THE ROLE OF KURDISH WOMEN ACTIVISTS IN REGIONAL HUMAN SECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

by

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ABSTRACT

Kurdish women have been lauded for their participation in fighting extremism, particularly in relation to the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. However, their motivations and contributions in fighting against these groups is often obscured in Western-based media or patriarchy's expectations of women and their respective role in society. For Kurdish women in the areas of Iraq and Syria, their understanding of gender, peace, and security is situated within Kurdish collective memory. This memory informs their perception of the past, allowing them to seek empowerment through the reproduction of the Kurdish historical narrative of gender equity and tolerance in ancient Mesopotamia, forming the bedrock of their views in present-day for why women seek stability and peace. Through the empowerment of their collective memory, Kurdish women engage in self-organization, transnational networking, and increasing women's visibility. Through qualitative methodological research and semi-structured interviews with activists, politicians, and fighters from the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), these narratives are reviewed in the context of peace, conflict, and gender. The thesis is informed by theories of intersectionality and postcolonialism, including gender as a social construction. Findings indicate that women have complex reasonings for participating in armed conflict; thereby rejecting the traditional and essentialist-based explanations of protecting their rights to motherhood or avenging fallen family members. This paper explores the different levels of this myth and how these are applied to present-day, and the inherent contradictions that arise from these intersections.

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ACRONYMS

ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

KDP – Kurdistan Democratic Party / Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê

KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government

KRI – Kurdish Region of Iraq

PKK – Kurdistan Workers' Party / Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê

PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan / Yekîtiya Nîştimanî ya Kurdistanê

PYD – Democratic Union Party / Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat

YPG – People's Protection Unit / Yekîneyên Parastina Gel

YPJ – Women's Protection Unit / Yekîneyên Parastina Jin

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

The Origin Story of this Thesis

In September of 2014, I watched the emerging news reports about the city of Kobani, a small town in Syria with a population of approximately 40,000 people. News agencies believed it would imminently fall to the extremist group, the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). By October 2014, US Admiral John Kirby gave a chilling assessment that Kobani would likely fall to ISIS, and that "we should all be steeling ourselves for that eventuality" (as cited in Yan, Levs, & Labott, 2014). Indeed, the area had taken significant hits from ISIS and toward the end of October, a six-week stand-off with ISIS led to "800 dead and forced more than 200,000 people to flee to the nearby Turkish border" (BBC, 2014). A couple months prior to that, ISIS shocked the entire world with their publicized barbaric and indiscriminate violence, airing beheadings of journalists and aid workers on TV (Gollum, 2014). While Kobani's impending fall to ISIS was downplayed by military intelligence (Yan, Levs, & Labott, 2014), it was a strategic city near the Syrian-Turkish border, allowing for ISIS to control an expansive land corridor to obtain supplies and resources.

While I was thousands of kilometres away from Kobani, these news reports were personal and alarming. I knew several Kurdish people in Vancouver, Canada that were devastated about news coming from their hometowns and their devastation and anger was almost tangible; friends and family were caught in the middle of it all and some had to flee their homes to escape the impending violence. There were no ground forces at the time that would have the required capabilities to prevent ISIS's further advances.

I wanted the Kurdish people to prevail in defending Kobani, but there was such helplessness surrounding ISIS's advancement that every morning I thought a red *Breaking News* graphic would certainly flash across the TV screen that ISIS was victorious in besieging yet another town. However, intense media coverage followed the People's Protection Unit (YPG) and the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) that were holding the city by a thread, assisted by the Kurdish Peshmerga. As the tide changed, I watched these women[1] in awe – why would they want to participate and sacrifice their lives for this cause? What was their motivation? These women showed a fierce courage in fighting the personification of violent hypermasculinity, willing to give their lives to ensure that Kobani and other towns like it did not fall to extremism. However, these stories in Western media also heavily contrasted femininity and masculinity. In a 2015 *Guardian* article about Shireen Taher, a Kurdish fighter who was martyred on the frontlines of Kobani, her brother noted how much her femininity changed after she joined the Kurdish military resistance:

> She used to have a Barcelona flag around her neck and wore full makeup. I can't remember her hands without rings or bracelets. Her bag, which was full of perfume and cosmetics, came to be loaded with bombs and bullets. (Mahmood, 2015)

These comparisons implied that women did not belong in the world "bombs and bullets," that it was strange for them to participate in this traditional form of masculine fighting. Despite acting out of the norm, women became symbols of fighting a battle much larger than themselves – battles which were deeply-rooted and embedded against women globally. I wanted to understand the *why* and *how* Kurdish women contribute to human security, which is the topic of this

[1] This study considers the binary definition of women within the context of this study, reflecting how participants present their answer and understand gender. It is in no way intended to diminish the experience of those who identify outside this binary (and restrictive) interpretation of gender.

research, including contradictory narratives that arise out of the motivation and reality of their decisions in the Middle East. As I learned more about the Kurdish people and their political structure, I became more intrigued. Were these women going to change the political stability in the area just with their participation? I had to get to the root of this exceptionalism. Was it true? Could it be replicated in other areas struggling with sustainable peace?

In this thesis, I was fortunate to interview three members of the YPJ. Their outlook was the most poignant and radical in a power system that often misrepresents and disenfranchises women and their contributions. While all participants within this study offered valuable insight into the research topic, an active member of the YPJ provided a memorable quote that captures the essence:

> When we reach that stage where a woman plays her role with her true identity, then she will reach the stage of equality. (Participant YPJ 2, personal communication[2], June 17, 2020)

Digging into the sedimental layers of socially constructed gender reveals an expansive and complex rationale into why women join movements for the purpose of future security and peace. It also begs the question of what drives the motivation for Kurdish women to join human security movements.

Research Questions and Scope of Research

Different academic fields and approaches like human security, and feminism, have contributed to the initial formation of this research study and informed its questions. In line with feminist research ethics (Ackerly & True, 2020) and in the tradition of feminist research in

[2] For clarity, "personal communication" refers to an online interview conducted on the noted date.

general, women's voices and perspectives are at the centre of this research. Furthermore, exploring the social and political environment of those involved in the study is also vital, including how women experience gender in relation to their history. Robinson (2006) asserts that undertaking of research involving human rights should include "a thorough examination of the history and political culture which surrounds that concept, including its highly gendered nature" (p. 232). As such, the voices of Kurdish women are the forefront within this study, with the focus highlighting their knowledge and experience. Research questions guiding this project include:

1. What are the reasons why Kurdish women want to contribute to human security in the Middle East?
2. What methods do Kurdish women employ to create human security within Iraq and Syria?
3. What contradictions are present in current Kurdish women's narratives in gender and security?

Through these questions, the subjective worldview of participants is explored, providing a space for participants to contextualize the contributions of women. As alluded to in the introduction, Kurdish women are the focal point of this thesis and exploring the complicated dynamics between conflict, security, and gender, and how they impact stability. The geographic area under consideration for this study are the predominantly Kurdish areas of northern Syria and northern Iraq. The temporal setting of this thesis focuses on attitudes, actions, and beliefs of present-day Kurdish women and their counterparts; however, participants do discuss historical events ranging from the 90s to historical narratives that reference time periods approximately 20,000 years ago.

In addition to the historical narratives, Kurdish women also use collective memory to rationalize their motivations of contributing to security. Women complete this through a variety

of methods, including self-organizing, transnational networking, and increasing women's visibility to normalize their participation in conflict and security settings. While the collective memory that motivates women may be a factual myth, it remains an intangible motivator that informs women's views and responsibilities about their roles within society and conflict.

As discussed above, the focal point of this thesis is centred on human security and the term is used frequently throughout the remainder of this chapter and throughout the thesis. Chapter 3 contains an operationalized definition of how the term is viewed within the context of this study. For consideration when traversing through the remainder of the Introduction Chapter, human security refers broadly to a post-conflict environment where the presence of overt violence in daily life is minimized (Lamb, Mixon, & Minot, 2015, p. 4). It is also a relative term that compares pre-, during, and post-conflict conditions; if violence continues to lower comparatively in these stages, then the process of security is occurring.

Background

The Kurdish people are often referenced "as the largest nation in the world without its own independent state" (Gunter, 2004, p. 197). The region that contains the densest population of Kurds is termed Kurdistan, an area spread over Turkey, Syria, Iran, Iraq, and parts of Armenia. Although Kurdistan remains unrecognized internationally as an autonomous state, regions within the area have achieved some autonomy, notably northern Syria. This region of northern Syria is called Rojava by the Kurds (in Kurdish: meaning "west" or West Kurdistan). Currently, there is a Kurdish *de facto* autonomous governance over the area; the area gained autonomy during the chaos of the Syrian conflict and is also known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). In Iraq, semi-autonomy has been achieved

and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) operates within the area of the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI), also termed Bashour in Kurdish.

The origins of the Kurdish people differ based on the source of information and answers of their origin is often controversial and inconsistent (Maisel, 2018). While this may seem rather irrelevant to the study of Kurdish women and human security at first glance, historical narratives of the Kurdish origin story later become a significant anchor for women. Some studies have examined traditional origin theories that Kurds are of ancient Iranian origin (Hennerbichler, 2012). Other scholars like Maisel (2018) have noted the difficulty of tracing the origins of Kurds prior to the 12th Century, as it was unfeasible to determine if "communities, tribes, and individuals described as being Kurds saw themselves as being part of a larger ethnic community" (p. 4). Kurdish origin stories have also been heavily influenced by Kurdish political figures like Abdullah Öcalan, former leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party or Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (PKK) in Turkey. Although Öcalan is now imprisoned for insurgencies against the Turkish government in the 80s and 90s, his writings released in prison emphasized "true democracy" to solve the issue of Kurdish statelessness. Instead of guerilla warfare and insurgency, Öcalan encouraged the PKK (and the Kurdish nationalist cause in general) to move towards democratic confederalism and autonomy within their respective nation-states. Part of Öcalan's prison writings also added to the historical interpretation of Kurdish history by claiming Kurdish origins could be traced back to 20,000 BCE (Öcalan, 2017). The claim by Öcalan effectively reconstructs the historical origin of Kurds, despite the fact that these claims remain difficult to verify (Urquhart, 2015; Szanto, 2018; Maisel, 2018). As demonstrated later in the findings chapter, the Kurdish origin story and Öcalan's popularization of this narrative plays a significant

role in informing the worldview of participants and how they interpret the contributions of women to human security and conflict.

Context of the Research Study

Women studies in the context of human security, stability, and post-conflict have seldom investigated the struggle of Kurdish women and their contribution to regional human security and the promotion of peace and gender equality. In the relatively new study on the importance of gender in development and security, women are receiving recognition for their role in increasing security within post conflict areas (Mojab, 1997; Porter, 2007; Ofra, 2016; Sabio, 2016; Tank 2017). The Middle East has remained relatively unstable and is still in post-conflict reconstruction following the malignant expansion of ISIS into the area, causing substantial refugee movements, increasingly extreme acts of violence against women, and human insecurity (Shahali, Sharitai, & Montazeri, 2020, p. 2), issues that will continue to reverberate for years to come. As discussed above, the Middle East reached another tipping point with the Arab Uprisings,[3] a series of uprisings and revolutions in the early 2010s, including the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011. The outbreak of violence amplified tensions in the region and highlighted gender inequality that existed pre-conflict (SREO; 2015; Alsaba & Kapilashrami, 2016, p. 5; MacTavish, 2020). Despite the glaring gaps in security, Kurdish people used the opportunity to promote their case for autonomy in the area, especially within Syria.

Despite claims of continuous discrimination, persecution, and geopolitical threats from sovereign states, the Kurds have attempted to create stability in the Middle East by including Kurdish women in key leadership roles and involving them in defence and protection (Bengio,

[3] Also stylized as the Arab Spring or Arab Awakenings, the revolutions included many different ethnic groups, not just the Arab people.

2016, p. 39; McKernan, 2017). While women in the Middle East have certainly contributed to movements that develop human security, the Kurds have claimed to be an exception to gender-based violence and regressive attitudes towards women (Bülent, 2016). The belief of exceptionalism appears to be present in Iraq and Syria, which necessitates the study of both areas to understand underlying motivations and what informs such claims and beliefs. Despite Kurdish beliefs in a history shaped by gender equality, there remains barriers for Kurdish women and men, including limiting gender stereotypes and expectations. While gender inequality touches many cultures and societies, the advancement of gender equality within Kurdistan appears to remain secondary to the goals of Kurdish autonomy (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2011). Achieving a semblance of gender equality and relative stability are also constrained by the general insecurity of the Middle East, particularly with geopolitical actors in the region. This thesis focuses on Kurdish women that seek to address underlying conditions of insecurity and instability in Iraq and Syria, reviewing narratives and stories about their contributions and the ideology that drives these women to participate in creating stability. The next section discusses exactly how this will be achieved, summarizing a road map of this thesis and what to expect in the upcoming chapters.

Road Map of Dissertation and Overview Summary

The themes of this thesis are unearthed with a qualitative research methodology, examining social constructions of gender, collective memory, methods that women utilize to contribute to human security, and contradictory narratives about conflict and the role of women. This thesis is comprised of five main sections: 1) introduction; 2) contextual and theoretical literature review; 3) methodology; 4) findings and analysis; and 5) conclusion. As noted within the table of contents at the beginning of this thesis, the five sections are further divided into 9 chapters in total. This chapter of introduction navigates through the context of this research study

and provides a backdrop to consider the study and research objectives. In an effort to explain the stages of this thesis and the structure of the project as a whole, the sections following provide a preview of upcoming chapters, specifically how and why they are structured in this sequence.

The literature review Chapter 2 reflects the recurring themes that emerge throughout this thesis, and as a result, is informed by several key academic sources and grounded in literature on the Kurdish people. The sources are presented in a contextual manner to give the reader an apt framework to consider the findings from Chapters 5 to 8. Some news media sources are also considered in the literature review to show the impact on narratives and stories in Western media (including McKernan, 2017 and Gol, 2016). These media narratives have previously driven academic and public interests of rationalizing the actions of Kurdish women – some of which are Western-centric narratives that serve to limit the full spectrum of agency that may influence a woman's decision in joining movements that focus on security. These types of media sources are highlighted purposefully, showing how these narratives either coincide or conflict with participants' views in the findings chapters. Other academic sources like Tank (2017) examine these narratives and the inherent problems of Western portrayals of Kurdish women and their motivations. As also concluded by academic literature, gender-based violence continues to affect Kurdish women, seemingly contradicting claims that the Kurds in Iraq and Syria are better positioned to incorporate gender equality and are more stable regions compared to non-Kurdish areas (Alsaba & Kapilashrami, 2016; Wright, 2014). As reiterated throughout this thesis and as a reminder to the reader, existing violence against women is a symptom of a patriarchal society and not necessarily meant as a generalized reflection of the Kurdish people.

Chapter 3 examines academic debates and is focused on theory-based literature, including constructivist versus essentialist positioning on women and security. Similar in structure to

Chapter 2, Chapter 3 is meant to demonstrate to the reader of the different theoretical viewpoints on women and security, which resurfaces in the findings chapter. Some participants later envelop their explanations and answers within essentialist positioning, often providing contradictory narratives of Kurdish women (highlighted specifically in Chapter 8). This thesis aligns with social constructivism theorists like Butler (1999), Lorber (1994), and Cockburn (2007) in that gender is socially constructed and women are not seeking security because it is inherent to their nature as a caretaker or nurturing instincts. Rather, it is a result of gender norms that have been performed and compounded, normalizing gendered behaviours and expectations. Essentialist theorizing is also reviewed and debated within this chapter, considering authors like Bloom (2011) and Gilligan (1977).

The nationalism and feminism dynamic of Chapter 3 is also reviewed, which informs the theoretical approach of the thesis. While the nationalism and feminism relationship may appear in conflict with each other, it is a way forward in advancing gender equality and increasing security. Taking a cue from Al-Ali & Tas (2018), the nationalism-feminism nexus is not always contradictory, especially in the Kurdish case; at some points, the two areas overlap, creating progression for women in gender equality. Additionally in this chapter, theory on alternative masculinities is also examined, looking into the effects of militarized (hyper-)masculinity on security. This section reflects on the work of Zalewski and Parpart (2008), Duncanson (2009), and Cohn and Enloe (2008) among other scholars. Chapter 3 is intended to guide the reader on the theoretical positioning of this thesis and how the findings are understood within these academic debates. The nuance in theory is especially evident in Chapter 8 where theory and reality clash, producing contradictory narratives about Kurdish women that are produced from participants.

After considering the contextual and theory-based literature, it was appropriate to detail the methodology and research design of this study in Chapter 4. Before moving into the findings chapters from 5 to 8, it was vital to show how this data was obtained. More specifically, this section details how participants were sourced, how the research was implemented, my positionality as a researcher, how participants were sourced and recruited, the process of data collection, the process of data analysis, ethical considerations, and general limitations of the study. Theories of intersectionality and postcolonialism inform the thesis and are discussed as a theoretical framework to this body of work. Both theories are especially pertinent, considering the layering of identity of Kurdish women and the multiple ways in which they are oppressed and experience oppression through their gender and ethnic identity as a Kurd.

Chapter 5 marks the beginning of the findings and analysis, setting the foundation for motivations that shape the worldviews of Kurdish women. Findings on the influence of historical collective memory on women's decisions to join conflict and security movements are presented at the forefront to demonstrate patterns that persist throughout the remainder of the findings. Through this chapter, the use of Kurdish collective memory is used as rationalization for Kurdish women to become involved in conflict and security. At first glance, the collective identity and history of Kurdish people may seem rather irrelevant to the question of why women want to contribute to stability in the modern era. However, the history forms the bedrock of why these Kurdish women are motivated or empowered to become involved. The pre-Islam era is also a significant marker for the participants in this study, particularly the religion of Zoroastrianism; all participants believed values and religious beliefs from Zoroastrianism formed within this time period endured generationally. As we explore the findings later in this thesis, these kinds of

narratives are grounded in the "imagined past" (Szanto, 2018, p. 97). The next two chapters of findings focuses on the tangible ways that women contribute to security.

Chapter 6 focuses on practical steps that women take to contribute to security, primarily answering question 2 of this research: What methods do Kurdish women employ to create human security within Iraq and Syria? These include looking at a participant-led definition of self-organization and what the activity entails. Additionally, the YPJ is also examined, including the act of self-organization being used as a means of protection and a way to create security. Participants also describe circumventing and working outside patriarchal power structures that permeate the government and society at large. Similar to Chapter 6, Chapter 7 continues the inquiry of methods that women use to create security. These include transnational networking, collaboration, and the Kurdish diaspora as a means to achieve stability in Iraq and Syria. Kurdish women engage in developing these networks to facilitate communication outside of the current political structure. The networks also assist in communicating and organizing within the Middle East and also allow women to make positive connections with like-minded groups internationally. Also explored is the impact that these types of women's networks have on security, including how the Kurdish-European diaspora influences values and beliefs in Iraq and Syria. Lastly, women's visibility within Iraq and Syria is another tool used to normalize women's participation in spheres of work that can affect the trajectory of security.

Throughout the findings, there were also inherent contradictions found in narratives around gender and security that were provided by participants in Chapter 8. Accordingly, this chapter is presented as the finale of the findings. One of the first set of contradictions includes the claim of liberation by participants (including female participants) and that Kurdish women are relatively freer than their counterparts. However, in situations and current conditions that

participants describe (double standards, gender stereotypes, and obstacles in place for women to freely participate in the public sphere), the idea of liberation may be misleading. Additionally, participants also discuss the YPJ in detail, whose actions and ideology categorically reject essentialism as an explanation for women's involvement in conflict (for the eventual goal of human security), while other participants use motherhood to justify women's inclination to peace. The façades of feminism are also discussed in this section, describing efforts by the KRG and other political movements in the Kurdish areas of Iraq and Syria. These political entities maintain that they are progressive organizations for women. Upon closer inspection, these efforts from government institutions are often empty and devoid of meaningful changes for women and divert energy from women's movements to forming an autonomous Kurdistan. As previously signalled in this section above, the next chapter of literature review presents a detailed overview on Kurdish women and narratives that surround their contributions to conflict and security.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter is focused on the background and context where this study is situated, grounded in academic debates and sources. This approach was appropriate given the complex themes that are later presented in the findings chapters that cover intricate and nuanced perceptions of Kurdish women, their contributions, and the reasons why they feel compelled to contribute to their human security. Without the information and background that is provided in this chapter, it would be challenging to understand the upcoming themes and relevancy in Chapters 5 to 8. Authors in this chapter that are similar to this thesis include Al-Ali and Pratt (2011); Szanto (2018); Bengio (2016); Toivanen and Baser (2016); Tank (2017); Hauge, Gill, and Begikhani (2013); Wright (2014); and Mojab and Gorman (2007). The chapter also delves into the use of collective memory, history, and the Kurdish narratives that are commonly reproduced through Kurdish identity. Additionally, the literature also focuses on unravelling narratives of Kurdish exceptionalism and how they are propagated to create the perception that Kurdish women are more advanced than their counterparts in the Middle East, despite the fact the Kurds continue to struggle with violence against women, similar to other patriarchal societies.

As alluded to above, this chapter examines literature of Kurdish juxtaposition narratives, Kurdish collective memory and history, women's self-organization generally in Iraq and Syria including global initiatives, the Western media's problematic portrayal of Kurdish fighters, and the continuation of gender-based violence in Kurdistan despite claims of Kurdish women's liberation. In attempting to move away from the age-old adage of participating in protection and

defence out of a sense of "revenge" of fallen family members (Tank, 2017), protection of children, or protection of women's future potential as a mother (Bloom, 2011), this study also attempts to draw out the nuances in women's participation in stability and security. The next section on Kurdish juxtaposition examines claims and assertions that may be projected onto the Kurdish cause and Kurdish people. These assertions could be indirect or direct, but ultimately portray the Kurdish people as an exceptional group within the vast expanse of ethnicity and identity within the Middle East.

Kurdish Juxtaposition and Identity

The Kurdish people are often placed in stark contrast with their counterparts to distinguish them as a unique ethnic group within the Middle East, with a diverse cultural and oral tradition (Al-Ali & Tas, 2018, p. 467). This subsection discusses the use of juxtaposition as a tool of "otherizing," which is a common theme found in Kurdish literature and is a way for Kurds to emphasize positive aspects of their identity (Szanto, 2018). Also contained within this section is academic debate on the formation of this juxtaposition, which builds onto the Kurdish collective identity (another theme discussed later in this chapter). First, the Kurdish people have been subjected to forced displacement, genocide, and assimilation policies by various majority ethnic groups within the area for a significant period of their history (Kelly, 2008). This ultimately resulted in suppression through intimidation, discrimination, exclusion, arbitrary violence, and genocide in all four areas of Kurdistan, including Rojava (Syria), Rojhelat (Iran), Bakur (Turkey), and Bashour (Iraq) (Hassanpour, 1992; Fernandes, 2012, p. 76; McGee, 2014, p. 173). The resulting oppression and power imbalance may have led to unique outlooks as a collective ethnic group, including the search for an autonomous state.

Looking towards the historical formation of Kurdish identity, Hassanpour (1994) argues that the oppression of Kurdish communities and the lack of a cohesive state awakened a "political consciousness" beginning in the 17th century (Hassanpour, 1994). More recent literature including that of Wright (2014) notes that the political consciousness continues and the "oppressive cultural experiences bind the Kurds, men and women, in a combined struggle" (Wright, 2014, p. 189). This struggle has created "platforms for commonality between men and women" (p. 189). In other words, the common struggle experienced in Kurdistan generally contributes to a mutual understanding between women and men on the importance of their respective roles in advancing the Kurdish cause of autonomy and recognition as an autonomous entity in the Middle East. While the case for Kurdish suffering is not in doubt, Wright's (2014) study appears to acknowledge that this bond between women and men is involuntary and an unavoidable outcome. However, it may give the impression that the Kurdish people need their own nation-state to prevent further oppression, a patriarchal extension of masculine power. The use of nation-states to mitigate tension and conflict appears to exacerbate security concerns. The relevancy of state-building to this study is the influence of this early history of colonization where the West (preoccupied with identity, national borders, and allegiances) significantly influenced the need to define identity, especially at the end of WWI:

> Working from a set of assumptions about the superiority of nationalism and self-determination as a future of civilized Europe, the League of Nations carved out new-nation states, trying to satisfy potential destabilizing nationalists where possible and creating a series of treaties to protect "minorities" when it became clear that each group claiming to be a nation could not be awarded an independent state. (Shields, 2011, p. 6)

While colonizing powers were attempting to "civilize" areas outside of Europe to reduce the occurrence of instability, it was detrimental to the Middle East by forcing diverse and fluid identities to confine themselves according to nation-states and fight for recognition, encouraging

and necessitating juxtaposition (Edayat, 2014, p. 77). Accordingly, identity loyalties and affiliations became a way to "reduce power struggles" (p. 77). While Shields' (2011) study examines the impact of people in the Sanjak of Alexandretta, it does speak to the larger issue of colonization and the impact on the Middle East. In terms of the application of Shields' (2011) and Edayat's (2014) work to this study, it could exemplify the origins of Kurdish juxtaposition, and how it becomes a powerful force for Kurdish people to employ in the Middle East. As discussed in the next paragraph, it is not the intention of this contextual literature review to justify the use of juxtaposition of Kurdish leadership or whomever is perpetuating the comparisons, but how these processes may be engrained in power sharing. Additionally, themes of comparisons between the Kurds and their counterparts forms a central understanding for the findings in later chapters, and its beneficial to understand how these complex systems (nation-states, nationalism, identity, juxtaposition) interact and how they may inform women's motivations of joining security movements.

These types of juxtapositions can reinforce that the Kurdish people are exceptions to the region, portraying them as the only group leading from a secular foundation or that secularism is necessarily the 'correct' method of governance. In contrast to the complex identities of the Middle East, Kurdish nationalists portray their governance as a "cooperative regional economy," appearing to have a clear Kurdish identity, and also working with different groups within the region to prevent conflict (Ottaway & Ottaway, 2014, p. 147). While the Kurds are trying a new approach to governance that emphasizes multiculturalism and inclusion (Al-Ali & Tas, 2018, p. 457), it is my opinion that this type of essentialism and juxtaposition has the potential to create toxic conditions of exceptionalism and absolve the Kurdish movement from criticism. Especially since the Kurds have been framed or have framed themselves as the symbol of "global struggle

of humanity against barbarism" (Bülent, 2016, p. 185). Religion has also been used as a juxtaposition tool in a similar way, again contrasting the secular approach with political Islam. Particularly in Chapter 5, we see this theme remerge. Religion is used as a relative focal point for participants to explain how Kurdish women are different from others in the area, including the motivators for their contribution to human security.

Islam has been used extensively as a marker of difference between Kurds and others in the Middle East, especially those that practice the religion of Islam. Al-Ali and Pratt (2011) discuss this in their work, arguing the "rejection of political Islam has been an important element of distinction between Kurdish and Arab identity in a context where Islamist political parties and movements play a significant role in post-invasion of central and southern Iraq" (p. 343). In addition, the Kurds in Iraq wanted to define their experience from their counterparts, due to their experience with Saddam Hussein's targeted oppression, (Ali, 2018, p. 210) and the Al-Anfal chemical attacks that targeted Kurdish people (Kelly, 2008). Alternatives to Islam have also been sought out by Kurds, specifically the religion of Zoroastrianism. According to Szanto (2018), some Kurds have been increasingly converting to or adopting the interpretation of the Zoroastrian religion, to "align" with Western values "such as pacifism, gender equality, democracy, and rationalism" (p. 100). The shift towards the religion was meant to further distance themselves from Islam and especially the extremist narratives of religion that ISIS propagated through their rise in Iraq and Syria in 2014 (p. 96). Zoroastrianism later plays a pivotal role in the collective identity of the Kurds (and resurfaces in the findings chapters of this thesis), which is further elaborated upon in the section following.

The section above demonstrates the different methods of juxtaposition and how it is used as a tool to highlight differences (whether these differences are grounded in truth or not) of

Kurds and their counterparts. While there are some works that note the Arab people are specifically the group being contrasted with Kurdish people (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2011), it can be a relatively harmful practice to promote that one group is relatively superior to the other. As a result, I conclude that these ethnic identity groups are reduced to singular entities in order to facilitate this juxtaposition, as these individuals and communities within the Middle East are diverse in belief and demographics. Some Kurds and Kurdish leadership may take advantage of these narratives, inspiring others to join their efforts in building a sustainable (and Kurdish-led) governance (Bengio, 2016). Mojab (2001) also notes this as a criticism of juxtaposition, where "glorification" of Kurdish people against their counterparts excuses Kurdish patriarchy and glosses over the contributions of women outside of the Kurdish identity (p. 10). I align with Mojab on this point; comparisons of this nature between Kurdish people and their counterparts simultaneously disregard efforts of women and shrouds the responsibility of Kurdish leadership in addressing the inevitable harms of patriarchy. As illustrated with the uprisings in 2011, resentment and discontent afflicted Syria and Iraq before ISIS rose to power in 2014. Eyadat (2014) supports that the multifaceted identity in the Middle East was often ignored by those in power, resulting in "its undoing and a threat the state's stability and security," specifically in Iraq and Syria (p. 75).

The scholarship outlined above does indicate Kurdish exceptionalism, along with a desire to align with the West and, in so doing, the active othering of non-Kurds in the Middle East, specifically Arabs. The Kurds, unlike other women in the Middle East, were given extensive Western media coverage regarding their status in society. These highlights seemed to romanticize the status of Kurdish women and contrasted them with Arab women. This ideal of Kurdish women having a certain equality with men in their society was deemed to be a ploy by

Kurdish nationalists to promote the "uniqueness of the Kurds and thus advance their nationalist agenda" (Bengio, 2016, p. 30) and increase their international appeal as a valuable ally of the West. This contrasting image against Arabs evokes divisiveness among women of different backgrounds and champions "Kurdish patriarchal oppression" (Mojab, 2001, p. 10). This point presents a hypocritical argument, as the Kurds are deemed to accept women from all backgrounds in their fight for equality, among other important initiatives, but the portrayals of these non-Kurds can do long-term harm to women who have a lesser status in their societies. The next section focuses on the literature that highlights the importance of a constructed collective memory and how it supports this narrative of exceptionalism.

Collective Memory

The use of collective memory is not uniquely Kurdish, however, an understanding and background of the general concept and its evolution through literature will assist in understanding how the Kurds may view themselves today. The Kurdish political and military leaderships invoke the use of collective memory to frame their struggles, necessitating its inclusion in this thesis. Whether this memory is historically accurate is another matter entirely, as some of the claims of Kurdish history are difficult to verify and trace through thousands of years of history. Perspectives of history, as supported by the findings in this thesis (particularly Chapter 5), is a powerful force that can motivate and inspire action (Confino, 1997, p. 1390). Collective history, collective memory, and cultural memory are established areas of study (Roediger, 2021; Erll, 2011; Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010; Confino, 1997; Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995), and the Kurdish context of these different concepts will be explored in further depth below. In relation to more general information on collective memory and its associated terms, different studies have characterized the concept aptly, including works from the 90s by

Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) and ranging from more recent work curated by American psychologist Roediger (2021). In this section, this collective history and collective memory will be defined, and how academic scholars understand Kurdish collective memory, specifically in the areas of Iraq and Syria.

The study of collective or group memory emerged at the turn of the twentieth century and was largely considered an "academic invention" to describe the process of memory and how it affected culture.[4] American psychologist Henry Roediger III (2021) has written and researched collective memory extensively, defining the term as "memories people share as members of a group, and such memories often form an important part of a person's social identity" (p. 1338). It is important to note that collective memory is an unreliable narrator of history, however, its upholders are noteworthy in the fact that they are relatively consistent (p. 1390). Confino's (1997) study acknowledges how collective memory was used to draw together social groups to unify for a common cause, but it had to evoke an emotional reaction to stir people to action:

> . . . to make a difference in a society, it is not enough for a certain past to be selected. It must steer emotions, motivate people to act, be received: in short, it must become a socio-cultural mode of action. (p. 1390)

Identity formation is particularly important to maintaining a collective memory and perpetuating histories through generations; however, it does result in group categorizations that simplify (and presumably highlight male perspectives) the experiences that are on the outside of that collective memory. Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) note this difficulty: "the supply of knowledge in the cultural memory is characterized by sharp distinctions made between those who belong and those who do not" (p. 130). There is also the issue in how memory is manipulated and that

[4] See Erll, A. (2011). *Memory in culture*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York. for a concise summary on the origins of collective identity.

forgetting is also a tool of collective memory. Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger (2010) research the use of silence and forgetting in memory to distance groups from negative moments or behaviours in their history. The areas that are forgotten are often intentional, "reflect[ing] real desires to mute certain aspects of the past in order to (re)present its other aspects in specific ways, often more favorable to those in power" (p. 1107). The forgetting in collective memory can result in these types of exceptionalism mentalities that become part of the group identity. Also of note is that societies create and recreate collective memory to reaffirm their identity; the process of remembering or intentional forgetting is not confined to the Kurdish identity.

The approach to identity in collective memory is somewhat controversial in scholarship, as critiqued by Erll (2011), it can overlook unique individual identities and therefore simplify the complicated histories and collection process of memory (p. 110). Additionally, it can also assume that the collective memory is interpreted to be the same by all Kurdish people. However, this thesis views collective memory in a different context than what Erll (2011) describes. Despite the debate of downplaying individual identities and in following the cue from Roedinger (2021) and Confino (1997), it is the position of this thesis that collective memory is a powerful motivator and tool of empowerment. Next, the Kurdish context of collective memory is reviewed, including how political figures like Abdullah Öcalan use this method to strengthen the Kurdish identity.

Kurdish Collective Memory

Kurdish collective memory was notably canonized by Abdullah Öcalan's (2017) prison writings,[5] where he claimed that Kurdish culture "began to develop during the fourth ice age"

[5] Öcalan has written several philosophical writings during his imprisonment in Turkey and has been a prominent Kurdish philosopher.

between 20,000 to 15,000 BCE (p. 3). Öcalan's viewpoints are largely unchallenged in the Kurdish community, and Al-Ali and Tas (2018) note that "it is practically impossible to find anyone openly criticising Öcalan's writings" (p. 467). I do support Al-Ali and Tas (2018) on this point, and without open debate of Öcalan's claims (especially within Kurdish literature), he has evolved to be a symbolic representation and idealization of the Kurdish identity. Simultaneously, these ideas have been "invaluable ideological and political tools" to women's groups, a by-product that cannot be ignored. This very point forms a central theme for this thesis (how women are shaped by these historical narratives that Öcalan perpetuates) and how it motivates them to seek security, which is found in the Chapter 5 findings.

Between 700 and 550 BCE, the religion of Zoroastrianism was described by Öcalan (2017) as "a way of life that was marked by work in the fields, where men and women were equal to each other" (p. 4). Both points (the ancient history of the Kurds and the practice of Zoroastrianism) have contributed to the complex collective memory of the Kurds and will be examined in further depth below. It is also a "historiographical myth" (Urquhart, 2015, p. 6) to use ancient Mesopotamia as a claim for autonomy in the Middle East. This historiographical myth remerges in Chapter 5, where the historical context that participants consider is described in further detail.

Absent from Öcalan's writings is the inherently negative aspects of Kurdish history, leading to a sense of Kurdish exceptionalism. Roediger (2021) describes the general process of collective memory (not specifically in its application to Kurdish collective memory) as "highly selective, emphasizing positive aspects and omitting negative features and episodes" (p. 1393). Szanto (2018) also later criticized Öcalan's writing of Kurdish collective history, especially the emphasis on the agricultural and agrarian era. Women likely did not experience gender equality

and fair distribution of work, which was romanticized in Öcalan's prison writings. In fact, Szanto (2018) posits the opposite, where "farm women do not control the fruits of their own labour and rarely own the farms they work on" (p. 106). While the focus of this thesis is not on the particulars presented in Öcalan's work, these narratives remerge in the Chapter 5 findings, where participants specifically reference the agrarian era being a defining feature in Kurdish history (or rather, Kurdish collective memory). Participants involved in my study reference the agrarian era as a time period that they believe Kurdish women and men want to return towards, stirring Kurdish women's motivations for participating in conflict and human security.

As mentioned briefly in the previous section on Kurdish juxtaposition, religion is also used as a device of modern Kurds to emphasize differences between Arabs and Kurds, especially after the 2014 rise of ISIS in the region and their brand of extremist (mis-)interpretation of Islam. Rose (2014) has written extensively on the religion of Zoroastrianism, which is notable for being termed as one of the world's oldest religions. However, this designation is somewhat imprecise, as the temporal boundaries of the religion are difficult to pinpoint (Rose, 2014). It also builds on the notion that Kurdish society somehow exists as a separate and ancient society compared to others in the region. The Kurds use Zoroastrianism to distinguish themselves against other ethnic groups in the Middle East, claiming it "was the 'original' religion of the Kurds before they embraced Islam" (Szanto, 2018, p. 96). Szanto (2018) problematizes the Kurdish construction of collective memory and identity because:

> this particular invented tradition emphasizes two issues: ethnic identity, which is linked to an imagined past, and a generic feminism juxtaposed with conservative Islamic gender norms. As such, it constitutes an imagined ideal, a claim to progress and innate liberalism. (p. 97)

Rose (2014) contends that the compilation of Zoroastrian beliefs is convoluted by the ever-evolving changes and advances in archaeology and linguistics. In doing so, Rose (2014) argues the resulting outcome is that Zoroastrianism and the evolution of the religion are simplified. In collective memory, a complex history is reduced, where "the story of the past is simplified" (Roediger, 2021 p. 1389). Through Öcalan's romanticized writings of an "imagined past" (Szanto 2018, p. 97) that has gender equality and stability, the Kurds have created their own identity, "of how things were and should be again" (Roediger, 2021, p. 1389). A fault of collective memory is that it is "often resistant to new evidence that contradicts the story" (p. 1389). As a result, a collective identity and history may be accepted as fact rather than relying on historiographical methods of interpreting the past. While not necessarily a problem in its own right, these types of narratives based on collective memory may lead to a sense of exceptionalism. Collective memory can pose conflicts and ideas of exceptionalism, and these contradictions should be acknowledged when considering the findings from Chapter 5 to 8. Again, drawing from Confino (1997), the thesis focuses on how collective memory is used to empower women to join movements and to self-organize to make their own changes to their security situation. The next section highlights literature on women's organizing, including different movements where women have self-organized in response to injustice.

Women's Self-organization Movements

Self-organization can be used to create awareness of injustices for women and unite women and their allies together to reach common goals. These types of activities initiated by women include protests, demonstrations, awareness-raising, and networking. Some applied examples of these various activities are presented below from different areas of the world to exemplify the wide variety of behaviours that self-organization can embody. Some Kurdish

women (especially members of the YPJ as an example) may utilize self-organizing to establish a network of like-minded individuals that support their goals, while simultaneously attempting to free themselves from gender-based violence and gender norms that are harmful to their overall agency (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2011, p. 347). The act of self-organizing is not wholly unique to Kurdish women and not the only method to draw attention to systems of injustice (Kanaovich, 2015; Rutland, 2014; Goddard, 2009). Oftentimes, this form of sacrifice compromises the personal safety of women and there are often violent repercussions in engaging in such activities (Langohr, 2015, p. 131; Goddard, 2009). Later in Chapter 6 of the findings, the participant-led definition of "self-organization" is explored, and this section focuses on general movements outside of the Kurdish region as an introduction to those findings. The relevancy of self-organization to my thesis is how it is viewed by participants as a tool to achieve human security. Given that it is a central theme in Chapter 6 of the findings, it is essential to briefly explore the concept to provide some context to upcoming themes, which is exemplified through examples in Russia, Argentina, and the United States.

One such example of self-organization is derived from Russia regarding the "Pussy Riot" case. Five women organized a "wild dance" in a Russian orthodox church protesting President Vladimir Putin's restriction on political freedom and were subjected to arbitrary arrest and deprived of due process in their sentencing (Kanaovich, 2015, p. 343). Despite great personal cost to the women in terms of their sentencing and targeting from Putin's regime, their organization as a collective group was an act of resistance against oppressive practices. In Rutland's (2014) article, he notes diverse debates on the Pussy Riot case, where the organization of the women allowed for them to respond to a power imbalance with the state and with Putin in an "asymmetric manner, by having women behaving in unfeminine ways" (p. 579) and defying

their society's conception of gender. Rutland (2014) also presents criticisms of this type of self-organization, where Western support popularized the actions of women, rather than creating meaningful discourse on the problematic outcomes that constructed gender produces (p. 579). However, in this context, whether good or bad, the Pussy Riot did attract attention for their actions and began to make space for similar notions of dissent within Russia and beyond Russia's borders. It is within dissent that the harms of gender can be appropriately explored and changed beyond the limits of what patriarchy typically allows. These types of feminist self-organizing activities also vary in their goals, but the framing of these activities by media outlets is also telling on the state of society and how gender is used as a lens to rationalize the actions of activists. These media narratives are discussed in the next section.

Other examples of self-organization also include the movement of the Argentinean Mothers, also known as the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. Later in Chapter 6, a participant in this research uses this group as a positive example of women's organizing, drawing parallels to the YPJ. As their name suggests, the group was comprised of mothers seeking to hold the government of Argentina accountable for their murdered and missing sons as a result of state violence (Goddard, 2009). Interestingly, the Pussy Riot case acted against expected gender norms while the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo embraced gender norms and the power of the mother figure to advocate for accountability. These women self-organized and protested against the government, and as Goddard (2009) notes, the group was unarmed in general. The movement of the "Mothers" was dangerous due to the potential retaliation from the Argentinean government and their supporters, as they were "subjected to threats and harassment, arrests, murder, and numerous other attempts to silence them" (p. 86). Their demonstrations were often viewed within the essentialist gender lens, which portrayed these women as peaceful and passive

bystanders, standing up for the injustice and inaction committed against their sons. It was also noteworthy due to the mothers' traditionalist gender roles in Argentina; it was out of the norm for bystanders to see these women protesting due to their categorization as peaceful and passive (Goddard, 2009). At first glance, the Plaza de Mayo movement may resemble other initiatives that women undertake against injustice, their involvement was tied to their experiences in motherhood, not generally in response to how gender roles have created oppression, resulting in ways women experience injustice. Another example of organizing for protection is Law's (2011) study *Where Abolition Meets Action: Women Organizing against Gender Violence.* As the name of the article suggests, women in the United States in the 70s began to organize to defend themselves, their kin, and other women from street violence and gender-based violence in the 1970s (Law, 2011). Women were also forced to take matters into their own hands due to the lack of effective police presence in preventing violence against women (Law, 2011).

Other authors, like Tadros (2013) have focused on heightened political and gender-based violence against women, despite their mounting organization to fight against such oppression. The exploration of the specific issue of violence against women during transition periods is also reflective of the current social environment in Syria and Iraq, where there is a level of transition through (oftentimes) violent evolutions of power. Unfortunately, the potential for violence is a common reality for women that wish to evoke changes. Tadros (2013) also explores the effect of contentious politics on organized movements aimed at effecting changes, an area of study that is explored in-depth by Tilly and Tarlow's (2015) work on contentious politics and how it affects revolutions, movements, and politically-motivated organizing. One of the aspects of contentious politics was "conscious-raising," which creates awareness on the problems of a group that binds these group members together in a united cause:

> conscious-raising was a creative tool for the development of new representation of women. Such grassroots activities fostered 'sisterhood,' women who had previously been demure and retiring learned to speak up for themselves, and new frames of meaning emerged. (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 155)

Movements that use contentious politics also have a vested interest in their public representation through self-organization activities. Tilly and Tarrow (2015) describe four such requirements that allow the public to view these groups as a united force of solidarity, including the projection of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment (p. 153). Linking this process back to the case of Kurdish women, they rely on such contentious politics to generate support and present as a united force that has the capacity to change conditions in their lives. Through their work, the *perception* of self-organizing activities is prominent in comprehending why women might join such movements, especially when it is known that they will likely face violent consequences for doing so. It becomes equally vital that women articulate their own reasons for participating in conscious-raising, instead of allowing media or Western interpretations to potentially misrepresent her understanding of why she might be involved in a self-organizing group.

Women's response to mitigate or eliminate conditions of instability can often be essentialized as an extension of motherhood and caretaking motivations (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015, p. 72). While that is not meant to detract from the immense sacrifice that women contribute, the framing of self-organization is just as vital as the desired outcomes of such activities. Essentializing these types of actions can prove to discredit their underlying motivations into an inferior understanding on the complexities of their accomplishment. It can also lead to the reinforcement of harmful assumptions related to binary gender roles that limit the exploration of why women want to join self-organizing activities. Similarly, media representation of Kurdish women's contributions is often understated and oversimplified, with

Western understandings used as a way of contextualizing the issues that afflict Kurdish women (and women generally) within the Middle East.

Media Representation of Kurdish Women and Equality

The mainstream Western media influences international attitudes towards the Kurds through the dissemination of subjective, and often politically motivated, portrayals of the Kurdish fight against ISIS and the parallels constructed regarding their beliefs about women's rights (Kardas & Tesiltas, 2017). Certain narratives, whether positive or negative, have the potential to influence academic research, policy decisions, and propagate unfounded perceptions of those living within that narrative or interpreting it outside of that narrative (Schemer, 2012). For the Kurds, there were several instances of positive and negative media coverage that framed the Syrian conflict and the general case for a Kurdish nation. Tank (2017) analyzed the impact of media on the media representation of Kurds, concluding "the media's portrayal of women combatants often ignores a deeper understanding of the women's political motivations and their roots within the Kurdish movement" (p. 405). Other literature remains in the form of news articles and media. One area of extensive Western media coverage was the battle for Kobani in 2014, which specifically referenced the consequences if Kobani were to fall to ISIS and mirrored pre-existing attitudes of women's gendered roles in conflict (James, Black, & Letsch, 2014; Yan, Levs, & Labott, 2014). These narratives in media, while seemingly innocuous at first glance, demonstrate the current attitude towards women in society and are telling of the contradictions and barriers that exist for gender equality and to a larger extent, human security within these societies. These contradictory narratives are presented in Chapter 8.

Although a smaller city within the Kurdish region, Kobani was deemed a strategic victory due to its use as a major supply corridor to the Turkish border. It was also a symbolic victory, as it demonstrated the contribution of the Kurdish people fighting for democracy and reiterated the importance of the Kurds to the Western-backed coalition against ISIS. The contribution of women in the Kurdish protection units was also noted as a unique aspect to the fight for Kobani, even though women had previously been involved in various political and activist movements prior to this time (Dirik, 2014). Even though women were finally receiving recognition for their sacrifice and contributions, few of the articles or reports that centred on Kurdish women had actually investigated "these fighters' political agency" (Tank, 2017, p. 406). Instead, images of female fighters began to flood Western media, with striking juxtapositions to the brutal and misogynistic regime of ISIS. These images became "war paraphernalia," and were portrayed by the media as a fight for "secular democracy and gender equality" (Kardas & Tesiltas, 2017, p. 272). Bengio (2016) suggests that the Kurds used this coverage to their advantage to advance their nationalist agenda as a unique nation and this was later romanticized by the Western media.

Even fashion magazines began to interview Kurdish women, but these outlets were also accused of doing so for "their own sensationalist purposes" (Dirik, 2014). The publications appeared to focus on physical attributes of fighters, with journalists and reporters picking "the most 'attractive' fighters for interviews and exoticise them as 'badass' Amazons" (Dirik, 2014). Toivanen and Baser (2016) also wrote extensively on the language used in media, focusing on coverage of Kurdish combatants in France and Britain. Through their content analysis on various media outlets in these countries, they found the media portrayed women's involvement in combat as unusual and often relied on visual or descriptive media to juxtapose Western concepts of femininity (beauty, passiveness, caretaking) with guns, uniforms, and active fighting or

traditionally masculine objects or actions (Toivanen & Baser, 2016, p. 206). The conclusion derived from Toivanen and Baser (2016) was that women's involvement in conflict and by implication, the post-conflict process, treats men's involvement as "normative against which the exceptionalism of female is constructed" (p. 206). In other words, the media reflected the current norms in patriarchal society, where women who participate in the same manner as their male counterparts are considered outliers.

Gentry and Sjoberg (2015) also had a similar finding, where "disproportionate coverage of women soldiers *as women* showed the rising salience of traditional gender roles" (p. 7). Further, the view does not capture the depth of commitment many Kurdish women fighters may feel by trivializing women's participation as the exception rather than the rule. Simultaneously, it seems like the presentation of the physical attributes of women is a way in which patriarchal audiences can digest and understand this information, that women can embody roles outside of motherhood and caretaking. This focus on physical characteristics has potential to belittle meaningful contributions to security in the area in favour of sensationalist journalism. Unfortunately, there are no shortage of examples in Western media of trivializing women's impact with gimmicks or disparaging representations.

In 2014, clothing store H&M was widely criticized for replicating the uniform of the Kurdish female fighters that was said to have borne "a striking resemblance to the loose-fitting fatigues worn by female fighters of the Kurdish People's Protection Units" (Wykes, 2014). In another example, a YPJ fighter was dubbed the "Kurdish Angelina Jolie" by Western media. The actual woman, Asia Ramazan Antar, was reportedly killed at the age of 19 while fighting ISIS in Northern Syria in August 2016. Women who fought alongside Antar were heavily critical of this comparison, stating it was "sexism and objectification" of Kurdish women who were giving their

lives to their cause (Gol, 2016). The Western media also fixated on the physical appearance of fighters, and often depicted them in comparison to their "feminine" characteristics, such as long hair, clothing, and physical appearance to the external "masculine" characteristics (Tank, 2017, p. 409). Even Dirik's (2014) article in Al Jazeera, while more sensitive to the dynamics of women's participation, does not escape the focus on physical descriptions of Kurdish fighters, referring to them as "beaut[ies]", while simultaneously acknowledging that attention individual Kurdish fighters received largely disregarded the harsh reality of women fighters against ISIS. An additional *Marie Claire* article in August 2014 included the narrative that women join armed movements because they wish to change the cycle of female victimhood (Griffin, 2014). If individual women do want to participate in changing the cycle of victimhood, it appears that Western media is intent on focusing on these narratives so Westerners would understand why women would take up arms in defence.

While these individual narratives are important and are not in dispute, this constant stream of "victimhood" descriptions to contextualize women's actions and motivations oversimplifies and underplays women's agency and reproduces stereotypical images of Kurdish women and women generally. Tank (2017) pinpoints the Western media's fascination with Kurdish women combatants due to the juxtaposition with male combatants, and the West's understanding of militarized masculinity. Parpart (2008) speaks to masculinity and conflict when investigating violence in Zimbabwe, in that "militarization has tended to reinforce a masculine identity tied to protecting a nation" (p. 182). As a result, these images of women as protectors and aggressors were sensationalized because it subverted gendered norms and simultaneously ignored the fact that "women in the Middle East have legitimate political grievances for which

they commit violence" (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015, p. 54). Militarized masculinity and alternative masculinity in conflict is explored further in Chapter 3.

This appears to be a common theme in Western academic literature, where women are typically noted as "followers or dependents, whereas men are viewed as fighters, combatants, or soldiers" (Cohen, 2013, p. 383). This "traditional perspective" is shallow in its exploration on the wide reasons, contradictions, and beliefs that women in hold in making the decision to join armed combat and "the need to specify the phrase 'female combatant' itself implies that the conventional understanding is of male-only fighting force" (p. 389). Therefore, this bias within Western media concerning Kurdish women must be recognized within this thesis, as these harmful representations may not reflect the reality and viewpoint of women involved in the Kurdish movement. Additionally, these representations perpetuate universalizing views of women that have historically justified inequality and women's subordination. In this thesis, I am mindful of these romanticized representations of Kurdish women fighters that were so prolific in the Western media. In response, I have identified my own positionality as a researcher and every effort to base the analyses on the contributions from my interview participants – some of whom have fought against ISIS – to avoid reproducing these representations (my positionality and biases are explored in-depth in Chapter 4). Some of these narratives that are told from a Western-centric perspective echo a common theme among the literature reviewed for this section: women only seek out equality when they are placed in a situation where they are victimized, but the problem goes beyond the fallibility about women and femininity generally and negates the role of women's agency. As Tank (2017) states, Kurdish women were viewed with the Western lens and the characteristics that are focused on were women's "weakness, interdependence, emotion, sensuality, domesticity" (p. 406). Not only with Kurds, but women in general from the Middle

East are constantly constructed along the lines of victimhood and oppression (p. 408), when it does not reflect their experience.

Women are precluded from being dynamic beings, capable of holding contradictions in their character, and instead, are most often portrayed as "victim or peacemaker" (p. 408). The overarching representation points to the West's limited understanding on the dynamic, not only of Kurdish women, but women within the Middle East. It negates other factors, including political reasons, individual beliefs, and individual circumstances of why a Kurd or any other woman would seek out these types of arrangements in armed combat or within the community. In addition, portraying women constantly as victims can degrade women's calls for empowerment that underplays their contribution to lasting security, leaving them largely excluded from peacebuilding and policy reformation after periods of conflict. International organizations like the United Nations acknowledged this in the UNSC Resolution 1325, which emphasized women's

> equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution (UN Security Council, Security Council Resolution 1325)

A lack of equal participation on the issues surrounding conflict and the subsequent peacebuilding process sustains the imagery of women as victims and telling narratives from the perspective of victimhood can keep these groups in "inferior, powerless positions" (Lord & Hutchison, 1993, p. 15). Despite the noted importance on women's inclusion in the peace process in UNSCR 1325, George and Shepherd (2016) also note women's inclusion is "slow" or "poorly formulated to address the wide and complex array of gendered peace and conflict challenges" (p. 301).

Despite the negative portrayals in Western media, there are some positives. As mentioned previously, the *Marie Claire* article, penned by Griffin (2014), detailed the experiences of women

in the YPJ, including their fight against ISIS and reasons for their participation in the armed struggle against radicalization. This is a departure from journalistic articles from other news sources as it is more directly derived from women who lived through this experience. Focusing on the narratives of women who have experienced being part of Kurdish efforts in fighting ISIS offers a more reliable insight into the ways Kurdish women perceive themselves to have contributed to the human security in the region. This thesis focuses on this important topic relating to Kurdish women and activists: how and in what ways does their movement contribute to human security in the region? From the literature reviewed on the media representation, the Western-centric conversation on equality is presented through the victimhood lens, which can prove harmful to the overall narrative that the Kurdish people put forward regarding their goals and aspirations within the Middle East. The result can amount in increased disempowerment and the perpetuation of harmful notions of gender roles, and the singular focus on the victimhood of women evaporates the "many insights that they may otherwise bring to the process of promoting peace and negotiation" (Marques de Mesquita, 2017).

Through Western depictions of Kurdish women, these images work to align the Kurds with the West as well as reproducing ideas that women are generally victims in the region overall. As a result, these representations overlook (whether intentionally or unintentionally) the complex reasons as to why women would join armed combat and take such a defining leadership role in a society that is so densely patriarchal. Women who remain knowable and predictable are less of a threat to the gender ideologies that underpin societies and to those in positions of power who have benefitted from patriarchy. The images of women's active involvement in violence is unsettling to these gender norms, clashing with conceptions that women are "not prone to men's mistakes, excesses or violence" (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015, p. 2) In other words, by portraying women as

victims-turned-heroes, it acknowledges that the institutions of a patriarchal society allowed for it to happen rather than acknowledging that women may rise against patriarchal powers and unseat those in positions of authority.

Continuation of Gender-based Violence despite 'Liberation' of Kurdish Women

Through Western depictions of the Kurds, there is an image that Kurdish women are liberated from patriarchy and are free to participate in realms previously reserved for their male counterparts. However, the Kurds continue to struggle with the treatment of women in Kurdistan along with other patriarchal societies globally (Al-Ali, 2018; Alsaba & Kapilashrami, 2016). Al-Ali (2018) emphasizes this fact in their study on sexual violence in Iraq, arguing that it was not necessarily religious conservatism or traditional cultural practices that enabled the continuation of gender violence. Rather, it was an intersection of a variety of factors, including "concrete and rapidly changing political, economic and social conditions" and oftentimes was influenced by domestic and international actors striving for power in the area (Al-Ali, 2018, p. 12). Hauge, Gill, and Begikhani (2013) also separately addressed this view years earlier in their work with a specific focus on the Kurds in Iraq and note that the persecution of Kurds coupled with increased militarization has actually "contributed to the practice of both 'honour'-based and gender-based violence" (p. 395). The Iraq War also led up to the beginning of the Arab Uprisings and the rise of ISIS in the region and highlighted extreme sexual abuse against women, particularly ethnic and religious minorities.

While Western media was eager to focus on sensational news articles detailing the abuse of women who were held as sex slaves and traded among ISIS, it uncovered "existing patterns of violence" against women (Alsaba & Kapilashrami, 2016, p. 5). Therefore, it is perhaps inevitable

that these struggles persist in Kurdistan, particularly in the area of study for this thesis – Syria and Iraq – despite claims that the Kurdish region is liberated for women. Wright (2014) has written extensively on the similarities between Kurdish women from Iraq and other women in the Middle East. Wright (2014) found that Kurdish women, unfortunately, had similar experiences with oppression, imbalances in the power in relationship with men, and experienced domestic abuse that bound women in a bittersweet "sisterhood" (p. 190). As a result, the typical outcome of patriarchal societies was embedded in all institutions and ways of life in the area and was not only limited to the areas of current conflict in Iraq and Syria: "patriarchal social structures that are embedded in Kurdish culture . . . pervade Kurdish women's lives whether they are from Iraq, Iran, Turkey, or Syria" (p. 185). Like most women in the region and globally, Kurdish women are still subject to double standards and confined to socially acceptable roles as a mother and wife (p. 184). As a result of these double standards and in general, the patriarchy and the presence of men in the lives of Kurdish women was simultaneously a hindrance and at times, a way towards equality (p. 190). This also ties into existing literature on the complex intersections between nationalism and gender, where women were frustrated with systems of male privilege for limiting their progress but had to rely intermittently on the nationalist movement to advance the women's movement concurrently. Despite this gloomy outlook towards the sustained treatment against all women in the area, both Kurdish-led areas in Syria and Iraq have attempted to improve the condition and treatment of women, with varying degrees of success (Hauge, Gill, & Begikhani, 2013; Al-Ali, 2018).

In Iraqi Kurdistan, there is extensive literature on the 'honour-based' violence towards women - why it continues to occur - and the extensive restrictions "in relation to dress, physical and social mobility, education, relationships with the opposite sex, and matters in choice of love,

marriage, and divorce" imposed on women (Hauge, Gill, & Begikhani, 2013, p. 388). This was also echoed by Wright (2014) who found murders of Kurdish women disproportionately affected women in "rural areas of Iraq" (p. 185). Gender-based violence was an epidemic pre-invasion in Iraq and continued to increase after the Iraq War (Al-Ali, 2018, p. 10). During the Ba'ath regime of the 1980s and 1990s, some parents became strict with their daughters regarding leaving the home and only allowed conservative clothing – allegedly to protect their daughters against violence. This resulted in the mobility and agency limitations for girls and women under the guise of protection from gender-based violence (p. 16). With the close of Saddam Hussein's regime, and the establishment of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in the 1990s, civil society and advocacy women's rights groups have begun to take root in these areas to help women in issues of gender-based violence. In Iraqi Kurdistan, these services include "raising public awareness, training other agencies on women's issues, campaigning, providing outreach services, and offering protection to victims/potential victims of VAW [violence against women]" (Hauge, Gill, & Begikhani, 2013, p. 389). However, these groups exceeded their capacity, becoming "critically overburdened and vulnerable to attack" from those that are hostile to the women's movement (p. 389). Notwithstanding, the KRG pushed forward with legal reforms concerning violence against women and 'honour'-based violence in 2007.

However, the KRG was criticized on the basis that reforms "have not been implemented reliably, or to any significant level" and were even more absent in rural areas (p. 390). Indeed, Mojab and Gorman (2007) acknowledge the lack of meaningful legal reforms but balance this by arguing that the KRG is constrained in its power to implement due to the influence of foreign powers in the area (p. 61). In addition, "historically rooted and structural injustices and forms of oppression, such as colonialism, capitalism, authoritarianism, patriarchy and neoliberalism" (Al-

Ali, 2018, p. 14) also arguably limit the capacity of the KRG. While the aims appear similar in the case of Rojava, both regions are on different trajectories in terms of government involvement and political situations, all of which affect attitudes towards women.

Rojava has had a different outcome than the KRG, as Bashar Al Assad's regime is still intact, and conflict stemming from ISIS's advance in 2014 have created an immense human security problem in the area (Al-Ali, 2018, p. 24). Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga (2016), writing on the Kurds in Rojava explained the compounded issues with Kurdish women in the area, who were discriminated against based on their gender but also their ethnicity. It was common under the Assad regime that Kurds were denied basic rights and oftentimes citizenship in Syria, placing unnecessary economic and mobility barriers on Kurdish people (Knapp, Flach & Ayboga, 2016, p. 62). Despite these disadvantages, women participated in grassroots protests and movements alongside men (especially militant groups like the PKK) as its ideology in the 1980s and 1990s shifted to include the liberation of women from the patriarchal society (p. 63). While there have been advances for Kurdish women, the idea that they are liberated may not be reflective of the current environment for women. The experience of liberation is also inherently subjective depending on the person. Conflicting and contradictory narratives of liberation are a question of this thesis that is later explored in Chapter 8, reflecting the current state of gender dynamics and their bearing on security.

Conclusion

Through the literature review, there were key themes that emerged in regard to Kurdish women and the Kurds, painting an intricate picture of the Kurdish people. Academic literature specific towards women's contributions are increasing, including works from Bengio (2016),

Mojab and Gorman (2007), Bülent (2016), Al-Ali and Pratt (2011), and Aghaie (2017). These authors have begun the task of including women in the canon of Middle Eastern history and write on topics relating to the use of juxtaposition, collective memory, and the problematic portrayal of Kurdish women in Western media. Despite criticisms of the Kurdish women's movement just being an international ploy by Kurdish elite to make a case for the Kurdish state, by recent accounts from McKernan (2017) and Tank (2017), the women's movement in Kurdistan continues to build momentum in Iraq and Syria. However, there have been several setbacks in terms of security and stability to continue the progress noted for female leadership and gender equality.

In the juxtaposition of Kurds and non-Kurds, the former draw from a collective history to emphasize and embellish differences, and in some cases, this has served as a foundation for why Kurdish women participate in such movements (more on this in Chapter 5). The use of collective history is evident in the Kurds' initial deviation from Islam and into different models of governance that were popularized by Abdullah Öcalan. What remains an overlooked aspect in literature is whether the leadership stemming from feminist efforts of Kurdish activists is meaningful and can affect change in terms of policy and administration to continue these trends. This also has the potential to evoke greater security in the lives of women. Another problematic subject in literature was the Western media interpretations of women. The specific focus on "exotic" women seemed to detract from important messaging about the reality of women in Kurdistan and at times, minimalized it to a fashion trend. However, it also placed women on the international eyeline, so their stories can finally be highlighted. This also leads to the final theme of the literature, which is lack of acknowledgement on the harsh scrutiny that Kurdish women still face today. Despite the portrayal that women are liberated in the Kurdish-held regions, they are still outstanding problems in society that are a result of patriarchy, including gender-based

violence, limiting gender roles, and pressures on women to conform to the standard of matrimony and motherhood.

CHAPTER 3 – THEORETICAL LITERATURE

Introduction

Debates regarding feminist and security studies have become increasingly animated over the past few decades. Literature has often debated women's ties to motherhood as a reason for their inclination towards peace and security (Fite et al., 1990; Bracewell, 1996; Cockburn, 2007; Brooks & Valentino, 2011; Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015). This difference in approach to conflict and peace between women and men is termed as the 'gender gap.' As some of my research participants reproduce essentialist positionality in their responses (as shown in Chapter 5 to 8 of the findings chapters), it is important to explain these philosophies and why they can be problematic for the progression of women. Prior to delving into this section on essentialism, I want to ensure the following disclaimer is clear: my thesis is formed on the opinion that gender is a social construction and justifying women's involvement in peace and conflict subverts the dynamic positioning of women and their role within human security.

In this Chapter, the theoretical literature is mapped, including an operationalization of terms that are found within this thesis. Key scholars reviewed include Ruddick (1980), Caprioli (2000), Fite et al. (1990), and Bloom (2011). Alternative masculinities are also explored within this section, reviewing work of Sharoni (2017), Duncanson (2009), Cohn and Enloe (2008), and Zalewski and Parpart (2008). In the following paragraphs, this theoretical section will map the existing claims around women's effect on lowering aggressive efforts and attitudes and increasing gender equality, thus increasing human security. The second half of this chapter is focused on the nationalism-feminism relationship and its relation to Kurdish women and post-colonial theory. The theoretical components related to feminist security studies are reviewed below, highlighting correlational relationships between women's empowerment, women's

participation, and human security. The literature reviewed in this chapter and the subsequent data analysis of this study is not intended to essentialize women's lives or create a generalized understanding of women in the Middle East or the Kurdish experience. The studies reviewed demonstrate that the weakening of harmful patriarchal systems produces the by-product of human security and gender equality.

The Gender Gap in Approaches to Conflict and Peace

International relations literature from the 1990s on aggression was still actively being shaped by the fallout from the Cold War. Investigations on reducing international aggression became priority, investigating the divergence of views between women and men on the use of force and violence in conflict. These areas of study provided new insight into women and men's domestic and foreign policy priorities (Fite et al., 1990). In Fite's et al. (1990) findings, there was a gender gap, where "men are significantly more likely than women to express hawkish attitudes across a broad range of foreign policy issues" (p. 494). In contrast to women, men were also found to achieve their foreign policy priorities by "doing what is necessary even if it risks starting WWIII" (as cited in Fite et al., 1990, p. 494). The gender gap of violence continues to persist in feminist conflict studies, and the potential impact in various regions, cultures, and genders continues to be actively studied. Examples of these conflict studies include the work of Brooks and Valentino (2011), who have found that the gender gap in the application of violence is far more complicated than just gender demographics. Through their public polling study, they found that the "gender gap is heavily dependent on the specific context of the war" and the goal(s) that the conflict is attempting to achieve (p. 271); Women were more likely to support "humanitarian stakes" over conflicts that were primarily focused on economic strategies and objectives (p. 273). Sharoni (2017) notes these generalizations paint women as a "monolithic

entity" that share universal experiences. However, generalizations tended to divert away from individual differences between and among women and men, diminishing the opportunity to contribute unique perspectives, not in spite of their gender, but due to their differing perspectives and viewpoints that could be useful in identifying alternatives to conflict (Sharoni, 2017). Women's empowerment has also emerged as a variable in conflict studies, including its correlation to increasing human security and providing avenues for long-term and sustainable peace measures (Porter, 2013). Themes of empowerment, while not the sole focus of this study, do have some bearing on my thesis by looking at ways Kurdish women use it to actively engage in movements that produce security.

Conflict can also create new "opportunities for women's empowerment" by disrupting gender power hierarchies (Webster, Chen, & Beardsley, p. 256). Concurrently, the opposite conditions may exist where conflict continues the decline of gender equality and there is little space for empowerment to exist (p. 256). As previously mentioned in the literature review on Kurdish women in this thesis, the United Nations has highlighted the importance of women's inclusion in the peace process with Security Council Resolution 1325. Two decades after its adoption, research into the area of women and security has grown and become far more intricate, mirroring the increasingly complex lived experience of women in conflict (El-Bushra, 2007; Pratt & Richter-Devroe, 2011; Caprioli, 2000; Sharoni, 2017).

Discourses on women and security have also shifted at a theoretical level in both academia and policy settings. Changes in policy approaches can be found within the United Nations. Pratt & Richter-Devroe (2011) note the United Nations has moved from viewing women from a victim perspective towards a "discursive representation of women as actors, agents or even 'superheroines'" (p. 494). The shift in discourse is, in part, a result of women's

representation in the peace and security process through female activism and "feminist critical engagement" (p. 494). Shepherd (2008) also provides that gender mainstreaming evolved the outlook of women's contributions that originated from women's conferences and gatherings organized by NGOs and the UN, which encouraged the promotion of gender equality and "improving the status and conditions of women" (p. 136). Academic contributions also shifted the narrative towards a nuanced view of women, peace, and security, that theorizes and acknowledges the "multiplicity of women's voices and perspectives in different contexts" (Sharoni, 2017).

Despite these positive advancements in feminist conflict literature, one significant issue in this field of study is the operationalization of terms like empowerment, security, and stability. These terms above can cause setbacks in generating valid data, with varied definitions found in virtually every space it is applied, including in academia and within domestic and international policy (Porter, 2013). Indeed, studies on women's empowerment and security have been conducted in multiple regions in the world, including Kemi and Jenyo's (2016) study on the relationship between gender equality and empowerment in Nigeria, Horst's (2017) study on the role of women in post-conflict Somalia, and Hossain's (2018) study on the post-conflict environment for women's empowerment in Bangladesh. Regarding theory on feminist intersections of security of the Kurds and regionally in the Middle East, studies have highlighted the fraught relationship between gender and conflict for different areas of Kurdistan. In Gökalp's (2010) study on Kurdish women in Turkey, Kurdish women displaced by violence were empowered to take advantage of "newly emerging power dynamics at home and in their community" to address systemic oppression that was levied against them (p. 568).

Different scholars (Mojab, 2001; Al-Ali & Pratt, 2011; Bengio, 2016) have recognized that Kurdish women have played significant roles in increasing gender equality and contribute to human security indirectly or directly, including, but not limited to supporting underground freedom movements, actively contributing to their protection by joining military organizations, or taking high profile political positions. Contributions of this nature also vary widely in the four areas of Kurdistan and among different ethnicities in the region. It is also difficult to ascertain the level of influence exerted by Kurdish women in regard to human security, as the area of the Middle East continues to struggle with overt violence against women (Al-Ali, 2018; Alsaba & Kapilashrami, 2016).

Nevertheless, the literature on women, security, and empowerment provides a breadth of knowledge in this subject area, navigating topic areas that are extremely difficult to study due to the dynamic and subjective nature of gender studies. Porter's (2013) study on women's empowerment and its relation to peace and Caprioli's (2000) research on women and human security has established exploratory studies on gender and security in broad terms. It is also important to note that these studies are not explicitly aimed at the Kurdish experiences or potential differences in gender and human security. Further, Caprioli's (2000) argument focuses on why women conceivably can change outcomes related to aggression, whether due to conditions related to their biology or socialization into gender roles.

Caprioli (2000) contends these 'nature versus nurture' arguments are inconsequential because ultimately, the outcome remains the same; women affect the outcome of domestic and foreign policy regardless of whether it is due to their inherent biology or socialization (p. 65). I do disagree with Caprioli that the outcome of the nature argument (that women are peaceful and want peace due to their natural predisposition at birth) is inconsequential and in fact, find it

harmful for understanding women's overall motivations. While it is argued that sex and gender may be indicators of peace and relative stability, Sharoni (2017) posits an alternative and also aligns with my position in regard to the theory of why women may contribute to human security: "it is not one's biological sex, but rather one's overall political perspective and vision on the gendered systems that shape them, that affect one's inclination for war or peace" (Sharoni, 2017). In Laura Shepherd's (2008) *Gender, Violence, and Security*, she also finds fault with the associations with motherhood and children through biological sex or constructed gender roles, due the implication that women universally trend towards peace because of motherhood (p. 88). In the next section, some of the terms used throughout the thesis including a closer look at the meaning of the broad terms of human security and empowerment and how it is used in the context of this study.

Terms of Measurement and Operationalization of Terms

One of the issues with the assertion that women's participation and empowerment correlates to positive outcomes on stability and peace is the inherent difficulty in the wide variety of measuring terms such as empowerment, peace, and security. Numerous studies, including the work of Lamb, Mixon, and Minot (2015) and Porter (2013), discuss how these definitions evolve throughout their respective studies according to feedback from their participants. At times, some terms like peace and security are used synonymously (Sharoni, 2017), despite indicating different processes or outcomes. Therefore, an understanding of stability for this thesis research is required before proceeding. Stability work is more focused on the aftereffects of conflict – the participation in peace. Stability "refers to a prolonged absence of violence" – also termed "negative peace," while "peace refers to the presence of institutions and attitudes capable of absorbing conflict" or also termed "positive peace" (Lamb, Mixon, & Minot, 2015, p. 4). In

other words, as long as violence continues to lower from its initial point, stability, as a process, is occurring. Sharoni's (2017) definitions of peace differ from outcome-based characterizations, but rather consider the "political position of the person or group who defines it as well as the particular sociopolitical context within which it is constructed" (Sharoni, 2017). In fact, security and stability are "a very complex and elusive process that needs to be negotiated and renegotiated as change occurs in different historical and sociopolitical circumstances" (Sharoni, 2017). As discussed in previous sections (and also linked to the findings of this thesis), this type of outlook supports the historical context in how Kurdish women view their own experiences and how these experiences are rooted in their history. As a result, this study will also borrow the definitions of peace and security from Sharoni, due to the dynamic conditions and context of the subjects in this study. Human security is the focal point of this thesis because of its overarching application to the conflict process, while encompassing a wide array of concepts like empowerment, peace, and security.

Empowerment is also loosely defined, and as Porter (2013) notes, the term is "rarely spelled out" (p. 4). However, Kabeer (1999) suggests "the value of the concept [empowerment] lies precisely in its 'fuzziness'" allowing for the term to be defined the context of analysis (p. 436). The United Nations also references empowerment frequently in their Sustainable Development Goals, using the term as a catch-all phrase referring to women's "choice, power, options control, and agency" (Sharaunga, Mudhara, & Bogale, 2019, p. 2). Empowerment is also expressed as a "process or outcome, an end state or a means to an end, a capacity" and is often an interchangeable term for other feminist concepts, like gender equality (p. 3). Gender equality is also an assumed precursor to empowerment and a central component to human security (Porter, 2013, p. 4). Measures of empowerment are also difficult to gauge, even with tools developed to

pinpoint empowerment like the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) used as a measure of "focusing on the relative empowerment of women" and their economic participation (Klasen, 2006, p. 243). However, these types of measures do not accurately account for women's armed participation in conflict (and likely there would be immense difficulty in finding an appropriate metric) and also neglects "grassroots activities of women who are deeply involved informally in conflict resolution, transformation and peacebuilding work in ways that are difficult or impossible to measure" (Porter, 2013, p. 4). Mandal (2013) also acknowledges the difficulty in defining empowerment but provides the following working definition to encompass the intricate term:

> The term empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process, and it helps people gain control over their own lives. Further, it can be called as a process that fosters power in people for use in their own lives, their communities and in their society, by acting on issues they think as important. (p. 18)

Through this definition, it would imply that empowerment is a tool marginalized groups to gain equity with privileged groups (p. 18). Mandal's definition is suitable for this study due to its acknowledgment that empowerment is comprised of agency rooted in the social environment. As later demonstrated in the findings Chapters 5 to 8, the empowerment of women is often woven throughout participant answers, including how it motivates women to join security movements and informs their decisions.

Empowerment, Gender Equality, and Participation in Patriarchal Institutions

Factors contributing to human security are often dissected as separate variables in conflict studies; however, women's empowerment, gender equality, acts of resistance, and participation all feed into this human security simultaneously and at varying levels, demonstrating their interconnectedness. As a result, women's empowerment can become a significant factor in

security because it fosters an opportunity where women can create and choose their circumstances and environments. Additionally, the term also implies that that a person must first feel disempowerment in order to be empowered. As Kabeer (1999) explains, empowerment "refers to the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them" (p. 437). Meaning, a person must first be deprived of meaningful agency and power to feel empowerment. In addition, strengthening empowerment later contributes to the overall human security by increasing gender equality and "reinforces the fundamental argument . . . of the centrality of equality and rights to the realisation of women's empowerment" (Porter, 2013, p. 4). With this in mind, this thesis explores women's sense of empowerment and contributions to human security. Its originality resides in that the thesis focuses on contributions to human security rather than focusing on the perceived incongruity of their participation in these efforts. As we move through this section, gender equality and empowerment are explored in further depth, including Kurdish-centric examples of women in conflict and how they contribute to human security within patriarchal environments.

Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga (2016) note that Kurdish women participate in resistance movements and are often inserted in areas of conflict. At the beginning of their involvement, women often provided logistical support to men in the underground Kurdish nationalist movement, as they were able to evade detection and continued the Kurdish movement while men in the movement were closely surveilled or detained (Knapp, Flach, & Ayboga, 2016, p. 63). Later, as seen in the fight against extremism, women participated in protection units and organized military groups, often depicted with guns and military fatigues (Tank, 2017, p. 409). The paradox exists that women join patriarchal movements, institutions, and organizations to eventually lessen their use of violence (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 114). However, women's

participation in patriarchal institutions (to lessen violence) can replicate the harmful structures that limit peace and stability (Cockburn, 2007, Ch. 8, para. 36). Women's contributions, as seen with the Kurds in Rojava and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), include activities like informal "conflict resolution, transformation and peacebuilding" (Porter, 2013, p. 5), but are seldom measured in the context of empowerment simply because they "are difficult or impossible to measure" (p. 5). These types of contributions continue in the face of growing turmoil and instability in both regions. Again, this thesis illuminates these areas by investigating human security who live these 'difficult to measure' experiences through participants in this study that are directly affected in the areas of the KRI and Rojava.

As Kurdish women's empowerment and continued involvement in defence, politics, and leadership have continued, credence can be given to the theory that empowerment can endure in extremely harsh environments. A relatively recent example is the threat against women's lives due to their political participation. In October 2019, the US military withdrawal from Syria prompted the Turkish state and Turkish-backed proxies to push Kurdish protection units back from the Turkish-Syrian border (Warrick, 2019). A prominent Syrian-Kurdish politician in the area, Hevrin Khalaf, was one of many victims of the Turkish offensive and was allegedly executed roadside by a Turkish-backed rebel group within days of the US withdrawal (Goodyear, 2019). Despite Khalaf's death shaking the Kurdish community, women involved in the political party continued Khalaf's work on "empowering women" (BBC News, 2020). Khalaf's colleague, Nubahar Mustafa, acknowledged the extreme danger of the political working environment for women and continued her work despite her estimation that women in similar political positions were "all expected to meet a similar fate [as Khalaf]" (BBC News, 2020).

The real-life example of empowerment continuing in the face of harsh environments refutes some elements of Porter's (2013) study, in that empowerment could only occur if there is security in place to foster it:

> "First, empowerment needs to be inclusive of difference. *Second, empowerment can only happen when there is a felt sense of security.* Third, empowerment prompts transformative changes, including the capacity to mobilise women in local communities to deal with conflict." (p. 6; emphasis added)

While this may be representative in some cases, in the case of the Kurds, the relationship between security and empowerment appears more complex, and the elements of empowerment that Porter describes are not entirely applicable to this study. Circling back to the death of Khalaf, it is likely that she did not feel a sense of security but continued in her role as a political leader despite a lack of security.

Gender equality and its role in mitigating violence in states have primarily been understudied (Wood & Ramirez, 2018; Schaftenaar, 2017); however, those believing in principles of gender equality are "more likely than other individuals to believe that the international disputes in which their country is involved should be resolved through diplomacy and compromise" (Caprioli, 2000, p. 57). In other words, if the discrimination against women is reduced, or a "worldview based on prejudice" is decreased, it "translates into a level of global intolerance resulting in higher levels of bellicosity against those states not perceived as equal" (p. 66). Gender-based discrimination also affects women's fertility rate, a potential baseline indication of women's agency, gender equality, and a marker for stability (Wood & Ramirez, 2018; Caprioli, 2000). Caprioli (2000), Schaftenaar (2017), and Wood and Ramirez (2018) have examined fertility rate as a determining factor in peace and stability. While biological reproduction is an essential process in itself, women are frequently described in terms of

motherhood and reduced to this biological process. The experience of motherhood can be an important aspect of life, but when women's value is described in these terms, it may indicate their "low social status" (Caprioli, 2000, p. 59). Generally, while fertility rate is intended to measure live births in women of childbearing ages, Caprioli (2000) argues it is also indicative of women's agency:

> fertility rate encompasses a broad range of concepts including level of education, availably economic opportunities, political rights, and overall social status. As such, fertility rates best measure a women's overall status by capturing not only an aspect of education, but also a measure of self-empowerment through control over her own life. (p. 64)

Regarding human security, Wood and Ramirez (2018) link fertility rate to lowering aggression and that "the likelihood of domestic and international political conflict declines as fertility rates decline, and when more women participate in political decision-making" (p. 347). Schaftenaar (2017) also had similar findings in their study: "an increase in fertility rates reflects a decrease in gender equality and we can therefore find support that when gender equality increases, the likelihood for a nonviolence conflict onset is also increasing" (p. 769). While this position is widely held, it is contestable in feminist literature.

Foster (2011) opposes this viewpoint of fertility rate being used as an indicator of women's agency due to its ethnocentric nature in regarding 'third world' women as victims that require a capitalist intervention and "assumes all women will choose this economically derived freedom" (p. 141). Therefore, the approach assumes that the measure of women's gender equality based on the fertility rate whitewashes the interests, ambitions, and experiences of non-Western women, a potentially harmful approach in interpreting the agency of women in a non-Western context (p. 141). As a result, using fertility rate as a benchmark for gender equality and

nonviolence should be explored with caution and sensitivity, considering the Eurocentric assumptions and biases.

Human security is also inextricably tied too different variables, but "even at the most basic level, women's domestic equality impacts foreign policy" (Caprioli, 2000, p. 65). This research confirms that the "inclusion of women as equal members of society will affect foreign policy, in that their domestic equality correlates with lower levels of international militarism" (p. 65). Human security is also arguably tied to gender equality, as found with Wood and Ramirez's (2018) work on women, gender, and peace, where they found that if gender equality existed, a reduction in violence (both domestically and internationally) would follow (p. 346). Caprioli (2000) also reaches this conclusion, where those believing in gender equality favoured outcomes that resulted in "diplomacy and compromise" rather than violence (p. 57). Caprioli's (2000) assertion supports the assumption that just by women participating in various levels of government and society, a semblance of security and stability would naturally follow. I do not necessarily agree with Caprioli on this point and believe the issue is more complex. Just because women are involved does not necessarily mean that their contributions are meaningful or effective (despite their best efforts), especially in environments where masculinity is valued and privileged.

Women's Impact on Human Security

In the past several decades of feminist conflict studies and theory, there is a shift away from "(neo-) realist state-centred [conceptualizations] to a more holistic, agent-centred conceptualization of security" (Pratt & Richter-Devroe, 2011, p. 492). In simpler terms, feminist theory, along with other critical security scholars, has begun considering the "*human* dimension

of security" (p. 492) that embodies the subjective and evolving experiences of conflict and how men and women[6] experience these two elements differently. In this way, we can begin to see that women can affect stability through their unique experiences. Cockburn (2007) elaborates on this idea that women, more grounded in everyday life and interconnected socialization (as part of their gender role), are well-positioned to raise awareness of others suffering in a similar manner:

> the sex- and gender-specific experience of women in war is often neglected, misrepresented or exploited by the media, by politicians and even by the anti-war movement. Many women therefore feel that women, speaking with a firm foothold in 'everyday life,' have something fresh to contribute to political processes and peace negotiations. Women activists circulate the information they gather, re-frame it in the light of their analysis, share it with other women and bring it to the notice of the public. (Cockburn, 2007, Ch. 8, para. 6)

Caprioli's (2000) research echoes this position that women may affect security and are adept at producing increasing levels of stability in contrast to their male counterparts. Other theories, like those presented by Porter (2013), point to the ripple effect of women's empowerment on the level of human security of the community at large because of their post-conflict focus on "prioritising practical issues such as reparations for victims, land rights for women, literacy, and women's specific health needs and skilled employment" (p. 7). Porter (2013) conveys a binary gender socialization theory approach in her work, noting that men and women experience empowerment and security differently due to the vast differences between the genders within society.

Essentialism vs. Social Constructivism Theorizing

Often found in human security studies are the two theories which provide explanations as to why women are inherently less inclined towards aggression in different areas of their lives.

[6] Research in this area is mostly focused on binary gender. Studies involving non-binary gender remains a vital topic within this subject area.

One of these theories, biological determinism, is controversial in contemporary feminist philosophy and discourse because it can continue harmful assumptions in viewing women's worth solely in the context of motherhood and precludes the transformation of problematic gender power dynamics by naturalizing gender inequalities (Foster, 2011; Locher & Prugl, 2001; Gentry & Sjoberg, 2014). Simply, the theory notes that women are predisposed towards peace because "women have an essential nature that is based on their natural reproductive capacity . . . women's behavior is instinctive and not learned" (Caproli, 2000, p. 54). Biological determinism focuses on women's ties to motherhood as a basis for acting in passive and peaceful ways. Fite et al. (1990) also reviewed this theory and why women were inclined more towards actions leading to peace because of the "potential for motherhood" (p. 496) and wanting to create an environment where their offspring could survive.

Ruddick (1980) embraces the effect of motherhood in her work "Maternal Thinking," which is centred on the theory that women are raised with the mentality of preservation of their environment and prioritization of personhood (p. 353). Ruddick (1980) provides an analogy to child rearing, which could also be applied to alleviating conflict. As a child may act in unpredictable ways, similar to the ways in which conflict can be unpredictable, the mother would seek ways to understand the root causes of this unpredictability and adapt to these changes (p. 352). Yuval-Davis (1997) asserts that women involved in resistance and militaristic movements have rejected the sentiment that motherhood is the reason for their joining. However, these notions are commonly attributed in literature on "militaristic constructions of femininity" (p. 111). While not a generalizable study, Cockburn's (2007) interviews provided insight on the incongruence between the militarism-motherhood relationship, and she found that most women did not believe their gender had an inherently peaceful approach to conflict and noted that some

women could be as aggressive and bellicose as men in pursuing militarism (Ch. 8, para. 30). In reality, the view of women as 'peaceful' due to their reproductive capacity, it has been argued, perpetuates the relationship between femininity and victimhood and continues the exclusion of women from other vital processes (McLeod, 2011, p. 600).

Feminist theorists have differing explanations on why women join combat or use violence to achieve their goals. Carol Gilligan (1977), in her study on women and morality thought that participating in combat is counterintuitive to women's ethical nature and that women would shy away from such roles due to their moral outlook as nurturers and carers to the general community. This conclusion limits women's agency of why they would join armed combat and categorizes them in terms of their feminine qualities. While written 20 years after Gilligan's argument, Peach (1997) provided another perspective on female combatants: they could not achieve equality with men unless they shared in this combat (p. 100). Mia Bloom (2011) asserts that women's use of violence is counter to society because of their inclination for motherhood and need to protect reproductive status in producing children (p. 306). In her study on female participation in violence, Bloom suggests that women may join these groups to avenge the death of a family member, due to an earlier trauma, or attempting to bring honour back to their family (p. 58). I disagree with Bloom's suggestion, as the projection implies that women only seek active participation in combat or violence that is tied back to the family or victimhood and discounting the role of agency in their decision of joining. Gentry and Sjoberg (2015) directly refute Bloom's work, noting the "maternal or domestic language" involved in rationalizing women's decisions limits ways in which women can express their motivations for joining combat or acting violently to achieve their goals:

> Women who engage in violence are placed into biologically determined categorizations, depicted in maternal or domestic language. They are 'told' as women who are fulfilling or avenging what is supposed to be a woman's biological destinies of wife and mother, elements which also define the private sphere. Violent women are often depicted as avenging lost love and/or a destroyed home (p. 72).

Stack (2014) also reviewed Bloom's work, noting that the language and narration of women in Bloom's case studies left the impression that these women were victims, and their actions could be traced back to sexual violence and lack of respect within their community (p. 385), which may not accurately represent that experience. I agree with Stack (2014), Gentry and Sjoberg (2015) and other feminists that have problematized Bloom's work (which has been widely criticized), due to the intense limitations and barriers that it places on women.

A second theory of women's inclination towards peacebuilding is that they are socialized into behaving in more peaceful ways, demarcated by the assumption that gender is a social construct, and that women and men are "forced into stereotypical roles" (Caprioli, 2000, p. 55). These gender roles lead women to the "existence and importance of interlocking social relationships," whereas men are valued for their "individuation and competition" (Fite et al., 1990, p. 496). The community-focused socialization may allow women to identify and relate to other groups that experience disenfranchisement and powerlessness. The identification of these "moral dilemmas" by women would then enable them "to minimize power differences, to share resources, and to treat others equally" (Caproli, 2000, p. 55). When women are allowed to guide policy and resource investment, they are quick to "invest in child welfare and education, to build food security, and rebuild rural economies, greatly contributing to longer term stability" (Coomaraswamy, 2015, p. 42). In relation to security, being free from the stereotypes present in patriarchy may result in being "freed from gender stereotypes" that cause the excessive output of violence. It would allow "both genders to become free to act on their beliefs rather than being

tied to roles that require males to be aggressive and females passive" (p. 55). However, the gender stereotypes are still challenging to interrupt, even after women and men begin to work together in contributing to the creation of a secure environment. These barriers highlight the need for a joint effort to reduce gender stereotypes and one that disrupts patriarchal power struggles:

> [Women] had to struggle with the men who, having picked up part of the burden of peace work, simultaneously refused the burden of childcare. Some women today feel similarly that rather than exclude men we should encourage them into peace activism, alongside us *and* simultaneously into more equal and less stereotyped gender roles (Cockburn, 2007, Ch. 8, para. 24)

The idea of the hyper-masculine gender roles acknowledges the harmful gender stereotypes that afflict both women and men. Here, we begin to see that the "institutionalization of masculinity is a major problem for peace" (Ch. 8, para. 45). Masculinity and militarization, including the responsibility of men in supporting gender equality is equally as important to discuss how men can impact the process of gender norms and increasing stability.

Alternative Masculinities and Militarization

Both women and men are often juxtaposed as "men-warriors and women-peacemakers" in conflict (Sharoni, 2017). Alternative masculinities have also recently gained traction in literature to determine other ways in asserting their gender and intersections between masculinity and post-conflict environments (Hamber, 2016). Duncanson's (2009) work on alternative masculinities in conflict reviewed autobiographies of four male soldiers in the Bosnian conflict of the 1990s to understand the shift from the hegemonic warrior to a peacekeeping operation. In her study, Duncanson (2009) found that men struggled with lowering bellicosity that peacekeeping required, even to the point where men felt emasculated when prevented from using force (p. 69). In response, these men reflected that peacekeeping was more challenging than

overt fighting and used their masculinity in different ways, including de-escalation, controlling emotional and revenge-based responses, and using persuasion as alternatives to violence (p. 70). As Cohn and Enloe (2008) point out, these are difficult mindsets to overcome, because ideas of masculinity are "so intricately and invisibly interwoven with ideas about national security" (p. 1204). Men and boys also play a significant role in increasing gender equality, as they are deemed as the gatekeepers because they "control most of the resources required to implement women's claims for justice" (Connell, 2005, p. 1802). Without participation from men in gender equality, it would be difficult to maintain a semblance of equality when power continues to be asymmetrically distributed.

Even if women are included in the masculine environment of war, their presence alone does not indicate equality or power sharing with their male counterparts. Parpart (2008) notes this point (a reminder that the 'add women and stir method' is not necessarily indicative of stability or gender equality) in her work on militarized masculinity in Zimbabwe: "The presence of a few women 'warriors' did not destabilize the link between militant masculinity and power, as long as most women accepted their role as 'protected' dependants" (p. 196). Clark (2017), who completed a study on the male survivors of sexual violence in the Bosnian conflict added that different dimensions and the evolution of masculinity was downplayed in post-conflict societies: "masculinity is seldom treated as significant in its own right, but only in the more relative sense of what it means for women" (p. 300). In addition, militarized masculinity inhibits human security and "has been identified as key to violence during times of political strife and afterwards" (Hamber, 2016, p. 16). While alternative and hegemonic masculinities in relation to conflict are not the focus of this review, it can assist in considering how patriarchal institutions and power relations affect men and their responsibilities in reducing harmful gender roles.

Conway (2008) discusses the militarization of masculinity, arguing there are "considerable cultural, legal, and discursive resources" invested into maintaining this type of masculinity (p. 127). Men who disagree with such hyper-masculine associations are often shamed into feeling "unmanly" leading to tensions between the state and the masculinity that keeps it afloat (p. 127). While the tension can invariably lead to conflict, the "contradictory pressures of militarization on society can provoke profound political change" (pp. 127-128), including levels of gender equality, and lessening existing power hierarchies. Later in this thesis, the impact of militarization is discussed by research participants in this study, especially concerning the role of the YPJ. Some participants within my study remain divided on the use of militarization and the effectiveness of such as a way forward to achieving a sustainable stability.

Nationalism, Feminism, Postcolonialism

Nationalism and feminism often have a turbulent relationship, as the former may impede the effectiveness of feminist objectives and gender equality by placing a dominant, singular focus on nationalist goals (Tank, 2016; Enloe, 2014; Mojab & Gorman, 2007). Nonetheless, in the case of Kurdistan as well as elsewhere, feminist and nationalist agendas are both closely related to resisting colonialism and colonization. The intention of this section and its subsections is to provide theory-based context that informs this study, navigating through schools of thought and their intersecting dynamics. As Golley (2004) explains, the rise of nationalist and feminist movements within the Middle East in the 18th Century was in direct response to colonialism within the region (p. 521). As a result of the intersections between nationalism, feminism, and postcolonialism, it has created a unique circumstance and effect on the Kurdish people. The resulting intersections have varied effects between minorities and indigenous groups in the area. As discussed in the previous section on the intentional juxtapositions between Arab and Kurdish

cultures, these narratives included a history of persecution against the Kurds, the inclusion of gender equality within the Kurdish struggle (Bengio, 2016), prolonged oppression from various governments and regimes (like the Assad regime in Syria, the previous Ba'athist regime in Iraq formerly headed by Saddam Hussein, and the Turkish government headed by President Recep Erdoğan), and a strong and enduring nationalist movement (Wright, 2014, p. 189).

Al-Ali (2018) has criticized the feminist-nationalist dynamic in the Kurdish context, as it often results in a "dialogue of the deaf" (p. 453). In nation-building, it was believed that women had been largely ignored "as nationality and citizenship are both considered to be masculine issues" (Aghaie, 2017, p. 29). It is important to note that there are also differences within the Kurdish community in regard to the nationalist and feminist relationship depending on the region, either in Iraq, Iran, Turkey, or Syria. Additionally, the relationship may also change depending on the cultural contexts that it is considered. In the KRI, Al-Ali and Tas (2018) assert that the Kurds moving from liberation to state building effectively diminished the momentum for women's rights and move "towards more conservative gender norms and relations and the marginalization of women in the political process" (p. 455). This may have been due in part to women's historical exclusion from the public sphere and as a result, their "oppression has been related to their location in a different social sphere than that of men" (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 5). Despite the increased awareness of Kurdish women in their fight against ISIS, their contribution seemed to count "only if they could assist men in the nationalist cause" (Aghaie, 2017, p. 42). As also critiqued by Szanto (2018) in Chapter 2 of this thesis, comparisons between Kurds and other ethnic groups have resulted in an inflated, empty feminist ideal. However, in light of these criticisms, Kurdish nationalism may not have derailed feminist efforts for political inclusion but provided it with a

platform to begin positive changes in gender equality and security and will be discussed in greater detail in later sections.

Post-Colonialism Contexts of Kurdish Nationalism

The post-colonial history of the Kurds is pertinent to the study of their general history and how this influences the trajectory and evolution of the Kurdish people, including gender dynamics between Kurdish men and women. Parpart (2008) notes the consideration of postcolonial and colonial contexts in the study of gender and masculinist power, including the "intersectionality of factors such as race, culture and class on gendered practices," especially when examining hegemonic masculinity (p. 182). According to the portrayal of the Kurdish collective memory, the Kurds have been subjected to colonization and imperialist movements "since time immemorial" (Öcalan, 2017, p. 7). These movements have attempted to assimilate the Kurds and various colonial powers including the French, British Empire, and Ottoman Empire, which attempted to reduce claims of autonomy through the Sykes-Picot agreement that divided the Middle East into the countries existing today, dividing tribal areas into nation-states (Kurt, 2019, p. 350). Öcalan (2017) argues that this type of colonization presented major setbacks in the Kurdish social development and claimed to be the cause of the Kurds' "societal backwardness" and gender inequality (p. 8). Again, this is another display of collective memory that is invoked in the (post)colonial narrative, where the regression of society was attributed to forced conversions to Islam (Szanto, 2014, p. 100). Different powers in the Middle East attempted a vigorous and often violent assimilation of the Kurds by denying their identity and existence (O'Leary, 2018). This included denying the existence of Kurds as a distinct ethnic group in the Middle East and subverting their identity into other ethnic groups (p. 354).

In addition, the Western imperialist interventions in foreign policy have also, unsurprisingly been influenced by (post)colonialism. Ferreira and Santiago (2018) offer this criticism, suggesting that the Kurds have sustained their power because of Western support and intervention (p. 494), which may raise doubts as to whether they are able to sustain the security situation within their autonomous and semi-autonomous areas. Particular to Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), their power to act autonomously is "severely constrained by the intervention of surrounding regional powers" and geopolitical interests (Mojab & Gorman, 2007, p. 61). The autonomous region of the KRG was supported by Western powers through "no fly-zones," which allowed the Kurds to actualize their ideations of the Kurdish homeland (p. 64). The dependency on Western support was demonstrated in Rojava, with the Turkish invasion in October 2019 after the withdrawal of the United States in the area. This threatened the progress of democratic confederalism in the so-called "Rojava Experiment" and allowed for rejuvenation of extremists in the area (McKernan, 2019; Warrick, 2019). For Kurdish women, postcolonialism also intersects with gender equality. For example, Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga (2016) notes that the women were not only seeking women's rights but fighting to overcome the "colonist disparagement of their own culture" (p. 63).

Kurdish Nationalism and the Women's Movement

The search for the nation-state within Kurdistan is a relatively new concept in Kurdish history with official attempts to form a state beginning in the early 20th century with the Treaty of Sérves in 1920 (Bajalan, 2019). The idea of nationalism and the identity of all Kurds is embodied by resistance, which has "become part of their life and culture" (Öcalan, 2017, p. 2). However, Al-Ali and Tas (2018) assert that the Kurdish nationalist movement "have led to the politicisation of women and the emergence of a feminist identity" (p. 471). The shift in consciousness away from

the traditional nation-state occurred in the 1990s, originating from Öcalan. Through this shift, it became evident to Öcalan and his followers that "a nation-state would continue only to serve the rule of the elites and bourgeoisie" (Kardas & Tesiltas, 2017, p. 270). The nationalism relation to Kurdish women is also antagonistic at times, according to Mojab and Gorman (2007), in that they had to choose between furthering the efforts of the women's movement for gender equality or support the nationalist cause (p. 66). Scholars like Al-Ali and Pratt (2011) differ from Mojab and Gorman's findings, believing that women's experiences with nationalism and the women's movement were not always antithetical and could be complementary at certain junctures. I agree with Al-Ali and Pratt in this instance – while certainly far from ideal, there are opportunities that nationalism may create (whether directly or indirectly) that may be advantageous for women in furthering causes they deem important.

The women's movement had been a secondary concern of Kurdish nationalists, and the goals of those within the women's movement were largely excluded from positive development and gains in Kurdistan. Despite the essential underground support that allowed the nationalist cause to continue, "the activities of Kurdish women are not evident, or are subsumed within predominantly male political/cultural fora" (Mojab & Gorman, 2007, p. 65). Instead, their role had largely been likened as the "peacemaker," embodying only feminine characteristics attributed to motherhood and caretaking (p. 66). Notwithstanding the issues surrounding the portrayal of women as caretakers, mothers, and victims of an Arab-centralist patriarchy (issues flagged in the previous section on essentialist theorizing in this Chapter), the women's movement and their very existence as a group defies the status quo. The taboos of women participating in armed combat and resistance had "redefined gender relations among the Kurds" and led to tangible results for women in Iraq and Syria (Tank, 2017, p. 422).

Moving the historical conversation to more recent developments, Kurdish women appeared to make gains as a result of the Arab Uprisings and general revolution within the Middle East (Tank, 2017, p. 405). Tank (2017) also claimed that non-Kurdish women were dissatisfied with the results of these revolutions and the advances made in gender and equality were generally dismal (p. 405). However, with the Kurdish model of resistance, Ferreira and Santiago (2018) argue that even before the Arab Uprisings, the creation of the women's protection unit was a feminist victory. The Kurdish women fighters and advocates wanted something beyond women's liberation: an autonomous environment where they could develop their freedoms and where they could come to their own conclusion and understanding of their role within the Kurdish movement, instead of internalizing the ideology of their male counterparts and predecessors (Ferreira & Santiago, 2018, p. 494). This idea is only a recent concept within Kurdish nationalism and feminism literature and one that has been largely ignored by Western media representation of the Kurds. This is exemplified in the Battle for Kobani media coverage, which appeared to objectify and exoticize female Kurdish fighters (Tank, 2017 p. 408), which was discussed in Chapter 2. Returning to nationalism and feminism, their intersections within the Kurdish movement have had an interesting effect on human security within Rojava and the KRI, and while there are negative connotations related to these intersections, this dynamic has simultaneously provided the foundation for women to achieve their independent autonomy.

The Nationalist-Feminist Relationship and Western Biases

Literature on the relationship between nationalism and feminism has often evolved through Western lenses and understandings. Mojab and Gorman (2007), similar to Aghaie (2017), have described the Kurdish feminist relationship to nationalism as "contradictory,"

lacking a clear trajectory in its explanation of the relationship in their symbiosis (p. 60). For example, Tank (2017) criticized the inaccurate portrayal of women and men, including their contribution to the Kurdish cause. The presence of women within the Kurdish movement was a signal to the West that the Kurdish people in general should advance in their nationalist cause because of their embracement of modernity, particularly in regard to gender equality and feminism. However, Tank (2017) claimed the contributions of these women was underscored to the point where they were afforded little credit in their sacrifices to protect the Kurdish state, identity, and culture, which their male counterparts were offered unconditionally (p. 407). To the contrary, Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga (2016) observed that Kurdish women were more than mere symbols of the Kurdish struggle, and at times, were the only vessel to continue the nationalist cause and were of upmost importance in continuation of the movement (p. 63). Due to the fact that men were constantly under suspicion for organizing and would be arrested, the responsibility for organizing protests and grassroots movements was taken up by women (p. 63). Despite this type of role, women were often categorized as non-essential actors within the Kurdish movement by their male counterparts, leading to a "patriarchal nationalism" (Enloe, 2014, p. 12), where the women were dissuaded or unable to offer their contributions and ideas (Ferreira & Santiago, 2018, p. 481).

As discussed earlier in this Chapter, nationalist power dynamics can maintain harmful systems of patriarchy that can disenfranchise vulnerable groups. As a result, nationalist movements may only offer the illusion of freedom and choice; nationalism "confers freedom only by imposing new controls" (Chaterjee, 1986, p. 154). This power imbalance also served to ignore the active contributions of Kurdish women to the feminist movement as independent actors instead of women in supportive roles to men. Even before the Arab Uprisings and the rise

of ISIS, Kurdish women often criticized the intersections of nationalism and feminism. For example, in 2007, a female Kurdish activist from Stockholm, Sweden expressed distain for the nationalist relationship:

> Kurdish men think that all of our problems are because we don't have a state. The left in Kurdish politics is also only preoccupied with class analysis. No political parties give women credit for their sacrifices and participation in politics for all these years. (Mojab & Gorman, 2007, p. 70)

This relationship appears cyclical and indicates the entangled relationship of nationalism and feminism, where women join nationalist-centric groups to attain freedom from (often private) oppression so they can escape male violence and the dominating system of patriarchy.

The Kurdish nationalism-feminism nexus shifted in the 1990s, erupting a political consciousness for women that was previously rooted in nationalism alone (Ferreira & Santiago, 2018, p. 483). Some of this shift is attributed to the Kurdish diaspora in Europe, who greatly influenced the resurgence of Zoroastrianism into the region during this time, particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan (Szanto, 2018, p. 98), and thereby establishing conversations about gender equality and the impact of religion on women and the Kurds in general. With Öcalan's new philosophy to democratic confederalism, a new space opened for grassroots feminism, which resulted in changes occurring from the ground level (Tank, 2017, p. 421; Aghaie, 2017, p. 42). However, can the two be separated? As Öcalan notes, the general existence of the Kurds and their resulting agency is contingent on women's freedom (Tank, 2017, p. 427). In Öcalan's (2017) own words, this leads to the conclusion that nationalism and feminism are bound by a symbiotic and iterative relationship. While women did level criticisms and frustration against Kurdish men in the revolutionary movement, a constant remained about the continuous support of Öcalan's recent prison writings, in which he emphasized the importance of a societal transformation that

included women (Al-Ali, 2018, p. 461). Öcalan's (2017) vision for women includes "the establishment of their own political parties . . . Building their own non-governmental organisations and structures of democratic politics" (p. 121). Critical analysis also needs to occur with regard to the Western feminist lens used so often to make sense of women's roles in Kurdish politics and security. To that end, it needs to be acknowledged that the Western conceptualizations of nationalism and feminism may not provide an adequate model to explain the symbiosis of the feminist and nationalist cause in non-Western contexts.

Western concepts of nationalism, as explained by Chaterjee (1986), are informed by "bourgeois-rationalist thought" and those that apply Western standards to the study of nationalism. Post-colonial cultures judge the beliefs of those who have been subject to colonialism using their "criteria of rationality or truth" that views power relations within the lens of universality (p. 11). This means that Western interpretations of nationalism assumes that beliefs, cultures, and identities arrive to similar social outcomes once they have undergone the process of modernity or enlightenment. In the practical application to the Kurds, the relationship between women, nationalism, and gender equality is difficult to conceptualize with Western theory because the means of attaining modernity is contradictory and, at times, out of alignment with Western concepts of rationality. Greenfeld (1996) provided an apt definition of nationalism in the Western lens: nationalism was a product of industrialization, capitalism, modernization, state-formation, and secularization (p. 7).

Further, it is arguable that the history of persecution and a model of governance outside of the Western ideals could be a unique factor in contextualizing the feminist-nationalist relationship and determining whether this relationship is positive for Kurdish women. Dhurvarajan, Vickers, and Bassanni (2004) agree with this point, arguing that some equality and

gender movements may be successful outside of this Western framework when coupled with a nationalist movement (p. 251). Another unique factor is that the "historical isolation" and the collective memory of the Kurds has allowed them to create feminism and activism that is separate and distinct from Western or global norms of feminism (Al-Ali & Tas, 2018, p. 467). However, it appears that the collective memory (particularly about Zoroastrianism) and those that forward it (like Öcalan) is attempting to connect with, or appeal to the West. Through this Chapter, the literature of nationalism and feminism (particularly the work from Al-Ali & Tas, 2018) show the dynamic to be complementary rather than distinctly adversarial.

Conclusion

The intention of this Chapter was to provide a theoretical understanding of women's contributions to human security, and how several schools of thought persist in the findings of this thesis. Capturing the essence of these variables, including empowerment, and rationalizing Kurdish women's contributions have evolved from simplistic victim-centric and ethnocentric theories to the lived experience. Through the discourse on problematic and simplistic framing of women's motivations (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015) to essentialist theorizing of women's role in improving the security environment (Bloom, 2011), a larger picture emerges of the intricate theories that inform this thesis. Similar to the contextual literature provided in Chapter 2, without the backdrop of this theory and how it informs my work, it would be a difficult task to digest the upcoming findings and appreciate their complexities. At the outset of this chapter, the gender gap in the approach to conflict was explored, showing how feminist conflict literature emphasizes different perspectives of women rather than universalizing their experiences (Sharoni, 2017). These simplistic approaches (also criticized by Cockburn, 2007) may also derive from Western-based understandings of nationalism and feminism, demonstrating that the relationship is far

more complex (and perhaps less adversarial) than previously postulated by Mojab and Gorman (2007).

CHAPTER 4 – METHODOLOGY & RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

The research design for this thesis uses a qualitative methodology to seek an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of Kurdish women and ideas that inform their views on human security. As a reminder, this study is examining the role of Kurdish women activists in regional human security within Iraq and Syria, including the methods that these activists use to further their causes and contradictory narratives that emerge from participant responses. To draw out these subjective opinions and experiences, I completed semi-structured interviews of women and men with first-hand experience on women's involvement with human security. The methodology was selected based on the opportunity to use various data sources, including the exploration of participants' lived experiences and the ideological assumptions that helped them interpret these experiences. Given the subjectivity of the research topic and thesis of this study (detailed further in the next section), it would be difficult to collect meaningful data without the tools and methods that qualitative investigations can offer.

Thematic analysis was the core method of achieving these results, due in part to its flexibility that can provide "a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). As the lived experience is deeply subjective, it was imperative to choose a methodology that could draw out this type of nuanced outlook from participants and allow them to guide the semi-structured interview to areas they deemed important. As Henry, Casserly, Coady, and Marshall (2008) assert, the 'lived experience' allows the researcher "to understand the issue or topic from the everyday knowledge and perceptions of specific respondent groups" (p. 10). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were the most viable format to amplify the voices of those within the study. As the chapter title indicates, this section will elaborate on the details

of how the study was conducted and is divided into eight segments: 1) theoretical framework 2) the research design, 3), positionality, 4) data collection methods, 5) participant selection and recruitment, 6) data analysis, 7) ethical considerations, and 8) limitations.

Theoretical Framework

Before delving into the methods and methodology in which this study was conducted, it is essential to note the theoretical framework underpinning the data collection and analysis. This section briefly explains the theories that anchor this study. This study is informed by two notable theories, namely postcolonialism and intersectionality. Based on the explanation provided by Yuval-Davis (2006), intersectionality refers to the cumulative identities that construct how one experiences oppression or privilege. This includes "identities of gender, class, race, ethnicity, [and] stage in the life cycle" (Shields, 2008, p. 200). Intersectionality or intersectional feminism, a concept developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, holds these ideas central, in that multiple identities can exacerbate oppression. In Crenshaw's (1989) work, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,* she found that experiences for women of colour and their gender held unique and oppressive results in the US court system.

As for its relation to this research project, the multiple intersections of identity among Kurdish women have created a distinctive collective identity that has informed the trajectory of the Kurdish people. These intersections are notable and become major themes that were explored in Chapters 2 and 3 and later in Chapters 5 to 8 of findings. Additionally, intersectionality can serve as a foundation to acknowledge the differing experiences of Kurdish women based on their individual intersectional profiles (ex. class, age, and ethnicity, etc.). Shields (2008) also notes that these "intersections create both oppression and opportunity" (p. 202), similar to how the Kurdish nationalist and feminist relationship often collide and coexist, creating avenues of

opportunity for women but also areas of oppression (Wright, 2014, p. 190). Intersectionality is also used as a tool for analysis, allowing for the consideration of "the range of intersecting social structures and contexts that may be at work simultaneously" (Ackerly & True, 2020, p. 178).

Postcolonial feminism also ties into intersectionality, as the former uses "intersectional analysis of the cross-cutting axes of racial, gender, and imperial domination" (Allen, 2013, p. 269). Postcolonial theory has also been characterized as a "history from below" (Roberts, 2017, p. 748), inclusive of perspectives and voices that were previously disregarded as a result of colonization. Another staple of postcolonialism is that it acknowledges that Western feminist theory is limited in explaining and acknowledging alternative experiences of women; different types of women's movements, including indigenous and non-Western approaches may "have long thrived throughout history and in other parts of the world" (p. 273). Most importantly, postcolonial feminism uncovered "space for silenced voices" in nationality, ethnicity, and religiosity (Marchand, 2009, p. 931). As a result of the themes reviewed in the literature and the apparent inclinations toward intersectionality and postcolonial theory, the study is framed by this theoretical context. I believe that due to the multiple forms of oppression and discrimination that are experienced by Kurdish women, these approaches are valuable in dissecting the various layers of oppression and discrimination that women work through to become involved in security movements. As such, their experiences cannot be solely understood through their gender and race, but multiple axis of discrimination. In addition, the postcolonial theory also acknowledges the impact of colonization in the area of Iraq and Syria and the continued impact that the fractured Middle East continues to be subjected to from Western powers. Marchand (2009) also speaks to application of postcolonialism to security studies, arguing that it can provide "discursive space for silenced voices" (p. 931). It is also an important theoretical guide for this

thesis to minimize 'othering' of non-Western concepts (especially acknowledging my positionality as a Western researcher, which is detailed in further within this chapter).

Research Design

The thesis is based on a qualitative, exploratory study with virtual, semi-structured interviews. Due to the complexity of the research questions and the topic of the thesis (proposed in the Introduction Chapter of this thesis) the qualitative methodological approach was the most appropriate fit to answer the research questions:

1. What are the reasons why Kurdish women want to contribute to human security in the Middle East?
2. What methods do Kurdish women employ to create human security within Iraq and Syria?
3. What contradictions are present in current Kurdish women's narratives in gender and security?

As the topic is intricate, the intention was to provide participants with the opportunity to express other aspects of human security and gender and unexamined perceptions of how these ideas are conveyed. Such an approach required flexibility, necessitating the need for the semi-structured interview questions. As a researcher, I also needed to be aware of my Western-based and Western-centric understandings of gender and security, which may have differed from participant understandings. In other words, what participants chose to highlight during conversation or the examples they used to illustrate concepts during the interview are indicative of things they find of value, which is what I subsequently explore within this research. For example, many participants wanted to discuss the collective memory and history, even though my interview guide questions were geared towards present-day insights. If I had adhered to a

structured and rigid research design, this theme (which comprises a large portion of my findings) would have likely been shallowly explored. In the next section, I explore my positionality in relation to this research and methods used to mitigate Eurocentrism in reporting of the research findings and data interpretation.

Positionality

The research topic and my own positionality have certain limitations in how I understand and interpret the experiences of the research participants. As a White, Western cisgender researcher, I owe an elevated duty to my research participants and the research at large to portray the findings that most accurately reflects the intentions of the participants in the study and that their voice is the predominant focus. Bourke (2014) discusses positionality in research, especially in relation to this topic of White researchers negotiating the fine balance between allyship and misrepresentation within research (p. 3). To achieve the balance, the "work has to reflect the voices of those who participate in research" (p. 3). In order to complete this task, the first step was to acknowledge my positionality, my subjectivity, and interrogate my understanding of the research topic in relation to my own belief system and worldview. As Bourke (2014) rightly notes, it would be impossible to completely separate my biases and understanding from that of my participants, as the "research represents a shared space . . . [where] the identities of both researcher and participants have the potential to impact the research process" (p. 1). Although this research is indeed conducted through my own experiences, especially interpretation of research findings, the structure of the interview format allowed participants to articulate their thoughts and feelings about their group and identity and also steer the conversation to highlight these views within the course of the interview. While Bourke (2014) and Marchand (2009) also acknowledged that creating space was a benefit, the fact

remains that the positionality can pose a problem of White researchers studying people of colour or minority groups. Upon further reflection of the interview questions and guide (see Appendix D) that were asked of participants, there were no significant discordances noted between the questions I chose and the answers that were provided. However, there were times I had to reframe my questions due to language barriers or clarify my intention with the questions. In a specific example, I asked a participant's opinion of the YPJ maintaining separate protection units for women. The participant understood that to mean that I was asking why women and men were not allowed to fight together in combat. Throughout the interviews, I had to ensure that I was intentional with my explanations and wording to prevent further misunderstandings. While these misinterpretations were relatively minor, the way I spoke and understood concepts may be heard differently by participants, allowing me to quickly adjust through the remainder of my interviews.

In addition, I acknowledge that I have limitations in fully appreciating the experiences of participants within this study, with my Western upbringing and worldview understanding. In terms of dealing with this positionality and mitigating the impact on the research study, I adopted the proposed framework of Milner (2007), who describes the responsibility of researchers when attempting to study minority groups or people of colour. It remains my responsibility as a researcher "to listen to the voices and perspectives of those under study" (p. 396), while also maintaining a critical lens to analyze the findings. As a result, in cases where there are disagreements between the participant and me, Milner (2007) suggests "report[ing] the narrative . . . and the counter narrative" (p. 396). In the Chapters 5 to 8 of findings, this method was used at various points to interrogate the wide range of perspectives and to combine my voice and the participants' voices into meaningful research conclusions. Providing narratives and

counternarratives was especially important in the conflicting narratives findings, where some participants framed their answers in an essentialist viewpoint. In these types of circumstances throughout the study, and especially with views that can perpetuate gender stereotypes.

Participant Selection and Recruitment Criteria

The majority of participants were recruited through the gatekeeper, Koya University. Due to the difficulty in securing research participants, many required contact through a trusted third-party that could vouch for the research project and was in the immediate area where most participants resided. For some participants, Koya University had to go through several layers of networks to retrieve contact details and information, especially for politicians and active fighters in the YPJ. The university became a trusted entity to recruit interested parties for the research, especially given the apprehension of some participants (those in high-profile politicians and active military) to give their details and information. If I had attempted to recruit these types of participants alone, it would have been difficult to make those connections, especially with language barriers and lack of access to networks in the Kurdistan area. In addition, my contacts at Koya also knew of participants in areas of Iraq and Syria. Koya University was provided with information on what type of participants would be suitable for this study and included the following types of individuals over the age of 18 years of age: 1) civil society, including activists, academics, and journalists 2) NGOs, 3) female or male community members, or 4) current or former government officials.

These types of participants were selected for a variety of reasons. The first is that thirteen out of fourteen participants (also see Table 1: Participant List below) were born and raised in Kurdish society and are intimately connected to the intersections of gender and security and have

witnessed the development or regression of stability in the region. Participants were previously or currently affected by gender stereotypes, and instability of the Middle East, making them subject matter experts of how these aspects impact human security in the region and the resulting effect on women's contributions and outlooks on gender and security. Demographic-wise, thirteen identified as being Kurdish and all thirteen of this group had lived in the area of Iraq or Syria at the time of the interview or had been raised in the Kurdish regions and were part of the Kurdish diaspora. Table 1 details the list of participants involved in this study, including their location at the time of interview:

Table 1 – Participant List

#	**Participant Name**	**Participant Occupation**	**Location at Time of Interview**
1	Frederike Geerdink	Journalist	The Netherlands
2	Narmin Othman	Former Minister in the KRG	Iraq
3	Behar Ali	Activist/Director of Emma Organization for Human Development	Iraq
4	Daban Jaff	Professor	Iraq
5	Tanya Khailany	Co-founder SEED Organization	Iraq
6	Saleh Moslem	Co-Chairman, Rojava, PYD	Syria
7	Nessrin Abdullah	Commander/Spokesperson YPJ	Syria
8	Jinar Abdullah	Former Member of Parliament; PDK Leadership Council	Iraq
9	Confidential – YPJ 1	Female YPJ Fighter	Syria

10	Confidential – YPJ 2	Female YPJ Fighter	Syria
11	Amal Jalal	General Director of High Council of Women Affairs	Iraq
12	Dr. Omar Sheikhmous	Retired Professor/Researcher	Sweden
13	Berivan Younis	Researcher at Centre for Jinology	Syria
14	Confidential – CL1	Community Leader, Kurdish diaspora	Germany

The fourteen participants who ultimately were interviewed had diverse roles within society and originated from the Kurdish areas of Iraq and Syria, the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden. Participants had diverse occupations, including former or current government officials in Iraq and Syria, journalists, activists, NGO co-founders, academics, community members, and a current commander and fighters within the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) in Rojava. Specific demographic information was not collected for the interview, but the age ranged from 19 to 70 years of age. The names of participants and their respective organizations will also be mentioned again in the Findings Chapter of this thesis, where participants elected to provide that information by waiving confidentiality in the Consent Form – Non-Confidential (Appendix C). Eleven participants were female, and 3 participants were male. It was essential to have a majority of female participants so they could speak directly to the role of women in the context of the study and to ensure that the voice that came through the research was predominantly that of women. It was also essential to gain insight into the male opinion of gender and security. Male perspectives in studies on women can provide insight into general reflections of how women are involved in human security, and how women are perceived in their actions, and exploring the

concept and relational nature of gender. Indeed, Heath (1987) suggests that women and men must work together to sustainably address women's discrimination and disadvantages within society: "it involves learning new ways of being women *and men* against and as an end to the reality of women's oppression" (p. 1).

Some participants also provided additional contacts after the interview that they believed could speak further to the topic of this study, particularly those that were involved in gender and security within the Middle East. If these participants met the selection criteria, they were also contacted for an interview. Using this snowball method, 2 participants were recruited. Participants sourced by Koya University were initially contacted by the gatekeeper to gauge interest in the study and ensure that contact information could be shared for interview purposes. At this time, the gatekeeper would also provide general information about the study, including the topic – based upon the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix A). At this time, the gatekeeper would also ask the potential participant whether they were comfortable conducting an interview in English, Kurmanji Kurdish, or Arabic. After confirming that contact could be made, I emailed or called the contact introducing myself and provided the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form (Appendix A). For non-English interviews, I provided a translated document that included both Arabic and English versions of the Participant Information Sheet and Informed Consent. At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked if they understood the informed consent and the participant information sheet. For those that consented to non-confidential participation, the participant was asked again if their name and organization could be published in the study.

Data Collection

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Ethical Review Committee at the University of Birmingham on June 5, 2019. Initially, ethical approval had been cleared to conduct interviews onsite in Erbil, Kurdistan, Iraq. As part of this clearance, I partnered with Koya University in Erbil, Iraq, which was meant to provide office space for interviews, transportation of the participants to and from the interview site, and my accommodation on university grounds. Fieldwork was planned for Spring 2020. Due to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, international travel was not possible after March 2020, and as a result, all fieldwork moved to an online format. Challenges with the online format are discussed in the Limitations section of this Chapter.

As stated previously, Koya University was designated as a gatekeeper within this research study. Their role, after the change in research design to an online format, was to provide contact information for those involved in civil society groups, NGOs, female community members, male community members, government, and activists that could potentially offer insight into Kurdish perspectives on gender and security. The gatekeeper was vital in obtaining participants' contact information, including high-ranking members in government, security, and protection within Syria and Iraq. After receiving re-approval from the University of Birmingham to move to an online format, interviews were conducted during a 5-month period from April 2020 to September 2020. All interviews were conducted through an online format from Vancouver, Canada through video conferencing. All interviews were audio-recorded, regardless of the language that was used in the interview. An interpreter was used during 7 interviews, as some participants spoke limited English and wanted to convey ideas in only Kurdish or Arabic.

The interpreter was a native speaker of Kurmanji Kurdish[7] and fluent in written and spoken Arabic. At the time the interviews were conducted, the interpreter was employed by the Ministry of Justice by the Provincial Government in British Columbia and had the necessary qualifications, skills, cultural awareness, and knowledge to conduct interpretation and relay complex information succinctly. Before the interview, I discussed the interview guide with the interpreter and how information was to be relayed. During the interview, the interpreter wrote notes on what was being said and would convey the information verbally in English for a further follow-up discussion with the participant. At certain times, some interviews were conducted in all three languages (English, Kurmanji Kurdish, or Arabic), depending on the dialect of Kurdish[8] that was being used and the needs of the participant. As Arabic is the formal language taught in education within the majority of the Middle East, it was commonly used to convey complex ideas related to the study[9]. Only three participants conducted their interviews exclusively in Kurmanji Kurdish and seven conducted interviews in English only. The remaining four foreign-language interviews were a mixture of Kurdish, Arabic, and English. On average, interviews were an hour in duration. Audio recordings were first placed on an encrypted file after completion of the interview and stored on the University of Birmingham's secure server. The ethics of translation and interpretation are discussed in the section on Ethical Considerations below.

[7] Kurmanji is a dialect mostly spoken in Northeastern Syria

[8] Some participants only spoke Sorani Kurdish, another dialect among Kurds. Where this was the case, Arabic or English was used.

[9] It is common for ethnic Kurds to have limited ability in writing or reading fluently in the Kurdish language, due various assimilation policies practices in the Kurdistan region that were aimed at eliminating the language from the area and supplanting it with Arabic.

For those that wanted to remain confidential, measures were taken to protect the identity of those participating in the study. These groups were assigned a category and number (depending on the participant group). Their written transcript was also coded, and similar to the audio recordings, were stored using the University of Birmingham's secure server, with that category and number. Where confidentiality was requested by participants, participant codes were used when saving and storing the file. 3 out of fourteen participants requested confidentiality; 2 active members in the YPJ organization requested to have their names be kept confidential, but their affiliation with the YPJ non-confidential. The third participant self-identified as a women's activist and was assigned the code of CL1 (community leader #1). The non-confidential group was necessary to add expert opinion to the data set.

All interviews were audio recorded and participants were advised of this at the start of the interview. Depending on the quality of the audio recording, some data transcripts were either manually transcribed or automatically transcribed by NVIVO Automatic Transcription software that was capable of transcribing recordings from both Arabic and English. For NVivo Automatic Transcription, data was uploaded and encrypted to NVivo servers. At the time of data collection, the server was located within the European Union and as a result, the data stored was subject to EU data protection law. Once transcription was completed, data files were permanently deleted from the NVivo Server within 90 days of the last modification to the transcript. For all transcripts, some of the audio was unclear at some junctures and required manual checks to ensure transcripts were accurate. In all cases, audio recordings were checked for accuracy regardless of language, even if automatic transcription software was used. For interviews conducted in English, participants used filler words that were captured by the transcription software or were written down during manual transcription (examples include but are not limited

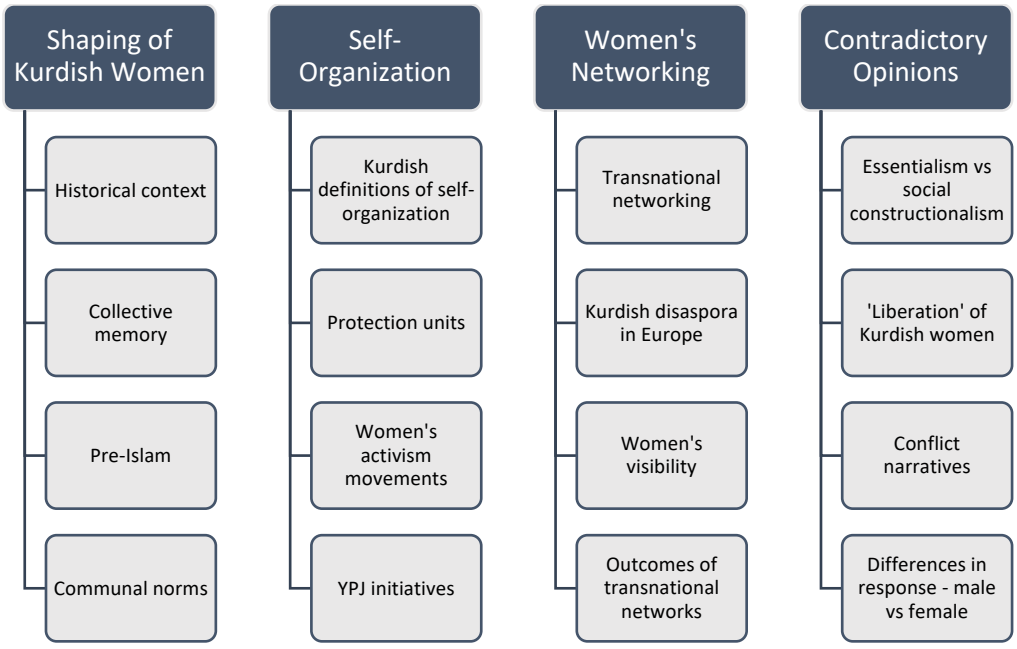
to: “you know,” “like,” or “um”) which disrupted the flow of wording. These filler words were reviewed and removed where required to improve the legibility of direct quotes from participants and for ease of reading. Completed transcripts were uploaded to NVivo 12 software for thematic data analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis occurred after the compiling of audio recordings into English transcription data. NVivo 12 software was used for the data analysis, which included coding transcripts into different nodes. For this coding process, I followed the standard approach as outlined in Castleberry and Nolen (2018) and explored coding “that uses verbatim words or phrases from the participants’ narrative to describe the unit of data” (p. 809). For each of the fourteen interviews, I read through the entirety of the transcript to find common phrases, real-life examples, or keywords before creating a node using thematic analysis. General ideas or points of interest were noted down. As a result of these general ideas, I began to develop a code that described some of these themes. For example, the first code that I identified were references to the history of Kurds as a reason why women were currently participating in security and peace movements. By reviewing each transcript multiple times, I found different ideas or keywords for diverse sets of coding. For example, history was one of the first nodes to emerge, and usually was mentioned during the first question of the interview, which referenced Kurdish upbringing in relation to other ethnic groups in the Middle East. As more themes emerged, especially subthemes that were related to the general idea of history, nodes were further refined to encapsulate what the node represented. Initial transcription of English-audio interviews also began to inform the possible coding and themes to focus upon when formal data analysis began. As highlighted in the research design section of this chapter, thematic analysis outlined by Guest,

MacQueen, and Namely (2012) was used, where the coding is determined by the researcher, who examines the data "trends, themes, or ideas in the data that will help outline the analysis" (p. 6). After transcription and/or translation, I read through each transcript, using an inductive approach to finding common themes. For themes that recurred, I created a node within NVivo, coding the transcript from individual participants. When mapping out areas for findings, I would review each node, writing general observations and commonalities between responses. As demonstrated in Table 2 below, the coding and node structure was found through thematic analysis in NVIVO 12 software.

Table 2 – Coding and Nodes Structure through NVIVO 12:



The thematic analysis also includes two levels of themes, including semantic and latent. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), semantic refers to identification of "explicit or surface meanings of the data" (p. 84). Conversely, latent thematic analysis focuses on the ideologies that have an influence in "shaping or informing the semantic content of the data" (p. 84). Semantic

analysis was imperative to answering the research questions presented in this dissertation, including the reasons why Kurdish women want to contribute to human security in the Middle East, and the more latent question on how constructions of gender and security are understood by participants.

Ethical Considerations

As stated in the data collection section of this chapter, the ethical approval application for this project initially included in-person data collection from Erbil, Iraq. It was amended to an online fieldwork format on May 5, 2020 due to the restrictions that were a consequence of the pandemic. When I contacted potential participants, they were sent the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix A) and a Consent Form to participate in research (Appendix B and Appendix C). Two types of consent forms were provided: 1) a confidential-participation consent form where the name of the individual would be withheld from the study (Appendix B) or 2) a non-confidential participation consent where the individual agreed to have their name, organization, and position published in the study (Appendix C). For the latter option, participants could also include all or some of their details regarding their organization and position. If the participant signed the non-confidential version of the informed consent, this detail of publishing their name in the study would be reconfirmed verbally before the start of the interview, including a reminder of their right to withdraw from the study.

Confidentiality was a critical aspect of this research, especially in an area where candid speech on sensitive topics regarding governance, challenges to gender norms, and security can be taboo; those that speak on these topics can be physically threatened for their viewpoints. Those who wished to waive anonymity were eager to offer their names and positions as credence to the

study and wanted to provide their insight. As described in the Chapter 2 (Literature Review), the Kurdish people have also experienced multiple forms of discrimination (Hassanpour, 1992; Fernades, 2012; McGee, 2014; Wright, 2014; Bengio, 2016) for their ethnicity, ideas, and practices throughout all areas of the Middle East, so those that wished to keep confidentiality were extremely important to uphold, given that breaches in that confidentiality could jeopardize their safety and well-being.

This research study was self-funded, with the exception of limited fieldwork funding that the University of Birmingham granted at the beginning of 2020. However, funding was later rescinded after fieldwork was indefinitely postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Koya University did not receive any financial compensation or any other incentives for its role as a gatekeeper in this study. Koya University was not informed which participants were contacted or the content of their interviews. As a Kurdish-based university, Koya has a vested interest in expanding literature on Kurds leading to their valued support for this research. Beyond this benefit, Koya University will not be receiving any other form of compensation, monetary or otherwise.

Limitations

There are some limitations as part of this research, and as detailed below, every effort has been made to mitigate or address these limitations where possible. One of the first limitations was that this work was produced during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, which altered the original research design of this study. With fieldwork scheduled for March 2020, international travel was impossible due to border closures and risks of travelling and as mentioned previously, online interviews were used to adapt to this change. Moving the data collection online was not

difficult, as most participants had access to online means; however, it was challenging to coordinate interview schedules, as some had increased responsibilities due to the pandemic. In addition, the time zone also posed scheduling challenges. I conducted all interviews from Vancouver, BC and many participants were 10+ hours ahead, which meant many interviews were started past midnight or in the early hours of the morning. Some interviews were also conducted during the holy month of Ramadan, an important month to the Islamic religion and also within Kurdish culture. Ramadan began April 23, 2020 to May 23, 2020. Ramadan is followed by the end celebration of Eid al-Fitr. As a result, during the beginning of data collection, responses to interview requests were slowed or delayed. High-profile participants also had limited time in scheduling interviews or interviews were interrupted to accommodate their work schedules. While the Ramadan did pose some scheduling challenges, it was necessary to complete data collection as soon as feasible to account for the timeline of the PhD project, especially due to the extended time required for ethical review.

At different times in the interview, technological issues hampered discussion and disrupted the flow of conversation. Especially in some areas of Iraq and Syria, participants indicated that rolling power blackouts during the summer months often interfered with their internet connection and power supply; these occurrences were difficult to predict. Other times, the internet signal was too weak to support video and sometimes audio. For several interviews, the video function had to be turned off and used as audio only, sometimes causing difficulty in knowing when a participant was finished communicating their answer and the resource of non-verbal cues about their opinion on the subject matter being asked. At the end of the interview, I would also pose follow-up questions to participants and reaffirm my understanding by repeating back what the participant had said to me and reconfirmed at the end of the interview if there was

anything further they wanted to add or clarify. While all interviews were complete, interviewees were also asked if they could complete additional follow-up interviews if required. All interviewees agreed to follow-up interviews if there was instances of missing data or clarification required for their contributions.

Language barriers also served as a limitation of this study. My understanding of the Kurdish and Arabic languages is limited, and therefore, I had to rely on interpretation and translation to complete this study. This could potentially undermine the data, as my interpretation could be different and Eurocentric, compared to the intended meaning from the participant. Despite this, there were several interviews that I conducted with participants in English only. As can be ascertained in the findings Chapters 5 to 8, some participants are not fully fluent in the English language, and the wording is grammatically incorrect at some junctures. However, these participants were still able to describe their ideas in the context of this study. In some cases, I had to interpret the meaning behind some English phrasing or provide an alternative, simplified phrasing to communicate ideas to the participants. Of course, this is a subjective process, but measures were taken to ensure I have captured the intention and meaning of their words.

Methods of addressing this included: 1) repeating back my understanding to participants after they provided their answer, 2) asking participants to provide an example of their answer, and 3) using alternative (or simplified terminology) to describe concepts in my research. For example, some participants initially struggled with the term “empowerment” and “stability” when these terms were first mentioned during the interview. Instead, or when there was difficulty in comprehending these terms, I explained how empowerment or stability can be observed or felt in practical terms. For empowerment, I told participants that it was a process where women are “making decisions for themselves and feeling confident to make those decisions.” Similarly, for

stability, I discussed “feeling safe” or “feeling secure.” As the project shifted, the way stability was described was more aligned with the concept of human security, and these changes have been reflected throughout this thesis. Most often, participants for English-language interviews understood or remembered the English term and its intended meaning in the context of this study. In all interviews, once the simplified examples were provided, interviewees began using the terms within their answers, demonstrating their understanding of the term itself. These types of limitations also occurred within the interpreted interviews, where the interpreter would translate participants' answers back to me in English, and in these cases, I would request further information on concepts or phrases that were described to ascertain the intention behind these statements. In addition, it is also important in this study to acknowledge that limited uses of Kurdish (either written or verbal) were due to Kurdish people being deprived of speaking, learning, and writing their language through the centuries, leading to the use of Arabic to communicate complex ideas, including the consent and participant information sheet. Some participants only spoke the specific Kurdish dialect of Sorani, most often spoken in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI). Due to the fact that my interpreter/translator was fluent in the Kurdish dialect of Kurmanji, interviews were completed in Arabic instead.

Translation is often overlooked within the methodological process, despite the fact that it can influence how the data is interpreted and presented (Abfalter, Mueller, Seeger, 2021, p. 471). The ethics of translation and interpretation in the past two decades have a renewed emphasis on the ethical aspects of these two processes in research (Greenall et al., 2019, p. 640). The most common of these issues, as posited by Chesterman (2001), is facilitating an ethical approach in representing participant feedback when using translation as part of the research methods. To translate concepts effectively, translations ideally would reflect the source text “truly, like a good

mirror" (p. 140). As discussed earlier in this Chapter, the translator, interpreter, and subsequent translation was completed by an individual with intimate knowledge of the culture and language. As a result, the interpreter/translator was better placed to interpret the meanings the participants were trying to convey because of their intimate knowledge of the region and culture. Building upon Chesterman's (2001) original work on ethical translation, Greenall et al. (2019) later provided a roadmap of how these ethics are practiced by the researcher in practical terms:

> meaning that they focus, respectively, on how to represent authors' intentions/texts in the best way, how to handle the otherness of the source culture/author/text in a respectful manner, how to best take into account the interests of commissioners and other recipients of translated texts, and how to bring culturally-specific values and norms to bear on ethical thinking and behavior. (p. 640)

The connection between culture and researcher is of particular importance during translation, so as not to reduce participant responses to align or be interrogated through Eurocentric values and norms. Another area of concern that Greenall et al., (2019) also discusses is the increasing need to have trained translators and interpreters to avoid common mistakes (p. 640). Again, this consideration was also addressed in the section on data collection that described the training qualifications of the translator/interpreter that was used for this study.

This is also a point to which I can attest towards as a native-English speaking researcher – some of the wording and description of ideas that participants had (particularly those interviews translated from Kurdish to English) were different from how I would personally describe concepts or how concepts have been described to me in English from other native English speakers. These talking points gave significant value to the research study to view concepts outside of the English language. One example was the description of the geographic influence on the shaping of Kurdish women. Participant YPJ 2 and YPJ Commander Nessrin Abdullah likened women's resiliency to the toughness of nature, better positioning themselves

and other women to contribute to human security. Maintaining the integrity of these translations was key once they were translated into English in describing the findings to preserve how concepts are conveyed.

Abfalter, Mueller, and Seeger (2021) recommend that the translation process occur early within the data collection preparation to "preserve linguistic context" (p. 475) and consider the translated document in full, rather than "translating key themes or selective quotes" (p. 475), which can effectively misrepresent the overall participant intention. My research followed this guideline, with all translations and transcripts being completed prior to data analysis to review the full scope of interview responses prior to completing thematic analysis.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the research design was described in the context of this thesis study. This thesis used qualitative methods to gather information on perceptions of human security and the precise application of this research type was demonstrated in this chapter. Thematic analysis was also used to deductively find themes. The theoretical framework considers intersectionality and postcolonialism to limit the impact of my Western biases and Western perspectives from inadvertently tainting the study. It also acknowledges the multiple forms of oppression in women's lives that influence their lives and decisions in joining security movements. As stated previously, these approaches are valuable in explaining and understanding concepts. The research design focused on 3 central questions that were intended to analyze the reason why Kurdish women want to contribute to stability, their role in creating human security in Iraq and Syria, and contradictions in narratives of gender and security. While there are limitations that will inherently be present in my interpretations of findings, it remains pivotal to present the

narratives of participants that is true to their intended meaning. Using Koya University as a gatekeeper, participants were generally sourced from the areas of Syria and Iraq.

Due to the nature of the interviews and their content, confidentiality was an important element in gathering data. In addition, the use of technology and the COVID-19 pandemic were significant challenges in completing online interviews. The ethics of translation and interpretation were also explored in this chapter, investigating ethical ways of approaching these methods that accurately reflect the participants intended meaning. Overall, the methodology allowed for the collection of a meaningful data set. Albeit there were challenges in light of the pandemic, language barriers, and the ethics of data interpretation. Participants were candid and enthusiastic on joining this study, which is reflected in the quality of information they provided. These insights are shared in the next chapter of Findings.

CHAPTER 5 – HISTORICAL INFLUENCES ON KURDISH WOMEN

Introduction

Social constructions of Kurdish history have affected how women understand the past (whether ancient history or recent history) to contextualize their experiences within peace and conflict. For interviewees within this study, the historical context is imagined through thousands of years of myth and collective memory, consolidated and popularized by Abdullah Öcalan's prison writings (previously detailed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 of this thesis). The collective memory appears to have an influence on how women see themselves within society, including their roles and responsibilities as it relates to promoting gender equality and general conditions of human security. Findings within this Chapter indicate that women base their ideology on collective memory and myth. The point of discussing these types of myths is not to disprove any of these narratives that are presented by the interviewees, but to interrogate what elements add to women's understanding of why they participate in peace and conflict. The interviewees need to contextualize their experience in ways that are relevant to them, despite the fact that these narratives can be inaccurate or hyperbolic. Based on interviews from participants, participant-driven discourse shows that that history is a significant component in shaping the actions of Kurdish women.

Key terms present in this Chapter include collective memory, myth, and the pre-Islam era. These concepts are participant-defined and are explored in conjunction with feedback from interviewees. Collective memory also informs subsequent findings and is threaded throughout interview responses. Previous research for women's motivations of engaging in conflict and peace has often been directed towards essentialist explanations and attributed to connections to

motherhood, nurturing, and caretaking (Fite et al, 1990; Ruddick, 1980). However, based on interviewees responses, the ideological drivers behind Kurdish women's participation (and aligning with my assertion that gender is socially constructed) are anti-essentialist.

In this Chapter, the focus is on these historical constructions and how they inform the viewpoint of Kurdish women and how it shapes their motivations. In the sections following, specific historical elements are explored and as directed by participants, these provide a glimpse into the foundations that support women's inclusion in security and conflict. First is the historical context of Kurdish women in what motivates them to actively participate in peace and conflict; second is the general Kurdish collective memory and history, as popularized by Abdullah Öcalan; third looks into the participant-defined "pre-Islam era" of Kurdish history based on myths of the Kurdish origins in ancient Mesopotamia; fourth describes briefly the geographical history as it relates to Islamic expansionism; and fifth describes the myth of communal norms that is derived from the overall collective memory of Kurdish history that has been carried forward from myth-making. This Chapter investigates the research question that underpins this study: what are the reasons why Kurdish women want to contribute to human security in the Middle East? Collective memory, myths, and history have shaped the motives of Kurdish women in creating human security in the Middle East and inform their value systems.

Kurdish Women and their Relationship to the Historical Context

The influence of Kurdish history resonated with all fourteen participants that were interviewed, signifying the historical influence on Kurdish women and how these narratives motivate their decisions in the present-day. The findings presented in this section also answer the first question of this thesis of what specifically motivates Kurdish women to contribute to human

security in the Middle East. According to participants, these historical constructions of collective memory were imparted on women during their upbringing by their parents and the social influences in the community at large. Historical constructions included values of communal norms, an emphasis on gender equality, and accounts of historical persecution of Kurds. The time period for this history can often encompass "thousands of years" (B. Younis, personal communication, July 3, 2020). These histories may have empowered women to participate in movements or organizations. Interviewees draw on this ancient history extensively, in that their oral tradition passes down a collective memory. Collective memory and its ties to cultural identity have been highlighted in the literature review. More generally, it allowed for the "collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of society" (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1992, p. 126). To adequately structure the responses of participants, this type of Kurdish history is grounded in this collective memory. A portion of this collective memory has propelled the idea of a harmonious Kurdish identity that originated from ancient Mesopotamia. From the Chapter 2 literature review, including work from Urquhart (2015) and Szanto (2018), the Kurdish origin story (described and identified in further in-depth below as a "myth") has significantly influenced the Kurdish identity and collective memory.

One of the main supporters of the Kurdish historical narrative is Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Öcalan has had a direct impact on the shift from patriarchal state-building to the Kurdish people gaining autonomy within the Turkish state and remains influential in Kurdish theory and ideology (Al-Ali & Tas, 2018). Known as the de facto leader of Kurdistan, Öcalan's writings are heavily influenced by the "historiographical myth of a continuous lineage of Kurdish people" to the ancient Mesopotamian era (Urquhart,

2015, p. 6). My research adopts a similar definition of "myth" that is presented in Urquhart (2015). It is irrelevant and outside of the scope of this research to determine if the Kurdish ties to ancient Mesopotamia are factual; however, I consider the resulting effect that the myth provides to Kurdish people "as receptacles of symbolic power which are essentially propagated for their effect rather than their truth-value" (p. 11). In other words, this thesis considers how these historical narratives construct Kurdish women's understanding of their contemporary world and how it influences their decisions. As many participants use the history as a reference in their reasoning as to why Kurdish women contribute to human security, it is important to contextualize this information when considering the findings of this study.

Against the Kurdish nationalist movement, Kurdish women were not only empowered in their search for liberation for Kurdistan, but it was needed to maintain their identity and to ensure the survival of their ethnic group. YPJ Commander N. Abdullah believes the persecution created a resilient group of women:

> Women are resistant because the Kurdish society has always been under oppression, injustice, and occupation. Naturally, Kurdish women's needs were to protect themselves. (N. Abdullah, personal communication, June 9, 2020)

The relationship between nationalism and feminism, considered complex (and often adversarial) interactions may actually be more of a dysfunctional symbiotic relationship (Aghaie, 2017; Al-Ali & Tas, 2018). Similarly, the relationship between Kurdish nationalist and feminist movements (see Chapter 3 for detailed information) simultaneously aligns or opposes each other, creating opportunities for growth in women's causes. With both ideologies being intertwined, the survival and growth of each depends on each other. By extension, the survival of the nationalist movement within Kurdistan may have also instilled a similar awareness for the women's

movement if we consider Commander Abdullah's perception from her quote above. While the nationalist-feminist relationship can be detrimental in the sense that nationalism can supersede the goals of feminism, it is still a tool (however flawed) that can be used to further goals of gender equality (Dhurvarajan, Vickers, & Bassanni, 2004, p. 251). However, this relationship may not be generalizable to other regions that have a similar dynamic or even other areas in Kurdistan. The awareness of the Kurdish identity being threatened (and by extension, the Kurdish nation-state) has permeated Kurdish culture, which is voiced by participants in this section and returns as a common theme throughout the findings. Commander N. Abdullah speaks to this point and highlights the harsh social conditions that women and Kurds experienced in terms of persecution and interpretation of Islam that deems women less than men:

> we are telling our Kurdish society that we are a nation that has been ripped off from our rights, our land is occupied, and we are in a state of war, and we are people of a forgotten history not recognized, stripped off our rights, in a male-dominated society, where the male power has major influence. What kind of justice says four women for one man[10]? (N. Abdullah, personal communication, June 9, 2020)

Commander N. Abdullah points to several issues that she feels are largely caused by Islam including the colonization of land, general conditions of insecurity, the inability of Kurdish people to learn their own histories, double standards that exist in a patriarchal society, and the subsequent inequality that exists between women and men with the interpretation of Islam. Participants' explanation of these histories appears to be embedded in the differences in Kurdish upbringing that could explain why women are inclined to protect themselves from gender-based violence or general conditions of instability, despite all the barriers that prevent them from fully

[10] Commander N. Abdullah is referencing an interpretation of the Quran where women require 4 witnesses to prove allegations of sexual assault. In Islam, there is debate on the interpretation and application of this tenet. See Noor, A. M. (2009). Punishment for rape in Islamic Law, *Malayan Law Journal, 5*. 1-9.

participating in their security and protection. Frederike Geerdink, a Dutch journalist that has worked alongside Kurdish people within Turkey and other areas of Kurdistan, notes the importance of this historical contextualization. At times, F. Geerdink reveals her observations in her interactions with Kurdish people and how history has been used to explain their ideas and contextualize their positioning or actions. She found that in order to understand why Kurdish women have evolved to their current point today, their extensive history had to be considered when providing an answer, especially considering the mentality and view towards life. F. Geerdink, who has spent time in both Rojava and Bakur (the Kurdish name for ethnic parts of the Kurdish region in Turkey), notes this nature of the Kurds:

> . . . it's always funny because every time I talk about this— I was with PKK for a full year and every time I ask something about the ideology, some fighter would say, "OK, we have to go back in time ten thousand years." And I would say, "no, no, no, no, just let's stick to the last decade, like a century or something." (F. Geerdink, personal communication, April 18, 2020)

F. Geerdink explained that it may be difficult for Kurds to see patterns in their actions or ideology, and through F. Geerdink's interactions, found that answers were based upon narratives of history. F. Geerdink's unique experiences with the Kurds were spent attempting to understand the "why" of their ideology, especially regarding women. Öcalan's writings have influenced the Kurdish region allowing for this collective memory to gain further traction through theories of Marxism, feminism, and the origin story of ancient Mesopotamia (Urquhart, 2015).

Kurdish Collective Memory and History

Participants extensively discussed the ancient Mesopotamia origin story or "myth" of the region, asserting that the Kurds had originally practiced the religion of Zoroastrianism, originating nearly 3,000 years ago. This also points to the Kurdish reliance on history in

understanding their place within their present society in the Middle East. For the actual answer to the question of why Kurdish women would want to actively contribute to human security, all participants reference the Zoroastrian religion to explain why Kurdish women become involved in the feminist movement and how their historic upbringings have allowed for a unique view on societal and community issues. The implications of the Zoroastrian religion on women and human security is explored in the next section on the pre-Islam era. Berivan Younis, a researcher at the Centre for Jinology,[11] agreed with F. Geerdink that the differences in how Kurdish women understand societal issues were based in the stories shared about ancient history:

> In reality, this goes back more to the history. There is a big difference between women in the Middle East, and Kurdish women in particular, in viewing societal issues, in term of treatment, dealing with society issues, and playing a role in solving societal issues to lead her local community or society toward the right path. Kurdish women play a major role in establishing gender equality, and we are intellectually applying that now. However, this has existed for thousands of years and has a foundation since ages. When the revolution in Rojava started, Kurdish women included Arab, Turkmen, and Syriac women in their mission toward this path. Building on this foundation, many other organizations bring these women closer to achieve and reach democracy in future. (B. Younis, personal communication, July 3, 2020).

B. Younis notes that women have embodied an innate responsibility in society, which includes communal living and community-minded approaches to societal issues. The reason for this type of communal responsibility, according to B. Younis, is that these ancient traditions have survived through the ages until modern day, despite repeated attempts to assimilate Kurds throughout history. B. Younis attributes the survival of these ancient traditions to folklore and a strong oral history of the Kurdish people (B. Younis, personal communication, July 3, 2020). The persecution and conversion to Islam also affected outcomes in language, culture, and folklore,

[11] Translated from Kurdish, the term Jinology means “the study of women.”

which amounted to a concerted effort to eliminate these elements from Kurdish identity (Hassanpour, 1992; Fernandes, 2012, p. 76; McGee, 2014; O'Leary, 2018). Religious tolerance was also a common component throughout history, with the Kurdish people continuing to practice a variety of different religions throughout their history. Dr. Omar Sheikhmous, a retired academic and researcher at the University of Stockholm, discussed how folklore contributed to understandings of tolerance and gender equality. According to O. Sheikhmous, the propensity toward folklore religion and tradition created a general atmosphere of tolerance in Kurdish society, that was juxtaposed with the Islamic imperialist history:

> . . . there is much more tolerance for other religions within Kurdish society than among neighbouring nations. That Kurdish society is much more plural, you have many more sects. There is a lot more folklore religiosity. . . This plurality of religions and communications and contact and interactions has led to a surge in acceptance of the other much more than within other traditions in Muslim societies. (O. Sheikhmous, personal communication, June 27, 2020)

While previous folklore traditions can serve as an ideological foundation or guide for present-day Kurdish people, previous work from Vania (1965) highlights the inherent issues with these types of foundations. The folklore tradition has perpetuated these versions of history that can be based on true events. Similar to collective memory, the initial event becomes "imperceptibly distorted" (Vansant, 1965, p. 5) after it is passed down through generations. Vania (1965) discusses how these narratives often pander towards their audience to increase uptake (p. 5) and use them as a self-fulfilling prophecy. B. Younis also believed that the continuance of folklore traditions has increased feelings of liberation among Kurdish women, and that through education and empowerment, women have learned more about their identity and culture:

> Language-wise, I did not speak Kurdish fluently before, but now, I speak much better, and as an example, the role of education has helped improve stability in the region. Also, traditions and folklore, such as Kurdish, Arab, and Syriac clothes, contributed to the

> feeling of women that they are free, equal to their male counterparts, and in turn, their male counterparts feel the same. This in turn, makes women feel their freedom within the family and society, where everyone has his or her own views and perspectives. (B. Younis, personal communication, July 3, 2020)

Based on the comments from B. Younis, it would appear that it allows women a feeling of empowerment in strengthening their culture and respecting themselves in the process, their male counterparts also afford a similar level of respect. This also represents a typical viewpoint on language and culture rights in the Kurdistan region, where there have been numerous offensives to limit the influence of Kurdish language and Kurdish culture (Bengio, 2016; O'Leary, 2018). This erasure of Kurdish collective memory also takes on other forms by designating significant Kurdish symbols or areas as Arab or Islamic points of significance. The Shanidar caves in Iraq are an example of tangible symbols of Kurdish collective memory, holding narratives of a persecuted and assimilated Kurdish existence. Jinar Abdullah, a former Member of Parliament and Minister for the KRG, provided an anecdote on the assimilation of Kurds in particular, referencing the Shanidar caves, an ancient area in Iraqi Kurdistan. In textbooks, these caves were presumably located in the 'Arab World'– a term describing all 22 Arab states. Kurdish people like J. Abdullah also felt these symbols have been appropriated as a significant historical site to the Arab people. J. Abdullah noticed that these caves, as taught in early education in Iraq, were devoid of all references to other ethnicities or religious groups that found value in these locations, including Christians, Yazidis, Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, or Turkmen. These types of assimilations and knowledge of fact through the Kurdish collective memory, folklore, and traditions is what aided in distancing Kurds from Arab identity, and left some participants in this study questioning how they could feel part of the country that disregarded the core of Kurdish existence:

> How can I feel that I am a part of this country, this land, this authority? And that's why I try to fight it. . . and then it makes war, it makes instability. When they refuse you, you will try to be more extreme to push. That's why you cannot find stability in this area. And this will have a reflection on social lives and women's issues, development, economy, and everything. (J. Abdullah, personal communication, June 10, 2020)

As J. Abdullah presents above, the instability continues to flourish because of a perceived lack of acknowledgement in the heritage of Kurdish people. Presumably, due to this lack of acknowledgement, there is a need to maintain Kurdish existence by entrenching into the collective memory or Kurdish cultural identity. Using intersectionality as a lens of understanding, I believe that women are at the axis of discrimination for being a woman and as a Kurdish person. Tanya Khailany, a founder of the NGO SEED[12] Foundation in Bashour, noted the continuous and extreme assimilation measures targeted at Kurdish people, which has left a lasting impact on women and influences their decision to participate in movements to improve conditions of security for women. As a result, T. Khailany believed this has created progressive, tolerant, and liberal Kurdish women:

> . . .all the atrocities and the genocides and everything that we have seen has made us a little more open-minded. And I think a little more understanding that in order to have stability, you must have peace. And in order to have peace, you must have justice. So those are the things that we work for. (T. Khailany, personal communication, May 6, 2020).

However, while the history is vital for the Kurdish people to bring awareness to their treatment, it is also difficult to instil in future generations due to efforts to limit education on Kurdish history. Written history is also particularly problematic because of the way that Kurdish people typically transmit their histories, through oral storytelling and folklore. Saleh Moslem, Member

[12] The SEED Foundation is a local charity operating in Erbil, Kurdistan, promoting humanitarian needs in Iraqi Kurdistan. For more information, see https://www.seedkurdistan.org.

of the Co-Presidency Committee for the Syrian Democratic Party in Rojava (PYD), notes this struggle:

> The story of the Kurdish people was written by the enemies of the Kurdish people. This is really a disaster. I mean, to have a people and their history written by the enemies. (S. Moslem, personal communication, June 2, 2020).

It became evident in the findings that participants have endured repeated attempts to rewrite Kurdish history by non-Kurds (especially Turkey, Arab nationalists, and Iranian nationalists) have entrenched the desire to maintain their identity and simultaneously created an idealized image of Kurdistan, where its people are liberated. While the general history is a significant source that empowers women to contribute to movements that simultaneously increase gender equality and human security, the pre-Islam era is of particular importance to Kurds, as it symbolizes the era of communal norms and ethics that have been passed through the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism.

The Pre-Islam Era

The evolution in secular, gender equal ideology of Kurdish women is attributed to the era prior to Islam in the Kurdish agrarian societies and through the practice of the ancient Zoroastrian religion. The ideology, as purported by research participants, instils a sense of responsibility within Kurdish women for *all* women. As a result, it appears to create an environment where women can exist freely, apart from the harmful power hierarchies that patriarchy inevitably creates. A common theme around the juxtaposition of Kurdish women and others from different backgrounds included forced conversion to Islam in the 7th Century (Kizilhan, 2017, p. 333). Many participants discussed how Islam was forced upon Kurds by Arab Muslims and many participants believed that early Kurds practiced the religion of

Zoroastrianism. The importance of Zoroastrianism to the Kurdish people was highlighted in the Chapter 2 literature review and participants echoed this prominence of the religion as a guide for improving gender equality, thereby increasing security.

Participants have framed their pre-Islam history as an era of "enlightenment" for the Kurdish people, similar to what Szanto (2018) described in Chapter 2, as an "imagined past" or "imagined ideal" (p. 97). The imagined past may selectively highlight positive aspects of history to elevate it as a marker or baseline to return towards, even if it never truly existed. The imagined past of the pre-Islam era continues as a theme throughout the findings. Commander N. Abdullah provides a typical quote among participants regarding the lasting impression of the pre-Islam era and believes that Kurds resisted adoption of Islamic beliefs and interpretation of religious practices due to their earlier traditions that were grounded in Zoroastrianism:

> Of course, there is a difference between the Kurdish society and other societies, because historically, Kurds were brought up with Zoroastrian belief, not with the Islamic belief, where Islam imposed itself by force, while the relationship between men and women was more open despite the arrival of Islam. The influence of Islam on Kurds was less compared to other nations because of their Zoroastrianism. (N. Abdullah, personal communication, June 9, 2020)

In the quote above, Commander Abdullah correlates the lack of a cohesive assimilation to the Islamic religion to her belief of Kurdish foundations in Zoroastrianism. Again, it is important to distinguish that Islam as a religion is not the subject of discussion or criticism, but interview data that has been collected in this study has indicated the *interpretation* of the religious texts often has detrimental and oppressive effects on women in society. Out of fourteen participants, 8 directly referenced the pre-Islam era of Kurds, appearing to be influenced by the ideas of women in the past. These ideas included practicing of the Zoroastrian religion in an agrarian society prior to the expansion of Islam. Subsequently, the worldview of modern Kurdish women that

was informed by the past shaped the belief that women had a "responsibility to protect themselves" (Rose, 2011, p. 45), accounting for why women would actively participate in protection movements or security movements in general. Female participants in this study seemed to account more for these differences, with 6 out of 8 referencing the pre-Islam historical origins of Kurdish women as a catalyst for participating in security, defence, protection, and leadership. Amal Jalal, a General Director of the High Council of Women Affairs in the KRG, provides a typical quote on the historical context:

> There is a disparity between the Arab countries, but the Kurdish woman has advanced and developed more, and the reason is, as mentioned, the participation of women in all agricultural and cooperative fields, and also since the outbreak of wars, she also participates in defence, in the political process, and so on. Therefore, the upbringing of the Kurdish women, or the social environment is completely different from the social environment of the Arab woman. (A. Jalal, personal communication, June 20, 2020)

During the course of the research interview, A. Jalal also discusses the religious limitations placed specifically on Kurdish women in the Middle East, who enjoyed relative freedom and equality in participating with men in the agrarian society. A. Jalal continued to elaborate on how this type of society primed women to participate in all facets of life in the modern era:

> Throughout her history, the Kurdish woman participated in the political struggle, in all the liberation revolutions to liberate Kurdistan— participated in many fields since her childhood and engaged in many social and agricultural aspects and so on, which she worked side by side with the Kurdish man. (A. Jalal, personal communication, June 20, 2020)

When asked why gender equality may exist in agrarian societies, Dr. O. Sheikhmous believed that it may have been heightened in the Kurdish region because "it's the necessity of life in rural and agricultural societies where women and children would have to participate in the production of their daily food and means of living" (O. Sheikhmous, personal communication, June 27, 2020). Daban Jaff, a professor in higher education in Iraq, also spoke to the agrarian origins,

where women were equal with men in the field, providing food security for their families. Some women had full ownership and managed their own property, and D. Jaff equated this ownership with economic independence:

> There's several women who have their own fields [pre-Islam] without support of men. That means that the pre–Islamic Kurdish woman was independent. (D. Jaff, personal communication, May 5, 2020)

These participants believed that this independent spirit was passed down through generations of Kurds, and (compounded by threats to their ethnic identity) continued to fuel women's response to insecurity by actively partaking in activities that alleviated these conditions. Again, the collective and cultural memory of the Kurds is implied in this statement, one which attempts to maintain Kurdish values "consistently throughout generations" (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995, p. 126) through these narratives. However, Jaff's positioning contradicts with Szanto's (2018) findings of agrarian culture and increased gender equality, where the latter believed it was unlikely that women had any increase in equality during the agrarian era of Kurdish collective memory. Similarly, Goetz (1998), in her study on intersections of women's dominance in agriculture in Uganda and South Africa, found that women's stronghold in the agricultural sector did not guarantee or necessarily result in increased gender equality or stability (p. 257). Comparable to the Kurdish case, and as D. Jaff describes, the independence of women based on their ownership of their agricultural labour does not necessarily indicate that Kurdish women had a higher status or experienced gender equality pre-Islam. Nonetheless, this imagined history or gender equal relations in Zoroastrian agrarian societies informs women's right to respect and security.

Behar Ali, founder and director of Emma Organization,[13] also referred to the Zoroastrian religion practiced by Kurds before the infusion of Islam in the area, allowing women to view issues in a secular context. According to B. Ali's understanding, women in the pre-Islam period were not forced to practice religion and did not place constraining gender norms on the role of women and men. Dr. O. Sheikhmous believed the respect of Kurdish women and their contributions to tribal society differed from other agrarian societies found worldwide, possibly due to the combination with Zoroastrianism. During the mostly tribal and agrarian period, Kurdish women were "much more free to express their views than maybe other women in other societies" (O. Sheikhmous, personal communication, June 27, 2020). However, Dr. O. Sheikhmous also believed that some researchers examining the history of Kurdish women might have idealized their situation when other agrarian societies[14] also had the elements of equal work distribution and community involvement.

Bengio (2016) highlights this point in their work on Kurdish women in conflict, in that Kurdish women are idealized and used to promote and further the nationalist agenda (p. 30). As a call-back to Chapter 2, Aghaie (2017) also refuted the belief that there was significant equality in the pre-Islam era, and woman's value was based upon motherhood, similar to how Kurdish women's contributions are categorized today within Kurdish society (p. 31). As a result, this data contradicts Aghaie (2017); while Dr. O. Sheikhmous acknowledges that the experiences of Kurdish women are sometimes idealized and romanticized by researchers, he believes there was

[13] Emma Organization is an NGO focusing on women's rights and empowerment in Kurdistan. "Emma" translates to "we are" in Kurdish. See https://emmaorg.me.

[14] Other examples of agrarian societies include China, ancient Egypt, Maya, and India.

still a relative difference between Kurdish people and non-Kurds and women in the former were in a slightly better social situation than women in the latter:

> Quite honestly, myself and a number of many other researchers in Kurdish society do not idealize the situation as they do. Because in most agrarian societies, the role of women is much more participatory and much more open because of the nature of agrarian society. And because of the nature of tribal society. And even rural societies. Because I have seen the same situation more or less among the Bedouin in the Syrian desert and among the Bedouin in the Iraqi desert as well. So it's not, I would say in agrarian India and agrarian in other societies, it could be the similar situation. But there seems to be a relative difference. As far as Kurdish culture and society is concerned that the position of Kurdish woman is a little bit better than the other women in Muslim societies. (O. Sheikhmous, personal communication, June 27, 2020)

The idea of the agrarian society, similar to collective memory, is inherently selective (intentionally so) to maintain the idea that gender equality was achieved during that time period and that women had equal control over resources. Given this difficulty in attempting to prove this as a fact, I agree with Szanto's (2018) criticism that the agrarian collective memory is simplified by participants; it was unlikely that women were more advantaged in these societies. However, this does not detract from the empowerment that women in present-day derive from this "imagined past," regardless of its plausibility, factuality, or provability. According to the quotation from Dr. O. Sheikhmous, the collective memory of the agrarian society has created the impression that women's independence and equality has continued throughout Kurdish history, leading to women's current outlook toward her community. It also appears that this state of equality and independence for women is possible and an achievable outcome because of the collective memory that it was "accomplished" in the past.

According to J. Abdullah, former Member of Parliament in the KRG and Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK)[15] Leadership Council, economic independence "runs in the social life of the Kurds and Kurdish society at large" (J. Abdullah, personal communication, June 10, 2020). The importance of this independence is punctuated by the fact that participants genuinely believed that women were able to participate more freely within their respective society, particularly in activities that contributed to the overall security situation in Iraq or Syria. These included contributing to security (participating in protection units for the goal of reducing the influence of extremist groups like ISIS in Iraq and Syria) and activism, by improving women's rights and gender equality (N. Abdullah, personal communication, June 9, 2020; B. Younis, personal communication, July 3, 2020). The increase of gender equality was noted as a precursor to reducing violence, thus allowing the use of critical thinking rather than acting within the confines of gender stereotypes (Caprioli, 2000).

The differences between Kurds and other ethnic groups in the area were drawn by several participants, including B. Younis. The differences Kurdish upbringing and other ethnicities within the Middle East were also discussed extensively by participants. B. Younis goes further in noting that the upbringing of the Kurds changed ways in which Kurdish women approached problem-solving and women were able to resolve issues that benefited the community at large, even non-Kurds. The focus on community outcomes rather than individual consequences was a distinctive element in early Kurdish society, according to research participant F. Geerdink. In her studies on Kurdish women, Kurdish people discussed going back to their pre-Islam roots in a community-centred approach, with more equality and fewer power hierarchies.

[15] PDK (Kurdistan Democratic Party) in the KRI and is a majority party in the KRG.

The foundation of Kurdish women has seemingly enabled them to be active participants in various struggles throughout their history, and even influencing other women of various religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds to reach a common goal of democracy. As noted previously in this section, Kurdish women were often placed in situations where they had to protect the continuance of their identity. Participants have indicated through their own anecdotes in this section that Kurdish women, not being bound by strict interpretations of Islam, were able to develop outside of the religion, without being bound by rigid gender relations based on the local interpretations of the Islamic religion.

According to participants, rural and tribal living also significantly contributed to women's status in Kurdish society, enabling them to participate in various societal roles typically held for men (including leadership, military, and defence). In the pre-Islam era, tribal areas were open in terms of religion with various sects in the area, which led to a tolerance of different ideas concerning religion (T. Khailany, personal communication, May 6, 2020). The openness and tolerance towards other religions and ethnicities later became a cornerstone of the Kurdish movement (Bengio, 2016; Al-Ali & Tas, 2018; Bülent, 2016). T. Khailany discusses the lack of influence that religion had in smaller villages in the Kurdistan region:

> Religion was not a huge factor in village life back then or there wasn't that understanding of religion like it was, let's say, in some of the bigger cities. So you did have a lot more openness. (T. Khailany, personal communication, May 6, 2020)

T. Khailany points to the tolerance and inclusiveness that the Kurds are often praised for internationally (Kardas & Tesiltas, 2017). The inclusiveness, based on the pre-Islam era defined by participants, has transferred towards the treatment of women in the region, which generally

focuses on the wellbeing and treatment of all women. A female YPJ fighter also elaborated on this contrast, noting that it did not mean women escaped discrimination or oppression entirely:

> Kurdish women in their upbringing were better off, I am not saying completely, but they were getting their rights compared to women from other components, because Kurdish society has a secular character that tends towards secularism, so it is more open. (Participant YPJ 1, personal communication, June 15, 2020)

The tolerance of different religions was also heavily juxtaposed with ISIS's persecution of other religions during their push to create a caliphate in the area. Kurdish people are often criticized for perpetuating this idea of "Kurdish exceptionalism" by contrasting their constructed and "progressive" history with extremism (Bengio, 2016). Participants also indicated that Kurdish people were also able to retain some of their past practices due to geographic protections, including mountainous terrain, which allowed for Kurds to escape forced conversion to Islam.

Geography and Islamic Expansionism

In this section, the impact of the mountainous and rugged topography of Kurdistan is explored through participant perspectives. Some participants (N. Abdullah, Participant YPJ 2) noted the extent of persecutions and assimilation attempts against Kurds and how the topography served as a protection of their collective identity and values. Kaplan and Herb (2011) asserted that there was a correlation between landscapes and national identity formation. Kurds, specifically women, were able to escape some of the Islamic influences and conversion because of their geographic location and advantage (N. Abdullah, personal communication, June 9, 2020). Due to the mountains and terrain, it was difficult for some imperialists to make the trek or sustain attempts to force conversions (N. Abdullah, personal communication, June 9, 2020). In fact, this is also a common proverb amongst Kurds: 'no friends but the mountains.' Meaning the

mountains are a symbol of protection, historically curated by the Kurds, to denote the continuous betrayals and attempts to destroy their identity and the physical boundaries of their nation. These mountains, as Kaplan and Herb (2011) discuss, served as a "visual trope that easily captures a nation's sense of itself" (p. 351). The terrain then becomes a two-fold meaning in this context. First, is that the mountains protected the Kurdish identity and second, it served as a symbol for Kurdish identity. In terms of its relevance to this study on human security, this was another participant-identified foundation as to how these ancient community-based practices survived throughout history (stemming from the Pre-Islam era). Coupled with the collective memory of Kurdish culture, these myths have been cemented into the narrative of Kurdish gender equality. Commander N. Abdullah elaborates on the interconnected relationship between the geography of the mountains and Kurdish traditions and how this has produced a resilient society:

> The other aspect is that Kurdish society is a mountainous society, which kept them away from more influences, which in turn made them stubborn and a resistant society that has formed relations with nature and God. (N. Abdullah, personal communication, June 9, 2020).

The terrain also limited the effect of Islamic imperialism in the area, which allowed Kurds to continue with their folklore religion and traditions:

> Because of the influence of Zoroastrianism, and because of hiding in the mountains, the impact of Islam was very strong on the other nations and societies, where Kurds, socially, were distanced from those nations and societies in the mountains. Therefore, the influence of Islam on Kurds was less. Also, because the Kurds did not accept Islam through belief, but it was forced. (N. Abdullah, personal communication, June 9, 2020)

The forced conversion of Islam left many Kurds resentful of their newfound religion, especially women, where religion caused instability in economic and political security (Çiçek. 2013). The backlash toward religious-based influence on Kurds has also gone through another wave of evolution, as noted in Szanto (2018), who found that many Kurds denounced the practice of

Islam after the outcome of ISIS's atrocities in 2014 and reverted to practicing Zoroastrianism, based on Kurdish perceptions of a shared history. A confidential participant, a female YPJ fighter, also made this connection to the influence of the topography, in that women were resilient not only because of their location, but because the harsh natural environment demanded it (something that was passed onto future generations):

> There is another aspect, which is the natural geographic protection of the Kurds, which was somewhat harsh, so Kurdish women gained toughness from their nature. (Participant YPJ 2, personal communication, June 17, 2020)

These are the only 2 participants that referenced the geographic influence on how Kurdish women evolved throughout history to the point where they are today, which is their involvement in security and defence, especially within Rojava. As a result of the historical collective memory explored above, participants guided their discussion towards communal norms. The values of communality are not exclusive to the Kurdish people, but findings indicate that the emphasis on communal norms has a significant influence on why Kurdish women are present in human security and conflict. This idea of communal norms is therefore embedded in the larger discussion of history, necessitating its inclusion in the overall history that has shaped and informed the viewpoints (and subsequent present-day actions) of Kurdish women.

Communal Norms

Communal norms, derived from the Kurdish understanding of Kurdish mythology and history, enable women to take a communal responsibility approach in addressing issues of stability and gender inequality. These communal norms focus on community and collective needs rather than individual aspirations. For this section, the definition of communal norms is derived from Trapnell and Paulhus (2012), who measured communal norms as "fulfilling

relationship and religious obligations and commitments, seeking 'purpose' in life, and sacrificing for others" (p. 40). In the sections above, some participants alluded to the communal approach in terms of how women take a responsibility in protecting other women, including non-Kurds. The communal norms and the responsibility that accompanies it were mostly discussed by female participants and were used to explain why women would want to participate in self-organization (discussed in further depth in the next Chapter) or movements that would increase the overall security situation of the general region. Some participants traced the origin of communal norms back to the Mesopotamian myth discussed in the section prior. F. Geerdink contextualizes the sense of community in the descendants from the Kurdistan region, and that it was a time devoid of patriarchy, resulting in a general focus on the community rather than individual aspirations:

> We have to go back to their descendants around caring for each other and community. It's about community and it's not about one interest against the other. Like, what about capitalism triggers in us. In humanity, you could say it's about caring for each other, for the group. (F. Geerdink, personal communication, April 18, 2020).

While the Kurdish leadership are often criticized for their attempts to appeal to Western conceptions of secularism (McKernan, 2017; Bengio, 2016), F. Geerdink's statement runs contrary to this idea, especially the rejection of a capitalist political economy. In its place, communal values are emphasized. The humanity and community-centric approach is also found in Rose's (2011) analysis of Zoroastrianism, where communal norms are integrated into religious ritual, "intended to encourage a sense of custom of sharing the bounties of life with others, particularly those who are in need" (p. 138). The ideology is also evident in participant responses. B. Ali believed the responsibility also extended towards protection movements (personal communication, April 30, 2020). Increasing security was also dependent on women's participation in these activities, as women had a responsibility to improve security on behalf of

women and men. F. Geerdink also elaborated on the aspect of responsibility within the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a group she spent considerable time observing within Turkey. Similar to the Kurds in Syria and Iraq, the PKK follows the ideology and writings of Abdullah Öcalan (Novellis, 2018, p. 116), and therefore bears relevance to the overall ideology of the Kurdish area. F. Geerdink spoke with a female PKK fighter about the Kurdish approach to community and explained that it was empathy that shaped and influenced the decisions of women. Awareness of empathy was the core of humanity:

> She [a PKK fighter] said this seed is in us, this seed wants to take care of each other, of the community that is still in us from Neolithic times. That is the core of humanity. That is the core of humanity that is in us. And we have to feed that seed again. And I said, how do I know that what you say is true? How do I know that that seed is in us? When I look at the world now, where is that seed, you know? And she said, if you see the Yazidi genocides or if you see a child dying of hunger, what do you feel? It's terrible, of course. I feel I don't know. Anger and sadness. And she said, that's the seed. And of course, it's still in you because this is biology; you get it from your ancestors. And that is still in us. And if you feed it. She said women are closer to that. But it's something you have to recognize, and you have to feed it. And that's what we're trying to do in building this society. We try to make that seed blossom again. However, she said it is without a doubt in the world that the seed is in every human being because it is the core of humankind. And she said that is never far away from anybody. The patriarchy can be very strong. And as it is in Sinjal or it still is in Bakur [Turkey], or it is in the states or in Europe. Patriarchy is strong everywhere. And it expresses itself differently in different parts of the world. But it doesn't kill the seed, never does. It's in us. It makes us human. (F. Geerdink, personal communication, April 18, 2020)

F. Geerdink discusses the conflation between biology and history, similar to Ruddick's (1980) approach with gender and security. The reliance on essentialism supposes Kurdish women are born with inherent traits of empathy and are naturally predisposed to acting in communal ways due to their history. However, this type of sentiment, although grounded in Kurdish collective memory can imply that Kurdish people are gatekeepers to empathy and guides towards humanity and peace. Such descriptions can lead to harmful juxtapositions with other groups in the area,

even if the intended outcome is geared towards facilitating an empathetic outlook for general humanity.

Other participants also indirectly discuss the connection of communal norms to empathy, and as T. Khailany provides, experiencing obstacles and discrimination as a Kurdish woman stirred her to action so she could prevent other women and girls from having similar experiences:

> . . . because this is an ongoing struggle for every woman and especially for Kurdish women. So there's always a sense of inclusiveness and making sure that— I suffered. So I'm going to help. I'm going to do my best to help others so they don't suffer. (T. Khailany, personal communication, May 6, 2020)

T. Khailany also believes that this empathy in ensuring that other women were protected translated into a responsibility to boost women's empowerment and act as a role model in the overall Kurdish feminist movement:

> For me, as a Kurdish woman, I believe it's my duty to make sure that young women know that women can get to be whatever it is that they want to be in our society, and also they need support or they need help— there are places that they can go to. There are people that they can turn to. There are champions for them that can support them. So just letting you know, just being out there, being available to speak to young women and let them know and leading by example or making sure that people know the stories of these women that have been successful or the young women that have succeeded against all odds or, even though the history of the Kurdish feminist movement, et cetera. I think that that's that really contributes to the empowerment part. But also at the same time, I mean, we have to look at empowerment, really. (T. Khailany, personal communication, May 6, 2020)

If we reflect back to Chapter 3, these role models (like Hevrin Khalaf, a Syrian-Kurdish leader that was martyred in the course of her political service) place themselves in danger to improve the security of other women and exemplify that female leadership is possible. T. Khailany highlights this responsibility for herself and other women and that maintaining visibility in the community will continue to prove to young women that they can participate in society and create

their security. In Chapter 7, Kurdish female leadership and women's visibility in roles that can impact security are discussed in further depth, but these role models are presumably any woman that chooses to engage in activism or self-organization for their cause. When asked if Kurdish women offer stability in areas of conflict and if women make areas safer with their participation, D. Jaff had a similar understanding to B. Ali and T. Khailany in that woman were obliged to play a role to achieve a stabilized society:

> Of course, I believe that in any civilized and stable society, women should have the—they must play their role. It's very important that women play the role in any stabilized society. (D. Jaff, personal communication, May 5, 2020)

D. Jaff frames his argument from more of an essentialist standpoint and describes what this "role" actually would encompass, focusing on a Kurdish proverb to illustrate his idea.[16] D. Jaff provided an English translation from Kurdish during the interview: "women are half of the society and she's the mother of the other half." D. Jaff focuses on the socialized gender role of women caretaking and raising children within society, therefore, having an influence on their education in the formative years of a child's life. The education of children is certainly an underscored and honourable endeavour in any society, however, this proverb and general outlook towards women as mothers is inherently problematic. Essentialist sentiments (as demonstrated with Sarah Ruddick's work) predetermine the way that women contribute to society, confining their role to motherhood. It also overlooks the contributions that women have outside of reproductive functions, including progress that women make in leadership and security

[16] During the interview, D. Jaff attributes this quote as a general Kurdish proverb. However, the quote appears to have multiple origins, including in the Arabic language. As the proverb has likely been carried forward throughout generations, it may have been adapted into the Kurdish language and widely accepted as a Kurdish proverb within the community.

movements. Other participants like T. Khailany and B. Younis have contrasting definitions of roles as opposed to Jaff, in that the women's role is not necessarily related to the influence on general society, but rather the protection of other women in similar situations. B. Younis ties empowerment to stability and women's level of collective participation in society, and that the terms are mutually reinforcing:

> If women can play a bigger role, there will be stability, and if there is stability, women can play a bigger role. They are interchangeable. If there is no empowerment, stability will be very hard. Our current difficulties in term of stability is because of the war. If the war ends, women will play a bigger role, where her role is necessary for stability. (B. Younis, personal communication, July 3, 2020)

Contrary to the idea that women are the 'mother of the other half of society,' B. Younis also provides that women's communal responsibility is focused on uplifting other women and working with men to create a society that is conducive to gender equality:

> . . . we can create openness in the Middle East through women, which in turn, will contribute to stability in the region if Jinology is considered, because Jinology is the foundation of life that gives birth to justices, and empowers work with men for the construction of nations. (B. Younis, personal communication, July 3, 2020)

B. Younis also discusses how the Arab Uprisings and women's revolution in Rojava was a foundation for the responsibility of women to improve the situation of others. B. Younis also contradicts D. Jaff's view that a woman's role is to influence and educate their society and that this is where their influence originates. In fact, women's role, according to B. Younis, is to carry the responsibility of diminishing this type of essentialist approach and also to break away from the association of women with motherhood; instead, she argues women should be concerned with the liberation of other women:

> We feel that we are the owners of the revolution. We started it, and we were the ones who brought up the equality with men. This was a foundation for us. And because the idea of democracy is the freedom of women, we see ourselves responsible to liberate women from their tight social spaces. And because we are the owners of this ideology, we want to conduct that ourselves, and there we carry the responsibility. (B. Younis, personal communication, July 3, 2020)

Other participants also described the YPJ as having the communal ideology that enables the protection of women, offering an umbrella of protection for all women, not just Kurds. YPJ Commander N. Abdullah elaborates on the goals of the YPJ that are not entirely centred on empowering Kurdish women and was intended to help women secure and protect their rights more generally:

> YPJ is a force that defends its community, its land, and it is also a global movement, where hundreds of women from other countries have joined. YPJ carries the spirit of universality so that any woman who wants to protect her rights from any party finds a place in YPJ. (N. Abdullah, personal communication, June 9, 2020)

Other participants that speak about the YPJ provide valuable insight into this type of communalism that is derived from the myths of ancient Mesopotamia and the Zoroastrian religion. All participants that provided their opinion on communal norms also made correlations for why their ideology was created within this type of myth. Commander Abdullah also addresses the need for unity between men and women, in addition to addressing the struggles that women and girls face in finding equality:

> YPJ is not only an armed force only, but it draws a path for women's rights, and struggle for those rights, and eliminates all barriers that existed between men and women. Through this ideology and philosophy, and this initiative to establish unity between all women of the Middle East. (N. Abdullah, personal communication, June 9, 2020)

Media representation of the YPJ also tend to depict the group in simplistic terms and fail to delve into the scale of their beliefs and the origins of these types of values. As Tank (2017) suggests the ongoing media perception is that those within the YPJ are "oppressed women whose motivation for joining a political movement is described in liberatory terms" (p. 408), but as Participant YPJ 1 asserts, the armed group is specifically for the protection of women:

> First, I want to clarify one point. It has been said that Women's Protection Units are part of People's Protection Units [YPG]. In fact, YPJ is a force for women, and is a part of the Syrian Democratic Forces, and it is for the protection of women. (Participant YPJ 1, personal communication, June 15, 2020)

Through media articles, the YPJ are often denoted as existing simply to have a group separate from men, however, the groups' members wish to bridge the divide between men and women, believing this type of responsibility in protecting women would result in the alleviation of barriers between women and men, in addition to creating stability:

> The Kurdish woman finds herself responsible, not because of women, but because of equality between men and women. To explain more, Women's Protection Units, doesn't rely on women only, and consider men as second level, but on the basis of a society where women are equal to men, and this helps stability in the region. (Participant YPJ 1, personal communication, June 15, 2020)

The communal norms and responsibility for women is an interesting frame for why they may feel compelled to join protection or security movements. These ideas are also intertwined and embedded with the historical myths and symbolism of ancient Mesopotamia and Zoroastrianism and form the foundation of many women's beliefs.

Conclusion

In understanding how and why women are able to contribute to human security, participants went back to the myth of Ancient Mesopotamia to illustrate that community-based gender equality was the norm and that these practices have survived throughout the ages. Like the Kurdish symbol of mountains as a protector, the Zoroastrian religion has also served as a symbol. The religion, described as one of gender equality, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of the Kurdish people. Despite that fact, the communal norms are seemingly being practiced, in the language used by participants in describing a group responsibility towards other women, not just Kurdish people. Due to the insecurity in the region, women are often placed into a position where they must defend themselves, drawing on tools of collective memory of the Kurdish history that supports their search for an idealized Kurdish utopia. The history or "myth" serves as a motivation to actively participate in improving human security —even if that way of being is based on "myth." Due to their gender, women face a similar feeling when attempting to defend the Kurdish homeland – if they do not struggle against attempts to erase Kurdishness, or in essence, themselves, then no one will rally for their defence. Women are continually reminded of the intersectionality of being Kurdish and of being a woman. The need for defence and security arises from this symbolic history that is engrained in the Kurdish consciousness; whether or not it is influenced by a need to be internationally recognized and supported by the Western world, these symbols still stir women to action.

Women are forming protection units, not to necessarily defend their right to be mothers or to care for her family (as essentialists would frame it), but rather to secure her own person from insecurity and violence that is mostly derived from a society that is hostile to women's inclusion. By extension, women are then placed in a position to protect *other* women. The

combination of symbolic history, opportunities to maintain a folklore oral tradition, and unsuccessful attempts at assimilating the Kurds into other ethnic groups in the area has resulted in a need to self-organize for the purposes of security, particularly in the lives of Kurdish women and women in general. The Kurds have created a history that has become an intangible symbol of their identity and struggle. Due to the temporal constraints in definitively proving the facts of their continuous lineage, the symbol is beyond reproach for those that believe in it and serves as an anchor to which the women's movement has irrevocably fastened. The mythology and symbolism have a direct influence on women's belief in their communal responsibility, thus creating a link between Kurdish history and Kurdish women's participation in security movements.

CHAPTER 6 – WOMEN'S SELF-ORGANIZATION

Introduction

The self-organization of women for the purposes of protection, activism, and security was a prominent theme within this study, with thirteen out of fourteen participants alluding to or directly addressing this point within the context of human security. While 'self-organization' initially appears as a relatively simple term to define, it comprises a set of activities and mentality arising at the behest of women. Rather than drawing on a standardized definition, characterizations regarding this term will be informed by participants, including women that have directly engaged in self-organization. Self-organization is a broad term encompassing a wide variety of activities that are organized by women and men to improve conditions of gender equality, human rights, and protections that ultimately contribute to human security. Specific examples of activities are discussed in further detail in the sections following. In addition, this thesis focuses on self-organizing for human security purposes rather than general organizing for any set of aims or interests. From both Rojava and in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), there are examples of activism, protection, and security-seeking behaviours that can provide an overview of how these women contribute to security in their local areas within the Middle East and beyond. The YPJ is also extensively discussed by participants regarding self-organizing and women's protection. The YPJ has served as a symbol for gender equality in Syria, especially given ISIS's harsh treatment of women (Kardas & Tesiltas, 2017). Such examples of ISIS's treatment of women and young girls included imprisonment, human trafficking, forced marriage, sexual slavery, and extreme sexual violence (Shahali, Shariati, & Montazeri, 2020). Western media's focus on ISIS's treatment of women and YPJ's subsequent fight against extremism could be construed as women standing up for their rights and protection of their person or a

clever tactic of "war paraphernalia" from the Kurdish nationalist movement to achieve a state under the guise of gender equality (Kardas & Tesiltas, 2017, p. 272). However, within the KRI, participant anecdotes detail the that it was not paraphernalia after all; participants in this study believe that women have made progress due to their organizing, including political and legal reforms. As is common with nationalist agendas, the feminist or women's movement is often afforded a secondary priority in achieving human security, prompting women in the Kurdish movement to seek out these rights for themselves (Tank, 2017). Detailed below are the participant-led definitions for self-organization, the organization of women seeking security, and the organization of the YPJ as described by commanders and soldiers within the protection unit in Rojava. In terms of the scope of this thesis, this Chapter of findings addresses how women create security within Syria and Iraq, demonstrating the different methods that women employ to increase security in their surrounding environment.

Participant-Led Rationales of Self-Organization

In order to conceptualize the definition of self-organization, participant responses are used to construct the overall rationale for participation, which creates an overall definition of what it means to self-organize in the context of this study. However, past literature also serves as a guide to understand the current outlook of women's organization. Ferre (2006) provides a broad definition of self-organization in their work *Global Feminism: Transnational Women's Activism, Organizing, and Human Rights*, referring to it as "feminist mobilization." Here, self-organization is described in general terms, encompassing a broad scope of actors and actions involved in this process:

> the full range of individual, formal, and informal women's movement actors that are agents for mobilization outside of the state, state agencies that have been explicitly

> established to promote women's rights, and the feminist frames that are forwarded by these state-based and society-based actors. (Ferre, 2006, p. 348)

Participant data in this section describe general and specific actions that both women and men undertake in self-organizing and describe why they needed or felt compelled to do so. Self-organization activities vary in both Iraq and Rojava, with different effects on overall human security, women's rights, and gender equality. Self-organization is also viewed as a right by participants, especially for women that are often excluded from political processes or decisions, even though they are affected by such policies. The importance of women's inclusion is detailed by S. Moslem, who believes women need to be included in general, and that if they are absent, their viewpoints are a missing component to the organization:

> if we don't have the women sharing with us in our activities, we feel that there is something missing. (S. Moslem, personal communication, June 2, 2020)

A. Jalal, General Director of the High Council of Women Affairs in the KRG, discusses the goals women adamantly want to achieve as a result of their self-organization and participation:

> Kurdish women not only demand their protection, but also demand their participation and demand [to be involved in] their issues, as I mentioned previously, on political, social, economic, civil rights aspects, and so on. (A. Jalal, personal communication, June 20, 2020)

Other participants, like B. Ali also shared similar views of women's organization, going a step further in emphasizing that women are charged with the responsibility of acting against injustice, even if it is taboo or dangerous. The responsibility to all women was also a theme in the previous chapter, where communal norms were further detailed. While women may demand protection for themselves when stepping outside of the gendered norms expected of women to (as A. Jalal

previously noted), B. Ali adds that women are also responsible to protect others in the same manner:

> We have a right to be active. We have a right to be a part, and also, we are responsible to be a part to protect our nation and our region. (B. Ali, personal communication, April 30, 2020)

In some cases, the self-organization described by participants embodies a movement to circumvent patriarchal power structures and is meant to work towards an alternative to capitalism, nationalism, and gender-based violence – all common markers of patriarchal power. To exemplify the relationship between self-organization, protection, and seeking an alternative to patriarchy, F. Geerdink uses the analogy of domestic violence within marriage to explain her point:

> Maybe a woman at some point, you know, you have to go to protect your life. But that's what we're doing. We go to the mountains. We defend ourselves. We have all weapons, but we build an alternative. If we don't build an alternative, we're going to repeat the same mistake and wanting to have a state, even if we put our system there, it would be repeating the mistake. So, if you live a violent marriage as a woman, you are going to make the same mistake if you don't make a bigger struggle and if you don't see all the mechanisms at work that make that situation so violent for you, so you will have to make it go in ways that it's never going to be enough. You have to struggle against everything that enables domestic violence. If not, it's going to repeat itself again and again. Maybe not to you, maybe to other women. (F. Geerdink, personal communication, April 18, 2020)

F. Geerdink's descriptive analogy implies that women have to forge a path forward by organizing their resources, people, and leadership to break the cycles of social norms and gender constructions that result in oppression. The need to participate is also influenced by empty actions from the United Nations and other international groups that declare the importance of women's participation, but still struggle with implementation. A. Jalal discusses this issue in

depth, particularly on the UNSCR 1325 Resolution and how implementation gaps remain in providing security for women:

> There are a set of resolutions in the Security Council Resolution 1325 Security and Peace for Women issued in 2000 in the United Nations Security Council. This resolution urges the relevant institutions in Iraqi states and countries that have armed conflicts— to protect women and preserve a safe environment for displaced women or battered women, but we find that these international resolutions and United Nations resolutions lack the implementation of the contents of all these resolutions issued by the United Nations or the Security Council on the ground. (A. Jalal, personal communication, June 20, 2020)

At times, female activists also feel a need to organize outside of such groups that perpetuate patriarchal hierarchies, as these ultimately create a feeling of false empowerment to women. Women's efforts or groups are redirected into upholding patriarchal society to prevent power (re-)distribution between women and their counterparts. According to Participant CL1, a Kurdish community member of the Kurdish diaspora, women are exploited under the guise that these international organizations assist in changing the status quo for women:

> Women played a big role and tried to reach their voice to international organizations and the United Nations through many organizations that were in conflict areas. However, as I said, it was not done professionally and well, and many of these female cadres were exploited by the patriarchal society to serve the parties or their policies or to serve combat groups. (Participant CL1, personal communication, July 31, 2020)

Joining patriarchal structures to enact sustainable change is difficult, and often self-organization becomes a vessel for making meaningful changes for women. Cockburn (2007) speaks to this concern, which also echoes my position on the matter, where women who participate in patriarchal institutions may inadvertently uphold power structures, thus repeating cycles of violence and power structures that cater to the ruling elite. She asserts that both women and men are "participating actively in, and sustaining, patriarchal power relations and thus gender hierarchy" (Cockburn, 2007, p. 6). Despite this issue, some participants noted that they work

within the patriarchal structures to create changes. Knowingly working within the same structure that causes the disenfranchisement of women appears to be a strategic move on the part of women to slowly change norms and attitudes that the patriarchal system uses to ensure its survival. In addition, it may also provide opportunities for their male counterparts to act as allies in making these changes. Taking a cue from Zalewski and Parpart (2008), men are also caught in gendered expectations of masculinities, sometimes shamed for acting outside of the violence and commandeering strength that is expected of a hypermasculine in conflict.

In terms of the modes and means of self-organization, participants describe various activities that Kurdish women are involved in to alleviate conditions of oppression and change their situations for the better. The activities that self-organizers participate in is listed below:

1. Organizing to change the law around labour for women's safety in the workplace in the KRG (A. Jalal, personal communication, June 20, 2020)
2. Creating organizations that exist to advocate for women's rights (B. Ali, personal communication, April 30, 2020)
3. Educating and training Kurdish Peshmerga on gender-based violence (B. Ali, personal communication, April 30, 2020)
4. Protesting and demonstrating against political conflict within the KRG (O. Sheikhmous, personal communication, June 27, 2020; T. Khailany, personal communication, May 6, 2020; N. Othman, personal communication, April 28, 2020)
5. Forming protection and defence units to provide security (F. Geerdink, personal communication, April 18, 2020; Participant YPJ 2, personal communication, June 17, 2020; Participant YPJ 1, personal communication, June 15, 2020; B. Ali, personal communication, April 30, 2020; N. Abdullah, personal communication, June 9, 2020)

6. Organizing projects that boost the visibility of women in media through radio (Participant CL1, personal communication, July 31, 2020)

These activities listed above are also linked with the historical dimension by participants in that women are instilled with a responsibility for their community, leading to their desire to self-organize (B. Ali, personal communication, April 30, 2020; B. Younis, personal communication, July 3, 2020). Indeed, B. Ali goes further to note that women are not only responsible for protection but have the right to be active and to organize themselves to increase their participation in basic elements of society:

> we are an active part of half of the society— there are so many women that graduated from high school— from university. So, there are so many qualified women in the Kurdish society. So why not? You know, it's also about right. It is about our belief. (B. Ali, personal communication, April 30, 2020)

As B. Ali alludes, the protection of women and responsibility to protect and empower women is a cornerstone ideology of the YPJ, a group that has derived its ideology from the teachings of Abdullah Öcalan (Al-Ali & Tas, 2018), which was discussed in the literature review. Tying this back to the definition provided by F. Geerdink, the YPJ seeks an alternative to sectarianism on principles tied to communalism through their projection of areas within the Rojava region. As participants discussed, the decision to participate in self-organization is based on the historic context (as discussed at the beginning of Chapter 5) of how women related to their society and the communal responsibility they had in the protection of identity. As a result, women identify situations that require a group response, and participate in rectifying or alleviating this situation by organizing or joining a group to bring awareness to that situation. Specific examples of these types of situations that require response are detailed throughout this Chapter. This group would rally together through advocacy, demonstration, or protesting to improve or eliminate the

situation. The anticipated result would be to bring awareness to the harmful situation and changing the harmful situation for long-term stability and security. The visual process of this self-organization is depicted in Figure 1.

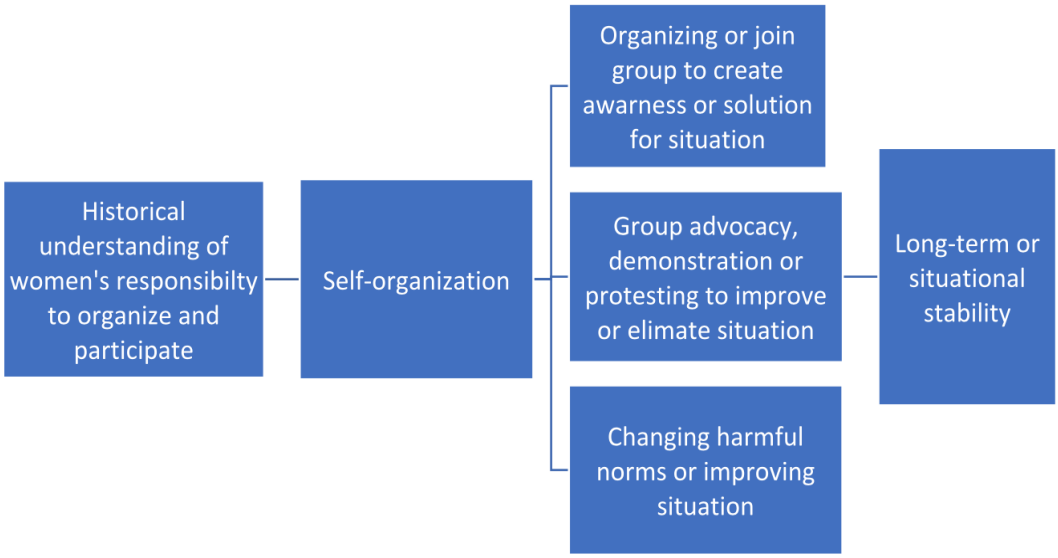


Figure 1: Self-Organization Process

Using this diagram, the next section will detail how this process is used in the context of protection, drawing on the YPJ in Rojava as an example.

Self-Organizing as a Means of Protection and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ)

Self-organization is used as a means of protection for women as individuals. In this vein, the YPJ is one of the foci of this section of Chapter 6, including their aims within the group and why women have joined these movements in spite of the inherent risk and potentially fatal consequences it poses for women. As stated in the definition of self-organization, raising awareness of insecurity or harms against women can rally women to participate in alleviating these conditions and advocating for justice. These examples were discussed in the literature review but included various examples globally of women's safety being undermined or

threatened due to their self-organization. This included the Pussy Riot case in Russia, (Kananovich, 2015), women being targeted for SGBV while demonstrating for women's rights (Tadros, 2013, p. 9), and sexual harassment of female Japanese politicians and leadership (Daltone, 2017). Unfortunately, there are no shortage of examples. While the above articles are indicative of the increased risk that women face in self-organization, some participants believed women could either participate fully in society (despite the likelihood that harm) or they could continue to live as subordinates to men (N. Abdullah, personal communication, June 9, 2020).

For Commander N. Abdullah, the organization occurred *because* of the potential for violence when women became more visible and organized. Commander N. Abdullah emphasizes that it is not a *choice* for women to take up activities to organize, but rather was done for *survival.* If these choices are not made to struggle against systems of oppression that harm women, women will be condemned to living as a subordinate or trapped in a metaphoric prison:

> We are in a society where we have two choices, either live in prisons, or live as subordinate ripped of your rights, or to defend yourself, where this defence ends with death. Therefore, nobody can protect women, not her husband, not her son, nor her father. Only she can defend herself. And for that, we seek leadership, to protect her society and land. (N. Abdullah, personal communication, June 9, 2020)

Commander N. Abdullah's opinion is glaringly dissimilar to the essentialist theorizing on why women would seek to protect and stabilize. Here, it is tied to prioritizing the woman and her agency instead of motherhood and simultaneously displaces the patriarchal role of men as protector and defender.

In some cases, women joining such groups like protection armed movements are often ostracized for doing so and face double standards from their family and communities:

> When I lived in Bakur [Turkey], I lived in a concrete building, 10 floors. And there was this old man— like really old 80s, 90s. And he asked me, “are you married? Do you have children?” I said, “oh, I'm not married. I don't have children.” “Oh, what do you do?” “I'm a journalist.” “Very good. You're a free woman. You're a free woman.” And then I thought would he say the same, if his granddaughter would be doing the things that I'm doing? It's sometimes hard to accept this in your own family. And I made a big story about that and interviewed many women in different cities in Kurdistan. And women also say that like they first have to make a struggle before they can go out and do things. So it's like it's easier to applaud women who do this kind of thing, if it's not your own daughter. Right. But the women do it anyway because they are everywhere. But it's still a struggle because there's patriarchy is rooted very deeply, of course.

In addition, the man in F. Geerdink’s story also has a conflicting understanding of Western women versus women within his family unit and by extension, his viewpoint of his community. It also shows that male counterparts within the community can support ideas of self-organization, but there are glaring social norms within their own community that need to be addressed. As F. Geerdink alludes, women first have to go against these norms to make them acceptable in their local community.

Participant YPJ 1 was also insistent that the group was keen on advancing the equality of both women and men, finding that the gender equality was directly linked with stability:

> The Kurdish woman finds herself responsible, not because of women, but because of equality between men and women. To explain more, Women’s Protection Units, doesn’t rely on women only and consider men as second level, but on the basis of a society where women are equal to men, and this helps stability in the region. (Participant YPJ 1, personal communication, June 15, 2020)

What is novel about the YPJ and what is noted through the language of the participant interviews is that women appeared to be described in terms of individual personhood and their right to exist as a result – no connections were made to grounding her existence in motherhood or the roles they fill in relation to men within a family unit, either as a daughter, sister, wife or mother.

Commander N. Abdullah also asserts that the YPJ is only an armed group to counteract the violence currently perpetrated against themselves and other women and that this militarization arises out of necessity rather than a choice. The ultimate goal would be to reach a level of stability and security that would render arms unnecessary:

> [The YPJ] are against arms, fighting, attacks, and arming if we were not forced to, because fighting brings destruction. However, this is a necessity, and tomorrow, if we do not need a weapon, we won't carry it. But in return, women found themselves forced to take up arms and defend themselves, because no can protect her, not fathers, brothers, husbands, or children. Only a woman can protect herself. So, this is a need for self-defence. We were absolutely obliged to carry arms; it was not a choice. (N. Abdullah, personal communication, June 9, 2020)

While some participants believed it was key to protect women to create stability, some participants found that stability would only be obtained once the fighting ceased:

> the role of women as fighters doesn't serve stability. To create stability, you need to stop fighting; there must be peace. I hope that the Kurdish cause and Kurdish women in Rojava achieve peace through dialogue. The woman is a symbol of peace that contributes to the de-escalation of fighting, not fighting. . . I think now it is time for gradual transitional justice We need to move toward that level and gradually move toward stability stage (J. Abdullah, personal communication, June 10, 2020).

J. Abdullah believes the militarism or Kurdish women is not the answer to human security, but that peace hinges upon dialogue and discourse. However, participants who were part of the YPJ see the militarism in different terms. Participant YPJ 1, a fighter with the YPJ, believed that the YPJ was not based upon militarization, despite their use of force to obtain protection and is unique compared to other women's movements due to its fight for protection of women:

> what makes the YPJ unique is it's not based on militarization, but there are separate principles. YPJ defends its existence, and fights for that, and protection is one of the foundations of YPJ. (Participant YPJ 1, personal communication, June 15, 2020)

As seen in various other women's movements that have self-organized for protection that were discussed in the literature review, protection movements are not entirely unique, but it appears the framing of the struggle purported by the YPJ steps outside of simplistic (and often essentialist) understandings of women's personhood. While it may be common for essentialism to weave through perceptions of groups like the YPJ, these ideas are not always shared by women involved in these self-organization movements and activities. Through Participant YPJ 1's statement, it appears that organizations like the YPJ: 1) defend their existence as an exclusively women's group that faces pressure from patriarchal forces and institutions and 2) defends the existence of women to participate in daily society, unencumbered by the threat of violence. YPJ 1 also discussed how the group looked to similar movements and that the structure and philosophy of the YPJ acted as a global movement and template for all women and women's movements:

> As for how we organized ourselves, we looked at the movements that had failed, and we worked on not to repeat their mistakes. YPJ does not see itself as a movement at the level of Western Kurdistan, but rather at the global level, and it sees all women's movements as blessed. Other woman outside YPJ can benefit from the experience of YPJ, work on this system, and benefit from the experience of successful movements, and the factors that led to the weakness of these movements. (Participant YPJ 1, personal communication, June 15, 2020)

The media has romanticized the portrayal of the YPJ, focusing on the physical appearance of the female fighters that wanted to show their overt masculinity and authority in a hostile environment (Tank, 2017). Other authors like Bloom (2011), Gilligan (1977), and Peach (1997) propagate essentialist theories (noted in Chapter 3) and limit the expressions of why women would seek to self-organize in response to their dwindling security and why women's goals may have a higher endpoint of human security rather than grounded in the continuation of the

reproductive cycle. B. Younis, a researcher for the Centre of Jinology, contrary to these essentialist readings, considers that women have the capability to rely on themselves, especially within the YPJ:

> In YPJ, the community protection forces and then woman protection, where we protect her person and her right. YPJ also has a philosophy, and we are the owners of this philosophy. For example, the more women know themselves, they can protect themselves. (B. Younis, personal communication, July 3, 2020)

Commander N. Abdullah offers a similar viewpoint as B. Younis, highlighting that women within Rojava and surrounding regions were left with few options to improve their situation, with self-organization being one of the last viable options to improve their lives and the lives of other women. The way Commander N. Abdullah describes it, women involved in the YPJ and similar organizations stand as a repudiation of essentialist theories. It is not nearly as simplistic as changing the narrative around women's victimhood but rather a responsibility that women owe themselves and to each other to strive for human security and until that security can be reached, they must utilize all available options to defend themselves including militarization. Participant YPJ 2 acknowledged the that women have a role in security and protection, but the systematic process and outcome of women's organization would take time to manifest into lasting changes:

> All the women of Rojava and Syria revolve around this organization whose foundation is based on organization because Kurdish women protect themselves on an organizational basis so that they act calmly, think carefully, then proceed to implementation. She does not act randomly and has the ability to organize and protect herself. Yes, she will have a role in stability, but this stability is not complete. I cannot say that I will live safely and live in peace, because somehow I have to wait. Things are step-by-step. I am sure that the Kurdish women will do something positive. (Participant YPJ 2, personal communication, June 17, 2020)

As demonstrated in the next section on self-organization and activism, participants detail the significant gains that women have made by banding together and pushing for change, despite all the barriers and social conventions that stand in the way of gender equality and progressive politics.

Women's Self-Organization for Security

Self-organization often includes political activism that may raise awareness of harms posed to general society, including women advocating for changes to policies that can limit women and pose security issues in their lives. Self-organization for security is often intended to mitigate or eliminate conditions of injustice or inequality against women, by gathering like-minded individuals for their cause. While the political activism of Kurdish women has been documented in the literature (Al-Ali & Tas, 2018; Dirik, 2014), self-organization is a relatively new context to view women's contributions to human security. In addition, the outcome of these activities is believed to contribute to overall human security, according to participants. T. Khailany believes that women were a stabilizing factor through their activism and movements, specifically in the KRI. T. Khailany adds that women could de-escalate violence and provides the example in the mid-1990s when the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) parties were on the brink of civil war:

> If we look at the example of Iraq, you know, in the mid-1990s, we had a civil war between the two major political parties [PUK and KDP]. But we had we had a pretty strong peace movement trying to push for the parties. We actually had a march. Many women that walked from the city of Suleymani all the way to Erbil. I think over three days or something like that, it was. And then they camped out in front of the Kurdish town parliament until they were able to impose a ceasefire on the political parties. That's a that's a story, unfortunately, that not many people talked about. Not many people know. (T. Khailany, personal communication, May 6, 2020)

Indeed, the above example of the PUK-KDP conflict in Iraq exemplifies how women's self-organization serves to de-escalate violence and produce tangible results. Dr. O. Sheikhmous also described the same example as T. Khailany, recounting the political infighting and how women mobilized to avert further acts of violence between the two clan political parties:

> the women and Kurdish society in Iraqi Kurdistan, they organized a march against the war and against the conflict, and they marched from Suleymani to Erbil. Suleymani was under the control of the PUK and Erbil was under the control of KDP and they wanted to intervene between both parties to stop the war. (O. Sheikhmous, personal communication, June 22, 2020)

Upon reaching Erbil, and as described by Narmin Othman, a former KRG Minister who participated in the march, women "demonstrated in front of the parliament to stop the war" (N. Othman, personal communication, April 28, 2020) with many women from Erbil joining the protest after the initial march settled into a demonstration. The specific march may indicate that women's involvement allows other women to experience a sense of security and draw awareness to demonstrations headed by women. Speaking on this specific event and how women contribute to human security in general, T. Khailany believes that women's organization against violence was a protection measure for women and acted to stabilize the area:

> So [the protests are one] the ways that [women] have been able to contribute. We have had so many campaigns when we find or we feel that things are getting political that could be— that could lead to some kind of unrest. We definitely have been a stabilizing factor. (T. Khailany, personal communication, May 6, 2020)

As described by T. Khailany, Dr. O. Sheikhmous, and N. Othman, the women's march to Erbil shifted the outcome of the KRG's subsequent politics in the region by recognizing women's importance to the political process. Women's involvement was also a predictor of women's continual presence and involvement in the KRG's political evolution. Al-Ali and Pratt (2009)

note the march to Erbil in their article, *Women and War in the Middle East: Transnational Perspectives* and agree that "there was considerable effort to rebuild the destroyed Kurdish region" and the rebuild was attributed to "devoted individuals, in particular women" (p. 105).

Participant CL1, a community member from Rojava, also noted that these women's activist movements in Kurdistan, particularly in Syria after the conflict began in 2011, were organized to give women their liberty out of chaos:

> All women's organizations and movements, or small groups calling equality between men and women, all arose out of the chaos that began with the Syrian crisis, unfortunately, where there are parties who took advantage of this point, because women, like any other person, or just like a man, took advantage of the situation to be liberated, but we did not reach the required degree, to which these cadres are able to transmit correct and healthy laws to rise the Kurdish or Arab society or the Middle Eastern society in general. Unfortunately, as I said, the reliance was on the chaotic situation, and there was no real reliance on the competent and academic cadres. So, let us return to the Kurdish case, in particular, somewhat better than the Arab case or from other sects and other components of our society. I think that now is not the same as the beginning of the Syrian revolution, for example, the chaos that occurred in 2004 and the war in Iraq. The situation has changed dramatically. (Participant CL1, personal communication, July 31, 2020)

Organizing in light of chaos and empowering other women to take up these types of protests or demonstrations also contradicts Porter's (2013) findings that women's empowerment only occurs if the woman feels a sense of security (p. 6). It also points to chaos being an opportunity to disrupt an already unstable set of power hierarchies. In some instances, the chaos is also an opportunity to advance the women's movement ahead of other priorities like the creation of the Kurdish state. Participant CL1 also notes that political parties took advantage of chaos to elevate their status in society, above women's organizations and movements that were attempting to progress gender equality. Meaning, the political parties presumably diverted the energy generated from the chaos for their own benefit and potentially away from improving the situation

of women. Similar to Participant CL1, Dr. O. Sheikhmous also comments on the "space" that women created or capitalized on to build their movement, specifically referring to the beginning of the Syrian conflict and the Arab Uprisings, which allowed women to mobilize and forward gender equality and women's rights:

> women are becoming much more active within Kurdish society because they have been given the advantage, the space has been created. (O. Sheikhmous, personal communication, June 27, 2020)

A. Jalal also provides other examples within the KRG where women's activism and self-organization work to create a sense of economic security for women. These initiatives were headed by women from Rojava and Iranian Kurdistan who organized in the KRG governorates. The goal was to normalize women's participation in the labour market and private sectors of business, thereby undermining the stereotypical belief that women's efforts should be focused on domestic work for their family:

> At the beginning, society here did not accept this, [for women] to be present in the labour market, and participate in the media sectors, but her sacrifices and insistence in her work forced the Kurdish society and the Kurdish woman in southern Kurdistan to initiate the same work and demand the same rights because they are not inferior to men to participate in the private sector and so on. (A. Jalal, personal communication, June 20, 2020)

Through A. Jalal's perception, women continue to work towards the participation of women in society, and primarily the private labour market that could potentially provide a level of economic and financial security for women. There is an underlying tension between Kurdish claims as an egalitarian society and A Jalal's quotation, as she points towards a laborious advocacy involved in creating conditions of equality. Presumably, the right to participate in the public sphere would normalize participation in other aspects of society. Despite these

advancements in obtaining a higher level of security and protections for women through advocacy, these changes are difficult to implement due to the initial pushback described by A. Jalal. The consistent advocacy and organization to improve their standing in society is directly linked to women's input in policies that can potentially affect outcomes for human security. However, B. Ali believes Kurdish nationalists would attempt sideline women's agency in favour of policies set by the patriarchal elite, especially within the KRG. Simultaneously, B. Ali recognizes the extensive accomplishments of women when discussing the political institutions that were formed in the KRG among other advancements for feminist activists:

> So there is all political parties they have quota for women and they are also active in their political parties and also there are many institutions formed in the last 15 years protecting women in the Ministry of Interior, there are more than 30 offices for working to protect women from violence and domestic violence. There are three courts for domestic violence in courts of Kurdistan. There are High Council of Women who are working to mainstream women's issues of gender equality in government policy. And there are women activists in the last four, five years. More than 50 percent of the students who are graduates from university are women. So all of these that, you know, result of the work of Kurdish women in Kurdistan for women's issues, . . . as a feminist activists think of ourself [*sic*], "we did a lot." (B. Ali, personal communication, April 30, 2020)

Despite the immense effort from women to concentrate the focus on women's issues, B. Ali describes the unfortunate reality where women must continuously organize despite setbacks to create an environment where they are heard and have some sense of security in their lives. Otherwise, those in a position to respond to gender inequality will waiver unless it is pushed to the forefront of political priority. Additionally, there is an intense focus on protecting women from domestic violence, but how effective are these offices in achieving their aims when gender-based violence continues in the KRI (Al-Ali, 2018, p. 12; Hauge, Gill, & Begikhani, 2013, p. 395)? Criticisms of the KRG's empty efforts in pacifying women with these types of prominent

portfolios in politics are discussed more extensively in Chapter 8. F. Geerdink also spoke about how Kurdish women reorganize in response to these types of barriers, including foreign interference and becoming internally displaced as a refugee. F. Geerdink observes that if women involved in self-organization are deterred or forced off track, "the next day they pick it up again" (F. Geerdink, personal communication, April 18, 2020) finding their role and continuing towards building an alternative society where they enjoy relative security.

Conclusion

Self-organization is a tool employed to enact significant changes towards those that are marginalized, particularly issues that affect women. Through interviews, participants discussed the array of methods to organize through a variety of different actors. Those that participate in self-organization thereby contribute to human security by creating conditions where women's voices can be included in mainstream policies. Participants like B. Ali indicated that women feel compelled to contribute to organizing and, as expressed in Chapter 5 of the findings, is derived from their reflection on the Kurdish past and symbolic history. The Women's Protection Movement (YPJ) in Rojava was particularly highlighted as a feminist movement that actively contributed to creating protection for all women, and not because women were vulnerable, but because it was their right as an individual to be free from violence in their lives. As YPJ Commander N. Abdullah emphasized during our interview, women are left with little option in protection measures for themselves and often find little recourse in their reliance on structures that perpetuate conditions of instability. Self-organization also involved advocacy in political change, particularly within the KRG, with allies coming together to create awareness and demonstrate against harmful conditions for women. In terms of how this would contribute to human security, women rally for changes despite the incredible risks and threats to their person.

In effect, women undermine their individual security to promote general security in the area, often resulting in the best interests of other women. The self-organization is what enables their participation in human security movements like the YPJ or other forms of awareness raising within the political structure of the KRG. It empowers women to continue working within politics and their community to create a better society for women rather than just Kurdish women.

CHAPTER 7 – WOMEN'S TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKING & COLLABORATION

Introduction

To find what could potentially lead to foundations of human security, this section looks towards the social organization and networking that women engage in to achieve their goals. The theme of women's networking also contributes to answering the research questions of this thesis, regarding how women contribute to human security, what elements produce the security, and in some circumstances, how women's self-organizing and advocacy repels extremism. As seen within Chapter 2, women often have difficulty in making lasting changes within patriarchal institutions, specifically ones that allow women to distribute power. Some participants also discussed the difficulty of working within the KRG, as there was a perception that the government served as an obstacle to genuinely addressing women's standing in society. As also detailed by participants, the best route to secure this type of improvement is through social democracy, and at times, it is imported through Western education and brought back to Kurdistan by those born and raised in the Middle East. The importation of Western values is also reminiscent of Said's (1978) work, where "values found in the West . . . is taken for granted as having the status of scientific truth" (p. 68). Alternatively, the West (advanced by participants and noted as potentially problematic in Edward Said's work) is looked towards as a gatekeeper in unlocking some sort of enlightenment and returning those ideas to Kurdistan where they can change the shape of gender equality and create human security.

Similar to self-organization, the definition for women's networking is described and defined by the participants of this study and discusses how Kurdish women appeal to others involved in women's rights advocacy or gender equality in the Middle East and beyond to improve human

security. Participants that were interviewed in both Iraq and Syria had witnessed the effort put in by Kurdish women to create this type of network. The building of a network would build capacity for other women to participate in high level leadership positions and to get women involved in areas that were previously reserved for men, including positions in security and leadership. Briefly, women's networking creates avenues for empowerment and new ways of addressing issues, not because they are mothers that care for the outcome for their children, but for the greater treatment of all women globally. In addition, it can lead to increased visibility for women, thus normalizing women's participation. This chapter is subsequently divided into 5 main sections: 1) the participant-driven definition of women's networking and what types of activities it entails; 2) women's communication outside of Iraq and Syria to create such networks; 3) the impact that the women's networks have on security generally and within Kurdistan; 4) the influence of the Western diaspora on women's networks; and 5) women's visibility as a key to networking.

Definition of Women's Transnational Networking

Women's networking was frequently discussed by participants in connection to its general effect on women's lives. Similar to the definition of self-organization, for the purpose of this thesis, the term "women's network" or "women's networking" is derived from participant understandings of the term and refers to advocating for women's rights to secure fundamental freedoms for all women (B. Ali, personal communication, April 30, 2020; J. Abdullah, personal communication, June 10, 2020; T. Khailany, personal communication, May 6, 2020; A. Jalal, personal communication, June 20, 2020). These understandings are as follows: A network describes an intricate communication system that facilitates the proliferation of ideas locally and transnationally among women and their allies. The aim of women's networks are to embolden,

raise awareness, and encourage innovation to improve the daily circumstance on women's lives. One participant in this study emphasized that the networking was universal in nature, applying to all women in various areas of the world (B. Ali, personal communication, April 30, 2020). A former government official from the KRG believed that the networking occurred at the local level and involved crossing party lines, working with different ethnicities and religious backgrounds, or working with different levels of government within the Middle East (J. Abdullah). B. Ali discussed the concentration of women's organizations in the Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria, providing that they were "women groups, women networks from an organization who are advocating for women's rights" (B. Ali, personal communication, April 30, 2020). This finding also affirms Hudson's (2009) research on women's networks in Africa, showing that women's networking assists in building security by distributing important information to other women (p. 300) and allows for post-conflict construction by "getting to the root cause of serious problems" within society (p. 317) like gender inequality and gender-based violence. While the finding is not simply transferable to the region this thesis is interested in, it demonstrates that women's networking is a foundation on which human security can be built. The networking also involves communicating the conditions or status of women's rights and spreading awareness about matters such as access to services. One participant expressed that the communication should be unimpeded by political affiliation. Participant CL1 discussed this in greater detail, in that global communication amongst women would build a civil society and create a resilient network for advocacy:

> [communication] should be civil and scientific society instead. I mean that communication should be really— in order to build a society to develop the role of women— to stand up to the psychological diseases of society, and to build civil society. To build women economically helps the family and society. As you know, women educate society, and this will have a positive, big and wider effect compared to the men.

(Participant CL1, personal communication, July 31, 2020)

Participant CL1, a former community member of Rojava who now resides in Europe, discussed how political affiliation should be excluded from transnational networks, and described it as "communication with the outside world without political hegemony" (Participant CL1, personal communication, July 31, 2020). Mojab and Gorman (2007) addressed this in their discussion of Kurdish women in the diaspora, stating that they "are a highly politicized group" (p. 61). Women's networking is politicized by others (in a problematic way), but their aims are not always for a political purpose. It appears that sometimes the networking is about improving service access rather than seeking political power. Thereby, it is my opinion that women's networking is not exclusively focused on political communication and establishing politically-motivated links. Operating outside the political structure within Kurdistan (a patriarchal structure) would allow communication to continue unfiltered by these patriarchal pressures. However, working in a bipartisan manner is common with women, especially in the KRG. Jinar Abdullah, former Member of Parliament in the KRG noted that the organization and networking of women occurred within different parties:

> We collect our activities and support each other to increase [women's empowerment] . . . we work on the parliament level, parties, political party level, people inside the government, and we try to make a lobby. And now we are supporting each other. Sometimes, when its election time and a new cabinet, we try to make delegations to meet with the parties to nominate women, and we have been dealing with NGOs, and international NGOs, to increase the quality life of women's, you know, in different levels, we are working to increase it, and at the same time, every one of us, member of this group we call Kurdish Women Leaders, and we have a network in Kurdistan, and we are focusing on our parties and all of us together, we are focusing on the government and election and parliament. (J. Abdullah, personal communication, June 10, 2020)

The networking, in attempting to complete the activities described by J. Abdullah and Participant CL1, can create opportunities for leadership and advocacy that would improve the overall conditions for women. As described by the participants above, women's networking is a method to increase the quality of women's lives by lobbying governments and increasing network contacts within the political structure. Next, the communication that J. Abdullah, Participant CL1, and B. Ali refer to is discussed in further depth below.

Communication and Women's Networking

The focus on political power within Kurdistan, specifically in the KRI, pose issues for creating diverse civil society networks that can become subsumed within the existing political system. D. Jaff also noticed the influence that governments can have on the creation and control of women's networking. He criticized the government for attempting to sway loyalty and support from activists and feminists and how some women have abstained from contributing to the "monopoly" that the KRG government wished to have over women's movements or initiatives:

> They [the KRG] fund them just for buying loyalty. And therefore so many serious scholars see as feminist, they are doing their job that they are doing their best to keep line with it, to keep their space with KRG. So for example, Lanja Khawe[17]— she arranged it to an international conference on feminism. So many organizations KRG offered sponsorship. She refused and instead she arranged the conference by the money that was collected through donation of different people. And she even rejected all the funding from political parties and political personalities. (D. Jaff, personal communication, May 5, 2020)

This theme occurred numerous times within the participants' narratives on women's networking, where the political system and political parties served as a barrier to increasing open communication between Kurdistan and those in the Kurdish diaspora and improving the situation

[17] Lanja Khawe is a prominent Kurdish lawyer and feminist activist in Iraq.

of women through discourse and activism. Participant CL1 also suggests that female political leaders working under a political party would be limited in pushing through progressive policies for gender equality or policies that could improve the lives of women:

> Unfortunately, we need cadres that conduct civil society without political influence and political parties. We need some neutral movements, otherwise the situation will remain as it is. The reason for its failure is also the influence political parties and movements. somewhat, and sometimes not that bad. This is normal, and this is a human nature. Even at times, the woman loses her peculiarity and freedom of opinion when making decisions as a result of that influence. (Participant CL1, personal communication, July 31, 2020)

This also links back to the literature review in Chapter 3 on how women's participation can create human security. With men continuing to dominate the political power structure of the KRG and potentially into Rojava, women would continue to be subject to the patriarchal hegemony and, consequently, face limitations in gaining their own power. F. Geerdink also commented on the tribal politics that is still prevalent in the KRI, demonstrating that the continuous power struggle between clans (and political parties) overshadowed women's progression in the KRI:

> But the [women's] movement is not very strong in Kurdistan in Iraq. And that is still centred around clans. It's still in Bashour, which is South Kurdistan, which is in Iraq. It's still very— the clans are still very powerful. And they call them political parties. Now, KDP[18] and PUK[19], but there are actually clans now and they're fighting for power. And that's also why I am a little bit bored about Bashour because I don't want to write about men having power or fights over power. (F. Geerdink, personal communication, April 18, 2020)

[18] Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) is a major political party in the KRG.

[19] Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) is also a major political party in the KRG.

Participant CL1 had similar views on the limitations that engaging with the political establishment or political structures placed over women and delayed women's development, networking, and growth within civil society:

> For our Kurdish society in the Middle East or even the Arab countries, which is worse than the Kurdish one, they need to communicate with the outside world more and more freely. Not through political parties or political currents, but through civil society contacts, and by staying away from political avenues and methods. *This point is very important, because I see that it does not reach the desired goal when it occurs under political influences or political events.* Negative results occur instead of positive results, which the goal of it is to reach development. (Participant CL1, personal communication, July 31, 2020; emphasis added)

Van Den Handel, Edwards, and Watson (2014) have linked women's networking with peace, finding that "as women's networks establish themselves in one country, they diffuse regionally as proponents of conflict resolution and state rebuilding" (p. 5). As Participant CL1 notes, the involvement of political parties limited the effectiveness of women's networks and women's efforts would not reach their potential if they were constructed under the purview of political influences. These criticisms are also reminiscent of the "add women and stir" analogy mentioned in Sharoni (2017) and Gentry and Sjoberg (2015), where adding women to patriarchal institutions in equal numbers to their male counterparts will not produce the desired outcome of gender equality or general conditions of security. Gentry and Sjoberg (2015) believe that simply adding women in aspects of society "creates the perception that women are achieving equality in global politics, when . . . public discourses communicate another message when we read between the lines" (p. 7). I agree that there are hidden messages and subtle (and not so subtle) hints about women's place in society and by intensely focusing on these soldiers in media, the message that continues is that they are against the norm and their actions are worth gawking over. I am not attempting to discredit the immense work that women have done and their actions, but the gender

roles that limit women's expression, showing that "traditional gender norms remain intact and thriv[e]" (p. 6) Indeed, many of these institutions that are headed by men are designed to preserve the authority and privilege of men and masculinity. In the next section, participants discuss how women's networks impact human security, particularly in post-conflict areas.

Impact that Women's Networks have on Human Security

Returning to the research question of this thesis, the women's network serves as an additional tool used by women to create conditions of human security and bring awareness to injustices or obstacles that women face in their daily lives. According to some participants, the method for achieving gender equality and security is by involving women from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities (B. Ali, personal communication, April 30, 2020; O. Sheikhmous, personal communication, June 27, 2020; N. Othman, personal communication, April 28, 2020; Participant YPJ 1, personal communication, June 15, 2020; Participant YPJ 2, personal communication, June 17, 2020; N. Abdullah, personal communication, June 9, 2020). Diversity, according to participants in this study, is effective due to the multiple perspectives that can be drawn upon to resolve various issues related to human security, including protection and security. J. Abdullah also commented on the effect of women's networking on leadership positions in the KRG:

> In the ministries and the government, first, there were very little [few] women inside of this process, but now we have women as ministers . . . The rate becomes increased day after day. It doesn't mean that our problems and gender equality are solved. No, no, we are in that first line, and we push it, but we see that there are reactions if we work. And now, have many, many activities, women together in parties, different parties. We are working together and push the parties to make changes more and more. But to me, it doesn't mean that everything is OK. no, we are not satisfied. (J. Abdullah, personal communication, June 10, 2020)

As J. Abdullah stated in her interview, these strides in women's participation are commendable and work towards creating security in the lives of women; however, she also notes that this is still insufficient. The viewpoint that J. Abdullah expressed is also typical in academic literature where Kurdish women (and Kurdistan in general) are idealized for their progressive approach to gender equality, when women are still feeling the effects and barriers to contributing to society based on their gender (Alsaba & Kapilashrami, 2016; Wright, 2014; Hauge, Gill, & Begikhani, 2013; Aghaie, 2017). However, J. Abdullah believed that there are improvements being made with women's inclusion in all areas of society, including politics and general participation in activism. Given the effects of women's participation, explored in the theoretical chapter on the correlation between women and security (posited by Cockburn, 2007), this is certainly a positive outcome because women's networking allows greater opportunity for women to participate and form a coalition to critique the treatment of women and the state of their security in general. J. Abdullah discusses the value of networking when asked what can be done to increase empowerment for women and encourage participation in politics:

> We collect our activities and support each other to increase this. We work on the parliament level, parties, political parties' level, people inside the government, and we try to make a lobby. And now we are supporting each other. Sometimes, when its election time and a new cabinet, we try to make delegations to meet with the parties to nominate women, and we have been dealing with NGOs, and international NGOs, to increase the quality life of women's, you know, in different levels— we are working to increase it, and at the same time, every one of us, member of this group we call Kurdish Women Leaders, and we have a network in Kurdistan, and we are focusing on our parties and all of us together, we are focusing on the government and election and parliament. (J. Abdullah, personal communication, June 10, 2020)

The networking parallels with Cockburn's (2007) analysis on women's contribution to politics in the context of conflict and how it adds value to the security process. Again, referencing back to intersectionality, Kurdish women belong to multiple marginalized groups, and they may have a

unique perspective on solving conflict, and in this case, share it with other organizations, thereby "bring[ing] it to the notice of the public" (Cockburn, 2007, Ch. 8, para. 6). Women in these cases are drawing upon experiential understandings of gender rather than essentialist. J. Abdullah also references 'increasing the quality of life for women,' and not only for the sake of their family or children, but also because they are individuals that deserve that sort of security in their own right.

Participant T. Khailany has also alluded to the mentorship aspect of networking, which also creates opportunities for younger girls and women:

> As a Kurdish woman, I believe it's my duty to make sure that young women know that women can get to be whatever it is that they want to be and in our society and also they need support or they need help. There are places that they can go to. There are people that they can turn to. There are champions for them that can support them. So just letting you know, just being out there, being available to speak to young women and let them know and leading by example or making sure that people know the stories of these women that have been successful or the young women that have succeeded against all odds. (T. Khailany, personal communication, May 6, 2020)

These types of communal norms shared across the Kurdish regions of Iraq and Syria stem from Öcalan's ideology on democratic confederalism. As explored in Chapter 5, these values that were supported through Kurdish collective memory result in women feeling responsibility for mentoring young women and girls. As T. Khailany also noted in her anecdote above, mentorship builds awareness on injustices that women face, in addition to creating opportunities for advancement in society. Participants also described efforts in reaching out to other women, especially in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region. N. Othman described how women's conferences could also have a snowball effect of influencing other women to join such causes:

> To help other women in the areas, we have meeting, we are working with Baghdad, we are working with women's organizations in a different area in Iraq and to also some time

> we are working with them at a part like with Lebanon, with Egypt. Yeah, with the Jordanian. We are working together by meeting and conferences. I think that not directly but indirectly we could influence all women in the other part. (N. Othman, personal communication, April 28, 2020)

Participant YPJ 1, YPJ 2, and A. Jalal also offered similar opinions, especially regarding the effect it has had on women's participation and networking with women outside of Rojava. Below is a typical quote that speaks to the influence that the protection movements have internationally from A. Jalal:

> In the military field, women in Rojava helped us in this regard, and changed the perception, mentality, and decisions about pushing or supporting women to participate in this regard, not only in southern Kurdistan, but I think that women in Rojava had a role even in regions in South Africa, in a group of Latin American countries, they initiated the same method to form regiments and to form a military team around their participation in defending their places and carrying arms. So, I think the world in general owes the Kurdish women in general and women in Rojava in particular. (A. Jalal, personal communication, June 20, 2020)

A. Jalal discussed the lasting influence and ripple effect of the YPJ, not only in Rojava, but in other movements outside of the MENA region. In Latin America, indigenous groups struggle with similar issues to the Kurds, including issues of displacement, gender inequality, self-determination, and colonization. Indigenous peoples in Latin America, specifically the Mapuche people, have been inspired by the women's revolution in Rojava through the sharing of experience (Villanueva, 2018), as J. Abdullah alludes to in her passage above. Additionally, J. Abdullah also suggests women's transnational networks have the ability to reach further to other regions, allowing for others to find inspiration and develop movements that speak to their goals. Dr. O. Sheikhmous also described how the networking strengthened other women's

organizations and movements that adds to the overall global goal of strengthening gender equality:

> Sometimes I have seen in some socialist international meetings when some women networks from Tunisia, Egypt, Kurdistan and Palestine have had meetings . . . and it's so interesting to see them interact and cooperate with each other. So I think, yes, these women networks and most of these societies will be able to give strength and give impetus and give rich experience exchanges to each other in strengthening each other. I mean, and they were so enthusiastic about establishing these contacts and cooperation networks. So, yes, definitely women networks in Kurdistan will be able to. And I know firsthand that they are looking for establishing cooperation and bridges with women networks in Turkey, in Lebanon, in Egypt and Tunisia and other places. I think there is a strong potential there. (O. Sheikhmous, personal communication, June 27, 2020)

The strengthening of women's networks also applied to learning from other women's movements that faltered or were unsuccessful in fully actualizing their goals. Participant YPJ 1 provided that the YPJ has been relatively successful in maintaining their organization by studying past movements that came before them. Indeed, Participant YPJ 1 emphasized that other networks were a source of knowledge or blueprint for women's movements globally, and each movement could then influence women in other regions of the world:

> YPJ benefited from all the women's movements that excelled, the factors that helped in their rise, and the factors and reasons that impeded their advancement. We made them all experiences that we can benefit from. All the feminist movements that took place around us, YPJ, benefited from them. As for how we organized ourselves, we looked at the movements that had failed, and we worked on not to repeat their mistakes. YPJ does not see itself as a movement at the level of Western Kurdistan, but rather at the global level, and it sees all women's movements as blessed. Other woman outside YPJ can benefit from the experience of YPJ, work on this system, and benefit from the experience of successful movements, and the factors that led to the weakness of these movements. (Participant YPJ 1, personal communication, June 15, 2020)

What is interesting about Participant YPJ 1's commentary is the collective approach to women's rights. It could be argued that Kurdish women are often ignored and have repositioned

themselves globally as a strategy to attract support, particularly from the perceived power in the West (Ferreira & Santiago, 2018). The focus on gender and secular democratization has been criticized as an attempt to be recognized by the international order, which is heavily skewed towards the United States and other Western countries to potentially validate their claim for autonomy of the Kurdish region in Rojava (McKernan, 2017). Kurdish nationalism has often taken priority over the advancement of Kurdish women or women's rights, and as D. Jaff believed, "until the day that we gain our freedom, until the day we see Kurdish in the Kurdish state— Kurdish independence state— the priority, the first the most important issue will be the freedom of the Kurdish state" (D. Jaff, personal communication, May 5, 2020). Participant YPJ 1 has an optimistic viewpoint that transcends the boundaries of nation states. The mindset would potentially provide women with opportunities to make gains in their position within society, and through this, would allow them to participate in greater quantity and in meaningful ways, thereby creating an opportunity for human security to be the outcome. As some participants note, once this freedom is experienced by those that are marginalized it is difficult to rescind.

Participant YPJ 1 and YPJ 2 separately discussed how improving women's situation globally would increase their freedom to freely participate and contribute to their communities. Once women experienced this type of freedom, it would be nearly impossible to revert to patriarchal gender norms. Participant YPJ 1 offered:

> When we build the thought of freedom in women or in society, and especially among women, it is difficult to extract it easily. In my opinion, it will be a good future. Women will play a big role, and it will be an experience that will benefit all countries, and therefore, I see their role positively. (Participant YPJ 1, personal communication, June 15, 2020)

Participant YPJ 2 provided a similar anecdote, but contextualized it in a multicultural approach:

> The Kurdish woman is in the same position and line - she has no advanced or backward position, as she found her destiny in this revolution, whether in the administrative, military, or other fields. The Kurdish woman finds herself with others. It is true that the woman here is known as Kurdish, except that she is with the Syriac, Armenian and Assyrian women. The woman here has taken her step and will not go backwards to what she was before, because freedom is a beautiful thing. (Participant YPJ 2, personal communication, June 17, 2020)

As many participants alluded, women's networking had reached areas of Europe and the West, importing values from the West. However, this is inherently problematic, as the West continues to struggle with its own patriarchal hierarchies, attitudes, and norms. Whether the aim is to increase the claim for a nation state or to improve women's rights in the context of stability building, the European or Western diaspora was a significant source of strength for women's networking and associated movements, and therefore, a contributor to human security.

The Influence of the Kurdish Diaspora

While the Kurdish diaspora is not a focus of this thesis, it does feed into the overall strength of the Kurdish women's movement, possibly allowing its members to use it as a tool to improve human security. Mojab and Gorman (2007) have studied this element and its role in state reconstruction in the KRI between the KRG's establishment in 1991 up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In terms of its influence on human security, Mojab and Gorman (2007) have established that the Kurdish diaspora has acted as another foundation toward supporting and informing the experiences of other women, including those that were raised in the Kurdish regions and either permanently settled in Europe or were educated in Europe and returned to their homeland. The Kurdish diaspora also allowed for "exiled women in state-building and post-war reconstruction projects" by organizing transnationally to support Kurdish women from a

distance with resources that may not be available or easily accessible to them in Iraq and Syria (Mojab & Gorman, 2007, p. 60). D. Jaff spoke about the diaspora and how many who left for Europe for the purposes of education returned to improve their community within Kurdistan with their knowledge and skills. When asked how gender equality has increased or decreased in the region, D. Jaff responded:

> This [gender quality] is all motivated by the Kurdish diaspora into Europe because those people who were living in these civilised societies of Europe, then when they come back to build to Kurdistan or the Kurdistan region in Iraq, they started to notice this. Then we find out all of a sudden, we wake up onto the Kurdish— the question of woman was serious and immediate. (D. Jaff, personal communication, May 5, 2020)

D. Jaff's response during his interview indicated that women reinvest back into their home community and can gain awareness about injustices that women experienced in their home country (and even how women may be oppressed in Western countries or the "host" country. Voller (2014) also notes this in their work on the KRI, where Western countries are idealized as progressive centres, but some women in the host country may identify similar patterns of oppression and gender inequality in the host country (p. 356).

Despite some women recognizing the glaring similarities in gender inequality within their diaspora community and their home country, it also served to improve networking functions, as women could secure "better access to education and communication technologies" compared to those in the home country (p. 356). Returning for a moment to D. Jaff's excerpt above, the period that the diaspora became more influential was in the early 90s, when the KRG formed its governance away from the power of the central Baghdad government. T. Khailany believed that Kurds were able to join the diaspora in increasing numbers between 2003 to 2013, and many women went on to hold high positions in government and private sectors in the KRI (T.

Khailany, personal communication, May 6, 2020). Women also benefited from the stability of the region compared to other areas of Iraq, developing their "language abilities and capabilities" through education (T. Khailany, personal communication, May 6, 2020). With women leaving Kurdistan for education and eventually returning, their education and skills were transferred back to Kurdistan, reinvesting back into the human security of the area. However, in 2013, the government in Baghdad cut off the KRI economically, followed by the Arab Uprisings and ISIS's rise in the area in close succession, causing numerous setbacks for women (T. Khailany, personal communication, May 6, 2020). Based on T. Khailany's anecdote, women's advancement was given secondary priority to the nationalist agenda and addressing extremism.

While this first appears contradictory to this thesis and its research questions, women's progress was sacrificed by the KRG to combat extremism, but it led to the empowerment of women to engage in protection and militarism. With women's progress becoming stagnant considering the crisis of extremism in the area, the Kurdish diaspora and its reinvestment in the Kurdish community (in terms of education and raising awareness of oppression against women) may have made women more resilient to address extremism. The resulting outcome would actually result in the empowerment of women, not necessarily co-opting women's advancement for the sake of the nationalist agenda. Dr. O. Sheikhmous also provided a similar opinion to D. Jaff and T. Khailany, in that Kurdish women were instrumental in promoting women's empowerment and that the Kurdish diaspora had a significant role in creating a "strong movement" in terms of communication and support for women's advancement in the area (O. Sheikhmous, personal communication, June 27, 2020). These types of advancements created opportunities for women in the region, increasing the visibility of women in both Rojava and the KRI.

Women's Visibility

Women's visibility was central to the normalization of women participating in the public sphere. Based on participant responses, the visibility of women was beneficial for the following reasons:

1. Women's participation was normalized at all levels of society, especially in the areas of leadership, security, military, and protection and other roles typically reserved for men.
2. It inspired and empowered other women in joining in activities or jobs that further increased women's visibility in society.
3. It allowed for women to network and connect with other women to strengthen organizations or movements that are focused on improving women's rights and gender equality.

Participant CL1 discussed point one above, where women are found acting in roles that increase their visibility to the public in Rojava, but that it was also indicative of the mounting security concerns in the area from geopolitical and extremist movements:

> The last time I visited Rojava [approximately in 2013 or 2014], I saw her at checkpoints, saw her as police, saw her in centres, and until now she is, as I said, unfortunately, carrying weapons, which indicates that there is a war, panic, and fear. Of course, it is a negative situation, but she is carrying out her duty despite the difficulties. The situation of Kurdish women in Iraqi Kurdistan is much better than Kurdish women in Rojava. (Participant CL1, personal communication, July 31, 2020)

While the security situation is dynamic in Rojava, women continue to fulfil these roles in both Iraq and Syria, despite security concerns. Participant CL1 correlates the fact that women need to participate in security as a sign of security deterioration. However, if these women chose not to act due to the mounting security concerns, progress would remain stagnant or likely become

worse in terms of gender equality and security. In simpler terms, the women have to start somewhere, even if that requires militarism. F. Geerdink provided similar commentary on women's participation and visibility in Rojava, even outside of the Kurdish areas in Syria. In 2019, F. Geerdink visited Raqqa, Syria and noted women were visible in many areas of society:

> In Holland I usually have to make a harder effort to do that [interview or speak to women] than in Kurdistan. Kurdistan— you stumble over the women having positions everywhere. Also, because they have this co-leadership principle.[20] There's women everywhere. I was in Raqqa last year, which is an Arab city, of course, under the under control of the SDF [Syrian Democratic Forces][21], of this ideology that we're talking about. And I was sort of like, okay, I need to make sure that I talk to enough women. But, you know, I didn't have to make an effort. They were everywhere. (F. Geerdink, personal communication, April 18, 2020)

These role models or leaders that F. Geerdink references includes co-leaders in Rojava, including the current co-president Ilham Ahmad, a leader in the Democratic Union Party (PYD) who serves with her male counterpart Mansu Selum. The normalizing of women's presence specifically in protection, leadership, and security roles also served as a means of empowerment amongst the general population to support female leadership. However, this has also been used as a point of contention in Kurdish groups like the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Rojava and the KRG in Iraq. Some participants felt that both the SDF and the KRG want to push the narrative that women are active in their respective governments in an attempt to advance the narrative that they have increased women's participation relative to other areas in the Middle

[20] F. Geerdink is referencing the co-leadership governance of Rojava, where male and female members govern simultaneously.

[21] The Syrian Democratic Forces is an alliance comprised of several groups in Syria (including Kurds, Arabs, and other ethnicities) and uses the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) and People's Protection Unit (YPG) as a military defence.

East. Despite this, it cannot be ignored that women are going against the status quo of gender relations in their region, despite the immense challenges and difficulties that beset them.

As T. Khailany noted, once women began to go against the status quo, it would trailblaze for other women that want to be accepted in high-ranking political or defence positions:

> But making that [female leadership] the norm or making that a possibility for people to accept, I think that would definitely empower women saying that women can just play whatever role that they decide to play. But also empowering them. Empowerment can be through having women in the security forces, because when you have women in the security forces, that allows— it breaks the taboo of seeing women in and or in unconventional, I guess, careers that makes it normal in society. So, if I see her as a police officer now, it's very okay for me to see her as a war general. You know, it's very okay for me to see her as the prime minister or the president someday, hopefully. (T. Khailany, personal communication, May 6, 2020)

In reference to female leadership as context, some examples include the KRG's cabinet minsters. While predominantly men, there are several women that hold high-ranking portfolios within the government as of 2024, including Kwestan Mohamad Abdulla Maarouf, Minister of Labour and Social Affairs; Begard Dlshad Shukralla, Minster of Agricultural and Water Resources; and Vala Farreed Ibrahim, Minster of State (Kurdistan Regional Government, 2024). The inclusion of women in high-ranking positions also influenced the response to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, where B. Ali found that women were underrepresented in media on public information briefings in the KRG, despite the fact that the majority of health care workers were women, losing valuable insight into public safety decisions regarding the handling of the virus (B. Ali, personal communication, April 30, 2020). For those that were public figures, leadership roles also added extra areas of stress and responsibility:

> However, with such responsibility of power and authority, the society's view of you, and the focus on your life, your behaviour, relationships, and performance, all create anxiety

> and instability because you feel the responsibility, you are always under pressure. The fact there are fewer women in leadership roles, there is always more focus on them to see if they are successful or not. this adds more anxiety, stress, it has a psychological impact and creates a sense of instability. It is a challenge, but we should expect such challenges and resolve them through our role. Continuing in these positions doesn't mean that as a woman you are comfortable and feeling stability, no. For me, although I had the strength and financial power, I still faced the challenge. These issues don't get resolved and won't reach their goal if we don't face those challenges. (J. Abdullah, personal communication, June 10, 2020)

J. Abdullah acknowledged the double standard that is common in Kurdistan and also in other areas across the world. In addressing gender violence, women are often looked towards as gatekeepers in addressing such risks for women to challenge these gender norms. A lesser scrutinized consequence is the pressure this places on women and the financial challenges of rising to leadership positions. Simultaneously, the societal expectations of women are nearly insurmountable compared to their male counterparts and can have a detrimental effect on mental health and feelings of personal security and stability (J. Abdullah, personal communication, June 10, 2020). As noted previously, if women do not take on these challenges, the dominance over their lives and the relative stability of their own lives will be unlikely to spontaneously improve. It also demonstrates the circularity of the pressure that women are called upon to change the patriarchy by those that benefit from patriarchy's power (such as the political elite or those who have a vested interest in maintaining their power).

Conclusion

Women's networking is vital to the human security activities of self-organization and also to normalize the presence of women outside of the male-dominated understanding of women's roles. Women within Kurdistan have used different methods to proliferate their values into mainstream acceptance into Kurdish society, including the use of the Kurdish diaspora to

encourage liberal democratic views of women by educating both women and men in the diaspora and returning these views back into Kurdistan through politics or advocacy. Women's networking would invariably lead to self-organization by increasing the involvement of women in all levels of society. Some participants, like Participant CL1 noted the need to communicate externally with other women's networks and thought it best to avoid political groups that may capitalize on or co-opt women's networking to improve their own political power. This would assist women in spreading awareness on the "dynamics of power" (Ackerly & True, 2020, p. 179) that are hidden within the intersectional forms of oppression against women in the international context, along with gaining inspiration from positive and negative outcomes in women's movements. As Participant YPJ 1 notes, learning from past movements allows the incorporation of best practices in order to derive and maintain a successful organization that can improve the lives of women and dispel gender stereotypes that cause internal turmoil and disease within society. In its application and relevance to this thesis, women's networking is a key cornerstone of human security, in that it provides the opportunity for women to branch outside of their stereotypical gender norm, not only for the sake of it, but to improve security conditions. As discussed previously in this section, Hudson (2009) found that conveying awareness to women on the way to liberation (in ways that are defined by women as individuals) is a precursor to post-conflict reconstruction. Some participants felt that political players often hindered this type of free-flowing information, often seeking to co-opt independent women's movements and diverting women's energy towards increasing power for political parties.

CHAPTER 8 – CONTRADICTORY NARRATIVES IN GENDER AND SECURITY

Introduction

A majority of participants provided contradictory opinions on women's status, often suggesting that the Kurds have achieved gender equality, while simultaneously acknowledging that there are conflicting narratives at play in how women are viewed through the lens of gender and security. The contradictory nature of how participants view themselves individually, their society, and the world beyond demonstrates the complex intersections of gender and conflict in discussing women's narratives and experiences. These types of narratives are especially important context to women's overall contribution to human security, as it signifies the perception of women's contributions and the gendered norms that can act as a barrier in achieving conditions of peace. Highlighting these contradictions can also bring awareness to the harmful stereotypes that women continue to struggle against, despite being liberated from gender misnomers. While the opinions within the study should not generalize the Middle Eastern region, the ideas of participants in this study can provide insight into the current gender roles and how they are affected by conflict and (in)security. Some female participants in this study also perpetuate gender stereotypes, linking the importance of women's role to childrearing and their domestic work within the home. These contradictory points are in no way intended to belittle the insight, thoughts, or values that the research participants have provided; indeed, it is extremely valuable to bring about the meaning of gender within their daily lives, particularly within the Kurdish community. For this section, the conflicting ideas on liberation of women is detailed, followed by the participant-defined narratives on the YPJ in Rojava and narratives of the KRG in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The "Liberation" of Kurdish Women

The Kurds have expressed that their society is increasingly gender equal or liberated when compared to other ethnic groups within the Middle East (Knapp, Flach, & Ayboga, 2016; Hauge, Gill, & Beghikani, 2013), albeit there were some inconsistencies or contradictions that participants expressed during their respective interviews. In some instances, participants describe ways in which the Kurds are more advanced and how Kurdish women enjoy freedom, and later conclude in the same interview that liberation is difficult to obtain, given the current ideas on gender and conflict that are enmeshed with essentialism and patriarchal norms. Participant CL1 notes one of these contradictions in explaining how Kurdish women in general are set apart from their Arab counterparts and other women in the region:

> [Women] enjoy freedom in Kurdish society, where the Kurdish society is *advanced* and *developed* in comparison with Arab societies or any other components other than Christians who are considered more developed than the Kurds in the region. (Participant CL1, personal communication, July 31, 2020; emphasis added)

However, Participant CL1 contextualizes women's contributions and attributes it to freedom *within* the home, with men opening opportunities for their wives. Men acting as gatekeepers in women's justice and progress is a common occurrence in peacekeeping and peacemaking. In the previous section on alternative masculinities, Connell (2005) and Zalewski and Parpart (2008) asserts that men continue their hegemonic control of resources even after peacemaking has occurred, leaving women to grovel for a portion of these resources at the discretion of men. In addition, Participant CL1 notes that women would also contribute to ideas within society by educating their children. These two factors would imply that a woman needs to wait to have opportunities that are conferred by men, more specifically through their husbands and that their

most significant contribution would be through the childrearing. D. Jaff also poses this point in his own interview:

> Let's not ignore the most important function or job of women, which is upbringing a society— of upbringing, educating the children. (D. Jaff, personal communication, May 5, 2020)

While D. Jaff's comments may have been well-intended, I believe the tension between hypermasculinity, alternative masculinities in peacekeeping, and continued violence can be a problematic barrier for women's progress. It can also act as a catalyst for political change, as Conway (2008) suggests, these types of clashes can lead to "profound" changes in the power hierarchy (p. 128). Those at the top of the power hierarchy are destabilized, allowing other groups to take advantage of this power. Participant CL1 confirms this was also the case for gender equality in Syria:

> All women's organizations and movements, or small groups calling for equality between men and women, all arose out of the chaos that began with the Syrian crisis. (Participant CL1, personal communication, July 31, 2020)

The resulting chaos and power redistribution, as Participant CL1 notes above, creates space for feminist groups to implement these types of profound changes, which was evident in Rojava after the Syrian crisis began. However, these contributions from women can be minimized with essentialist tropes.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the essentialist assumptions of women's contributions within society can severely limit (or even ignore) other ways in which women can contribute, especially outside the domestic domain or motherhood. Participant CL1 also discusses how Kurdish men have contributed to advancing women's opportunities and towards gender equality and security:

> The woman had most of the responsibilities on her shoulder to find the opportunity for development, but the masculine Kurdish society was open, and the man's pursuit of freedom and attainment of his rights, planted the feelings toward his wife and to obtain her rights and freedom as well. So, this aspect helped the woman to find her way and try to take advantage of the possible opportunities to build her home and to help develop her children culturally, as well as sending her children to schools and universities, an aspect which she has always focused on. (Participant CL1, personal communication, July 31, 2020)

Participant CL1 offers a couple of assertions that need to be deconstructed, and also provides a glimpse on her definition of liberation, the relation of women to men, and the women's normalized role within Kurdish society. The generalized claim that Participant CL1 suggests is that the Kurds are working against a force that attempts to limit the "open," Kurdish masculine society from creating conditions that would provide their partner (or just women in general) with equal access to liberation.

The fact remains that this may not be true in all cases, as violence against women and patriarchal societies continues to permeate the culture in all areas of Kurdistan (even continuing beyond the areas of Kurdistan) and can be perpetuated by Kurdish men (Wright, 2014, p. 190). Participant CL1 suggests that men's pursuit of freedom has led him to acknowledge that his partner[22] has limited space within society to pursue opportunities. However, this viewpoint discounts the fact that his "wife" may have already recognized that she is lacking appropriate agency and instead, must wait until her partner clears the socially constructed barriers for her to participate in her life as she deems appropriate. Further, Participant CL1 may imply that a woman firstly must marry to increase her chances of this type of liberation. In other words, the only way for women to assert their position within the male-dominated society is through the

[22] In this particular example, a heteronormative relationship is assumed by the participant to articulate her ideas.

education of her children and marriage, perhaps in the hope that she can improve the lives of future generations rather than improving the conditions of her own life. Based on participant responses, my thesis also supports Wright's (2014) claim (which is explored in further depth in the literature review) that Kurdish women often rely on Kurdish men to obtain any semblance of equality, despite the latter existing as a simultaneous barrier to achieving any progress in gender relations and gender equality (p. 190). Kurdish women and men can also contribute to enforcing strict gender norms under the guise of women's emancipation so this energy can be effectively reallocated into the Kurdish nationalist movement rather than the empowerment of women. When asked if issues affecting women are equal to the need for a Kurdish state, D. Jaff provided the following:

> Well, I have to be honest with you, until the day that we gain our freedom, until the day we see Kurds in the Kurdish state—Kurdish independence state, the priority, the most important issue will be the freedom of the Kurdish state. But I cannot say that the question of women will be secondary. No, the question of the woman is not secondary until now. There are other important questions. And for some people, you know, the question of women still is not so serious because people are suffering from other problems and struggling with other issues right now. So, my answer would be no. (D. Jaff, personal communication, May 5, 2020).

While gender stereotypes are damaging to women and men alike, women still find themselves seeking the cooperation and meaningful support from men. Women's access and participation to leadership in security is particularly important; however, participants of this study, including T. Khailany note that feminist movements face mounting difficulties without alliances with men. T. Khailany points to this issue in describing how women seeking change need active participation from men and are often confronted with indifference:

> . . . women start the feminist movement, but without the partnership of men, they have not been able to succeed . . . even though it was women that fought for it, but then

> because the men did not go for it, it did not get ratified. So, these are the kinds of things that we have to look at. It's just not about women working for it, but it has to be a true partnership to be able to make this, to make real change. (T. Khailany, personal communication, May 6, 2020)

In the course of women's initiatives for equality, other issues rise to prominence, including economic and security issues within the Kurdish regions. As a result, the topic of the independent woman and associated initiatives are sidelined:

> There are so many initiatives by so many Kurdish feminists and the scholars who are asking for the equality between the male and female. But, you know, as I said, that because of the politics, because of the economic crisis, it's not easy to talk about the free independent women because the most important thing for anybody to be independent is economy. (D. Jaff, personal communication, May 5, 2020).

The issue of economy and the impact on initiatives and programs aimed at promoting women's progress is a prevalent issue in the KRI, as the semi-autonomous Kurdish government has faced mounting economic insecurity due to their relations with the centralized Iraqi government in Baghdad, the COVID-19 pandemic, and general conditions of instability. These issues are elaborated on in the section following.

There are also cases where women acted outside of the status quo to find some form of liberation. As some participants illustrate through anecdotes or personal experiences, those within the Kurdish community are proud of women acting against gender norms, but this partial or full acceptance is only achieved once the woman has acted. As noted previously in Chapter 6 on self-organization, F. Geerdink described a conversation she had with a male Kurdish elder, who applauded her single marital status and labelled her as a "free woman." The conversation that F. Geerdink had with the Kurdish elder left her to ponder if he would extend the same outlook to his own female relatives. These deep roots of patriarchy and the expectations of

women is not unique to the Kurds; it extends outside of the Kurdish sphere of influence, and it is naïve to suggest that it is overall absent within Kurdish regions. In attempting to exemplify the double standard that Kurdish women are subjected to, F. Geerdink describes an interview she conducted with women that joined the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK); a decision which was only honoured and applauded by the woman's family after the decision was made. While the PKK and the YPJ are based in different geographic locations and have differing approaches in achieving their goals, F. Geerdink's example describes the general outcomes when a woman acts in defiance of norms:

> You know, in the PKK I interviewed a few women— one was still very young. She was like 17, 18, and her cousin died as a guerrilla fighter. And then she wanted to go to the mountains too, and her parents had told of suspicion that she wanted to go. So, then she was not allowed to leave the house anymore because her parents thought she would run away. And her father was also violent against her. But one evening he fell asleep in front of the TV, and she stole the key, and she opened the door and ran away. And now she had been in the PKK for two years or something. And now she heard that the parents were very proud of her. And that's often how it goes. It's not necessarily always like that restricted. But of course, it's a pain. If your daughter or some of are talking about women, or if your daughter goes, it's a pain and it's something— it's a big pride as well. Like you try everything to prevent her from going. But once she goes then she becomes the pride of the family or something. (F. Geerdink, personal communication, April 18, 2020)

The intricacy of gender and its intersection with insecurity is evident in F. Geerdink's anecdote. In addition, sentiments of Kurdish nationalism are also present, and the woman of this story presumably feels liberation by joining a Kurdish nationalist group. As F. Geerdink provides from her interview of the young woman, the woman is also forced to contend with domestic violence within the family home, a symptom of the patriarchal system and hypermasculinity. Despite the violence present in her home, the young woman achieves recognition for rejecting the norms and receives her parent's admiration and pride for her decisions by participating in a realm previously reserved for her male counterparts. However, is that young woman truly liberated by

joining a militant group or has violence led to her being displaced into a secondary patriarchal institution under the guise of liberation? It seems that the latter may be possible, however, the woman ultimately achieved her freedom by joining the PKK and fleeing familial violence and simultaneously expressing herself in ways that challenge patriarchal norms. Other participants found that women simply sharing spaces and contributions in masculine organizations to achieve liberation and gender equality was problematic. S. Moslem also alludes to women assuming traditionally masculine roles to further gender equality, but he found this approach counter-productive:

> What gender equality? . . . when we talk about this gender equality, because some women, especially in the other societies, they think by doing what the men are doing, they think with a man mentality, they're going to have rights. (S. Moslem, personal communication, June 2, 2020)

S. Moslem describes women "acting" in a masculine mentality by using violence is not enough to secure gender equality or stabilize regions. As a result, and as Caprioli (2000) hypothesizes in her work, dropping the gendered expectations of how women and men act in response to conflict could create conditions conducive to human security. Alternatively, organizations like the YPJ have implemented protection as a means for women's security, with participants praising the group for reframing the liberation of women in a male-dominated society.

Participant-defined Conflict Narratives of the YPJ

The viewpoints from participants of this study that were active members in the YPJ were consistent in the implicit rejection of essentialism to describe women's narratives of gender and security. As stated previously, a total of 3 active members in the YPJ were interviewed for this study, including Commander Nessrin Abdullah and two active members, confidential

participants who did not wish to be identified by name in the study, referred to as YPJ 1 and YPJ 2. Commander N. Abdullah and the other members of the YPJ that were interviewed provide a contrasting narrative from other participants in terms of women's "liberation," particularly D. Jaff and Participant CL1. For those participants currently within the YPJ organization, women's contributions and their impact on human security in the region was described in terms of protection and the advancement of *all* women's rights as a global contribution. These participants had significantly different responses from others that were interviewed in the fact that they were optimistic about their global contribution as a movement that can benefit all women, rather than relying on essentialism to justify their reasoning. As a result, Commander N. Abdullah frames women's contributions as achievements on the individual level:

> Women of northern Syria are a model that other women in the Middle East take pride of. Like all goals, we place the rights of nations, and the equality between men and women to eliminate oppression, occupation, and addressing inferiority, and create a major element in stability. That is our goal, and we do not base things on beliefs, identities, and nationalities. Everyone is respected with his or her privacy as a *human being*, a woman or man. (N. Abdullah, personal communication, June 9, 2020; emphasis added)

The framing of the YPJ is also a contrast in the simplified media portrayals and interpretations of motivators for their actions, with the YPJ frequently being juxtaposed with the symbols of masculinity (guns, violence, and militarism) that were previously highlighted in literature from Toriven and Baser (2016). The Western media also played on narratives of avenging deaths of family members or internalizing feelings of victimization to explain participation in the group (Tank, 2017). In one example, Tank (2017) describes the story of Shireen Taher, who joined the YPJ due to the death of her father rather than illustrating the complex political and social agency that may have also factored into Taher's decision (p. 22). However, the YPJ, as described by those that are within the organization, have a fundamentally divergent viewpoint of their role and

impact than what may be perpetuated by Western media. When asked how equality is defined between women and men and how it will be achieved in an area that is generally unstable, Participant YPJ 2 provides:

> . . . when we reach that stage where a woman plays her role with her identity, then she will reach the stage of equality. (Participant YPJ 2, personal communication, June 17, 2020)

Participant YPJ 2 describes the sense of self is a marker of true equality, and while Caprioli (2000) portrays a largely essentialist approach in her research on women and their correlation to security, this would support Caprioli's (2000) claim that basing decisions on values and beliefs are more likely to create conditions of human security, rather than relying on outdated expectations of gender roles: "policy output might become less bellicose as both genders become free to act on their beliefs rather than being tied to the roles that require males to be aggressive and females passive" (p. 55). In other words, undermining gender expectations and the resulting security would be obtained through women connecting to their sense of self, unimpeded by the norms of femininity or masculinity. Interestingly, Participant YPJ 1 also alludes to the connection to the sense of self and continues that gender equality would be achieved through social justice and only after the woman has made the connection to who she is on the individual level:

> Of course, equality comes from social justice and through the woman knowing herself. (Participant YPJ 2, personal communication, June 17, 2020)

Participant YPJ 2 also provides the overall goal of the YPJ is not for the sake of adopting militarism to strengthen the argument of a Kurdish nation state, but rather toward the

development of a decent life (specifically for women) where this type of free expression can take place for women to unreservedly explore their identity in absence of gender norms:

> The organization of YPJ, which was established in the face of ISIS, defeated extremism, but not absolutely because extremism exists in the minds of ISIS terrorists. On the social level, there is more acceptance of women and a love for women's power, because the approach is not based on war, but on the basis of a decent life. (Participant YPJ 2, personal communication, June 17, 2020).

The explanation also fills a gap in the literature from Tank (2017) in determining the agency of fighters in the YPJ and is far more complicated than the symbolic representation of fighters for democracy described by Kardas and Tesiltas (2017). Indeed, and through their own understanding of their role within the organization, members within the YPJ have a radically differing view than what has been projected by Western media and their focus on the development of the individual identity to align with their values. All the while, sentiments of motherhood and essentialism are devoid in the anecdotes of the three members of the YPJ versus what the other participants provide in their interpretations. As noted previously in Chapter 6, the YPJ have been praised for their impact on quelling extremist movements and challenging attitudes toward women in Rojava and outside the Middle East. The organization's approach and mentality also undermined extremist groups' estimation of the YPJ's skills, allowing the YPJ to make significant advances against ISIS during the rise of the extremist group in Syria (N. Abdullah, personal communication, June 9, 2020). In effect, the strategic deployment of assumptions and narratives of Kurdish women in conflict were used against groups like ISIS.

In discussing the merits of the YPJ and their impact internationally and in the Middle East, A. Jalal believed that the organization allowed Kurdish people and the Middle East

generally to see them in a new context, despite the mounting obstacles and hostility towards their movement:

> the women in Rojava changed this stereotype and gave a bright image of women, in addition to having had an impact on the international level, considering that women are not weak and have the ability to participate and will. Women participated in political work, participated in the military operation and merely accomplished their role. In my opinion, and according to the opinion of many in this regard, even the masculine society in the Iraqi state, especially in the south of Kurdistan in which we live, changed their perception of women in general. (A. Jalal, personal communication, June 20, 2020).

Despite the inherent contradictions on the state of gender equality and the reality of the Kurdish region, the YPJ inspired other women to ask for their rights and continue participating in the women's revolution outside of Rojava and inspiring women within he KRI and Iran:

> Frankly, even in the field of the labour market in the private sector, women from Rojava and Iranian Kurdistan were present in the KRG governorates and went out of their homes to meet the needs of their families. At the beginning, society here did not accept this, to be present in the labour market, and participate in the media sectors, but her sacrifices and insistence in her work forced the Kurdish society and the Kurdish woman in southern Kurdistan to initiate the same work and demand the same rights because they are not inferior to men to participate in the private sector and so on. (A. Jalal, personal communication, June 20, 2020).

After the intervention that the YPJ and other protection units provided to contain extremist movements like ISIS, these women were viewed as peculiarities or exceptions within the "feminine gender," which was highlighted by Toivanen and Baser (2016) in the portrayal of women in combat. Despite the immense personal sacrifices of YPJ members and their immense contributions (as noted by all participants in this study), Participant CL1 believed the group was reabsorbed into Middle Eastern politics and received little recognition for their work:

> [the YPJ members] did not receive the help she deserved when the war ended. She deserved the utmost attention and care from international organizations and the great countries that were active in the war. Quite the opposite, she was neglected; they did give

> her a uniqueness in the world. I think she deserves more than that, and the issue does not concern only the Middle East because this terrorism attacked the world. If it left the borders of the Middle East, it would've reached to Europe and beyond. Unfortunately, these women did not receive full attention after the end of the Baghouz battle. They did not receive attention and uniqueness, unfortunately, from the major countries and the United Nations. Instead, she remained under the domination of Middle Eastern politics, and this is a bad point. (Participant CL1, personal communication, July 31, 2020)

Participant CL1's viewpoint appears more pessimistic compared to YPJ participants' articulation of their experiences, where the latter appear to be more identity affirming about their contributions and the future of the organization. An example of this is evident with D. Jaff's essentialist response, where he believes that women's impact is intertwined with childrearing, compared with Participant YPJ 1 and YPJ 2, who create spaces where women can connect inward to their identity apart from the socially constructed gender norms that pose challenges in achieving human security within Rojava and the Middle East. The contradictory language and viewpoints were also prevalent in the Kurdish Regional Government within semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan, where numerous participants comment on the perceived "empty" feminism that the government uses to obtain international support.

Narratives and Criticisms of the KRG and the Political Façades of Feminism

During participant interviews, there was significant criticism on the discourse of the KRG and their use of politically motivated forms of feminism and activism. As described by Participant CL1 in the women's networking section in Chapter 7, the politically motivated links led to inconsistencies in feminist discourse within the KRI generally, contributing to the misleading account that women were making significant gains in a patriarchal institution. In fact, women's energy was largely redirected into advancing political parties within Iraqi Kurdistan (Participant CL1, personal communication, July 31, 2020; D. Jaff, personal communication, May

5, 2020). Some participants also provided contradictory anecdotes of conditions within the KRI. Additionally, many participants were critical of the KRG's approach and their lack of advancement of women's rights in the area, including B. Younis:

> Honestly, the KRG government achieved the self-administration right decades ago but did not advance far in term of women rights. There is a small percentage active, and they are empowered through the movement here in Rojava. (B. Younis, personal communication, July 3, 2020)

There are also inconsistencies with how participants view the "advancement" of Kurdish women in contrast with her Arab counterparts and other surrounding regions in the Middle East, particularly due to the social environment. A. Jalal provides one of those inconsistencies and appears to use Kurdish exceptionalism to demarcate the difference in opportunity that the Kurdish society has provided its women:

> There is a disparity between the Arab countries, but the Kurdish woman has advanced and developed more, and the reason is, as mentioned, the participation of women in all agricultural and cooperative fields, and also since the outbreak of wars, she also participates in defence, in the political process, and so on. Therefore, the upbringing of the Kurdish women, or the social environment is completely different from the social environment of the Arab woman. (A. Jalal, personal communication, June 20, 2020)

A. Jalal attempts to separate the "advanced" Kurdish woman from the influence of the Middle Eastern social environment, noting that gender equality it is not at the required level in the KRG when asked if there was increased gender equality in the Kurdish society. A. Jalal notes that there was significant difficulty in raising quotas from the centralized Iraqi government and garnering support for increasing women's political representation within the KRG:

> No, not enough for the Kurdish woman as she aspires to more than equality. Kurdish women are demanding equality between rights and duties, and so far, they lack many issues that violate their rights, such as on the military and political side. For example, so far, the quota system in the Kurdistan Parliament is 30% and has not come into practical

> application in political parties. We demand that the percentage be increased or raised to 40% in the Kurdistan Parliament at least ten years after the legislation of this system [the quota] came to light. (A. Jalal, personal communication, June 20, 2020)

T. Khailany also spoke on the quota system for women's participation in the KRG, noting that initially, women asked for 40 percent of women's representation in the KRG's Parliament when the when it was first established in 1991; however, this change could not be enacted due to barriers posed by those involved in the creation of the Iraqi Constitution, and women later obtained a 30% quota[23]:

> when Kurdistan parliament was established, there was a quota. I personally worked on this and establishing according to the Iraqi constitution, but that, we were asking for 40 percent. But unfortunately, I mean, we're able to get the 25 percent. So, we were still happier than-- 25 is better than 0, obviously. But still, it wasn't where we wanted it. And also even then, if it was not with it, if it was not for the support of the Kurdish leadership, that the Kurdish political parties, we would have not been able to impose this 25 percent in the Iraqi Constitution to be part of, for representation. In Kurdistan parliament, we were able to raise the bar for the quota. And it's a 30 percent. (T. Khailany, personal communication, May 6, 2020)

Quota systems and their associated merits in the expansion of gender equality have been explored in literature (Verge & de la Fuente, 2014). While the quota system and its effectiveness are outside of the scope of this research, some participants within this study including A. Jalal and T. Khailany have touted it as an achievement in gender equality. Voller (2014) does note that gender quotas "often have no practical significance" as many high decisions are made by the ruling (and male-dominated) elite (p. 358). Although gender quotas can be an excellent start in gender parity within governance, I do agree with Voller (2014) that they largely reman ineffective. In addition (and perhaps contradictorily), I also believe T. Khailany is correct in

[23] For clarity, in 2005, the quota of women's participation in the KRG Parliament was raised to 25% and was later increased to a 30% quota in 2009.

noting the setbacks of achieving less than a 50% quota within government and the associated difficulties in incorporating the voices of women in issues of security and conflict, but that any progress is good progress:

> Now, you know, it's not perfect, but the feminist movement, if you look at it historically everywhere in the world, it's a constant uphill battle. So, those small wins, I still think that they count even today. (T. Khailany, personal communication, May 6, 2020).

Despite the perception of this progress, the quota system may be used as a pacifying gesture to feminists and women's activists to be content with the limited social progress of women or appropriate levels of progression as determined by their male counterparts. In general negotiations between the central Baghdad government and the KRG, B. Ali asserts that female representatives are largely excluded from such discussions, despite the quota for females that was achieved in the KRG parliament. In lieu of participating in an official or formal capacity, women revert to their advocacy work:

> For example, there is no woman in all these groups of negotiation with Iraq, with Baghdad. So, there are always negotiation only men are giving. Sometimes we are doing a lot of advocacy at work. Advocacy to include women at this negotiation committees within Baghdad with Iran sometimes and within the political parties, or within inside Kurdistan. (B. Ali, personal communication, April 30, 2020)

The limitations in women's meaningful participation within the KRG appears to be a secondary priority compared to garnering Western international support for a Kurdish nation (Bengio, 2016; Mojab, 2001). Based on participant responses, the narratives surrounding gender equality increase the international appeal of Kurdish governance by contrasting their efforts with their counterparts, placing blame on surrounding powers rather than the KRG's own limitations. D. Jaff blames the KRG for their lack of interest in the advocacy of women rather than on the centralized Iraqi government:

> KRG is really not advocating for women, for a woman cause . . . I think personally, I think that a woman cause was not on the table of KRG. KRG never wanted to improve this, despite the fact that they have . . . the woman independent bureau or directorate. But all those people who are working there, all the women who are working on this institution or the governmental body, they are not serious feminists. They are not concerned about feminism. They are not really into the problems of women. And instead, they are just a fake feminist who are advocating for the party and promoting their parties on the expense of their original cause, which is the woman's cause. (D. Jaff, personal communication, May 5, 2020)

D. Jaff continues that the KRG's internal focus on furthering political parties detracted from the overall goals of Kurdish women, where their goals and energies were co-opted into strengthening their respective political parties:

> the body of the Kurdish Independent Directorate, that is a governmental body which is subordinate to KRG, there are something like 20 women who are supposed to be a feminist working on that body. But instead of concentrating on the issues or the problems that women in the region are suffering from, they are concentrating on their parties. They are concentrating on promoting their party. And they would fund the organization who is subordinate to their parties. So, it's not funding for the sake of woman cause. It's funding for the sake of buying loyalty, which all serious feminists refuse to do. (D. Jaff, personal communication, May 5, 2020)

The redirection of women's efforts was previously mentioned by participant CL1 in women's transnational networks – CL1 believed it was critical for women to establish communication outside the KRI for this reason, to ensure issues affecting women were not overtaken by patriarchal-focused goals. The recurring theme of women's efforts being diverted and co-opted into patriarchal power structures was woven throughout the findings and identified by Mojab and Gorman (2007) and Cockburn (2007). Participants like D. Jaff and CL1 also note the consequences of attaching to political parties to elevate women's power. Without depoliticization, women's contributions may be subsumed without notice.

Conclusion

Throughout the research interviews, some participants offer an opinion of women's status, at times an idealized opinion, and then follow with a description that speaks to the opposite. These contradictions may signal two things. The first is that gender equality and achieving human security are nonlinear processes and difficult to fully comprehend and categorize. Second, it also shows that, whether consciously or unconsciously, that women and men have accepted contradictions and live with dualling ideas about how they view themselves and their community at large. As women have the lived experience of intersectional discrimination, they may be better positioned to hold these contradictions. The language used to describe the situation of women in the KRI and Rojava reflects the internal and societal viewpoints of how women are regarded and how their role in society is perceived. These narratives are important to understand contradictions women face in attempting to find their own version of liberation and simultaneously being limited by socially constructed expectations of their gender. Of course, these contradictions in the perceptions of women and conflict are hardly ground-breaking, however; it does provide insight to how Kurdish women and men compartmentalize their experiences including how they view themselves, the Kurdish people in general, and the society at large. It also adds to the narrative of the vast distortions that women are forced to contend with and accept to move forward in finding their place within a society that is often hostile or unbending to their ambitions.

Research participants seem to acknowledge different identities and each identity exists in a different state of liberation. First, is at the individual level. As described above, women are actively taking a role within their community to counter taboos on women's participation, especially in areas like security and stability. Second is the Kurdish identity. Despite being

influenced by their society and seemingly reflecting the gender norms and roles within their speech, many participants that the Kurdish identity is synonymous with gender equality – even though Kurdish people still perpetuate traditional gender norms. In other words, it appears participants have granted that the Kurdish people are able to place themselves above the influence of society, which again, leads to the problem of Kurdish exceptionalism. The third identity is that of a victim within the society. At varying points, Kurdish people point to the region as a whole in their difficulties and often blame extreme interpretations of religious values or societal norms in their struggles for gender equality. However, it is my opinion that the Kurdish identity and the societal identity have always meshed, and it would be difficult to pinpoint where the Kurdish identity would end and the societal cultural norms would begin. It is likely impossible to separate the two. This is how the Kurdish people have compartmentalized their experiences. However, the three identities of the individual, the Kurdish society, and the Middle Eastern region have resulted in inconsistencies, and it is here that ideas are borne to work around these inconsistencies. For example, the absence of Kurdish nationalism, hypermasculine forms of militarism, and essentialism in the YPJ's motivations for participating in protection moves beyond typical victimhood narratives on women and militarism. The YPJ's motivations begin to demonstrate the intricacies of improving the quality of life for women that is founded upon the woman's right to exist as a *human and individual*, rather than as a vessel for motherhood and childrearing.

CHAPTER 9 – CONCLUSION

Introduction

Alas! The conclusion. After several years of researching, writing, and re-writing, this Chapter serves as a summary of this thesis, intended to be a succinct briefing of the dissertation process and its contents. This conclusion is divided into three main sections: chapter summaries, reviewing how findings have answered the research questions, and contributions to the research. More specifically, the first section in this chapter details key elements from the literature review, theoretical foundations, and the methodology chapter. Second, the three research questions of this thesis are answered in-depth and directly. Third, the contribution to research is presented, including propositions for future areas of study.

Literature Review Summary – Chapter 2

The literature review chapter discussed past research or themes that appeared in the findings chapter and provided a background context of the rise of the Syrian conflict in 2011. The research review debated various arguments that focused on why women joined armed combat groups or activist movements that may compromise their physical safety. Women's participation, as shown through the literature review, appeared to have changed the trajectory of the Syrian conflict, especially the YPJ's efforts in areas of Syria. The Chapter investigated six different areas that were inspired by the research questions and the findings: the Kurdish juxtaposition of their counterparts in the Middle East; the presence of collective memory throughout Kurdish history; the intersections of nationalism, feminism, and postcolonialism in the Kurdish women's movement; women's self-organization movements; Western media

representations of Kurdish women; and the continuation of gender-based violence in Kurdish society.

Kurdish people often juxtapose their efforts and ability with their Middle Eastern counterparts. These narratives create an impression of Kurdish exceptionalism, and that Kurdish people are gatekeepers of gender equality and human security in the Middle East. Kurds intentionally position themselves in this manner to align with Western powers that emphasize gender equality as a foundation of governance in order to gain international support (Bülent, 2016, p. 185). There has also been a noted rejection of political Islam throughout the majority of Kurdish politics (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2011, p. 343), allowing for secularism to become the dominant political approach, one that is used in the KRI and Syria.

Collective memory is another tool used to reinforce Kurdish "history" as a given reality and has been incorporated into Kurdish cultural identity. As a result, it elevates the positive elements of "history" and creates distance from negative aspects of their past (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010, p. 1107). As a result, Kurdish history is intentionally oversimplified to promote the Kurdish cause (Erll, 2011, p. 110). Abdullah Öcalan was a significant source of Kurdish myth and collective history, popularizing and codifying these myths into his prison writings, and again Kurdish collective memory was invoked to further distance Kurds from Islam and into the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism.

For literature on the intersections between nationalism and feminism, these two ideological streams often clashed and simultaneously created areas of opportunity for women to further their own causes. The persecution of Kurdish people in terms of Islamic expansionism and British and French colonization in the area also affected the current outcomes for all people

in the Middle East (Bengio, 2016). Nationalism and Kurdish state-building often overshadow or overtake any sort of progression in gender equality, security initiatives, or women's rights movements (Al-Ali & Tas, 2018, p. 455). Western imperialism and Islamic expansionism altered the state of the Middle East, placing the Kurdish people at a disadvantage to exploring their identity and existence as a distinct ethnic group in the Middle East (O'Leary, 2018, p. 15). Women often felt pressured to choose between the nationalist or the feminist movement, often resulting in a false idea that women who participated in nationalist causes were simultaneously furthering the women's movement. In actuality, their efforts may have been "subsumed" within the patriarchal power structure (Mojab & Gormann, 2007, p. 65), thus diverting their energy into maintaining such structures and keeping the status quo intact. In order to circumvent the energy vortex, women organized themselves as a way forward.

Women's self-organization movements were also discussed and were deliberated extensively by participants in Chapter 6. Essentially, self-organization has been used broadly throughout the globe by women's groups that want to advocate for change or bring injustices to light. Examples discussed included Russia's Pussy Riot case, Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, and American women forming their own defence groups against urban violence. Self-organization is not a unique element to Kurdish women but used as another tool to instigate change in areas that are fraught with gender-based violence and instability. Media narratives are also utilized to promote these group's goals; however, many of these narratives appear to be sensationalized and quippy, failing to capture intricate ideas that influence the participation of women in conflict.

Western media played a role in the construction of narratives that surrounded Kurdish women's efforts in Syria and Iraq, often simplifying their struggle and juxtaposing it with

imagery of religious extremism and clashing ideas of masculinity and femininity. The visual imagery of Kurdish women fighters was implied that these women were the exception against a patriarchal norm and seemingly captivated the attention of the West (Toivanen & Baser, 2016, p. 206). The interest in why Kurdish women joined these types of armed movements is a frequent area of discussion in academia (Mojab, 1997; Mojab & Gorman, 2007; Bengio, 2016; Tank, 2017; Kardas & Tesiltas, 2017). Some of these arguments were also later discussed by participants in the course of their respective interviews, mostly focusing on essentialism or women's biological functions as an explanation for why they seek out peace. To explore the ideas of essentialism as an explanation for women's involvement in conflict, a variety of work was reviewed from Gilligan (1977), Peach (1997), Stack (2014), and Bloom (2011). However, these theories often mispresented the efforts of women and distilled complex social constructions into gender stereotypes. Disrupting these norms helped illustrate women in a more dynamic way, rather than victims of their environment and circumstances (Lord & Hutchinson, 1993, p. 15). However, the media attention from Western outlets did bring awareness to the Kurdish women's cause, allowing a spotlight that is often overshadowed within the daily occurrence of war and violence. It also shone a light on the overall conditions that all women are subjected to in the Middle East, not just Kurdish women (these noted conditions include difficulties in maintaining agency, limitations in women's private and public life, and gender-based violence). These narratives were then used by nationalist movements to show that Kurdistan could build a governance structure (either within the KRI or Rojava) that appealed to the international values of democracy and gender equality. However, in doing so, it contributed to a false narrative that Kurdish women were elevated within their society.

The narrative gave the sense that women were liberated, despite overt violence and continued hostility that still prevailed within society. In the final section, these aspects were discussed in that Western media coverage appeared to idealize current conditions for Kurdish women, including embedded attitudes that continued to plague women in the KRI and Rojava. Despite overarching claims from Kurds, there continued to be instances of domestic violence, 'honour-based' killings, and gender-based violence generally, that bound women into a twisted "sisterhood" (Wright, 2014, p. 190). However, within this chaos, women found areas of opportunity to work in the fine lines and intersections of patriarchy, nationalism, and feminism. At times, they were often hindered in trying to improve the security conditions for women. These conflicting narratives of liberation and security were further investigated in the findings section that examined these differences in detail.

Theoretical Literature Summary – Chapter 3

In support of the general claim behind this thesis that women contribute to human security, a review of theoretical literature was also completed**.** In this review, terms of stability, empowerment, peace, and security were operationalized in the context of this study. The next subsection looked at the current literature of why, theoretically, women impact human security with their participation and presence in the conflict landscape. Two diverging views centred around biological determinism and social constructivism. In the former, women were more inclined towards peace because caretaking and motherhood was "instinctive" (Caprioli, 2000, p. 54) rather than a by-product of socialized gender roles. However, it is an opinion I share with other anti-essentialist feminists working in this field (including Shepherd, 2008; Foster, 2011) that these essentialist theories and explanations of women's behaviour is inherently harmful, and reduced women's efforts to reproductive capacities. Once women were freed from these very

stereotypes, they would be acting from their values rather than socially constructed expectations of their gender to act in passive or 'peaceful' ways**.** In line with social constructions of gender, alternative masculinities and militarization were also discussed, showing how hypermasculinity is present in conflict studies, the effect of hypermasculinity on security, and the societal shaming of men for acting passively or de-escalating conflict instead of using force (Zalewski & Parpart, 2008, pp. 127-128). These contradictions, while destabilizing, can serve as a platform for change, which can lead to a renegotiation of how gender is constructed in relation to peace and security.

Empowerment, while difficult to quantify or measure within research, was also a noted contributor to women actively participating in conflict and security movements (Porter, 2013; p. 50), especially when these contributions can have fatal consequences. Gender equality and its effect on security was also previously studied, in that it reduces the occurrence of violence as a tool to resolve conflict and instead, uses diplomacy and compromise to achieve such objectives (Caprioli, 2000, p. 57)**.** While there were many theories as to why bellicosity was lowered due to gender equality, through literature, it remained that gender equality did ultimately affect human security generally.

Specific to the Kurds, there were also assumptions within feminist conflict literature about women's participation that led to human security. Similar to Caprioli's (2000) findings, the overarching assumption of why women contribute to conflict are grounded in the motherhood trope, which is inherently detrimental because it can be easily overtaken and absorbed into nationalist goals (Cockburn, 2007). Since the Kurdish identity is rooted in nationalism, it has become connected in their identity and how they understand their role within security. In addition, the history of persecution and the collective memory of an ancient Kurdish origin also

needs to be considered in the distinct intersections between gender, conflict, and security. The unique local and cultural understanding of gender roles also factors into this understanding (Horst, 2017, p. 391). What is certain is that distinct contradictions exist in the gendered realities of achieving stability.

Methodology & Research Design Summary – Chapter 4

The study consisted of qualitative research that utilized semi-structured interviews to gather meaningful data on an inherently subjective research topic. In addition, thematic analysis was also used to uncover emerging themes. Intersectionality was used as a lens to develop and understand the findings, and to comprehend the cumulative effects of oppression and the multiple ways they present through gender, race, and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1989). Postcolonial feminism was also used as a lens to understand the research results, especially with the history of colonization in the Middle East from the British and the French, and also the expansion of Islam. My positionality also had to be considered, especially its impact on the research study. Being a Western and White researcher, I cannot eliminate my biases or identity that may be inadvertently projected onto the research topic. However, as explored in this section, I mitigated these concerns to the best of my ability by listening to the different perspectives that were provided by participants and actively reflecting on my own positionalities and biases during the course of interviews and data analysis. The majority of participants were sourced through the gatekeeper of Koya University in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan and those interviewed had diverse experience within the research topic, including female and male participants. Fourteen participants were interviewed, with the majority being Kurdish. Participants included individuals that worked in politics, civil society, activists, journalists, members of the YPJ, and academics. While the group

was diverse, the majority of participants discussed common themes of security and gender equality that were of universal interest to the participants interviewed.

Data collection was completed in the Fall 2020, with transcription and translation occurring within the same timeframe. Due to the travel restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews occurred online. Upon completion of the interviews and transcription, data coding was completed through NVivo. Coding was completed inductively to allow participant response to guide the creation of themes. The study also had a variety of ethical considerations, specifically the collection of informed consent about the study and the information that would be published. Participants had the option of confidentiality partial confidentiality (publishing specific pieces of identifying information), or could contribute their name and affiliate organization.

Limitations of the study centred around delays and travel restrictions that arose out of the COVID-19 pandemic, the generalizability of the study to all Kurdish experiences, language barriers during interpretation and transcription, and my Eurocentric biases that could impact the study results. Remedies to these limitations included acknowledging that this study was intended to explore the deeper themes of human security and gender equality, simplifying terms used within the research when describing concepts to participants, and allowing the participant to guide the interview to ensure that the impact of Eurocentrism was mitigated.

Findings Summary: Research Questions

This research study proposed three questions as part of this thesis. As a recap, they are presented below:

1. What are the reasons why Kurdish women want to contribute to human security in the Middle East?
2. What methods do Kurdish women employ to create security within Iraq and Syria?
3. What contradictions are present in current narratives in gender and security?

In response to these three questions, this section will summarize evidence presented in the findings to clearly denote how these three factors were answered in the context of the research study.

Question #1: What are the reasons why Kurdish women want to contribute to human security in the Middle East?

As indicated in the findings, female and male participants alike referred to the collective history of Kurdish people as a key influencer in the decision of women to contribute to human security. The Kurdish collective memory, and as confirmed by participants, focuses on a unique brand of Kurdish exceptionalism, which evokes conditions of gender equality and communal responsibility of women in creating their own spaces within society. F. Geerdink described this in her work with Kurdish women, in that they contextualized their experiences within their past in order to understand their present actions and their future (personal communication, April 18, 2020). Other participants like B. Younis believed that women had a "innate responsibility" to contribute to society, with the specific goal of achieving a lost gender equality that was previously enjoyed by her Kurdish ancestors (personal communication, July 3, 2020). It remains difficult to determine the veracity of Kurdish collective memories and myths (and again, outside of the scope of this research). The fact remains that the collection of such memories and their popularization is embedded in the Kurdish ideology and has become a critical part of why women participate in human security. All those interviewed framed their answers within the

context of thousands of years of history, most of which is derived from the symbolic myths that have carried through Kurdish culture. The cohesive identity has allowed for women to consolidate and ultimately justify their actions in creating a secure environment where even more women can participate.

Participants also used juxtaposition to substantiate their points, especially in the findings of the pre-Islam era, where many participants pointed towards Islam as a marker for their people's descent from gender equality and continued troubles within the Middle East. In conjunction with this assertion on the issues with Islam and gender equality, the religion of Zoroastrianism has also been cited by participants as a baseline to return towards. Other scholars like Szanto (2018) have noted this trend, which is described as the "imagined past" (p. 97). YPJ Commander N. Abdullah evidenced this in her response, in that Kurdish people were able to resist the expansion of Islam and hold onto the core principles of Zoroastrianism.

The ancient agrarian or Zoroastrian origin story was passed down generationally and served as a compelling factor for modern-day women to contribute to building society with their male counterparts (A. Jalal, personal communication, June 20, 2020). Participants like B. Ali expressed that the Zoroastrianism religion itself was a significant contributor to women's viewpoints in tolerance and instilled a desire in maintaining secularized viewpoints. In combination with the religion, Dr. O. Sheikhmous concluded that the residual values of tolerance led to women freely expressing their viewpoints and empowered them to seek out opportunities that would support the continuation of this type of living. In essence, this would lead to increased security. Despite the fact that this may have been an idealized vision of how women contribute to security (Agahie, 2017, p. 31; Bengio, 2016), interviewees found that these beliefs and ideas

formed an ideological bedrock, motivating and empowering women to continue in their contributions.

Some participants like J. Abdullah believe that Kurdish women have increased economic independence in contrast to other ethnicities, even though Kurdish women continue to face the same barriers as other women in the Middle East. Kurdish women also have a vested interest participating in security to maintain their nationalist Kurdish identity. As expressed by various participants, the upbringing of Kurdish women influenced their decision to become activists, denoting a sense of Kurdish exceptionalism. Again, these differences were accounted for in the ancient history of the Kurdish people and the collective memory that was popularized by Abdullah Öcalan. Islam's expansion within Kurdistan was prevented by the mountainous topography where Kurds settled, allowing the Kurdish people (as per their collective memory) to retain their egalitarian ideas on gender equality (Participant YPJ 2, personal communication, June 17, 2020 & N. Abdullah, personal communication, June 9, 2020).

B. Younes believed that women had a responsibility to contribute to society in creating a sense of openness, while working towards a gender inclusive and stable society. In addition, working to develop an open society would also dispel ideas of essentialism towards women (in that their most important role is the rearing of children and being the domestic provider in the home), allowing for the space for women to be concerned with liberation of themselves and other women. Thus, women would be encouraged to act in their best interests rather than from the perspective of what it means to be a "good mother" and self-sacrificing individual for the family.

The communal responsibility that was felt by women would then serve as a basis for participation in security movements, as described by Commander N. Abdullah. The communal

responsibility is another claim derived from the myths of Ancient Mesopotamia and Zoroastrianism. While studies like Bengio (2016), Tank (2017), Al-Ali (2011), and Kardas and Tesiltas (2017) have looked at the motivations of Kurdish women, acknowledging how they contribute to security, they stop short of capturing the complexities of their participation. This thesis has demonstrated the impact that these myths have women's motivations for participating in human security and is far more complex than previous studies in this field. Participants insisted that the ancient history and collective memory predisposed the Kurds to strive for an environment of gender equality and political stability. In sum, according to the research data, women want to contribute to human security in the Middle East for the following reasons:

- Women and men alike are attempting to revert to the imagined past of gender equality. Participating in security movements is one method of returning to practices and norms of the past.
- The "imagined past" serves as a motivation and influence in participating in movements (whether for protection, militarized, or increasing political standing)
- Women feel an innate responsibility, derived from the collective memory of the myth, to protect the Kurdish identity and to provide security for other women. Presented as "communal norms" by participants, each woman is responsible to provide for themselves and other women.

Question #2: What methods do Kurdish women employ to create human security within Iraq and Syria?

Women's mobilization and organization as a response to conditions of instability utilizes a wide variety of methods that are detailed within this section. Participants described their own definition of what it means to self-organize, and activities generally varied in the KRI and

Rojava. However, the consensus among participants was women's involvement improved stability, gender equality, and women's rights. As discussed in the findings, communal norms (a collective memory derivative from the Zoroastrian religion) instilled a sense of responsibility in women; B. Ali emphasized that women had to take responsibility in organizing themselves to improve the situation for all women, not just those that identified as Kurdish. Self-organization also served to circumvent patriarchy, as acting within the patriarchal system to resolve instability would have limitations for women, especially in attempting to achieve meaningful changes in a system where men hold power and have a vested interest in keeping that power (F. Geerdink, personal communication, April 18, 2020). However, in doing so, women that did try to organize change within a patriarchal power system may have been given a false sense of empowerment and were later exploited or supplanted to serve nationalist agendas (Participant CL1, personal communication, July 31, 2020).

Other self-organizing activities included the following: political advocacy and lobbying, especially within the KRG; creating women's organizations that advocate for women's rights; education and training provided to men and women involved in armed groups or protection units; and boosting the visibility of women through media and radio. Self-organization was also used extensively for protection purposes, especially the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ). Paradoxically, classifying themselves as a women's organization added additional scrutiny and risk of violence from groups or individuals that are against women's participation. However, Commander N. Abdullah of the YPJ noted that there was an absence of choice for women and that organizing was necessary for survival. Tying into the conflicting gender conflict narratives in the next section, Commander N. Abdullah's viewpoints on the role of women differed from other participants and the way that women are portrayed generally for their efforts – women's

agency was the main reason for protecting women. Other discussions centred on the cessation of self-organization (or armed movements) before actual stability could be achieved (Participant YPJ 1, personal communication, June 15, 2020).

In the KRI, women attempt to create security in the same way, by organizing to bring attention to the harms that ail women (T. Khailany, personal communication, May 6, 2020). In fact, women often act in ways that reduce unsustainable outcomes that would normally be achieved through violence (T. Khaliany & N. Othman, personal communication, April 28, 2020). Women's demonstrations and awareness-raising have historically changed the tide on whether male-dominated groups use aggression to solve issues (N. Othman, personal communication, April 28, 2020 & O. Sheikhmous, personal communication, June 27, 2020). The disruption of the authoritarian regime in Syria after the 2011 uprisings also gave women the space to bring up organizations and organize in their best interests (Participant CL1, personal communication, July 31, 2020). Women in the KRI also worked within the existing political structure to enact change, to ensure economic security for women and normalizing their participation in the labour force to allow women more incentive to participate in society (A. Jalal, personal communication, June 20, 2020). Despite this, women still had pushback from their own peers or were given empty support from the KRG, amounting to "fake feminism" (D. Jaff, personal communication, May 5, 2020). In conclusion for this research question, women contribute to creating human security with the following methods:

- Self-organizing to gather support to change detrimental policies and awareness raising about injustices or adverse conditions for women.
- Transnational networking with other women and movements is used to garner support and communication to build support.

- Increasing women's visibility in society to normalize their presence in different roles and functions that were previously reserved for men. Pushing their way into protection, security, or politics also empowers other women to join these movements.
- The Kurdish diaspora synthesizes with Kurdish understandings of themselves and their history, creating further entrenchment of values of democracy, secularism, and gender equality.
- The understanding of the role of Kurdish women in security is informed by understandings of themselves and their history.

Question #3: What contradictions are present in current narratives in gender and security?

With participant responses, there were contradictions in how participants viewed women and their roles in society. Some responses from participants also served to reinforce gender stereotypes and conflations of women with motherhood and child rearing. Kurdish exceptionalism was used extensively to place Kurdish women apart from their Arab counterparts in order to portray Kurdish women as 'liberated,' despite glaring contradictions and the barriers that currently exist for women. Participant CL1 believed that Kurdish women were "advanced" and "developed." Similarly, other participants that believed Kurdish women were more liberated, exemplified through a women's ability to educate her children, thereby educating the society at large (D. Jaff, personal communication, May 5, 2020). The baseline proposed by D. Jaff, although intended to be complimentary, is a very narrow scope in identifying women's contributions to the security movement in Kurdistan. In addition to the limited scope of assessing women's contributions, women also have excessive responsibility in finding opportunities outside of motherhood and are often unlocked by their male counterparts (Participant CL1,

personal communication, July 31, 2020). This sense of liberation is contrary to the idea that women are empowered to create their own opportunities, without the gatekeeping of men.

Another contradiction found in this Chapter was that women must first submit to matrimony to gain access or knowledge to this type of liberation. Other negative impacts to the liberation of women included policies focused on poverty alleviation initiatives and nationalist movements that seemed to take precedence over gender equality. D. Jaff noted this in his interview that achieving a Kurdish state would be the determining factor for when women would have an increased focus on gender equality. Another finding was that women were often discouraged to act outside of the status quo and were only idolized after they had joined politics or an armed group. Often women that joined armed movements (like the Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK in Turkey) or protection units (YPJ) were shamed by their families and likely their surrounding communities. Their decision was only honoured and supported after they had followed through. By claiming liberation to be a unique element of Kurdish identity, the fact that women continue to be oppressed in their society by members of the Kurdish community is ignored.

Participants that were involved in the YPJ also provided an insight into conflict narratives and how the group focused on the liberation of *all* women on an international scale. Fundamentally, the view of the YPJ group by its own members and participants in the study was a departure from the simplistic interpretations of Western media that were proliferated throughout the world. Instead, the YPJ's conflict narratives from its own members focused on a sense of self and aligning values towards life outside of gender norms. Through the sense of self, gender equality would be possible and would allow for social justice to become the priority. Unlike some participants, the YPJ do not view their existence within the lens of motherhood, but

rather the emancipation of women. They defend themselves and other women to ensure the security of the individual, not to protect their capacity for motherhood or future child bearers. Essentially, the group allowed for women to be viewed in a new context and broke down those common stereotypes of the roles of women and men, according to A. Jalal. Unfortunately, conflict narratives often continue false viewpoints that women are passive victims. The subsummation of women's efforts by the KRG was another finding of this study; D. Jaff believed the KRG's efforts were mostly empty gestures designed to disempower women and boost the controlling patriarchy in continuing their case for an autonomous nation state. In sum, the research data had the following key findings:

- Despite the fact that women continue to face barriers in society, participants believed that Kurdish women enjoyed more freedoms in Iraq and Syria compared to other women in the area.
- Kurdish women must contend with the duelling identities of the expectations of motherhood and her needs as an individual.
- Women participating as a protector is viewed as a protector of children. The concept of woman as mother is still deeply embedded in Kurdish society, while putting increased pressure on women to protect herself and open opportunities for other women.
- The KRG has engaged in empty feminism, allowing women into politics, but not providing women meaningful opportunities or leadership positions to enact policies that would further encourage gender equality and peace.
- The KRG has co-opted women's contributions to increase the strength of an autonomous Kurdistan, again a reflection that nationalism is the more important priority in Kurdish politics.

- Previous conflict narratives presented by Western media have simplified the overarching reasons why women participate in armed conflict and reinforce and encourage ideas that women are acting in exception to what is the norm of their gender.

Contribution to Research and Areas of Future Study

In the Kurdish areas of Syria and Iraq, women's contributions to human security are fuelled by Kurdish collective memory, Kurdish history, and Kurdish myth. Kurdish women use this as a motivation and instilled responsibility for the Kurdish people and women generally. While research on the Kurdish people (specifically women) has uncovered information about their motivations for participating in security, this research departs from those narratives, reaching far beyond revenge narratives presented in Tank (2017) or motherhood tropes in Bloom (2011). This thesis is one of the first to research the underlying motivations of Kurdish women joining movements in detail and identifying the *origins* of such motivations and how it impacts the actions women undertake to get back to the 'imagined past.' As a result, these findings are valuable narratives about why women join movements and how their actions contribute to stabilizing society. Inherently, women contribute to human security by self-organizing, creating transnational networks with others that are invested in the feminist cause, and increasing the visibility of women's struggles and bringing awareness to the discrimination and oppression women continue to face in their daily lives. Adding to the existing work of Mojab and Gorman (2007), Kurdish women organize and utilize available transnational networks to bring further awareness to women's suffering and through my research, has additionally demonstrated how these tools are used in the context of creating conditions of security.

Through the research, there is also an undercurrent of contradictions – women constantly battling the duelling identities and social constructions of gender in society, and their progress is often gatekept by men. While these contradictions have been explored previously, including in Szanto's (2018) and Urquhart's (2015) research on the Kurdish use of the Zoroastrian religion, I added an additional layer, demonstrating how these narratives and juxtapositions serve to motivate women towards an imagined ideal of gender equality, security, and stability. The explicit focus on contradictory conflict narratives in the Kurdish context is also a relatively new area of study, one that can likely be expanded upon in the future. What is clear is that Western explanations of women joining security movements are oversimplified. That is also a prevalent theme within this research when attempting to decipher women's intentions; it is often essentialized or simplified to be easier to digest and understand. It is also imperative that we understand conflicting narratives in these types of qualitative studies because they can be detrimental for the progress of women (and men alike) in the overall advancement of society. Conversely, these conflicting narratives can also reveal the current state of status of women in society, and pierce through misleading assertions that women are relatively liberated. It also confirms assertions made by Gentry and Sjoberg (2015) that creating the perception of equality requires a reading "between the lines" (p. 7) to ascertain the true extent of women's equality.

A future area of study would be comparisons in thought to Kurdish people in Iran and Turkey to see if they coincide with similar collective memories or if regional differences play a factor. A generalizable study of Kurdish women may also be of benefit to determine if collective memory aligns with their reasoning to participate in security and conflict. Such a study would also be indicative of the prevalence of collective memory in informing beliefs and worldviews. Additionally, the activities and self-organization of Kurdish women in Turkey and Iran would

also be a research site for the future. By examining these types of initiatives globally, we can give appropriate credit to those that stand up in the face of injustice, often leading to personal consequences. Creating spaces for women to understand their own values and identity, separately from gender expectations, will inevitably empower other women and men to do the same. Indeed, researching women's motivations for working towards peace and human security (and stepping outside of the essentialist rationalization) uncover dynamic constructions of gender.

APPENDICES

Appendix A – Participant Information Sheet – English/Arabic

Participant Information Sheet

Research on Stabilization within Kurdistan

This information sheet is for those wishing to participate in the research titled: ***The role of Kurdish feminism in international development and regional stability in the Middle East***

This research is part of a research in the PhD - Doctor of Philosophy Political Science and International Studies programme at the University of Birmingham. The principle investigator is Emma MacTavish.

This Participant Information Sheet includes important information on participation in this research study. Please pay close attention to each section and please notify the principle investigator if there are any questions.

Introduction

My name is Emma MacTavish and I am a postgraduate researcher at the University of Birmingham. I am conducting research on Kurdish women's activism within the Middle East. I am providing you with information about the research process and inviting you to participate. Participation is voluntary, and you do not have to decide now. You may wish to think about it for few days, and consult others as to whether to participate or not. You can also ask me or another researcher about terminologies used in the research if further clarification is needed.

Purpose of the Research

This research seeks to understand the role of Kurdish feminism within the Middle East and identify how this stability can be replicated and encouraged in other conflict areas. We want to learn about your experience and observation related to this topic in order to repel extremist groups that flourish within the Middle East, and simultaneously promote the empowerment of women in these areas.
We want to learn about your experience and observation.

Type of Research Intervention

This research will involve an interview for duration of 45-60 minutes, with breaks if required.

Participant Selection

We are inviting you to participate in this research because we believe that you have the experience on the topic of women's activism as a community member, expert, or a member of civil society, and can contribute to our understanding that is derived from lived experience.

Voluntary Participation

The purpose of the interview is to collect data and different perspectives on Kurdish women's activism. Therefore, your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to stop the interview or remove your contribution to the research, you can do so by making the request directly to the researcher. You may withdraw your participation up until the data is compiled, which will be six-weeks after data collection is completed. After that time, individual contributions will be impossible to extract.

Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in an in-person interview or online interview with the principle investigator. Skype will be the preferred method for online interviews method. During the interview, if you do not feel comfortable answering any of the questions, you do not have to answer. Please ask to move to the next question. If you feel like having someone else present during the interview, you are welcome to do so. Otherwise only the researcher, and at times, an interpreter will be present. Information recorded during the interview will remain confidential and only the research team will have access to data. The whole interview will be audio recorded, and the recording will be stored on an encrypted server. No one else will have access to the recording, as it will remain confidential. While transferring data to online software, the data will be stored on a British server administrated by the University of Birmingham until the research is finalized.

Duration

Data collection for the purpose of this research will take place from Spring/Summer 2019 to Fall 2020. During that time, you will be interviewed up to 60 minutes.

Risks

There is a chance that you may feel uncomfortable in speaking about these topics. You do not have to answer any questions or take part in the discussion and interview if you feel the questions are too personal or if talking about them makes you uncomfortable.

Benefits

Although there is no direct benefit to you, your input is likely to help communities experiencing conflict.

Reimbursements

You will receive no reimbursement in taking part in the research.

Confidentiality

Although your participation in this study may draw attention in the community, the research being conducted will remain confidential, in order to allow you to speak freely. However, if you divulge details that put yourself or others at risk, authorities will be notified. For any input that we do receive, your participant number will be used on the documents and the code for this number will be stored securely on University servers. If you are a participant that has been asked to be identified and you have agreed to these conditions, please see Appendix B for more details and signature.

Sharing the Results

You will receive a summary of the results of this research. The input that you have during the interview will not be shared outside of the research team, and nothing will be linked to your name. However, the research will be published so those that are interested may look at the results.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

You do not have to take part in this interview, as it is voluntary. If at any time you wish to stop the interview, there will be no consequence. At the end of the interview, I will give you a chance to review your input and you may modify or remove portions that you may not agree with or if I did not understand you correctly.

Who to Contact

If you have any questions about the interview input, publication, or follow-up questions, you may email Emma MacTavish at [redacted] or call [redacted]

This proposal has been reviewed and approved by the University of Birmingham's Ethical Review Committee. If you have any questions about the ethical review, please contact the University of Birmingham's Ethical Review Office at ethics-queries@contacts.bham.ac.uk.

ورقة معلومات المشارك في البحث

ورقة المعلومات هذه للراغبين في المشاركة في بحث بعنوان: دور النسوية الكردية في التنمية الدولية والاستقرار الإقليمي في الشرق الأوسط .دراسة بحثية عن الاستقرار في كردستان

هذا البحث هو جزء من بحث في دكتوراه - دكتوراه في برنامج العلوم السياسية والدراسات الدولية في جامعة برمنغهام. الرئيسية هي Emma MacTavish.الباحثة

تتضمن ورقة معلومات المشاركين هذه معلومات مهمة حول المشاركة في هذه الدراسة البحثية. يرجى الانتباه عن كثب لكل .قسم ويرجى إخطار الباحثة الرئيسية إذا كانت هناك أي أسئلة

المقدمة

.أنا اسمي إيما ماكتافيش باحثة دراسات عليا في جامعة برمنغهام. أنا أجري بحثًا عن نشاط المرأة الكردية في الشرق الأوسط أقدم لكم معلومات حول عملية البحث وأدعوكم للمشاركة. المشاركة طوعية، وليس عليك أن تقرر الآن. قد ترغب في التفكير في الأمر لبضعة أيام، والتشاور مع الآخرين حول ما إذا كنت ستشارك أم لا. يمكنك أيضًا أن تسألني أو أي باحث آخر عن .المصطلحات المستخدمة في البحث إذا كانت هناك حاجة لمزيد من التوضيح

الغرض من البحث

يسعى هذا البحث إلى فهم دور النسوية الكردية في الشرق الأوسط وتحديد كيف يمكن تكرار هذا الاستقرار وتشجيعه في مناطق الصراع الأخرى. نريد أن نتعرف على خبرتك وملاحظاتك المتعلقة بهذا الموضوع من أجل تكرار تجربة الاستقرار نريد .و صد الجماعات المتطرفة التي تزدهر في الشرق الأوسط، وفي الوقت نفسه تعزيز تمكين المرأة في هذه المجالات .أن نتعلم عن تجربتك وملاحظاتك

نوع التدخل البحثي

.سيشمل هذا البحث مقابلة لمدة 45-60 دقيقة، مع فترات راحة إذا لزم الأمر

اختيار المشاركين

نحن ندعوك للمشاركة في هذا البحث لأننا نعتقد أن لديك خبرة في موضوع نشاط المرأة كعضو في المجتمع، أو خبير، أو .عضو في المجتمع المدني، ويمكن أن تساهم في فهمنا المستمد من التجربة الحية.

المشاركة الطوعية

الغرض من المقابلة هو جمع البيانات ووجهات النظر المختلفة حول نشاط المرأة الكردية. لذلك، مشاركتك طوعية تمامًا. إذا اخترت إيقاف المقابلة أو إزالة مساهمتك في البحث، فيمكنك القيام بذلك عن طريق تقديم الطلب مباشرة للباحثة. يمكنك سحب

مشاركتك حتى نقطة قبل تجميع البيانات، والتي ستكون ستة أسابيع بعد اكتمال جمع البيانات. بعد ذلك الوقت، سيكون من .المستحيل استخراج المساهمات الفردية من تجميع البيانات

الإجراءات

إذا وافقت على المشاركة، فسيُطلب منك المشاركة في مقابلة شخصية أو مقابلة عبر الإنترنت مع الباحثة الرئيسية. ستكون

الطريقة المفضلة لطريقة إجراء المقابلات عبر الإنترنت. خلال المقابلة، إذا كنت لا تشعر بالراحة في الإجابة على أي من الأسئلة، فليس عليك الإجابة. من فضلك اطلب الانتقال إلى السؤال التالي. إذا كنت ترغب في حضور شخص آخر أثناء

المقابلة، فنحن نرحب بك للقيام بذلك. غير ذلك، فقط الباحثة من قبل فريق البحث ستتواجد في المقابلة، وفي بعض الأحيان، سيكون هناك

مترجم أذا تتطلب الأمر. ستظل المعلومات المسجلة أثناء المقابلة سرية ولن يتمكن سوى فريق البحث فقط من الوصول إلى البيانات. سيتم تسجيل المقابلة بالكامل صوتيًا، وسيتم تخزين التسجيل على خادم مشفر. لن يتمكن أي شخص آخر من الوصول إلى التسجيل، لأنه سيبقى سريًا. أثناء نقل البيانات إلى البرامج عبر الإنترنت، سيتم تخزين البيانات على خادم بريطاني تديره جامعة برمنغهام حتى الانتهاء من البحث.

المدة الزمنية

سيتم جمع البيانات لغرض هذا البحث من ربيع / صيف 2019 إلى خريف 2020. وخلال ذلك الوقت، ستتم مقابلة المشاركين والخبراء لمدة تصل إلى 60 دقيقة.

المخاطر

هناك احتمال أنك قد تشعر بعدم الارتياح في التحدث عن هذه المواضيع. لذا، لست مضطرًا للإجابة على أي أسئلة أو المشاركة في المناقشة والمقابلة إذا شعرت أن الأسئلة شخصية للغاية أو إذا كان التحدث عنها يجعلك غير مرتاح.

فوائد

على الرغم من عدم وجود فائدة مباشرة لك، فمن المتأمل أن تساعد مساهمتك المجتمعات التي تعاني من الصراعات.

التعويضات

لاستقلالية البحث، لن تتلقى أي تعويض للمشاركة في البحث.

السرية

على الرغم من أن مشاركتك في هذه الدراسة قد تلفت الانتباه في المجتمع، إلا أن البحث الذي يتم إجراؤه سيبقى سريًا للسماح لك بالتحدث بحرية. خلال المقابلة، إذا قمت بالإفصاح عن أية تفاصيل تعرض نفسك أو الآخرين للخطر ، فسيتم إبلاغ السلطات.

بالنسبة لأي مساهمة نتلقاها، سيتم استخدام رقم المشارك الخاص بك في المستندات وسيتم تخزين رمز هذا الرقم بشكل آمن على خوادم الجامعة.

2

إذا كنت مشاركا في هذا البحث كخبير، فسيتم رفع السرية عن اسمك بعد ان توافق على الأمر ليتم تداول اسمك في البحث بصورتها النهائية. اذا كنت ضمن هذه الفئة من المشاركين في البحث، الرجاء الاطلاع على الملحق ب.

مشاركة النتائج

سوف تتلقى ملخصا لنتائج هذا البحث. لن تتم مشاركة المداخلات التي أدليت بها أثناء المقابلة خارج فريق البحث، ولن يتم ربط أي شيء باسمك إلا أذا كانت مشاركتك بدور خبير في الشؤون الكردية. بذلك، سيتم نشر البحث حتى يتسنى للمهتمين الاطلاع على النتائج.

الحق في الرفض أو الانسحاب

لا يتوجب أو ينفرض عليك المشاركة في هذه المقابلة لأنها طوعية. إذا كنت ترغب في إيقاف المقابلة في أي وقت، فلن يكون هناك أي عواقب. في نهاية المقابلة، سأعطيك فرصة لمراجعة مساهمتك ويمكنك تعديل أو إزالة الأجزاء التي قد لا توافق عليها أو إذا لم أفهمك بشكل صحيح.

بمن اتصل

إذا كانت لديك أي أسئلة حول أسئلة المقابلة أو النشر أو المتابعة، فيمكنك إرسال بريد إلكتروني إلى الباحثة الرئيسية إيما [redacted] .ماكتافيش على البريد التالي أو رقم الهاتف المكتوب أسفله

12502190141

تمت مراجعة هذا الاقتراح والموافقة عليه من قبل لجنة المراجعة الأخلاقية بجامعة برمنغهام. إذا كانت لديك أي أسئلة حول المراجعة الأخلاقية، فيرجى الاتصال بمكتب المراجعة الأخلاقية بجامعة برمنغهام على ethics-[redacted]

Appendix B – Informed Consent (Confidential) English/Arabic

Informed Consent
SECTION A: (to be completed by the participant)

For participants in the research study titled: ***The role of Kurdish feminism in international development and regional stability within the Middle East.*** Please ensure you have referenced the *Participant Information Sheet* before reviewing and signing this document.

This research is part of the PhD - Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science and International Studies programme at the University of Birmingham. The principle investigator is Emma MacTavish.

Participant Name	
Organization (if applicable)	
City/Country of Interview	
Method: (in-person/skype)	

I confirm that I have read the *Participant Information Sheet*
Yes ☐ No ☐

I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction
Yes ☐ No ☐

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study
Yes ☐ No ☐

Signature of Participant	
Date of Signature	

By signing, the participant confirms the above as correct.

SECTION B: (to be completed by the Principle Researcher)

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability.

Yes ☐ No ☐

I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Yes ☐ No ☐

Was an interpreter present during this interview?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Principle Investigator Name	
City/Country of Interview	
Time of Interview	
Signature of Investigator	
Date of Signature	

By signing, the principle investigator confirms the above as correct.

Contact

If you have any questions about the interview input, publication, or follow-up questions, you may email Emma MacTavish at [redacted] or call [redacted]

This proposal has been reviewed and approved by the University of Birmingham's Ethical Review Committee. If you have any questions about the ethical review, please contact the University of Birmingham's Ethical Review Office at ethics-queries@contacts.bham.ac.uk.

القسم أ: يستكمل من قبل المشارك في البحث

للمشاركين في الدراسة البحثية بعنوان: دور النسوية الكردية في التنمية الدولية والاستقرار الإقليمي في منطقة الشرق الأوسط. يرجى التأكد من الرجوع إلى ورقة معلومات المشارك قبل مراجعة هذا المستند والتوقيع عليه

هذا البحث هو جزء من دكتوراه - دكتوراه في العلوم السياسية والدراسات الدولية في جامعة برمنغهام. المحققة الرئيسية هي **Emma MacTavish.**

اسم المشارك	
المنظمة إن وجدت	
المدينة, الدولة	
وسيلة المقابلة: سكايب هاتف او شخصية	

أؤكد أنني قرأت صحيفة أو بما يعرف بورقة معلومات المشارك

☐نعم ☐ لا

لقد أتيحت لي الفرصة لطرح أسئلة حول البحث وتم الرد على أي أسئلة طرحتها

☐نعم ☐ لا

أوافق طواعية على المشاركة في هذه الدراسة

☐نعم ☐ لا

توقيع المشارك	
تاريخ التوقيع	

من خلال التوقيع ، يؤكد المشارك بان ما تم ذكره أعلاه صحيح.

القسم ب: يستكمل من قبل الباحث الرئيسي

أؤكد أن المشارك مُنح فرصة لطرح أسئلة حول الدراسة ، وتمت الإجابة على جميع الأسئلة التي طرحها المشارك بشكل صحيح وعلى قدر استطاعتي.

☐نعم ☐ لا

أؤكد أن المشارك لم يُكره على إعطاء الموافقة ، وأن الموافقة مُنحت بحرية وطوعًا

☐نعم ☐ لا

هل حضر مترجم هذه المقابلة؟

☐نعم ☐ لا

اسم الباحثة الرئيسية	
مدينة / بلد المقابلة	
توقيت المقابلة	
توقيع الباحثة	
تاريخ التوقيع	

من خلال التوقيع ، تؤكد الباحثة الرئيسية أن ما ورد أعلاه صحيح.

الإتصال

إذا كانت لديك أي أسئلة حول أسئلة المقابلة أو النشر أو المتابعة ، فيمكنك إرسال بريد إلكتروني الى الباحثة الرئيسية إيما ماكتافيش على البريد الالكتروني او الهاتف التالي:

[redacted]

تمت مراجعة هذا الاقتراح والموافقة عليه من قبل لجنة المراجعة الأخلاقية بجامعة برمنغهام. إذا كانت لديك أي أسئلة حول المراجعة الأخلاقية ، فيرجى الاتصال بمكتب المراجعة الأخلاقية بجامعة برمنجهام على **ethics-queries@contacts.bham.ac.uk.**

Appendix C – Informed Consent (Non-Confidential) English/Arabic

Informed Consent
SECTION A: (to be completed by the participant)

Consent to be Identified Within Research – Research on Stabilization within Kurdistan

This consent form is a second part of the Participant Information Sheet and is specifically for those who have expressly agreed to participate and be **identified** in the research titled: *The role of Kurdish feminism in international development and regional stability in the Middle East.*
This research is part of the PhD - Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science and International Studies programme at the University of Birmingham. The principle investigator is Emma MacTavish.

Participant Name	
Organization/Affiliation (if applicable)	
Profession	
City/Country of Interview	
Method: (in-person/skype)	

I confirm that I have read the *Participant Information Sheet*
Yes ☐ No ☐

I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction
Yes ☐ No ☐

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study
Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that my first name, last name, association, and profession, all or part of these information will be published in the research

Yes ☐ No ☐

Signature of Participant	
Date of Signature	

By signing, the participant confirms the above as correct.

SECTION B: (to be completed by the Principle Researcher)

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability.

Yes ☐ No ☐

I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Yes ☐ No ☐

Was an interpreter present during this interview?

Yes ☐ No ☐

I have reconfirmed with the participant that their contribution waives confidentiality and that their information could be published within the research

Yes ☐ No ☐

Principle Investigator Name	
City/Country of Interview	
Time of Interview	
Signature of Investigator	
Date of Signature	

By signing, the principle investigator confirms the above as correct.

Contact

If you have any questions about the interview input, publication, or follow-up questions, you may email Emma MacTavish at [redacted] or call [redacted]

This proposal has been reviewed and approved by the University of Birmingham's Ethical Review Committee. If you have any questions about the ethical review, please contact the University of Birmingham's Ethical Review Office at ethics-queries@contacts.bham.ac.uk.

موافقة على إلغاء خصوصية حجب الاسم (السرية) لذكر الاسم في البحث المتعلق حول الاستقرار في كردستان

استمارة الموافقة هذه هي جزء ثانٍ من ورقة معلومات المشاركين ، وهي خاصة لأولئك الذين وافقوا على المشاركة بشكل علني، و أن تُذكر أسمائهم في البحث المعنون: دور النسوية الكردية في التنمية الدولية والاستقرار الإقليمي في الشرق الأوسط.

القسم أ: يستكمل من قبل المشارك في البحث

للمشاركين في الدراسة البحثية بعنوان: دور النسوية الكردية في التنمية الدولية والاستقرار الإقليمي في منطقة الشرق الأوسط. يرجى التأكد من الرجوع إلى ورقة معلومات المشارك قبل مراجعة هذا المستند والتوقيع عليه

هذا البحث هو جزء من دكتوراه - دكتوراه في العلوم السياسية والدراسات الدولية في جامعة برمنغهام. المحققة الرئيسية هي **Emma MacTavish**

اسم المشارك	
المنظمة إن وجدت	
المهنة	
المدينة, الدولة	
وسيلة المقابلة: سكايب هاتف او شخصية	

أؤكد أنني قرأت صحيفة أو بما يعرف بورقة معلومات المشارك

☐نعم ☐ لا

لقد أتيحت لي الفرصة لطرح أسئلة حول البحث وتم الرد على أي أسئلة طرحتها

☐نعم ☐ لا

أوافق طواعية على المشاركة في هذه الدراسة

☐نعم ☐ لا

أتفهم أن اسمي الأول واسم الكنية وانتمائي التنظيمي إذا وجد، والمهنة ، سيتم نشر كل هذه المعلومات أو جزء منها في البحث

☐نعم ☐ لا

توقيع المشارك	

تاريخ التوقيع	

من خلال التوقيع ، يؤكد المشارك بان ما تم ذكره أعلاه صحيح.

القسم ب: يستكمل من قبل الباحث الرئيسي

أؤكد أن المشارك مُنح فرصة لطرح أسئلة حول الدراسة ، وتمت الإجابة على جميع الأسئلة التي طرحها المشارك بشكل صحيح وعلى قدر استطاعتي.

☐نعم ☐ لا

أؤكد أن المشارك لم يُكره على إعطاء الموافقة ، وأن الموافقة مُنحت بحرية وطوعًا

☐نعم ☐ لا

هل حضر مترجم هذه المقابلة؟

☐نعم ☐ لا

لقد أكدت من جديد أن بمجرد المشاركة والتوقيع، يتنازل المتشارك أو الخبيرعن السرية وأنه يمكن نشر معلوماته ضمن البحث

☐نعم ☐ لا

اسم الباحثة الرئيسية	
مدينة / بلد المقابلة	
توقيت المقابلة	
توقيع الباحثة	
تاريخ التوقيع	

من خلال التوقيع ، تؤكد الباحثة الرئيسية أن ما ورد أعلاه صحيح.

الإتصال

إذا كانت لديك أي أسئلة حول أسئلة المقابلة أو النشر أو المتابعة ، فيمكنك إرسال بريد إلكتروني الى الباحثة الرئيسية إيما ماكنافيش على البريد الالكتروني او الهاتف التالي:

[redacted]

تمت مراجعة هذا الاقتراح والموافقة عليه من قبل لجنة المراجعة الأخلاقية بجامعة برمنغهام. إذا كانت لديك أي أسئلة حول المراجعة الأخلاقية ، فيرجى الاتصال بمكتب المراجعة الأخلاقية بجامعة برمنجهام على **ethics-queries@contacts.bham.ac.uk.**

Appendix D – Interview Guide

Interview Guide

1. What are the differences in upbringing between Kurdish women and other women raised within the Middle East in regard to gender equality?
2. Do you believe Kurdish women have an increased gender equality in their society? Why or why not?
3. Do you think Kurdish women offer stability in areas of conflict? If yes, how do you believe they do this? If no, why not and what could this be improved?
4. Through your own life experience, how has stability within your region changed, if at all?
    a. If you believe there was increased stability, why do you think that has occurred?
    b. If not, what could be done to improve stability?
5. How do you think women are empowered within the Kurdish society?
6. How do you view the Women's Protection Unit within the Middle East (YPJ)?
    a. Overall, do you view women's role with YPJ positively or negatively? Do you think women's role with YPJ is successful in stabilizing the areas in which they work?
    b. What factors make the YPJ a success or failure?
    c. Do you think this movement is a success or failure in repelling extremism? Why or why not?
7. Are there Kurdish women in the surrounding community that are active in an advocacy capacity for helping other women?
8. How, if at all, does the Kurdish Reginal Government (KRG) promote and invest in the empowerment of Kurdish women and women in general?
9. How do you think other women can empower women within the Middle East to create lasting stability?

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