts. These include Boko Haram, al Qaeda, and Hamas; as well as the Islamic State. How do varying terrorist organizations utilize women, and how has their role evolved to meet the terrorist organizations or insurgency’s needs. Finally, I assess whether or not the model can be generalized. An important question is whether the Kurdish model can serve as a tool in the global war on terrorism – if other ethnic groups within region are successful with female combatants, and could the model be applied to other cultures that are vulnerable to
extremism such as the Tuareg. The Tuareg are an Islamic tribal culture in North Africa currently coming under increasing threat from al Qaeda.
CHAPTER ONE
INSURGENCY, COUNTERINSURGENCY, AND TERRORISM

Insurgency and Counterinsurgency

The technical definition of an insurgency is a rebellion against authority, to be more
precise an “insurrection against an existing government, usually one's own, by a group not
recognized as having the status of a belligerent; (or a) rebellion within a group, as by
members against leaders.”¹ Using this definition, a counterinsurgency is a group fighting
counter-insurgency or counterinsurgency, (COIN) “may be defined as ‘comprehensive
civilian and military efforts taken to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and
address its root causes.’ Insurgency is the organized use of subversion and violence to
seize, nullify or challenge political control of a region. As such, it is primarily a political
struggle, in which both sides use armed force to create space for their political, economic
and influence activities to be effective.”²

“COIN focuses on destabilizing/defeating insurgents and creating a secure
environment that supports government rule. Although COIN is often referred to as
‘winning the hearts and minds of the people,’ a more accurate assessment of the true
capabilities of an effective COIN strategy comes from an unidentified colonel who
appeared on the Cable News Network. During his interview, he stated: “We cannot really
win the hearts and minds of the Iraqis but we can provide security and establish trust. In


² U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide (PDF), Bureau of Political-Military Affairs,
Department of State, 2009.
security lies the support of the majority and the environment in which a new and better state may emerge.’ This statement captures the core idea of COIN, which is a struggle for the population’s support.”

Are the Kurdish Militias Insurgents or Counterinsurgents?

The question on whether the Kurds fall into the category of insurgent or counterinsurgent, or even terrorist organization, is a complicated one, and the answer depend on who you ask in the Middle East. Ask Turkey, and the Kurds are terrorists, ask Syria and they are an insurgency, ask Iraq and they would most likely say they are counterinsurgents or a paramilitary force.

The Kurds are an ancient culture, and a would-be nation born of the geopolitical struggles of the 20th century. Those struggles, and betrayals, have been brought the forefront now as they play a leading role in the fight against the Islamic State.

For this thesis, I classify the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga, and the Syrian Kurdish YPG and YPJ as counterinsurgents. They are actively fighting the Islamic State (as well as other terrorist organizations within the region such as al Qaeda in Syria known officially as the al-Nusra front).

The Peshmerga are not the official Iraqi forces, but are the only military forces allowed to operate within Iraqi Kurdistan, and therefore are in control of its security.

The YPG, and its female counterpart – the YPJ, are the militia wing of the Kurdish political party in Syria, known as the Democratic Union Party. It’s important to take a

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moment to explain that the YPG/YPJ was originally formed as an insurgency fighting against the Assad regime in Syria in 2003. Over time, they have taken the role of counterinsurgents as they fight the Islamic State within Syria.

**Terrorism and Terrorist Organizations**

Terrorism is perhaps one of the most difficult words to define in the national security lexicon, primarily because there is no one definition, and while many departments and military branches have their own unique definition of terrorism, there is no universal standard – this is especially true internationally. Likewise, there is no universally accepted definition of a terrorist organization, however it is generally understood that a terrorist organization is “a political movement that uses terror as a weapon to achieve its goals”

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**Is the Islamic State a Terrorist Group or an Insurgency?**

For this thesis, the Islamic State is categorized as an insurgency, primarily because unlike terrorist organizations, the Islamic State has taken territory, set up bureaucracies within captured towns, and instituted basic governmental services such as the issue and regulation of currency, law enforcement and security services. “Terrorist networks, such as al Qaeda, generally have only dozens or hundreds of members, attack civilians, do not hold territory, and cannot directly confront military forces. ISIS, on the other hand, boasts some 30,000 fighters, holds territory in both Iraq and Syria, maintains extensive military

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capabilities, controls lines of communication, commands infrastructure, funds itself, and engages in sophisticated military operations.”

CHAPTER TWO

WOMEN IN OPERATIONS

Women have always been involved in military operations throughout history, and their roles have evolved and changed depending on the cultures involved. Until recently, most historians believed that within Viking culture, it was men that made up the warrior class. Recent discoveries challenge this assessment, so much so that some archaeologists claim that up to half of Viking warriors were women. In general, a ‘female warrior class’ or ‘female warriors’ in general, are typically little-known parts of history, but they do make up an important part of some societies and sometimes contribute lasting, if often forgotten or overlooked, impacts. For example, the Japanese had the Onna-bugeisha, the female Samurai; Europe had female knights and the Order of the Hatchet, and later, Joan of Arc inspired and led the French against the English; West Africa’s Dahomey female soldiers struck fear in the hearts of French colonials; and in the Vietnam conflict, women guerrillas were often more feared than their male counterparts; and last, but not least, we have the legendary Amazons (or Antianeirai) of Greek mythology.

Some of the better-known images of women in war and fighting in open rebellions can be found in occupied Europe during World War II and in Latin America during the Cold War. These women helped to establish how our popular culture views women’s roles in insurgenecies. They show that women could no longer be seen simply as sitting on the sidelines, but frequently took part in planning and executing combat operations.

Women’s roles in present-day Western militaries are changing. Last year, the Pentagon announced it was opening several thousand positions previously denied to
women; and, the special operations community quickly followed suit. The U.S. Army’s legendary 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR – the “Nightstalkers”) announced it would allow women to try out; furthermore, the well-known Army Rangers, have also invited women to join. These high-profile positions are important on how to view a ‘big military organization’ and modern fighting force, which, in the United States is still trying to find itself in the 21st century landscape.

Less known to the public however, are women’s roles in insurgencies, revolutions and rebellions, guerilla and asymmetrical warfare, and counterinsurgency operations. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) frequently made use of women throughout the Cold War, and it continues to exploit certain unique opportunities (what some may call ‘enemy weaknesses’) during the years since 9/11. The collection of Human Intelligence, or HUMINT, is invaluable to a nation, and is only achieved through field operations by going directly to the sources and talking with, or in many instances, simply listening to people. All they must do is to be in the room, never say a word, and simply listen. Such assets are invaluable and far too often overlooked. But the wealth of information they can supply helps shape operations, which, in turn, help shape policies and options.

The role of women in not only clandestine operations, but military ones as well has taken center-stage in the last few years. The numbers of women within the American military has steadily grown as more positions have been made available to them, and in 2013, then-Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, removed the barrier to allow women within ground combat operations, although the U.S. special operations command is still
undergoing its own research on whether to allow women into full-on special operations billets.

However, what has emerged is the ‘Female Engagement Team’ (FET), utilized mostly by the U.S. Army, and U.S. Marine Corps, and proved to be very effective in operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq. “Female service members serve as an instrument in support of full spectrum COIN operations by enhancing access to civilian women amongst the population and thereby enabling ground forces to conduct operations necessary to defeat the enemy. Military women support COIN operations as additional members of the all-male teams. While performing engagement missions, women run the risk, alongside their male counterparts, of being exposed to direct ground combat.”¹ The successes of the FETs have added a substantial voice in the ongoing policy debate about allowing women to participate in ground combat and the controversial decision to open thousands of billets once closed to women.

**Women in World War II**

Women in both World War I and World War II, were mostly relegated to the role of nurses, however, as both wars consumed the whole of the globe, including all aspects of society, women stepped up to serve in roles needed in both the military and clandestine operations. The early twentieth century was a time significant social history. “At a time when the role of women was undergoing great change, when Rosie the Riveter was working in the factories for the first time, and the United Kingdom’s Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), and Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS), and the American Naval

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¹ Tyra Harding, "Women in Combat Roles: Case Study of Female Engagement Teams.”
Reserve (Women's Reserve), better known as WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), Women’s Army Corps (WAC), and the WASPs (Women’s Army Service Pilots) were serving in most branches of the armed forces, the women of the Special Operations Executive (and Office of Strategic Services) were setting the pace. They showed that not only could women work like men, they could fight like men, too.”² The Americans alone saw approximately 400,000 women serve in the armed forces during WW2, including the WACs, WASPs, the WAVEs, and the U.S. Marine Corps Women’s Reserve.

Perhaps, most famously, were the Soviet women who served directly in combat, both on the ground as snipers, and in the air as fighter and bomber pilots. “By one estimate, 800,000 (women) served in the Red Army during World War II. Many filled “traditional” non-combatant roles – as nurses, cooks, or clerks, but thousands fought with weapons in their hands and a few ranks with history’s deadliest snipers. As soldiers who kill deliberately with cold precision, snipers are a powerful test case for the capability of women in combat…(And) Women were thought to make good snipers, because they could endure stress and cold better than men, and they had “more patience” to wait for the perfect shot.”³

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World War II also saw the expansion of the role of women within covert and clandestine operations. Female partisans extensively served in the resistances of Spain, France, Greece, Italy, and the country formerly known as Yugoslavia, and conducted several covert operations designed to disrupt the enemy. The Yugoslavian female partisans were especially ruthless. They formed what came to be known as the Women's Antifascist Front of Yugoslavia or AFŽ. The group had both military and civilian brigades, and made up of about 2 million women, and of that 110,000 women were in military units. “Most notable among the World War II women partisans were those of Yugoslavia, a country where centuries of tradition allowed some role for women as fighters…. just over 10
percent of the soldiers in the National Liberation Army were women. They received the same kinds of minimal basic training as men (but first aid or medical training more often than men), and the official communist ideology declared them equivalent. In practice, women tended to remain at low ranks and to be concentrated in medical tasks. In one set of units studied, 42 percent of the women were “fighters” and 46 percent medics. ‘Clearly, the role of medic became ‘feminized’…[I]f there was a single woman in the [unit], she would be designated the medic.’ Nonetheless, in guerrilla war even medics are usually fighters too. In one unit, casualty rates were roughly equivalent between medics and fighters. ‘Women partisans led the same life as men – they slept in the same quarters, ate the same food, and wore the same clothes.’”


Additionally, British and American women, were recruited into the UK’s Special Operations Executive (SOE) and US’s Office of Strategic Studies (OSS). They actively participated in the planning and execution of espionage operations on the European

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continent and were vital to the success of the war effort. “They ranged from girls barely out of high school to mature mothers, from working-class women to aristocrats, from the plain to the beautiful, from the prim and proper to wild high-lifers. The only women from the Western Allies to bear arms in action during the Second World War, they suffered torture, the misery of the concentration camps, and death at the hands of Nazi butchers. They were a band of sisters such as has not been seen before or since…”

General William “Wild Bill” Donovan, took seriously the order from President Franklin D. Roosevelt, to create a war-time spy agency, and for Donovan, women played an integral role in not only the support staff of the Office of Strategic Studies, but in its operations as well. All seven of the working branches of the OSS would employ women.

Like its American counterpart, the SOE recruited women for several operational roles. Sixty of these women would be dropped behind enemy lines on the European continent with orders to form and operate the local resistances, disrupt enemy lines of communication and transportation, and perform espionage activities. These women were performing asymmetric warfare with guerilla tactics before the terms became fashionable in military circles. “Women agents could do what men could not: blend in. They were not combatants. Nor were the Nazis rounding up women for forced labour. Women could travel on trains or trams or ride bicycles with explosives hidden under their groceries without arousing as much suspicion as men.”

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5 Simon Mawer, "Special Agents: The Women of SOE."


Women in the Cold War

As the twentieth century moved on, the roles of women continued to evolve and during the Cold War, when military engagements were played out through proxies, and to avoid an outright third world war between the United States and the Soviet Union, covert and clandestine operations took center stage. The OSS developed into the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and women began to move away from the typical roles of secretaries and in human resources, to analysts and operators. The same was true for roles of women in the third world, where most of the military engagements between east and west would play out. Insurgents and leaders of revolutions quickly learned the benefits of women, and women were eager to play a role.

Women in Guerilla Warfare: “Never has a woman been more equal to a man than when she is standing with a pistol in her hand”

Unlike women in regular military units, females were common in guerilla warfare, even mixed-gender units. Throughout the Cold War, women played prominent roles in the militias of Central and Latin America, Vietnam, South Africa, Northern Ireland, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Nepal, and India.

Women in Latin America

Many of the Communist-based revolutions in Latin America were eager to include women. They were utilized as assassins, neighborhood organizations, and intelligence gathers. Che Guevara touted the importance of women in his book On Guerilla Warfare, “The part women can play in the development of a revolutionary process is of extraordinary

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8 Tupamaros slogan of Uruguay.
importance….Women are capable of performing the most difficult tasks, and fighting beside men….”

The Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua could not have happened without the support and participation of women. “By 1987, it was reported that 67% of ‘active members’ in the popular militia and 80% of guards - an estimated 50,000 nationwide - were women.” Women penetrated nearly every aspect of the Sandinista insurgent organizations. “In Women Challenge the Myth, Patricia Flynn argues that ‘(Nicaraguan) women held important leadership positions, commanding everything from small units to full battalions.’ As evidence, she points to the key final battle of León, where four of the seven high-ranking commanders were women.”

Vietnam

Women from both the North and South of Vietnam participated in the war, and often in combat. North Vietnamese women were especially prominent in insurgent units. “They were all trained to use weapons. Women formed militias to defend bridges and roads, watch the skies, fire antiaircraft guns… They also participated in assault teams.”

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11 Ibid.

Women in Clandestine Operations: "The best spies are women"¹³

Some of the greatest unsung heroes of the United States come from the anonymous stars of Central Intelligence Agency and many of those were women. During the Cold War, the CIA recognized the evolving role of its female staff with some of them moving out of the secretarial position and into full-scale overseas operations. It wasn’t always an easy transition, especially in the early days when the ‘good-old boys club’ was still in effect. Per CIA Museum Director Tony Haily, “It was easier to be a woman in the OSS than in the CIA in the early days.”¹⁴ But one of the biggest success stories is “Eloise Page was one of 4,500 women who served in the OSS. She began her career as the secretary to General

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William Donovan, head of the OSS, and ended it as the third-highest ranking officer in the CIA’s Directorate of Operations.”\textsuperscript{15}

**Women after 9/11 – the Female Engagement Team**

After the attacks of September 11\textsuperscript{th}, and the subsequent invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. military began its counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns in both theatres. David Kilcullen in his paper *Twenty-Eight Articles Fundamental of Company-level Counterinsurgency* directly addresses the uses of women within COIN operations: “Engage the Women- Most insurgent fighters are men. But in traditional societies, women are hugely influential in forming the social networks that insurgents use for support. Co-opting neutral or friendly women, through targeted social and economic programs, builds networks of enlightened self-interest that eventually undermines the insurgents…Win the women, and you own the family unit. Own the family unit, and you take a big step forward in mobilizing the population.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16} Tyra Harding, “Women in Combat Roles: Case Study of Female Engagement Teams.”

Between 2002 and 2003, the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC), followed by the U.S. Army began to develop programs to utilize female soldiers to engage the local female populations. Because of the sometimes-strict religious laws, women of the local communities could not interact with male soldiers, this led to potential intelligence gaps.
“The male soldiers are prohibited from looking at or talking to these women due to Afghan cultural norms which disallow as much. So, in order to engage the female populace the American Army has established female engagement teams (FET).”

However, there is an argument that these are not “Religious laws” at all, but tribal customs and taboos that have been given the status of religious law in a largely illiterate society where people cannot read the Quran.

The Army’s Team Lioness, was the precursor to the FET, and their successes in Iraq in 2003 and 2004 not only demonstrated the cohesion of female soldiers within a special operations team, but also at gathering on-the-ground human intelligence (HUMINT), and participation in combat. The Lioness’ were attached to a USMC combat unit and often found themselves in the middle of guerilla warfare. “‘We’d been downtown searching houses, and fighting would break out,’ Staff Sgt. Ranie Ruthig, a former mechanic with a Lioness team, said in a recent interview. ‘We’ve had grenades thrown at us, shooting at us with AK-47’s. It’s a fight-or-flight thing. When someone is shooting at you, you don’t say, ‘Stop the war, I’m a girl.’”

Team Lioness and the FETs of the Army and Marine Corps have demonstrated that women can participate effectively within frontline operations, and guerilla warfare. Women have a role within COIN actions, and while female participation isn’t new, it

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remains underutilized. “Women's participation in combat, although rare, demonstrates potential capability roughly equal to men's – though women on average may fight less well than men. Women have proven to be capable fighters in female combat units, in mixed-gender units, as individuals in groups of men, and as leaders of male armies.”

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17 Joshua Goldstein, “War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa.”
CHAPTER THREE
THE KURDS AND FEMALE COUNTERINSURGENTS

Brief History of the Kurdish People and Kurdistan

To understand what follows, it will be useful to briefly review Kurdish history and culture. The Kurdish people have a long history, and ancient culture, “They consider themselves… descendants of the Medes and other Indo-European tribes who settled around the Zagros Mountains range some 4,000 years ago… The Kurdish world is diverse, and there are no exact linguistic and religious criteria by which the Kurds can be defined. There are a number of Kurdish dialects; there is no single religion that binds them; and they are spread out across many different countries. This division is the result of geographical factors. Located at the crossroads of civilizations, Kurdistan has been traversed by numerous invaders and occupying forces. Alexander the Great followed this path on his way to the east, as did the Persians en route to the west”¹

While it is widely understood that there is a region known as ‘Kurdistan’, they remain a people without an internationally-recognized nation, in fact they are considered the largest ethnic group in the world without a state. Their number, in 2017, is estimated at thirty million, mainly concentrated in the Middle East, especially Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

Throughout the past century there have been several failed attempts to create a Kurdish nation, especially after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire and World War I. After World War II, numerous Kurdish political parties emerged as independence movements backed by the Soviet Union.

The major modern Kurdish political parties are the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq and its military wing known as the Peshmerga, the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (PKK) with its military wing Hêzên Parastina Gel (HPG) in Turkey, the Partiya Yekîtiya
Demokrat (PYD), the Syrian affiliate of the PKK and its military arm the Yekîneyêh Parastina Gel (YPG), and in Iran the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI).²

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Feminist Movement of the Kurds

During the second half of the twentieth century, as the ideological Cold War took shape around the globe and divided cultures and societies, the Kurds were no different. The Marxist-Communist outlook appealed to the Kurds – the ideology offered equality for the often-oppressed group, and the Kremlin provided a backing from a geopolitical superpower willing to provide the varying Kurdish organizations weapons and support for independence. The ideology would also shape how the Kurdish culture approached gender, and gender equality. “The Kurdish freedom movement’s outlook on women’s liberation is of an explicit communalist nature. Rather than deconstructing gender roles to infinity, it treats the conditions behind current concepts of womanhood as sociological phenomena and aims to redefine such concepts by formulating a new social contract.”

Built into many of the Kurdish political party’s manifestos are the desire for gender equality and the importance of women. The PKK coined the term ‘jineology’ – ‘jin’, in Kurdish, means ‘woman’ – the term is defined as “a fundamental scientific term in order to fill the gaps that the current social sciences are incapable of doing. Jineology is built on the principle that without the freedom of women within society and without a real consciousness surrounding women no society can call itself free.”


Much of the Kurdish feminist movement can be traced to the political and ethnic struggles in Turkey in the 1980s and 1990s. The feminist movement in Turkey encouraged women to form their own groups, recognize their own identities separate from their husbands. The Kurdish women in Turkey took these ideas to heart, especially in Turkey where the Kurds have been historically repressed and separated sociologically and politically. Because of this, Kurdish feminists have developed a dual identity which has taken root in the Kurdish feminist movements throughout Kurdish-held territory – that they are not only women, but also members of a nation, specifically a repressed nation, and that by freeing Kurdistan, all women will gain freedom and equality not experienced by many of their cultural neighbors. “Kurdish feminists argue that being members of the oppressed nation has not caused them to ignore the domination and oppression of Kurdish men over them. In this respect, it is insistently emphasized that Kurdish women should be possessed with the desire to simultaneously fight against two enemies.”

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5 O’mer Çaha, “The Kurdish Women’s Movement: A Third-Wave Feminism Within the Turkish Context,” *Turkish Studies*, 12, no. 3 (September 2011); 435–449.
In the Kurdish-held territory in northern Syria, the approach to gender and equality are no different, and even in war, remains a vital part of Syrian Kurdish culture, and a point of pride for its leaders. “Gender-based discrimination, forced marriages, domestic violence, honor killings, polygamy, child marriage, and bride price are criminalized. Many non-Kurdish women, especially Arabs and Assyrians, join the armed ranks and administration in Rojava… In all spheres, including the internal security forces (asayish) and the People’s Defense Units, YPG, and Women’s Defense Units YPJ, gender equality is a central part of education and training.”

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6 Dilak Dirik, “Feminism and the Kurdish Freedom Movement.”
CASE STUDY: THE SYRIAN YPJ

The Women’s Protection Units or Women's Defense Units, or Yekîneyên Parastina Jin in Kurdish, more colloquially known as the YPJ, are an all-female military organization. They are the female branch of the People's Protection Units or Yekîneyên Parastina Gel in Kurdish (YPG), a Syrian militia. The YPG is part of what is known as the Kurdish Coalition, and occupies the Rojova region in northern Syria, also known as western Kurdistan. “Kurdish women, regarded as some of the most liberal in the region, have a decades-long history of fighting.”

Their reputation as some of the fiercest fighters has aided the Kurdish cause and demonstrated that they can be relied on both on the battlefield and as allies as well. The YPJ have developed a counterinsurgency model that has proven successful in not only breaking down stereotypes of female military fighters, but in breaking down stereotypes of Muslim and Middle Eastern women in general.

Brief History of the YPJ

The YPJ was formed in 2012 to assist in the defense of the Kurdish people against attacks from the Islamic State, the Assad-backed Syrian regime, and the Al Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra Front. At the time, there were roughly 7,000 female volunteers in the YPG. Those numbers reportedly swelled to 10,000 by the end of 2014, and in November 2016 it was reported that 20,000 women now participate in the female counterinsurgent group, and the

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8 “Kurdish Women Turning Kobani into a Living 'Hell' for Islamic State,” Telesurtv.net, 14 October 2014.
YPJ make up about 35% of those fighting under Kurdish command in Syria. Furthermore, it isn’t simply Kurds forming YPJ ranks; Arab, European, and American women have joined the militia. The Kurds have set up training camps for the YPJ to help train local women throughout the Rojova region, as well as ‘military academies’ that new recruits participate in an eight-week training course learning how to shoot and the basics of guerilla warfare. Counterinsurgency tactics are also taught. In the end graduates join the ranks of the YPJ militia.


The group was formed as a direct response to the growing threat of the Islamic State in Syria: a threat not only to the region but to gender as well. The dehumanization of women by the Islamic State is well-known and one of the major reasons women have taken up

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arms against the insurgent group. “Islamic State, has a dual attitude to women. On the one hand, it treats those it considers heretics as almost sub-human, as commodities to be traded and given away as rewards to jihadist fighters.”10 This attitude has been put on horrific display with IS’ treatment of the ethnic Iraqi group known as the Yazidis. Captured women and young girls are turned into sex-slaves to be sold in markets in IS-held territory, and given away as brides for Jihadis.11 However, women are also essential to the Islamic State, which encourages Muslim women immigrating to the caliphate to produce their next generation of Jihadi fighters. As Dr Katherine Brown, an expert in Islamic Studies at King's College London, puts it “They want women to join them...They see women as the corner stones of the new state and they want citizens.”12 IS’ brutality has only fueled women to join YPJ, and the Kurds were quick to utilize the opportunity to increase their ranks.

The group has had immediate success on the battlefield, and have earned a fearsome reputation. In an interview, Deputy Defense Minister Galiye Nimet gives her firsthand account of IS fighters encountering women on the battlefield: “I personally met IS fighters face-to-face. Women fighters infringe on their psyche. They believe they won’t go to paradise if they are killed by women. That is why they flee when they see women. I saw that personally at the Celaga front. We monitor their radio calls. When they hear a woman’s voice on the air, they become hysterical.”13

10 Frank Gardner, ”The crucial role of women within Islamic State," BBC, August 20, 2015.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.
The Feminist Movement and the YPJ

The YPJ have become an international symbol of feminism, and they consider themselves a ‘sisterhood’. The all-female counterinsurgency stands in stark contrast to the brutal repression of the IS insurgency, and the success of the YPJ only highlights the notion that women have a place as combatants, and more importantly fit well within a counterinsurgency model. One YPJ commander in the Kurdish city Hassakeh, stated confidently, “Women can fight better than men. We remain calm and steadfast.”

The women of the YPJ are aware of their model status and many recruits cite this as one of the many reasons they volunteered. A YPG fighter known as ‘Jazera’ has said, “I see the Syrian revolution as not only a popular revolution of the people but also as a revolution of woman...The woman has been suppressed for more than 50,000 years and now we have the possibility of having our own will, our own power and our own personality.”

The YPJ are also successfully changing how the world sees the Kurds, Muslim women, and Middle Eastern women. The appearance of armed women in uniform counters the stereotype of the repressed woman, dressed from head to toe in a burka, and not allowed to leave her house except when accompanied by a man. “The YPJ is in itself a feminist movement, even if it is not their main mission,’ says Erin Trieb, a photographer who


14 Ahmad Khalil and Karen Leigh, "As ISIS Advances, Kurdish Female Fighters Take a Stand.”

15 "Kurdish Women Turning Kobani into a Living 'Hell' for Islamic State.”
documented the daily lives of the women in north-eastern Syria. ‘They want 'equality' between women and men, and a part of why they joined was to develop and advance the perceptions about women in their culture—they can be strong and be leader,’ she adds. Since enlisting, one fighter told Trieb that ‘the men back home changed their opinions about me and other women. Now they see that we are their equals, and that we have the same abilities, maybe sometimes more than them. They understand we are strong and that we can do everything they can.” 16

**Success on the Battlefield**

The Kurdish opposition against IS, the Syrian Assad regime, and AQ within Syria has demonstrated its skill and effectiveness since the onset of the conflict. With their long history of repression, knowledge of guerilla tactics, and connections throughout the regime, it should be no surprise that the Kurds and the YPJ offered the only real obstruction to IS and its brutality. Their impact was immediately felt, and both the Kurds and Western media were quick to capitalize on the successes of an all-female counterinsurgency winning against an ultra-conservative radical interpretation of Islam.

During the 2014 military campaign for Kobane, the YPJ played a crucial role in the siege of the city, and are credited with major victories. In 2014, northern Syria was engulfed in flames, and the Kurdish city of Kobane looked to join to ranks of Sarajevo, Yugoslavia, or Grozny, Chechnya in terms of urban destruction. Between September 18 to the 22, 2014, over 130,000 fled the city into Turkey and on September 27, 2014 coalition forces, led by

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the United States, begin aerial bombardment to drive IS out.\textsuperscript{17} The situation rapidly devolved into street fighting, with each block, and every building becoming a potential sniper’s perch or ambush site. Standing between IS and total control of the city were the Kurdish YPG and YPJ fighters, both led by a Kurdish woman - General Nalin Afrin.

**General “Nalin Afrin” in Kobani and Her Guerilla Fighters**

When you first encounter General Afrin, either in pictures or in person, your first impressions are of a battle-hardened, stone faced woman who is acutely aware of the responsibilities resting on her shoulders. She constantly carries her well-worn Kalashnikov rifle, with her hair pulled loosely under a headscarf. She has proven herself to be IS’ most formidable opponent, stubbornly refusing to lose. Her stature inspires those under her – both men and women, civilian and military – her plea is emotional and her warning is concise: ‘We will fight until the last bullet to save the civilians. It is a fight for all of us, a fight for freedom. If you don’t help us, they will come for you one day.’\textsuperscript{18} “According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), Kurdish defenders in the besieged town of Kobani are being co-led by a 40 year old Kurdish woman from the Afrin region of Aleppo province. ‘Mayssa Abdo, known by the nom-de-guerre of Narin Afrin, is commanding the YPG in Kobane along with Mahmud Barkhodan,’”\textsuperscript{19}


\textsuperscript{19} "Kurdish Women Turning Kobani into a Living 'Hell' for Islamic State”
January 6 through 15, 2015, saw major Kurdish advances Kobane, and by January 26, 2015, IS was driven out. The victory was a major one – not only the Kurds and the Western allies, but for women in general and their ability and willingness to conduct the brutal street warfare required for counterinsurgency. One female YPJ Commander, Azime Deniz, explained the ground situation: “When the expansive attacks by ISIS aiming to occupy Kobanê first began, we developed a committed resistance and remained in defensive position as a tactic. Over the last one month (November 2014), we have moved into active defense and offensive position, while on the other hand also maintaining our defense position. Our tactics mainly advanced by holding and protecting every single house, street and neighborhood we captured. In other words, we didn’t pursue the offensive in the form of hitting, striking and retreating. We made advances by holding the areas and positions where we hit and struck the enemy. Of course we didn’t pursue this tactic only...
by holding the area and attacking, we also predicated it on defense, further strengthening our lines of defense and enriching them with new defense techniques. When we liberated a street, we also turned it into a line of defense. Owing to various and enriched tactics, we have made significant progress over the last one month, also bearing a spirit of sacrifice, which has weakened the ISIS and not allowed it to resist at many positions, while we developed resistance in the areas we had been weakened, and inflicted severe blows on the ISIS gangs.”

General Afrin further explained her approach to guerilla tactics within Kobane: “IS is relying on ‘heavy weapons’ like tanks and artillery fire, but in the slim streets of Kobani YPG/YPJ fighters have fought back ‘with ambushes and traps, creative defense tactics and a sacrificial determination…We turned the first places they entered – the southern tip of


the city and the 48th avenue – into a hell. And from now on Kobani will continue to be hell for them."\(^{21}\)

**Commander Rojda Felat in Raqqa**

Commander Rojda Felat is a revolutionary commander of YPJ forces in Syria, she is also a fierce feminist who believes that the women’s movement and the defeat of the Islamic State are tied into each other: “liberating the Kurdish woman and the Syrian woman in general from the ties and control of traditional society, as well as liberating the entirety of Syria from terrorism and tyranny.”\(^{22}\) Commander Felat prefers to keep a close hold on her identity – some reports claims she is as young as 35, while other reports put her birthdate in the 1960s. Her country of origin is just as mysterious, most reports state that she is either a Turkish or Syrian Kurd. She joined the YPJ in 2013, and has since risen to become one of their best field Commanders.

She has led several offensives in the Al-Hasakah Governorate in northern Syria, and is credited with launching the first attack on the de-facto IS capital of Raqqa, Syria, known as Operation EUPHRATES WRATH. The YPJ spokeswoman, Cihan Ehmed, has stated: “The first phase of the EUPHRATES WRATH Operation was led by YPJ commander Rojda Felat…Women are playing a key role in this operation. Our female fighters are participating in this operation for one main objective, which is the liberation of women held by ISIS terrorists in Raqqa city.”\(^{23}\)

\(^{21}\) "Kurdish Women Turning Kobani into a Living 'Hell' for Islamic State."

Commanding a force of 15,000, Commander Felat is quick to emphasise the role of women within Kurdish culture and against IS: “The state of weakness that the woman in Rojava [a Kurdish-held territory] and Syria had experienced has gone now. We are not weak any more. Women are playing a vital role in leading and managing the society.”

While the first assault on Raqqa stalled, Commander Felat regrouped and redeployed her forces participate in the successful Manbij offensive before turning to again command the second phase of Operation EUPHRATES WRATH on December 10, 2016.

**YPJ in Iraq – Helping the Yazidis**

The YPJ are not only fighting in Syria, but assisting the fight in Iraq. During 2014, the Islamic State trapped a large contingency of ethnic Iraqi Yazidis on Mount Sinjar in an attempt to ethnically cleanse and enslave the group. The YPJ, in coalition with the YPG and Turkish PKK, participated in operations to push back IS forces, allowing the Yazidis to flee the mountain, and humanitarian aid to reach them. It is important to understand who the Yazidis are – they are an Iraqi ethnic minority whose numbers globally only total about 700,000 people. Ethnically, they are Kurdish and speak Kurmanji (northern Kurdish). “The ancient religion is rumoured to have been founded by an 11th century Ummayyad sheikh, and is derived from Zoroastrianism (an ancient Persian faith founded by a philosopher), Christianity and Islam. The religion has taken elements from each, ranging from baptism (Christianity) to circumcision (Islam) to reverence of fire as a manifestation from God

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24 Tom Coghlan, ”Revolutionary Kurdish feminist leads assault on Raqqa.”
(derived from Zoroastrianism) and yet remains distinctly non-Abrahamic. This derivative quality has often led the Yazidis to be referred to as a sect.”

25 Muslim fundamentalists regard them as devil-worshiping, and label them heretics. From the Ottomans (who committed upwards of 72 attempted genocides on the group) to al Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State denounced them as infidels and sanctioned the indiscriminate killing of them.

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Successes in Syria: The YPJ Model Duplicated

Never before have female fighters played such a pivotal role on a global scale, and shattered so many stereotypes. In WWII, millions of Soviet women served as front-line combatants. Researchers mostly ignore this because postwar Soviet historiography wrote most of the women out of the story (except for the handful of glamorous aviators), in a deliberate effort to restore traditional gender roles, and to protect male Communist egos. However, the Kurdish movement, especially the Kurdish female movement, has received live, in real time exposure. There is no skirting them under the rug to try and ignore their involvement or impact they have had on the wars in Syria and Iraq. Today, researchers and military strategists have to contemplate whether such female involvement could be duplicated utilizing the Kurdish model in other parts of the world.


25 Ibid.
Bethnahrain Women's Protection Forces

The ethnic Christian Syrians known as the Assyrians, have faced an-ever increasing genocidal threat in their homeland. Their number have reduced from 1.6 million in 2003 to around 300,000 in 2015.27 “Syriac Christians belong to the eastern Christian tradition and pray in Aramaic. They include both Orthodox and Catholic branches, and constitute around 15 percent of Syria's 1.2 million Christians.”28

Figure 11. Bethnahrain Women's Protection Forces (Syriac:ܚܝܠܘܬܐܕܣܘܬܪܐܕܢܫܐܕܒܝܬܢܗܪܝܢ or HSNB; accessed March 2017.

As a response, they have formed the Syriac Military Council and joined forces with the Kurds against the Islamic State, al-Nursa Front, and the Assad regime. Based on the


Kurdish counterinsurgent model, the Assyrians have also created an all-female militia known as the Bethnahrain Women's Protection Forces or HSNB based in al-Qahtaniyah, al-Hasakah Governorate, Syria, “They are following in the footsteps of Syria's other main female force battling the jihadists -- the women of the YPJ, the female counterpart to the Kurdish People's Protection Units or YPG.” The group was officially formed in September 2015, an aided in Operation EUPHRATES WRATH in the winter of 2016 and 2017, along with the Kurds. The first fifty graduated of the Syriac training camp participated in the retake of the town of Al-Hol, Syria. “Al-Hol, on a key route between territory IS controls in Syria and Iraq, was the first major victory for the Syrian Defense Forces (SDF), which has captured around 200 villages in the region in recent weeks. It has received air support from the US-led coalition fighting IS, as well as drops of American weapons.” The women receive outside training from international forces which include basic military and law enforcement tactics, as well as how to conduct guerilla and counterinsurgency operations.

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28 Ibid.

29 Tom Wyke, "Christian women who have left behind their jobs, studies and children to take up Kalashnikovs in fight against ISIS," The Daily Mail, December 13, 2015.
The ideas of gender equality and cultural history run deep within the Syriac female recruits. “Some women cited what is known as the Sayfo ('Sword') massacres in 1915 of Syriac, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians as reasons for joining the unit. 'We are a community that is oppressed by others,' said 18-year-old Ithraa. She joined four months ago inspired by the memory of Sayfo, in which Ottoman authorities are said to have killed
tens of thousands of Christians in Turkey and Iran. She said the community hoped to prevent 'a new massacre like that committed by the Ottomans... when they tried to erase our Christian and Syriac identity'."\textsuperscript{31} The Assyrian genocide refers to the slaughter of the Assyrian people and culture by the Ottoman Empire during World War One. It took place in conjecture with the Armenian and Greek genocide at the same time, and conducted by the same people.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
CASE STUDY: THE IRAQI FEMALE PESHMERGA

Brief History of the Peshmerga in Iraq

It’s important to distinguish between the Peshmerga in Iraq and the YPG/YPJ in Syria. The Peshmerga which in Kurdish means ‘those who face death’ are the official military of Iraqi Kurdistan. Under the current constitution, the Iraqi Army is banned from entering Iraqi Kurdistan and so it falls to the Peshmerga to provide security for those living within the region. Estimates of the Peshmerga’s size range from 50,000 to 190,000 troops and it is considered one of the most experienced and battle-hardened paramilitary forces in the world. “The Peshmerga was first officially organized into a nationalist fighting force in 1943, although the idea of Peshmerga fighters existed prior to that, and the word referred to bands of Kurdish warriors and guerrilla fighters. From 1943 to the present day, the Peshmerga in Iraq fought a war in almost every decade in an attempt to create an independent Kurdish nation. In the 1990s, they waged a ferocious campaign against Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard, and effectively expelled the Iraqi military from several Kurdish sections of the country.”

The group has fought alongside U.S. Special Operations Forces for decades, working with U.S. troops during the first Gulf War in 1991, and again in 2003. In return, the U.S. has provided direct training of Peshmerga forces, and while the Iraqi Kurds do not have warplanes like Iraqi forces, they have been given modern heavy weapons.


32 Ibid.
Female Peshmerga

There are approximately 1,700 women serving in the Peshmerga, and the mixing of genders within units is left up to the Peshmerga themselves. There are units in which men and women participate in combat and fight alongside one another. This intermixing does not appear to hinder any operations, instead it appears to enhance them, and encourage gender equality in the ranks, and within the Kurdish culture in Iraq itself. Middle East researcher, Zack Bazzi, Middle East project manager for Spirit of America, has observed that men and women are fully integrated into the Peshmerga ranks, with very few problems on record, and that back home, these women are respected and revered, as role models, “As a matter of fact, people in the region view it as a point of pride that these women share an equal burden in defense of the homeland.”34 One 26-year female unit commander, Nishtiman, has been the head of an integrated gender unit for the past four years, and fights alongside her brother and husband. She proudly proclaims, “On our team, we women are fighting along with the men shoulder to shoulder on the front lines.”35

Women have been involved with the Peshmerga in limited numbers since its inception, “There is a long tradition of female peshmerga. Kurds are proud of the “Zhini Shakh” (women of the mountains), those who fought as guerrillas against Saddam in the 1980s. Various names are revered, such as Khuska Halima (Sister Halima), a peshmerga commander in the 1970s; Leyla Qasim, a student activist executed by Saddam in 1974;


34 Ibid.
Hero Ibrahim Ahmad, a pioneer fighter and the wife of Jalal Talabani.”

But it wasn’t until 1996, the all-female 2nd Peshmerga Battalion was formed. Furthermore, recently, the Iraqi government formally recognized the ‘The Pêşmerge Force for Women’ which formally allowed all-female units to become part of the Iraqi Kurdistan security force. The military has a history of promoting gender equality and breaking stereotypes. While many women go into teaching or administrative positions, the Iraqi Peshmerga security forces have always provided an environment where women could excel in the same environment as their male counterparts, and be rewarded for it. “Women are paid the same as men. Colonel Rangeen Yusuf, a female Peshmerga, earns 925,000 Iraqi dinar a month (about US$622.70); regular soldiers, around 500,000 Iraqi dinar (US$323.80). (The average monthly salary in Iraq is 3,253,000, or £1,700.) ‘We don’t become peshmerga for the money,’ Colonel Yusuf says.”

(March 2017 exchange rate is US$ 1.00 = 1168 Iraqi dinars)

It is important to note, that within the more remote parts of Iraq, gender equality within the militia has begun to take hold and gain acceptance. Tribal Kurdish leaders are now allowing the women of their society to leave the villages and join the Peshmerga. In 2016, the ‘Fire Brigade’ was formed. Made up of about thirty women from remote Kurdish villages, they were allowed to participate in combat on the frontlines against the Islamic

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State. 24-year-old Asiba Nawzad, a second lieutenant with the Kurdish Peshmerga forces stated, “We are supported by Sheikh Loqman to have a female team to fight with our brothers… Normally, Kurdish tribes do not allow their women to fight, but Sheikh Loqman permits it.”

Female Kurdish fighters in Iraq are different from those within Syria (and Turkey) in that it wasn’t until recently that women in combat has become widely accepted, and that is mostly due to necessity – fighting the Islamic State is considered a total social and cultural war, where everyone needs to participate, and women have proven themselves on the frontlines. An American trainer, Ryan O’Leary says that things are rapidly changing for Kurdish women, “Sheikh Loqman Sharafan is pretty open to allowing women to fight, culturally-wise this is something new… (Kurdistan is) a country like Israel, with a small population of 3 to 5 million people surrounded by enemies, they need to defend their country, and women need to step up (and) female Peshmergas are capable of doing it.”

**Training**

The men and women of the Kurdish Peshmerga Battalions go through basic military training, as well as specialized guerilla warfare training, and a ten-week coalition training on light, medium, and heavy weapons which also includes education on how to deal with improvised explosive devises (IEDs). “Lower-level recruits train at the women’s barracks. Each is given a uniform – almost everyone wears khaki camouflage rather than traditional

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38 Ibid.
peshmerga dress – has 45 days of training and is taught how to take cover, how to advance across open ground, how to mount guard and, above all, how to use a weapon. The highest rank they can achieve is warrant officer class 1. Graduate officers are commissioned as second lieutenants after a year’s course and are promoted every three years. The highest ranking among the women peshmerga is a major general who works in the Ministry of Peshmerga in Erbil.\textsuperscript{40}

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\textbf{2\textsuperscript{nd} Peshmerga Battalion}

The female-fronted 2nd Peshmerga Battalion was formed in 1996 to originally engage Saddam Hussein’s forces. The regiment is capped at 600 women, but continues to train others for other units and brigades. The 6th Brigade of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Battalion, “is based just

\textsuperscript{39} Sally Williams, “Meet the Kurdish women fighting the Islamic State.”
outside Sulaimaniya, in the south of Iraqi Kurdistan. It is situated in a large military compound, along with several male divisions. The base has been here since 1998, and the grounds are established, with bougainvillea and eucalyptus.”

The 2\textsuperscript{nd} Battalion has a fierce reputation as elite female soldiers with a strong sense of feminist and nationalist pride. “One soldier who has been fighting with the battalion since its creation in 1996, describes the loyalty she has to defend her people and their land: ‘It’s an honor to be part of a modern Muslim country that allows women to defend the homeland ... We enjoy the same treatment as male fighters do, as required by law.’”

\textit{Mosul Dam}

When the Islamic State took the Mosul Dam it dealt a huge blow to Iraqi forces, and sounded alarm bells around the world that the terror insurgent organization could no longer be ignored as no more than insurgent nuisances. Their threats to blow-up the dam were equally alarming because the civilian population in northern Iraq could suddenly be inundated. As CNN’s Dan Pipes reported, “If you control the Mosul dam, you can threaten just about everybody -- a very substantial part of Iraq -- with flooding, with lack of electricity, with lack of water.” The recapture, and holding of Mosul Dam became a significant priority for all forces on the ground.

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Dealing one of the most important blows to the Islamic State was the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Peshmerga Battalion - “backed by US airstrikes, the female-fronted 2\textsuperscript{nd} Peshmerga Battalion recaptured the strategically located Mosul dam.”\textsuperscript{44} The blow was not just a strategic defeat for IS, but a cultural one for the Kurds – and for women in combat advocates everywhere. Not only did the women take back the dam, but they took it intact, and when left in charge of it, a unit of 10 female Peshmerga continued to guard the dam from IS sabotage.

**Colonel Nahida Ahmed Rashid**

Colonel Nahida Ahmed Rashid is a unique woman – she is the highest-ranking female within the Iraqi Peshmerga and Commander of the famed 2\textsuperscript{nd} Peshmerga Battalion, having joined as a teenager, Colonel Rashid originally sought separatist independence for Kurdistan but now finds herself front and center along the battlefront lines dividing her unit, and the rest of Iraqi Kurdistan, and the Islamic State. To know her is to respect her, she is a model inspiration for women around the world, and especially within Iraq and the Muslim world. She is also a target, IS wants her dead, so much so that when she goes out on patrol with different units, or converses with the varying brigades around Northern Iraq, she is always addressed in the male form, and by her male codename, ‘Mr. Muhammad’, so IS cannot target her, or the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Battalion directly.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{43} Anushay Hossain, "A Woman’s Job: Kurdish Female Fighters on the Front Lines in Iraq."

Colonel Rashid is also warm, friendly, and feminine; and very open to sharing Kurdish successes, but she is also highly disciplined, once a decision is made – it is made, and she is knows how to fight, little do most know, the Colonel is highly skilled in Taekwondo. Her childhood was traumatic and would shape her view of the world and the military direction her life would follow, “When she was young, Rashid witnessed Iraqi soldiers tie her uncle to a tank, pull him along the road, then throw his lifeless body into a pit….As a teenager Rashid, living in Chwarta, a town near to Sulaimaniyah, became a tanzeem, one who secretly helps peshmerga residing in the mountains by providing food, clothing, and ammunition. She also passed on information about the strength and location of the Iraqi forces.”  

46 In her own words, “I didn’t want to become a good student. I wanted to be a good Peshmerga.” 47 And that she did. The Colonel is one of the legendary founders


46 Ibid.
of the all-female battalion and has helped shape it, and the Kurdish cultural outlook on it since the 1990s. “In 1995, Rashid met Jalal Talabani, the primary founder and leader of the PUK, and later President of Iraq. She suggested to him the idea of a woman’s military base. Talabani agreed and Rashid became a leader of a small group of peshmerga women fighters, the original nucleus of today’s battalion.”


Colonel Rashid is also a feminist, and quick to emphasis that the women within the female Peshmerga ranks feels a sisterhood amongst them, but that the Peshmerga itself attempts to be gender-blind, with an emphasis on equality – men and women train the same, and engage in combat just the same, and, in certain units, are integrated just the same. “Today there is absolutely nothing different….When I first served as peshmerga many men

47 Ibid.
looked at me critically. But I asked them directly, what’s the difference between me and you? It was very hard for a woman. Religion and culture have held women back. But I am glad we have managed to change the opinion round. Today the training is the same for both men and women….Today the training is the same for both men and women.”

**Success in Iraq – The Female Model Duplicated**

The experience of the female Peshmerga in Iraq and the he YPJ in Syria has led to a number of offshoots from various tribes, and smaller ethnic groups looking to duplicate Kurdish success. against the Islamic State. For the Yazidis, this isn’t a stretch. Although, until recently, it was an endangered, obscure Iraqi minority, they are ethnically Kurdish, and therefore readily connect with the Iraqi Peshmerga and Syrian YPG/YPJ.

**The Yazidi’s Force of the Sun Ladies**

The all-female Yazidi militia known as the ‘Force of the Sun Ladies’ formed in 2016 from a group of rescued Islamic State sex slaves, and their relatives. Their commander is Khatoon Khider, a former folk singer who took up arms after IS ravaged her home village and began slaughtering neighboring Yazidi towns.

She is credited with founding the all-female militia, and specifically sought out the Kurdish Peshmerga to teach and train, herself and her recruits to fight IS. “She then travelled to the frontline to ask the chief of staff to the Peshmerga, the armed forces of Kurdistan, After consulting the president, he agreed to train them up….The Peshmerga, which has a proud history of recruiting female soldiers, taught them how to use weapons

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48 Ibid.
and what to do in the event of a chemical attack. They taught the battalion to protect all religions in the region without discrimination.”


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CHAPTER FOUR
WOMEN AND TERRORISM

Women represent a growing and often misunderstood section of radical Islamic fundamentalist. They are often misrepresented by the media and misinterpreted by analysts. The days when it was believed that women could not, and would not participate within jihad are long gone and now present a clear and present danger to the national security of the United States and other countries around the globe. “When female terrorists are depicted by the media, they are often siloed into one of three categories: 1) the dutiful, supportive mother and wife, who cooks, cleans and cares for her children; 2) the coerced victim, who participates out of devotion to her husband; or 3) the fetishized, sexual deviant, whose personal history is analyzed in an attempt to pinpoint which character flaw led her to commit such an “un-womanly” act.”\(^1\) While these descriptions might, at one point, have been accurate, they are, nonetheless, stereotypes.

For the majority, women within fundamentalist organizations, or living under their control, are taught to practice the traditional roles, and adhere to strict forms of Sharia law and Islamic morality code. “Though jihadi groups tell women that their most important role is that of wives, sisters, and, most critically, as the mothers of future warriors, their aim is not to simply restore traditional gender roles. The women are advised to know what is going on in global political affairs and remain vigilant against attempts to take away their

However, in order to progress in their jihad, most terror organizations have had to reevaluate their views on women, and what they will and will not be allowed to do and participate in.

Furthermore, as terror organizations have evolved, so has the role of women on every battlefield – physical, cyber, and cell, leaving one to wonder if this expansion is simply a reaction to female militias formed to fight such extremist organizations, or if ‘feminism' has an underlying current even within fundamentalist thinking. “We associate women’s involvement with women’s liberation. That’s precisely not the case. We are seeing women involved in terror in places that are the most conservative, the least progressive when it comes to women,” said Mia Bloom, Professor at the University of Massachusetts in Lowell. Because of this, analysts and policymakers must react accordingly, and not ignore a growing threat. “Given the complexity of conflict, each one must be viewed separately, and take into account the social context to understand why some women are permitted (or encouraged) to join terror groups while others are excluded. Of equal value is the cultural psychology of men. Female acceptance by male leaders is key to gaining access into terrorist organizations and perpetrating suicide attacks—a tactic that has helped alter the assumption that women are pacifists, moderate and non-violent.”

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Women in Al Qaeda: “In reality, radical Muslim women ‘embarrass Muslim men. Radical women send a message to Muslim men: Are you capable?’”

The roles of women in al Qaeda have evolved over the course of the organization’s history. Not all of its offshoots enforce the same strict principles the core founders, Bin Laden and Zawahiri, advocated. Bin Laden said: “Our women had set a tremendous example of generosity in the cause of Allah; they motivated and encouraged their sons, brothers and husbands to fight for the cause of Allah in Afghanistan, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in Chechnya, and in other others…our women encourage Jihad.” But as the organization grew and evolved so too did the Mujahidaat or Muslim female fighters.

Originally, al Qaeda emphasized traditional roles for women as wives and mothers who should properly raise their children as future jihadi warriors, and shelter and care jihadis fighting in the name of Allah. “When Ayman al-Zawahiri gave an open interview to jihadist forum members in early 2008, one woman asked Zawahiri, “Does al-Qaeda accept women in its ranks?” to which Zawahiri bluntly replied, “No.” Another asked, “Who is the highest-ranking woman in al-Qaeda? Don’t mention names if you do not want to do so, but what is their duty in the organization?” Zawahiri responded that al-Qaeda had no women in its ranks and that the role of women is to take care of the families of the mujahideen: “Al-Qaeda has no women, but the women of the mujahideen do their heroic part in taking care of their homes and sons in the roughness of the immigration, movement, unity, and expecting the Crusader strikes. But the Crusaders - who claim defense of liberty

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5 Farhana Qazi, "A Close Look at the Women in Al-Qaeda and ISIS."

6 Ibid.
and human rights - purposefully strike woman, children, and civilians in their wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Palestine, so as to force the fighters to either retreat or surrender. This is their constant method in their wars. Then after they destroy villages and the homes, the blame falls on the Mujahideen because they were the ones who took cover in the families. These crimes will not - Allah willing – go without punishment.”

It’s important to emphasize that the extreme social and legal constraints on women seen – for example - in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are not inherent in mainstream Islam, but stem largely from Bedouin tribal customs that pre-date Islam. Khadija, first wife of the prophet Muhammad, was a successful businesswoman in the highly competitive caravan trade. Fundamentalists of all kinds like to insist that their extreme beliefs and practices are rooted in “Religion” when, in fact, there is usually no scriptural or theological justification for them.

In much of the Islamic world the oppression of women is a reaction to the legacy of Western colonialism and the impact of globalization: “We would rather kill our daughters than see them turn into whores like American girls.” Western notions of human rights and gender equality are widely viewed as an alien imposition to be resisted in defense of a (largely imaginary) organic traditional culture in which ‘everyone knew their place.’

In societies where under-employment is a chronic problem, the participation of women in the workforce is viewed a direct threat to men. In societies that view themselves as under threat, the ‘coercive pronatalism’ of many regimes (forcing women to bear more children than they want or can afford) is seen as a demographic weapon against the

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7 "The Women of Jihad," The Site Intelligence Group, October 2010.
Others (notably in Hamas-controlled Gaza, which has one of the highest birth rates in the world.)

Over the years, this hardline approach has been softened as the advantages of utilizing women within jihad has taken root. Hassan Abu Haniya, an Amman-based analyst of Islamic groups, told the BBC, “While the traditional jihadists limit women's participation in jihad to supporting militant men in activities such as nursing, teaching, and moral support, the new ideologues have begun to mention female participation in armed actions in their literature recently.”

Women are often seen as invisible and therefore have the ability to maneuver in and out of crowds and places where male counterparts would be conspicuous, likewise, due to cultural demands and sensitivities they are often allowed to bypass search and inspection by authorities.

Al-Qaeda picked up on these advantages, and blurred the lines for women to participate. Yusuf al-Uyayri, leader of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, was among the first al-Qaeda leaders to encourage women to take a more active role in jihad.

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8 Murad Batal al-Shishani, "Is the role of women in al-Qaeda increasing?" BBC, October 7, 2010.

In 2009, Zawahiri’s own wife, Omayma, went online encouraging more women to be more active in jihad, and support it by all means necessary, except for direct fighting. As the participation of women in radical groups has grown, al Qaeda has begun to capitalize on female desire to be involved. “Radical women want to be heard. They may be invisible but they have a powerful message to share with the world.”9 They use their voice to recruit for al-Qaeda, and spread propaganda. This is especially true for Western women. Malika el Aroud, a Belgian of Moroccan descent, has been in and out of jail for over a decade while continuing to encourage jihad and recruit on the internet. “She calls herself a female holy warrior for al-Qaeda. She insists that she does not disseminate instructions on bomb-making and has no intention of taking up arms herself. Rather, she bullies Muslim men to

9 Farhana Qazi, “A Close Look at the Women in Al-Qaeda and ISIS.”
go and fight and rallies women to join the cause. ‘It’s not my role to set off bombs — that’s ridiculous,’ she said in a rare interview. ‘I have a weapon. It’s to write. It’s to speak out. That’s my jihad. You can do many things with words. Writing is also a bomb.’”10 Another Belgian, Murielle Degauque, a Muslim convert, became what is believed to be the first western women to conduct a suicide bombing for al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2006.

The growing role of women in al-Qaeda reflects the growing presence of the terror organization in Western countries. Here, Muslim women are educated, they know the laws, the customs, the ways to speak, they are treated as equals by other Western Muslim men, and they have rights and freedoms not afforded to their Middle Eastern sisters. As Ms. El Aroud has said, “Normally in Islam the men are stronger than the women, but I prove that it is important to fear God — and no one else. It is important that I am a woman. There are men who don’t want to speak out because they are afraid of getting into trouble. Even when I get into trouble, I speak out. I write in a legal way. I know what I’m doing. I’m Belgian. I know the system.”11

The growing number of women in al Qaeda and other Islamic extremist organization has been seen as a rebuff and rebuke of social norms, similar to the Marxist movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Alain Grignard, a senior official in the antiterrorism division of the Belgian Police, was quoted in the New York Times saying, “They are people

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11 Ibid.
rebelling against a society in which they feel they don’t belong. They are people searching through a religion like Islam for a sense of solidarity.”

While it is clear that the roles within the various al-Qaeda organizations have changed, and shifted, one thing remains the same – there hasn’t been any all-female al-Qaeda linked militia openly fighting on a battlefield. Within al-Qaeda at least, women remain relegated to the roles of suicide bomber, recruiter, and propagandist, and for the traditionalist jihadi these may be the less threatening ways that women can participate. As Mia Bloom states in Bombshell: Women and Terror, “A significant development in women's participation in the global Jihad has been the dissemination of radical ideologies on-line. The Internet has afforded Jihadi women ... the opportunity to participate in Jihad without compromising their position and inferior status in the society.”

**Women and the Islamic State**

The so-called “Islamic State” (IS) also known as the “Islamic State of Syria and Iraq” (ISIS) or the “Islamic State of the Levant” (ISIL) claims that women are just as important as are men in waging jihad, and has issued worldwide appeals to women to join their wars in Syria and Iraq. These appeals have been moderately successful. Unlike the offshoot branches of al-Qaeda, regional variations of IS groups such as those in the Sinai, Libya, and the Caucasus, have not only welcomed women but encouraged them to be active, vocal, and engaged in jihad. “The Islamic State’s ideological argument regarding

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the position of women in *jihad* differs from that of Al-Qaeda (AQ). Ayman Az-Zawahiri, AQ’s spiritual leader, has argued that women are not allowed to be part of the tactical team or to be present on the battlefield, unless they are involved in defending their rights and territory. In contrast, ISIS allows women to participate in offensive combat operations as well as in defensive activities.”

Unlike their al-Qaeda counterparts, women in the Islamic State are encouraged to participate in weapons training and bomb making. “The Eastern Indonesian Mujahidin commanded by Santoso (aka Abu Mus’ab al Zarqawy al Indonesia) - one of the Indonesian terrorist organizations affiliated to the Islamic State - has been fighting against the Indonesian police since early 2015. Some of Santoso’s soldiers are women. Not only have they undergone weapons training, but they have also been involved directly in the fight against the police.”

Women in the Islamic State play many roles and are considered cornerstones of culture. The Islamic State is not a “death cult,” (as it is sometimes described in Western media) it very much wants to be a recognized, functional state – and women play a key role in furthering this goal. “Unlike al-Qaeda, Isis is looking to establish a permanent society with roots. They are bringing families from the entire Muslim world, not just from Europe and the US but from Central Asia... providing families for the Islamic State…and they very much want women to join that as part of this utopian politics.”


15 Ibid.
The Al Khansaa Brigade

The Al Khansaa Brigade is an all-female militia group, developed, supplied, and supported by the Islamic State. It currently operates in Iraq and Syria, but is mainly relegated to Mosul, Iraq and its surrounding areas, and Raqqa (the de facto IS capital), Syria and surrounding locations. They have both defensive and offensive capabilities. It was formed in 2014, and takes its name from Al-Khansa (575 – 645 CE), a female Arab poet who was an early convert to Islam, and a contemporary of the prophet Muhammad.

Originally the group was formed to enforce the group’s strict interpretation of Sharia law on other women, making sure that they comply with all rules and regulations. The group become known as IS’s ‘moral police’. Abu Ahmad, an Islamic State spokesman in Raqqa, said “We have established the brigade to raise awareness of our religion among women, and to punish women who do not abide by the law. Jihad is not a man-only duty. Women must do their part as well.”

It is believed that the brigade was originally formed out of necessity, men are the traditional enforcers of modesty in public, however, these same men cannot inspect women for contraband and weapons, or even to check to make sure they are women. Recruits are between 18 and 25 years old, and IS reportedly pays the women about 25 thousand Syrian pounds a year. At the current exchange rate, 1 Syrian Pound equals 0.0047 US Dollar, so SP25,000 would be US$117.21, or less than ten dollars a month.

16 Frank Gardner, "The crucial role of women within Islamic State,” BBC, August 20, 2015.
Women of the brigade carry weapons, and often follow male-IS fighters on to the battlefield. This is especially true when IS commanders know they will be engaging with Kurdish brigades. Furthermore, the women within the brigade hold an unusual amount of power within the Islamic State and enjoy many rights, other women under IS rule do not. These women can drive cars, and do not need to be accompanied by a male relative, are free to move in and out of Raqqa and Mosul, and they are also relied on as city administrators.\textsuperscript{19}

The al-Khansaa brigade also serves a real purpose on the physical battlefield. IS fighters believe that they will not ascend into heaven if they are killed by a woman. It is important to note that there is no scriptural justification for this misogynist superstition in the Quran or Hadith, it is a myth, but one the Kurds and other groups use to their advantage.

“They think they're fighting in the name of Islam. (But) They believe if someone from Daesh (The Islamic State) is killed by a girl, a Kurdish girl, they won't go to heaven. They're afraid of girls," said a 21-year-old commander, fighting under the nom-de-guerre Tehelden - which is Kurdish for 'revenge'.\textsuperscript{20} The women in al-Khansaa are therefore used to fight other all-female militias. The Kurds are the most well-known of these militias. In Iraq, the Kurdish Peshmerga has the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Peshmerga Battalion, a 550-strong all-female Kurdish Special Operations Forces group. Commanded by Colonel Nahida Ahmed Rashid, the battalion was organized in 1996 as an elite special operations unit to fight against Saddam

\textsuperscript{19} Ghardinia Ashour, "How the Islamic State uses women to control women,” \textit{Syria Direct}, March 25, 2015.

\textsuperscript{20} Rebeca Perring, "ISIS men afraid of being killed by women,” \textit{The UK Express}, December 05, 2015.
Hussein. In Syria, the all-female units are part of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and known as the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ). Women make up at least 20 percent of the Kurdish fighting force in Syria. These women have been so successful that their model has been duplicated by other groups within the region – the Yazidis in Iraq have created their own militia known as the ‘Force of the Sun Ladies’, and several Assyrian enclaves have all-female militias as well.

Active Participants in Worldwide Cells

As the Islamic State has lost ground in Syria and Iraq, their global efforts have stepped up in recruitment, online propaganda, and executing attacks on soft targets in the West. Women are a big part of this. “Using women is particularly advantageous for the Islamic State because it works against our biases. Since we are less likely to view women as potential terrorists, it makes it easier for them to be successful in their missions…The more police focus on those fitting the typical terrorist profile, males, the easier it is for women to escape detection. And if their attacks succeed, the mere fact that women carried them out somehow amplifies the attack's propaganda value.”

Information warfare is, in large part, a battle of narratives. An important narrative for Western critics of Jihadist extremism is that ‘Militant Islam marginalizes and oppresses women.’ For IS, employing a highly visible token force of female fighters allows them to propagandize a counter-narrative: ‘We have women warriors, too.’ In the early history of Islam (which is central to the IS narrative), there were prominent women warriors - this

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was part of pre-Islamic Arabian culture. Examples include Hind bint Utbah, Asma bint Abi Bakr, and especially Nusaybah bint Ka’ab (Umm Amarah). Nusaybah bint Ka’ab was an early female warrior who is believed to have participated in the Battle of Uhud. She not only saved Muhammed during the battle but reportedly endured several wounds herself.

“At this point, Nusaybah went forward, with her sword unsheathed and her bow in her hand, to join the small group who were standing firm with the Prophet, acting as a human shield to protect him from the arrows of the non-believers. Every time danger approached the Prophet she hastened to protect him. Mohammed noticed this, and later said, ‘Wherever I turned, to the left or the right, I saw her fighting for me.’” (Qur’an: 3:153).

**Women in Hamas**

Since its inception in 1987, women have played a pivotal role within Hamas, not only in traditional family roles, but as active participants within the organization both operationally and politically. Rajaa al-Halabi, head of the women's movement within Hamas, states that “Hamas views women as a main pillar of Palestinian society, and not as subordinate to men. Since the movement’s inception, women have assumed advanced positions in Hamas and have left their marks in the various organizational committees, thanks to the directives of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the founder of the movement, who allowed in 1987 their access to senior positions within Hamas.”

In truth, Hamas is full of contradictions, the average woman who lives under Hamas has very few rights. Women are not allowed to appear in public without a male companion, they cannot smoke in public, they cannot go to the beach, and the Islamic dress code is

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strictly adhered to. “However, these severe restrictions do not apply to women who are prepared to become "martyrs" in the fight against Israel. So while a woman is barred from smoking in a café or restaurant, or walking in public unaccompanied by a male relative, she is permitted to join a military training camp in preparation for war against Israel…. if a woman is prepared to die in the fight against Israel, she suddenly receives a different kind of treatment and is given more rights, including the right to be away from her husband and children. Even more, these women are granted the right to be in the company of men who are not close relatives, and who train them how to become part of the jihad against Israel.”

_The Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades’ One and Only Women’s Battalion_

It isn’t easy for women to join in Hamas operations, and early in the organization’s history they strictly forbade women to participate. Article 17 of the 1988 Hamas Covenant limits female roles to supporting men and raising children. But as within al-Qaeda, Hamas has evolved in its continued conflict with Israel, taking advantage of the misconception that women are less-likely to be terrorists. The Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades or Al-Qassam Brigades (EQB) is the military wing of the Palestinian Hamas. The EQB “announced in April 2007 the formation of the first female battalion within their ranks, where women receive military training, including physical and weapons training. This development in women’s military role in Hamas means that the movement has moved beyond the tenets of its founding covenant.” Very little is known about this organization, since Hamas prefers to sensationalize its female suicide bombers.

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The Women of Nasser Eddin Brigades

In the summer of 2015, the Nasser Eddin Brigades opened the all-female ‘First al-Quds Army camp’. Girls between the ages of 13 to 18 receive weapons and explosive training, and education in how to participate in jihad as soldiers. Sixteen-year-old Wafaa al-Sharbassi reported to Al-Monitor News “This camp revived our hopes to create a female army to liberate Al-Aqsa from the occupation. We learn about weapons and how to handle them, and we are ready to go through intensive military training for this purpose.”25 Thirteen-year-old Hiba Abu al-Laban echoed her saying “I joined the First al-Quds Army camp because I hope women can play a role in the future liberation battle.”26

24 Adnan Abu Amer, “Women's roles in Hamas slowly evolve.”


26 Ibid.
Suicide Bombers

Suicide bomber is perhaps the most well-known women’s role in terrorist and fundamentalist organizations. The decision to become a suicide bomber doesn’t happen overnight, and it is certainly not made on a whim. “Radicalization is not a mechanical process. It is deeply emotional and personal—especially when suicide is involved….It is also worth remembering that the widow of a man who kills himself or is killed in combat often gains status from her late husband’s ‘martyrdom.’” Use of women to kill has increased since the 1960’s, but they have been utilized for decades. One example is the Algerian War for Independence. The National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale or FLN) deliberately sought out soft targets using light-skinned Arab and Berber

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27 Christopher Dickey, “The Role of Women in al-Qaeda.”
women in western dress and hair styles because they could move freely to plant explosive devices within the European Quarter and places where Europeans gathered. Women are also shamed into suicide. “In Iraq, male terrorists rape women in order to shame them into believing they have nothing to live for and can redeem themselves as martyrs.”

Likewise, organizations who have amended their policies to include female suicide bombers, have seen what could be considered more ‘success’ in their conflicts. “There appears to be a correlation between the rise of female suicide attackers and the length of conflicts and existing opportunities open to women to conduct operations. Ongoing conflicts, such as the war in Iraq, suggest that more women will commit suicide attacks or support their male handlers and leaders in future operations, making it more difficult for authorities to counter a rising threat.”

_Tashfeen Malik: Female Suicide Bombers Come to the United States_

Tashfeen Malik is the now-infamous wife of the San Bernardino bomber, and her role in the radicalization of her husband (an American citizen) has raised questions about the roles of women, and the possibility that women now are not only active recruiters and propagandists on the internet, but may be deliberately targeting individuals based on information gathered on social media. It’s potentially a new role – the ‘terrorist suicide honeypot.’ Several in the FBI have speculated that Malik deliberately targeted her husband for radicalization and then pushed him into his attack at his office in San Bernardino in

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29 John Dyer, “International Arrests Show Women Are Playing an Active Role in Al Shabaab.”

30 Farhana Qazi, “The Mujahidaat: Tracing the Early Female Warriors of Islam.”
2015. She was the one who reportedly shot first, and friends described her as the dominant partner in the relationship. “The FBI is investigating the theory that she may have targeted shy Farook, who listed his interests on his iMilap.com profile as 'hanging out in the backyard doing target practice' and 'working on vintage and modern cars, reads religious books', in a terrorist 'honeytrap.' As he was both religious and experienced with guns, Isis leaders may have circled him as an ideal jihadi candidate for radicalization, while his US citizenship would allow Malik into the country.”

A study by the George Washington University’s Program on Extremism found that the presence of American women engaging in jihad has significantly grown in the past few years. The study suggests that, at the moment, there are no discernable patterns indicating that particular groups or ages are likely to be radicalized, or whether they will pursue jihad in a violent manner. The American Muslims the study analyzed ranged in ages from 15 to 44, came from fourteen different states, and aligned themselves with a variety of Islamic extremist organizations. “The study also finds that women’s contributions, both aspirational and achieved, fall into three overlapping categories: plotters, supporters, and travelers…. The plotters design, attempt, or carry out domestic attacks. The supporters are less directly operational, choosing instead to garner resources within U.S. borders, disseminate propaganda, or conceal information about impending threats to advance the agenda of jihadi groups…and the travelers, migrate to participate in the movement directly.”

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It is important to understand the threat that these women present. U.S. law enforcement needs to take active steps to interdict them, and potentially to institute programs of de-radicalization.

**The Rise of Kurdish Female Suicide Bombers**

Kurdish female suicide bombers are not new; that some women are extreme enough to die for their cause should surprise no one, and while it is rare, there are Kurdish female suicide bombers.

In Northern Syria during the Battle for Kobane, the most famous was Dilar Gencxemis, her name in Kurdish, but more commonly known as Arin Mirkan. She was a guerilla fighter who, according to reports, when trapped attacked the IS position with the intent of blowing herself up, along with every IS jihadi she could. According to Mustafa Bali, a Syrian Kurdish official “She threw many grenades at IS insurgents. After that, she blew herself up….She killed dozens of gang members and demonstrated the YPG fighters' determined resistance.”

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Kurdish suicide bombers are unusual, and are not typical within the YPJ or Iraqi Peshmerga playbook. However, as a last resort, some have made the ultimate sacrifice.

**Russia’s ‘Black Widows’**

The female jihadi suicide group colloquially known as the ‘Black Widows’ were originally recruited by the separatists’ commander Shamil Basayev. In Russia, they are called *Shahidka* ("girl martyrs"). Basayev has claimed that the *shahidkas* are part of his force, called the Riyadh-uss Saliheen Brigade of Martyrs, and that he personally trains them.\(^{34}\) The Black Widows were widows of fallen Chechen warriors recruited to avenge the deaths of their husbands. Recruiters easily manipulated grieving widows on the basis of the Chechen cultural tradition of revenge killing. Revenge killings are still practiced

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today to satisfy blood feuds between families. This vendetta code has proven difficult to discourage, despite attempts from authorities.\(^{35}\)

The initial success of the Black Widows in the early 2000s prompted Doku Umarov (self-styled Islamist Chechen militant leader who sought to establish a North Caucasus Emirate, known in the West as Russia’s ‘Osama Bin Laden’, to expand recruitment to women across the North Caucasus as well as ethnic Russian women who converted to Islam.\(^{36}\) He manipulated young women to expand the Black Widows female suicide bomber brigade. When Basayev died in 2006, Umarov took to the suicide brigade under his influence. “The recruitment, indoctrination and training take some time and young women do not become ‘Black Widows’ overnight. This implies that there must be a corresponding support infrastructure in place.”\(^{37}\)

The use of women for terror acts is nothing new, and the number of participants has steadily increased. “Tactically, it makes sense to use women operatives because they’re just seen as less threatening. In many cultures, it’s just not really seen as acceptable to really check women or frisk women carefully, so they’re able to smuggle suicide devices into places.”\(^{38}\) Furthermore, the same factors that motivate men to join terror groups, influence women, and researchers have found this to be especially true with Russia’s Black


\(^{37}\) Ibid.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.
Utilizing a gendered analysis reveals that the roles of men and women in armed groups are not uniform, but rather reflect conceptions of femininity, masculinity and gendered power relations in different societies. These realities must be taken into account by humanitarian practitioners in conflict-affected contexts.\textsuperscript{40}

**Great Britain’s ‘White Widow’**

Samantha Louise Lewthwaite, also known as Sherafiyah Lewthwaite, as well as the ‘White Widow’ is a British woman born in 1983. She is a Muslim convert and one of the most wanted terrorists in the world. She married a jihadi and pledged allegiance to the Somali-based terrorist organization al-Shabaab, and it is believed that she is responsible for at least 400 deaths.\textsuperscript{41} The media gave her the nickname ‘White Widow’ as a play on her race and the similarities to the Russian ‘Black Widows’ suicide cult. “Somalia’s National Intelligence and Security Agency said: ‘The lady has moved up the ranks. She is one of the most important figures in the terror group. We think this lady is sitting at the right hand of the leader directing attacks. She does not carry out attacks herself as she is too important but is responsible for many, many deaths - hundreds. She uses children to kill for her after giving money to their families.’”\textsuperscript{42}


\textsuperscript{40} Britney Card, “Where are the Women? The Diverse Roles of Women in Islamic Armed Groups.”

\textsuperscript{41} “White Widow ‘has killed 400 people’ as key figure in al-Shabaab,” *The Telegraph*, May 18, 2015.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
Lewthwaite plays a critical role in recruitment for suicide missions, often enticing desperate and impoverished young women with money, reportedly she pays as little as £300. One of her most famous coordinated attacks was at a Mombasa police station in Kenya. Cyber-units uncovered documents leading investigators to believe that Lewthwaite mentored the all-female jihadi suicide team that knifed and fire-bombed the station until shot dead by police.43

Authorities believe that she operators primarily on the dark web and has recruited women in Nigeria, Kenya, Somalia, and Yemen, and has played a role in linking the Somali-based al-Shabaab group with al-Qaeda on the Arab Peninsula (AQAP).44 She primarily targets women, especially late-teenage girls either as jihadi suicide bombers, or wives for jihadi fighters. “It's believed that she commands a terrifying army of up to 200 female jihadis who she has trained to infiltrate governments, carry out suicide attacks, and call her 'Mother of Holy War.'”45

Women and al-Shab: False Empowerment

Over the past five years, investigations have shown that women are emerging as key players within the Islamic militant group known as al-Shabab, not only as recruiters and trainers of suicide cells, but as financial backers as well. Furthermore, al-Shabaab broke with traditional al-Qaeda doctrine, encouraging women or ‘Jihadi Janes’ to engage

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44 Marco Giannangeli, “The White Widow is alive and recruiting female jihadi suicide bombers in Yemen,” The UK Express, April 12, 2016.

45 Julian Robinson, “British white widow terror fugitive Samantha Lewthwaite 'mentored all-female team of jihadists’ who attacked Kenyan police station.”
in espionage, and to use any means necessary to plant bombs, smuggle weapons, and gather information for further terrorist attacks. “They are no longer nurturers but fierce combatants who at times can be crueler than their counterparts, mostly driven by the desire to be respected by their peers. Whether their participation is attributable to holy war, grievances against the current government, or the fight against the ‘Kuffar’ - the disbeliever.”

This break with traditional extremists Islamic thinking, however, is rarely publicized and al-shabab prefers to reinforce traditional Somali social constructs and marginalize women to promote private, more traditional Islamic roles. Dyan Mazurana writes in *Women and Wars: Contested Histories, Uncertain Futures*, the “exclusion of women from visible positions is in part a reaction to decades of internal warfare in Somalia which fundamentally altered the economic and social expectations placed upon women and girls, and consequently challenged patriarchal Somali notions of masculinity and manhood.”

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47 Dyan Mazurana, *Women and Wars: Contested Histories, Uncertain Futures*. 
In an attempt to counter the radicalization of its citizens, and break traditional gender roles and promote equality, the African-Union backed Somali government have several hundred female soldiers who actively participate in military operations and United Nations peacekeeping missions. These women are colloquially known as the ‘Tank Girls’. The 500-plus all-female contingent has a clear mandate: to prevent conflict-based sexual violence, encourage and enforce the ongoing peace process throughout the Horn of Africa, and encourage and inspire the younger generation of African women. 48

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Women, Boko Haram, and Nigeria

Nigeria has seen a severe uptick in suicide bombing, particularly by female suicide bombers acting in the name of Boko Haram. In early December 2016, two women set off improvised explosive devices (IED) killing 31 and injuring dozens more.\textsuperscript{49} The attack highlights a growing problem, and according to a confession from a captured, unexploded female, the group is widely recruiting women and girls specifically for suicide attacks – in 2014, it was reported that Boko Haram had recruited at least 50 women for suicide alone.\textsuperscript{50} These women are typically between the ages of 15 and 18, and “some observers have associated this spike in female suicide bombers with Boko Haram's notorious kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from a state secondary school in the Chibok area of Borno State this past April, and are beginning to speculate that the group is deploying these girls as suicide bombers throughout northeast Nigeria.”\textsuperscript{51} A rescued sixteen-year-old Chibok girl recalls, “They came to us to pick us. They would ask, 'Who wants to be a suicide bomber?' The girls would shout, 'me, me, me.' They were fighting to do the suicide bombings.”\textsuperscript{52} It has been reported that Boko Haram has used girls as young as eight for suicide missions.

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item [51] Johnny Magdaleno, "Boko Haram Plans to Massacre 100,000 Nigerians with Female Suicide Bombers,” Vice News, December 5, 2014.
  \item [52] Brent Swails and David McKenzie, "Kidnapped to kill: How Boko Haram is turning girls into weapons,” CNN, April 16, 2016.
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CONCLUSION

Kurdish female militias have been successful – and not just from a security and military point of view. The achievements of the female officers have demonstrated women’s ability to perform in ground combat, shown how mixed-gender units can train and function on the battlefield, and changed perceptions about women in war, women in terrorism, and women in the Middle East.

Women’s roles as combatants and within militias and terror organizations must be fully explored and understood. Women can no longer be viewed as sideline watchers and non-participants. The participation of women in operations – tactically as well as within cyber operations, are growing, and we are currently witnessing how this can mean major changes on the battlefield.

Analysts and policymakers alike must adapt to the ever-changing environment that terrorist groups operate in. The roles of women within such organizations can offer insight into how such groups are evolving and reacting to operations against them. They also offer insight to what such groups want and what they are willing to sacrifice to achieve it.

Women aren’t going away. We can expect to see their continued increasing presence, and policy makers, operators and analysts need to adapt accordingly. After all, conflict is an opportunity for gender roles to change - for all sides.

Can the Kurdish Model Be Duplicated?

Clearly, the Kurdish model of female counterinsurgency can be duplicated. The success of the Yazidi’s Force of the Sun Ladies in Iraq and the Assyrian Bethnahrain
Women's Protection Forces in Syria demonstrate the exportability of this model in both military and cultural domains.

The Kurds were clearly predisposed to accepting women in a gender equal positions. For the past century, their experience exposed the culture to understanding that women could work, and participate in security roles. This is very different from many of their regional neighbors.

However, the rise of IS has allowed for a cultural breakout of Middle Eastern and Muslim women to demonstrate that the Islamic State, al Qaeda, and many of the region’s extremist organizations are wrong, their interpretation of the Qur’an is false, and their misogyny does not work or resonate in 21st century society.

But can the Kurdish female counterinsurgency model be replicated in a different region? A useful test case to consider is the matriarchal Tuareg Islamic people of North Africa.

Tuareg

The Tuareg are a matriarchal tribe of about 2.5 million people residing in North Africa and the Sahel. They are not Arab, culturally or ethnically, but they are Muslim. The majority reside in Libya, Mali, and Niger, and they are largely nomadic, herding camels and goats.
The Tuareg are a tribal culture, they move, back and forth across the Sahara, rarely settling, and their interpretation of Islam would likely shock most Western observers simply because it doesn’t fit to the stereotype – it (like the Kurds) smashes it. The men, not the women, are required to cover their faces, the women may take as many partners as they like, and are not required to ask for permission from their fathers or next male kin for anything. Divorce is not taboo, the women hold all the property rights, and when it comes to blood lineage, in the Tuareg society, everything is carried through and dominated by the female line. “Tuareg society is matri-lineal, which means the families trace their lines through the women, rather than the men, all the way back to their first queen.” As one tribal man explained it, “Traditionally, the man would belong to the woman's group, rather than the other way around. The preference for the women's line goes as far as man leaving his possessions to his sister's son as it is considered a stronger link to your family than to your own son”.

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However, the Tuareg have come under increasing influence and pressure from the al Qaeda network within North Africa, known as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM.) The Islamic Maghreb refers to the lands mostly in Algeria, Morocco Tunisia, Mauritania and Mali. “Al-Qa’ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb is an Algeria-based Sunni Muslim extremist group. It originally formed in 1998 as the Salafist Group…AQIM historically has operated primarily in the northern coastal areas of Algeria and in parts of the desert regions of southern Algeria and the Sahel, but in recent years has focused on expanding into Libya and Tunisia. AQIM employs conventional terrorist tactics, including guerrilla-style ambushes, and mortar, rocket, and IED attacks.”²

Recently the Tuareg tribes have come under increasing pressure from AQIM to ally themselves with the Islamic extremists against what are perceived to be the western imperialists of France, Germany, Italy, and the United State. The chaos unleashed in neighboring Libya has only heightened tensions and continues to threaten the region.

It may be possible to utilize the Tuareg culture, their matriarchal society, and their traditional drive for independence to duplicate the Kurdish female counterinsurgency model. Train the women, work with the women, promote them, give them a voice and an image, and it will fight the misogyny of Saudi-dominated Islamist policies. It will help counter terrorism, defeat AQIM, and promote regional stability.
Policy makers and those with the power to make the decisions, can learn from this, to create a more peaceful, hopeful and stable future, with allies that can be relied on, with benefits to our national security.

Final Thoughts

There are several conclusions that we can draw on from our study, in the broadest terms it is clear that female counterinsurgent units are effective, and they are effective, on the battlefield, a tool against extremism, and assisting in gender equality. The Syrian YPJ and the Iraqi female Peshmerga have demonstrated their ability to fight the enemy in ground combat, between the success in Kobani and Operation EUPHRATES WRATH, to Mosul Dam, Kurdish female fighters have left their stamp in the war against the Islamic State.

Their successes have also proven to shatter many of the preconceived notions of women in combat roles, and in mixed-gender units. The Kurdish women fight like their male counterparts, undergo the same training, and are willing to die for their cause, their culture, and their brothers and sisters. This has translated to newfound respect and more equality for Kurdish women. Society doesn’t expect them to hide their faces, or not go out in public. Kurdish women have a voice, and are expected to use it. This voice has the potential to aid in the long-held dream of one united Kurdistan. The Syrian YPG and YPJ were integral in Operation EUPHRATES WRATH and worked with coalition forces including Turkey. This cooperation potentially could ease some of the ongoing tensions between the Turkish government and its own Kurdish population. Furthermore, the Kurdish successes in Syria has translated into renewed cooperation with Russia. The YPG
are expanding their numbers with a goal to reach 100,000 fighters, and evolve into a more traditional standing army. YPG spokesman Redur Xelil has stated that “The Russian presence ... comes in agreement between (the YPG) and the Russian forces operating in Syria in the framework of cooperation against terrorism and to help train our forces on modern warfare and to build a direct point of contact with Russian forces.”

The victories of the female Kurds have also had a psychological impact on IS. Whether based on the Qur’an or not, the superstition of male jihadi fighters not able to go to heaven if he is killed by a woman, has changed the way IS approaches military engagements with the Kurds. We also see the formation of IS’s female al Khansaa brigades and their ability to carry weapons as a reaction to the Kurdish female COIN units. The accomplishments of the female Kurds shatter the extremist view of women as nothing more than wives and mothers who are not allowed to leave their homes without a male relative. Female Kurds also dismantle preconceived western notions about Middle Eastern and Muslim women.

The Kurds and the female Peshmerga and YPJ, have so much to offer and teach western society about Middle Eastern ethnicities and cultures. We live in an era where you cannot ignore women. They are an integral part society, and whether they society is Western-learning, or terrorist-controlled, they will be heard one way or another. It is up to us to listen … and learn.

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