

UTRECHT UNIVERSITY

Re-Narrating Female Fighters through the Medium of Photography

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Introduction

The Provocative Presence of Militant Women



Figure 0.1: A female rebel-in-training sets her sights on a target whilst showing some precious bling. The image is taken by Karam al-Masri (AFP/Getty Images) in Aleppo (Syria) and published in the article of Jeff Neumann on www.vocativ.com in July, 2013.

This image of a Syrian female fighter was found amongst trending worldwide stories as published on the *Vocativ* online news platform in July 2013. This Syrian female fighter from *Our Mother Aisha Brigade*, a rebel group based in the northern city of Aleppo, is shown setting her sight on an unseen target; the photograph also featuring two precious rings prominently shown on her finger. The photographic accent on jewelry and the ominous: “Dressed to Kill: Syrian Female Rebels Go Chic” title (www.vocativ.com), suggest a migration of the visual focus from glamorous feminized figure to threatening image of a woman, whose feminine nature and militant practice are difficult to reconcile. The significance of the dislocation between the feminine and the militant

has to do, of course, with gender; to the extent, that female combat is understood as a troubling category, with both a credibility and a realness that is difficult to grasp.

Such concern with Syrian militant women is not only limited to the case of *Our Mother Aisha Brigade* and is in no way unique in the history of female combat, other examples being: the female Zapatista movement in Mexico or the female soldiers of the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK). Yet, the increasing number of female combatants joining the ongoing Syrian civil war receives significant and sustained attention in international coverage (Foreign Affairs, Minerva Journal of Woman and War, Global Policy Journal, The Wall Street Journal, The Middle East Journal to name but a few) all highlighting the feelings of consternation, horror, rejection, bewilderment, confusion and pride that surface in relation to female gender involvement in acts of warfare. The phenomenon is certainly less prevalent numerically, from male participants of the Syrian civil war; however, it is the specifically gendered characteristic of female fighter's representation that evokes feelings of ambivalence and uncertainty: feelings that become manifest in diverse visual and verbal narratives. Local and global media practices tend to portray female fighters in different ways either as heroines or as victims, yet equally characterizing them in terms of their femininity as in the case of the respective image where the militancy of female combatant is contraposed to her glamorous choice of jewellery.

The emphasis on female gender is not only circumscribed to media practices of depicting militant women, for feminist scholars (Yuval-Davis 1997, Kandiyoti 2004, Berger and Naaman 2006, Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, Naaman 2007) have long elucidated the gendered discourse deployed in the construction of "appropriate" female images when women's bodies become personified or represented as national symbols and when the notions of female sexuality or assumptions of "proper"¹ womanhood become associated with daily politics, ethnicity and membership. Yet, the increasing role of image-based media, where photographs of individuals are "deliberately used to exert political influence" (Khatib, 2013, p. 1), points to the specific power of the visual enacted within public contexts. Many different visual scholars have highlighted these power narratives, for example: Mirzoeff 2006, Hariman and Lucaites 2007, Azoulay 2008, Khatib 2013, Zarzycka 2014. According to them, the photographic medium does not only problematize the construction of represented subjects but also shapes societal relationship to them. To take an example of a specific female fighter's representation (Figure 0.1) on the *Vocativ* website: the photograph does not just

appear to be an image of Syrian rebel woman marked through the gendered act of display; it also draws upon the collective experiences of perceiving the female fighter as a gendered entity deeply incorporated into the patriarchal and heterosexist structures of her society. In this sense, photography cannot be considered as mere reflection of societal culture but rather as an instrument by means of which cultural views and attitudes are systematically reproduced in the course of knowledge production. Additionally, the digital nature of contemporary photography significantly extends its ideological influence through multiple modes of dissemination, “transforming the photograph from a discrete object to a node in a network” (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010 p.25), thus creating “malleable records of the visible that can and will be linked, transmitted, recontextualized, and fabricated” (Ritchin cited in Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010, p.25). Such interactivity of digital photography is particularly employed in electronic media that through the communicability, versatility and easy distribution of digital images attempts to enable large and more sustained political networks. On the one side, such a diffused nature of electronic media allows the existence of multiple counter-narratives; but on the other side, it creates multifarious platforms for ideological repackaging carried out through the digitally refined framing of photographic images.

For all these reasons, this research can be viewed as an attempt to analyze the ideological role of photography in managing and maintaining societal stereotypes as applied to militant women and their representation in both local and global media spaces. The current preoccupation of Western media with images of Syrian female fighters demonstrates how ambiguities of female gender become translated and reified into highly diversified spaces of electronic media that, whilst offering women an opportunity of visual presence, regularly attempts to utilize their bodies for the production of diverse political meanings. The particular concern with female fighter’s identity, manifested in the desire of Western media to contain her within discourses of modernity, represents a site of gender trouble, viewed by the ruling powers as a subversion of patriarchal order (Tasker 2011). Anxiety lies in the cultural unease at attempts to reconcile the notions of “woman” and “soldier” lying at the heart of gendered discourse within which fighting is perceived as a masculine business. As such, when a militant woman demonstrates her capability to fight, the dominant power attempts to conform her militant image to the needs of her nation. The practice is not limited to Western media only, yet the power of the latter to transcend cultural borders points

to the applicability of Western media framings in diverse local and global contexts within which female fighters are portrayed in accordance with their groups' expectations whether as "emancipatory" heroes or as "backward" victims. These two conceptual frames, employed in both local and global settings, define therefore the two main questions of this research:

- How do appropriations of female fighters' visual images become subjugated to the nationalist and religious sentiments of two Syrian rival groups that through both gendered and heterosexist processes attempt to politicize the women's bodies linking them to the political projects of their groups?
- And how do two specific groups of female combatants: Kurdish female fighters and female jihadists, become differently portrayed in a Western media context that, through various visual strategies, aims to foreground its own democratizing mission in relation to the non-Western world?

As such, my approach will be to focus attention on how females, through images, operate as distinctive cultural referents with which political powers aim to manage the ideological construction of their collective spaces. The significance of this research lies not only in the elucidation of the process of ideological codification through which female fighters gain their symbolic meaning but also in highlighting the power of photography to transmit societal attitudes towards militant women whose visual presence can be interpreted as simultaneously empowering and controversial. In this regard, the validity of this academic work resides in an expansion of our visual literacy, through the deployment of which, we can learn how to contest the tradition of appropriating female images for the sake of patriarchal order and its gendered stereotypes.

Controversies of Female Combat: Reviewing Feminist Literature on Militant Women

In order to illustrate the contradictory nature of female fighters' representation in contemporary Western media I would like first to provide an overview of feminist perspectives on female militancy and its ambiguous location within Western discourse. Existing analysis has been mostly split between a liberal feminist approach that traditionally views women as victims of militant conflicts (Moghadam 1994, Yuval-Davis 1997, Victor 2003, Giles and Hyndman 2004,

Bloom 2005), and broader feminist contextualizations of women's motivations to engage in combat (Luciak 2001, Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, Alison 2009, Naaman 2007, Rajan 2011); one that acknowledge women's violent agency and will to fight alongside men. Despite differently framed arguments of these approaches, their common position is grounded in the idea of a gendered discourse that has traditionally considered women as the objects of their cultures. As Nira Yuval-Davis pointed out in her work (1997), throughout the centuries women have been expected to uphold their groups' ideological values based upon long-standing traditions that view them as cultural bearers of national identities. Her argument suggests that patriarchal, societal and moral imperatives have always considered female bodies as territories on which states and oppositions could "wage their wars and play out their ideologies" (Parashar, 2009, p. 238). Valentine Moghadam (1994) saw it as a strategy of national projects in which women were either used as symbols of a national culture that was to be reclaimed or as tokens of liberation when women were encouraged to take part in the armed struggle themselves. According to the author (Moghadam, 1994), these two ways in which females have been implicated in violent conflict have subsequently defined the nature of 'postmodern wars' in which women, whether willingly or unwillingly, have been incorporated primarily through their gender.

Based on this understanding, some feminist authors have pointed out the significance of militant activism to women who decide to take up arms for fulfilling their own aspirations (Alison 2009, Parashar 2009, Rajan 2011). Miranda Alison (2009) showed, for example, that ethno-nationalist political movements provide a lot of ideological and political support to female combatants who want to contribute to the cultural rejuvenation² of their group values. When motivating women to fight in their ranks, nationalist ideologists rely upon emancipatory agendas, which make female fighters feel that they are fighting for their own rights. It is particularly visible in the case of LTTE (The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam) movement the leadership of which "has often argued that that freedom, both economic and political, must translate into the emancipation of women" (Balasingham cited in Parashar, 2009, p. 240).

The same happens in the case of fundamentalist religious movements, which in comparison to state nationalism deploy religious ideology as a means of fostering national identity. Swati Parashar (2009) presents the example of Kashmiri Muslim female fighters whose incorporation into the Kashmiri military has been enabled through the advocacy of the Islamic way

of life. V.G. Julie Rajan (2011), when describing women rebels, also demonstrated how the harsh contexts of war affect female social views and make women launch their own military agenda, as in the case of Kurdish female fighters, in order to resist oppressive practices within their own communities. Thus, there is a substantial body of evidence to say that women join militant organizations for their own purposes that they aim to fulfill within the ideology of militancy. Yet, whatever reasons women articulate for joining combat, whether in the name of nation or religion, their militant agency remains ambiguous in relation to the patriarchal contexts within which it is exercised. While choosing one or another side in militant and political struggles, women unwillingly act as the upholders of values that apparently corroborate deeply rooted patriarchal relationships. Whether the goal of the struggle is articulated through emancipatory rhetoric or fundamentalist conformity, the militant agency of women is merely utilized as a strategy for backing local or global political orders.

Such patriarchal practices, of using women's identities as adherents to diverse political camps also translates into the realm of global politics when different states seek to contest their opponents' political realities through the bodies of women appropriated for the purpose. Kelly Oliver (2007) and Shirin S. Deylami (2013) have succinctly illustrated how hegemonic Western power resorts to the "question of woman" when establishing its rhetoric of modernization and democratization in relation to the non-Western world. Whilst doing so, Western imperialist forces contrapose images of Western and Eastern women foregrounding their physical and sexual qualities. For example, the veil of Muslim women and their covered bodies as such turn to function in the Western discourse as the symbol of female circumscription (Deylami 2013) whereas the uncovered body of Western woman comes to represent values of emancipation and democratization propagated by the West (Oliver 2007). In this regard, the women's will to reveal their bodies in public functions as a sign of female liberation which in the context of Western discourse becomes merely reduced to women's sexual freedom. As such, the role of veiled Muslim women adds up to "the construction and consolidation of the [sexually] free Western woman" (Oliver, 2007, p. 57) whose emancipated nature becomes foregrounded as a symbol of Western democratization. The conjunction of such dominant Western narrative with the rhetoric of women's emancipation marks the figure of woman as the object of contestation between two different patriarchal ideals.

Thus, through this examination of feminist theoretical perspectives on female combatants, we can see that the multifarious identities of militant women are “multilayered, constructed by the societies they come from, by the militant and political extremist groups they are part of” and by the local and global powers they affiliate themselves to (cited in Parashar, 2009, p. 254). Armed militancy, therefore, can just as easily as offering opportunities for civil presence, also reinforce their gendered status within this civil space. As such, it is imperative not to exclude women’s militant experiences but to critically evaluate them in order to understand where and when their agency is at risk of patriarchal appropriation.

Tracing the Visual Tradition of Representing Militant Women

One way in which to critically engage with women’s militant experience is to analyze the visual tradition of their representation in different fields of work. Despite the fact that, I cannot for reasons of space here, provide a full overview of female fighters’ visual representation, I would however like to examine some characteristic traits of this tradition in Western film and press images from the last century as well as in contemporary Western media practices as examined by different visual and feminist scholars. Jayne Steel (1998) reveals that popular tropes accompanying women warriors in the British press in the last hundred years have been: the fighter’s young age, sexual beauty and danger. Having analyzed press reporting images of female members of PIRA (Provisional IRA) from 1968 to the present, the author revealed the fantasmatic nature of women’s representations that referenced the image of “Vampira”³, the deadly and seductive female vamp. According to Steel (1998, p. 275), “Vampira” was a perfect metaphoric image that connected “cultural anxieties about the dangers of “unstable” women with the anxieties about terrorism”. Through the description of British cultural obsession with this fictional female image the author highlighted how this trope was gradually transformed into a troubling issue that began to signify PIRA terrorist and female warriors in general.

Yvonne Tasker (2011) also elaborated on the troubling nature of female militancy in Western cinematographic narratives that, according to the author, aimed to portray women-fighters not really as soldiers and not really as women. Through analysis of television and cinema since the Second World War, Tasker (2011) foregrounded two recurrent tropes surrounding female fighters, firstly as militant woman as auxiliary and secondly as a provocative presence. Bringing as

an example the heroine from the British film *Airwoman* (1941), which depicts the daily work of women in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, Tasker showed how the female soldier had been initially seen as a force of men or, as a "vital part [...] of men's trials and triumphs" (Tasker, 2011, p. 26). When in the context of war, woman's auxiliary service as soldier was presented with her in a supporting rather than a leading role, thus characterizing her as a military agent yet dependent upon her male peers. By the end of the World War II the female auxiliary service was no longer needed and as result, women who remained in military service within institutions "which [were] defined and organized in terms of military masculinity" (Tasker, 2011, p. 11), were no longer welcomed, rather, characterized as troubling and provocative. This ambiguous characteristic of female fighters' militant agency, as shown in the work of Steel and Tasker, was later translated into their visual representations in contemporary Western media that while establishing the popular Western rhetoric of modernization deployed old visual traditions of portraying militant women either as dangerous or victimized.

In the era of digital media when photographs of individuals are no longer considered discrete objects but rather as a networked production, controversial images of female fighters tend to penetrate the public consciousness as collective imaginary or as conventional tropes visualized in the context of pervasive media framings. Eva Berger and Dorit Naaman (2006, p. 280) illustrated an example of a female fighter's image from the Israeli army magazine *Bamahane*, whose representation was organized in narrative frames "similar to fiction rather than just structures, relying on much shorthand, based on people's cultural and ideological belief systems". According to both authors, the female image was instead "contextualized as an erotic content" (2006, p. 280) aimed at sexualizing the female body, thereby presenting female soldiers as objects of male gaze rather than free agents able to fight as the male soldiers do. This is not the only framing strategy employed in the visual representation of militant women. Brigitte L. Nacos (2005) and V.G. Julie Rajan (2011) also highlighted other types of framings frequently used in the media when reporting on female terrorists. The most popular is the family connection frame, which explains the military action of female combatants through their personal motivations, like taking revenge for the loved husband or a relative in ways that tend to reduce women's militant agency to private reasons whilst attributing all political agency to men. Another widespread strategy used in the visual portrayal of female soldiers is the woman's equality frame (Nacos 2005) which is very popular in

the European media and which attempts to present female armed participation as an excess of the women's liberation movement. Some media accounts as I show in the case of Kurdish female fighters even tend to embellish female combat through the expressions of gender equality portraying women as liberation fighters whose primary goal is to fight for the rights of women worldwide.

As it becomes clear from this short overview, Western practices presenting female soldiers as controversial figures find its roots in the long visual tradition of describing these women in terms of established tropes, the superiority of which was translated into the framing strategies of contemporary Western media. But whereas the visual presence of female fighters in media can be considered as an empowering experience suggesting the potential for a photographed woman "to perform a meta-narrative of [her] political agency" (Khatib, 2013, p. 9); the gendered nature of traditional tropes prove to stir up the same conventional prejudices about women representing them rather as impersonal agents than the individual characters. Because these kinds of female fighters' representations reinforce deep-seated gendered views on women, political powers are able to take advantage of such visual practices for the establishment and maintenance of their patriarchal order. As such, my goal here is not to deny the potential of female fighters' visual presence but to offer a critical reading of their representations in contemporary Western media that through the gendered interpretation of women's images assures the survival of patriarchal logic.

Highlighting the Scope of this Project

This research examines several photographic representations of Syrian female fighters stirred by the visual interest to female presence in war that Syria has been witnessing since the beginning of the revolution in 2011. In particular, it constitutes an attempt to reveal the visual framing strategies of Western media to narrate female fighters' identities in ways that reinforce their gendered receptions both within and outside their cultures.

For my study I have chosen four photographs of Syrian female combatants, two of which are taken from the Facebook pages of Syrian belligerent parties and two others from the online news portal of international German broadcaster *Deutsche Welle* (DW). My choice of social and broadcast Western media is dictated by their growing role in the distribution of information and by

their profound impact on the ways in which individuals receive and distribute news stories (McCombs 2004, Graber 2009). With regard to Facebook, it is the popularity of this social platform, especially since the Middle East uprising, that attracts many journalists and ordinary individuals to report on the events around them and to spread their information to the broadest public possible. As for the German news portal *Deutsche Welle*, it is its international nature and wide coverage (circulation in 30 languages) that define the broadcaster's strong influence on shaping public meaning within the boundaries of its spectatorship. Therefore, my interest to these particular forms of Western media can be explained through their degree of popularity, accessibility and wide circulation within national as well as international borders.

The significance of the four images chosen for this project lies in their representative nature that through the ideological constituent embedded into each photograph delineates bigger trends of the ambiguous portrayal of female fighters in social and broadcast Western media. In the case of Facebook images of Syrian female fighters, their profound social impact is informed through their contained references to recognizable collective tropes of femininity, on the premises of which two Syrian rival groups define their ideal female images. The two other photographs from the DW online news portal, point towards Western practices that employ different framing strategies within the same discourse on Syrian female combatants. The location of images within the structure of this work is dictated by two conceptual frameworks in my research – local: produced by the Syrian state and rebel culture in which the images of female soldiers are used as a means of securing a particular national and religious ideology; and global: produced by the West for its mission of democratization propagated through the opposition of “civilized” and “religious” female images.

In order to fully respond to the research questions stated during the introduction, I will apply a discursive method to the examination of a given photograph that allows me to interpret respective images on the symbolic level not only elucidating their compositional modality but also highlighting their social production and effects embedded into the patriarchal practices of both states and opposition alike. Drawing upon feminist analysis of female fighter's agency within local and global contexts⁴, I intend to critically reassess subsequent appropriations of female images that are used by different political powers for the establishment of their dominant ideologies. In

this regard, the research does not merely examine the visual portrayal of female fighters but illustrates the fundamental role the female body plays in the current Syrian conflict.

In accordance with the guiding questions stated in this research, this paper is organized as follows: after the introductory section I will move to the first chapter where I will illustrate how two Syrian rival parties appropriate female fighters' identities for the corroboration of their nationalist and religious projects. Through an analysis of two Facebook photographs depicting Syrian militant women I will demonstrate the gendered and heterosexist processes through which the Syrian state and opposition aim to construct their ideal female images. In this chapter I will also draw on the opportunity the visual presence offers to female combatants for the negotiation of their civic status and highlight the danger of this form of citizenship production under which one group's ideal image of femininity is constructed in opposition to another group's female image. Then, I will move to the second chapter where I will demonstrate how female fighters' identities are capitalized upon within the global context informing Western desires to propagate its "civilized" mission to the non-Western world. By examining two photographs from the DW online news portal I aim to show how Western broadcast media differently frames two groups of female combatants, Kurdish female fighters and female jihadists, thereby securing its dominant imperialist position in relation to a religious, Islamic East. In the conclusion I will consolidate my analysis of the respective photographs and will reflect on the power of the photographic medium to narrate female fighter's identities in accordance with the political agendas of their groups. By summarizing the examined cases I will point to not only the potentiality the visual presence offers women but also to the risks it conceals.

Chapter 1

The Appropriations of Female Fighters' Images within the Context of National and Religious Conflict in Syria

The Syrian civil conflict brought to the fore the fact of women's participation in war that has been reported by different Human Rights Organizations. According to estimates made by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, around five thousand Syrian women served in military combat and logistics in 2013 (Al-Monitor 2013). The Syrian regime actively seeks female recruits for a paramilitary force called *the Lionesses for National Defense* as a subsidiary of the National Defense Force (NDF) that "[has] already been deployed on the streets and at the checkpoints" (The Washington Post 2013). Additionally, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) also has its own female battalions such as *Our Mother Aisha Brigade* and *Katiba*, the latter of which consists mostly of Kurdish female fighters who were at the beginning of the conflict fighting alongside the Free Syrian Army, but later set its own agenda due to their anti-jihadists views and emancipatory politics. The above mentioned female military groupings operate within two oppositional forces - the Syrian Arab Army and the Free Syrian Army respectively - both major players in the ongoing civil struggle. While the NDF serves as legal governmental forces of Syria that support pro-Assad's government and the regime as such, the second, the FSA, does not represent a distinct military organization and is understood mostly as an umbrella name with which primarily nationalist and often religious groups associate themselves. Their motivations for taking part in the Syrian civil struggle can be explained through their disloyalty to Assad's authoritative regime and their affiliation to Sunni expressions of Islam that stand in contrast to those of the predominantly Shiite pro-governmental forces. As such, the conflict can be considered as being both ethnically and religiously framed, a dynamic that suggests the use of political identities in the shaping of oppositional political realities.

Images of female combatants have been widely deployed on different sides of the conflict generating a variety of responses in the context of both local and global cyberspaces. The reliance of political powers on the medium of photography is explained through the opportunities that images, in this case of women, offer for the communication and dissemination of political messages. Whilst for the Syrian state authorities the use of photographs enables control over its political spaces and identities, for the opposition their use signifies the possibility of visual

representation understood as the ability to be seen, not only heard. Contemporary photography scholars (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, Azoulay 2008, Khatib 2013, Greenwood 2012) point out how photographic images are deliberately used for the production of national identities, which in turn can be instrumentalized for the construction of desirable political spaces. The technology of photography helps political powers to visually generate the popular representations of individuals codifying them into the national symbols on the premises of which the (future) nation can be formed. By embracing this visual strategy, the power relies “on images for legitimation (of the self) and delegitimation (of “others”)” (Khatib, 2013, p. 7), thereby turning individuals into cultural products through which the political message can be mediated. In this regard, the mediation of the female body in front of the camera aims at the construction of an ideal female image through which the political parties tend to project their national and religious aspirations (Berger & Naaman 2006, Khatib 2013). Therefore, the analysis of visual images can bring light upon how the politics of gendered representation is embedded into the photographic practices of different powers and how the body of a woman is instrumentalized for the construction of the ‘appropriate’ national spaces within the boundaries of which the particular political power is exercised.

In this chapter I will focus on two photographs of Syrian female fighters that are representative of the previously mentioned warring camps, and will try to delineate how their female bodies are used as a tool to shore up the belligerents’ political spaces and to inform the ‘appropriate’ national logics needed for the existence of these spaces. Elucidating on the tradition of using women as symbolic markers of their communities (Yuval-Davis & Anthias 1989, Moghadam 1994), I reflect on how the appropriations of female fighters’ visual images become subjugated to the nationalist and religious sentiments of two rival groups, one of which defines its “appropriate” femininity in relation to “modern”⁵ image of pro-Assad female fighter whereas another builds its collective female image through its affiliation to religious tradition of the group. My aim is to interrogate the gendered and heterosexist process by which two Syrian rival parties attempt to politicize the female body idealizing certain female body types, often framed by the proper dress and the woman’s sexual embodiment. Acknowledging the opportunity the visual presence offers female combatants for the negotiation of their civic status, I highlight the danger of such citizenship production under which one group’s ideal image of femininity is constructed in

opposition to another group's female image, thereby circumscribing female civic status to either one or another side of the binary.

The first image (Figure 1.1) I am going to analyze in this chapter has been taken by a professional photographer and published on the website of American daily newspaper *The Washington Post* in 2013. This image has also circulated in the social media, particularly it can be found on the pro-governmental Facebook page of "Syria Sky" (www.facebook.com/SyriaSky.SS) that posted the respective photograph in the section "Our Lionesses" accompanying it with the praising words "Our beautiful and brave lioness". The second image (Figure 1.2) was made by an unknown photographer and posted on the pro-opposition Facebook page in April 2013 (www.facebook.com/KtybtSmyhBntAlkhyat), also accompanied by the eloquent cue "May God blesses you!" I have chosen these particular photographs because they form a good sample of female images used by two Syrian political powers in their social media. They have not been compared before and are exhibited solely in relation to their political spaces. Yet, both images show women in their active role depicting them as soldiers serving in the National Defense Force of Syria and the Free Syrian Army respectively.

The first photograph (Figure 1.1) shows a female member of the Syrian National Defense Force:



Figure 1.1: a new member of Syria's National Defense Force holds her rifle at a training center in Homs. It is a photo made by the professional photographer Anwar Amro in 2013, published in the Washington Post.

She poses in front of the camera looking straight at the viewer. Her modern military outfit, uncovered head, styled and colored hair stresses the woman's belonging to Assad's Alawite sect that claims to be secular and pro-Western. The woman's overall posture with the head turned unstrained with the rest of the body and the hands keeping loosely the weapon invokes rather the image of the model or pop-star than a highly disciplined and exact soldier. Her languishing and direct look attracts and invokes our fascination. On the background we see the bar fence behind which some parts of city buildings, moving cars and a bus are visible. The figure of the female fighter stands in the centre of the image, thus positioning the viewer face to face with the photographed woman and leaving the background frame out of focus. Such spacial organization focalizes the spectator's look at the body of a woman whose stature is emphasized through the close shot and the dominant source of day light.

On the second photograph (Figure 1.2) we see a Free Syrian Army female fighter whose head and hair are covered by a headscarf making visible only the woman's eyes and eyebrows. On the right side of female body we see a piece of weapon which is visually foregrounded on the level of woman's face:



Figure 1.2: Syrian female rebel standing with her weapon in front of the camera. Photo is made by an unknown photographer and is placed on the pro-opposition Facebook page in April 2013.

The spacial organization of the photograph positions the woman's upper body and a piece of weapon into the centre while leaving out of focus the deserted house on the background: The image is shot from very close up, thus offering a relation of intimacy between the woman and the spectator. Moreover, the woman's upper body is lighted by the flash what in contrast to the dimmed background places even more emphasis on the female face. The covered female figure and a piece of weapon next to it make visual connections to the Muslim fundamentalist community associated with religious pioussness.

The fact that both images circulate within the social media spaces of opposing military camps indicates the importance of women in the construction of discourses needed for the proliferation of particular political ideologies. Although the article of *The Washington Post* is framed by anti-Assad feelings exhibiting female fighters as a proof of Assad's cruelty, the appropriation of the first photograph by Syrian pro-governmental forces, however, assigns another meaning to its female soldier. On the pro-governmental Facebook page she is praised as "our beautiful and brave lioness" being addressed as a member of a community which is proud of having such a fighter in its military ranks. In the case of the second photograph, the same communal affiliation takes place: the woman receives the blessing of her group, thereby being acknowledged as its precious member. The high number of Facebook responses which predominantly express forms of praise, indicates the importance of photographs to their communities that subsequently legitimize the respective images by their glorification. Thus, we can read these photographs as group manifestations of their communal affiliations and aspirations as expressed through the bodies of female fighters.

What becomes clear from the social contexts, within which both photographs circulate, is that their interpretive frames engage the idea of membership that shapes the way we imagine and construct the "us" and "them" (Yuval-Davis & Anthias 1989). Feminist scholars have critically examined the construction of collective spaces elucidating the gendered nature of nationalist and military projects and the role women play in it. Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias (1989) describe how women serve as symbolic markers of their groups' cultural identities when they are assigned the roles of signifiers of ethnic and national differences. Because the symbols of cultural particularity are always guarded, women become controlled by the dominant power in their strategies to maintain the groups' boundaries. In this regard, female bodies and identities serve as the

territories on which nationalist military groups wage their wars and play out their ideologies. Cynthia Enloe (2000) also showed how women are incorporated into militant activities within which female bodies become linked to desirable national narratives: contemporary ethno-nationalist and religious wars as well as institutions behind them rely upon particular ideas of the “liberated woman” when inviting women to participate in a ‘common’ struggle. According to Valentine Moghadam (cited in Alison, 2004, p. 452), women’s role within nationalist movements is defined in relation to two models: “a modernizing type that includes ideas of the equality and emancipation of women, where women are linked to progress and modernization, and a form where women and their acceptable behavior and appearance are viewed as central to cultural rejuvenation or religious orthodoxy”. Both these models involve the gendered assumptions of femininity articulated by a particular community for its interest. In this regard, making photographs is considered to be the technique that utilizes female bodies as a medium with the help of which the political power tries to carve out a national space for itself. The patriarchal moral imperative of this power tends to appropriate the images by claiming their authenticity in relation to the context and cultural milieu which give the birth to the respective photographs.

In the case of Syrian Civil War the politics of constructing the “proper” femininity takes place through the media campaigns of both Syrian warring parties that rely strongly on the contextualized photographic images of women in propagating their ideologies. Both photographs reveal the symbolic dimension of women’s dress that communicates the views of the respective communities on their ‘appropriate’ female image. While the NDF woman (Figure 1.1) has a fashionable military suit on that accentuates the contours of female body revealing its pleasant and attractive shape, the upper body of FSA fighter (Figure 1.2) is completely covered by the headscarf making visible only her eyes. The difference between two women is also emphasized through the revealed skin of one and the hidden flesh of another. We also see that the hair of NDF fighter is bleached blond while the hair of FSA soldier is not visible at all. Such contraposition is also reinforced through the daylight of the first image and twilight background of the second one. The spacial organization of both photographs positions female figures in a very close up thus emphasizing their forms. And yet, in the case of the first image we are able to see almost the overall stature of the woman whereas the second image reveals only the upper part with a focus on the face accentuated through the highlight.

The contrasting representation of both women elucidates the oppositional dimensions of their respective political powers, which use these images as “the symbolic repository of group identity” (Kandiyoti cited in Peterson, 1999, 49). In this regard, the photographs serve as instruments that help embed the female identity into the collective “meaning system” (Bloom cited in Peterson, 1999) assigning her a particular role in relation to this very system. While doing it the political powers do not only establish the borders of their groups, they also reassure the survival of their heterosexist nationalist imperatives that rely upon the female bodies in their strategy of group building. If we look at both photographs again, we can observe how the heterosexist idea is played out in relation to both women’s bodies. In case of the first photograph (Figure 1.1) the female fighter’s languishing and direct look against the background of her open face invites the viewer to associate the female image with the Western sexual idea of beauty that attracts, arouses and fascinates. In this sense, the representation of NDF woman resonates with the secular sexual idea of how her female body might look like in the eyes of her community that visually forwards such an open-minded attitude to its female members. Conversely, the covered face of the FSA female soldier (Figure 1.2) creates a feeling of mystery and intimacy accentuated through the very close up shot and piercing look of the woman. The flash of the green light directed at the woman’s face intensifies this feeling referencing her image to the old religious tradition of depicting holiness and chastity, thereby accentuating the woman’s sexual purity. In comparison to the image of the NDF female fighter the beauty of the FSA woman is not exposed, yet the degree of its (in)visibility defines her sexual appropriateness in relation to the man from the same nationalist/religious group. Consequently, both photographed female bodies are employed as a means of heterosexual bonding projecting their groups’ sexual expectations. In this way, the patriarchal moral imperatives of both political powers establish their image of ‘appropriate’ femininity that becomes proclaimed and visualized as being normative (Peterson, 1999). Yet, this sexual normativity is articulated within the oppositional framework of both powers that use contrasting female images (secular and religious, open and covered, sexually attractive and mysteriously intimate) as signifiers of their groups’ identities.

As such, both representations of female fighters assure the oppositional logic of their realities within which women’s bodies are used to represent one side of the binary in relation to the other. In this way both political powers assure the maintenance of their groups’ borders

simultaneously acknowledging their own female image and subverting that one of the 'enemy'. Consequently, the production of 'appropriate' femininity becomes central to the fulfillment of national projects in the framework of which the images of women are used as symbols of the respective political ideologies: the styled image of NDF female fighter (Figure 1.1) is forwarded as a symbol of pro-Western and emancipatory Assad regime while the woman from FSA (Figure 1.2) serves as a symbol of religious culture and tradition that are to be reclaimed through the covered body of the combatant. In this respect, the female bodies become a medium through which patriarchal nationalist imperatives establish their political realities. As such, both female bodies become subjugated to the nationalist logics of the political powers that rely upon the photographed female images for the solidification of their nationalist and religious sentiments.

On the basis of this argument it becomes clear that the female body, in this context, becomes conflated with the 'appropriate' national imaginary of the (future) nation. The gendered representation of women as signifiers of group identities, pro-Western or traditional, tend to accentuate their in-group similarities as well as their inter-group differences, thereby defining the force with which their communities draw national and religious boundaries in the context of civil division. As result, their photographed bodies become a territory on which the boundaries of membership are drawn. This membership status serves later as a pre-condition for the attainment of legal citizenship in the (future) state. As such, women's affiliation with their groups does not only define who and how can join the particular collective space but also ensures that the respective female subject will achieve the civic status in exchange for her membership. In this respect, the photographs serve as a contract between the female subjects and their groups whose patriarchal moral imperatives dictate the conditions of this future citizenship (Azoulay, 2008).

Following this line of thought, I therefore consider the photographs as being not only symbolic of the oppositional and heterosexist patriarchal order in which both women exist, but also as serving as "a metaphor of the way [dominant powers] approach the idea of citizenship" (Khatib, 2013, p. 93). In this regard, the photographed images of both women become a property of their communities which the respective female fighters belong to. These communities grant in exchange, an imaginary citizenship to those female members who offer their bodies for the fulfillment of national projects. In this way, women's bodies become the product of negotiation between the particular national/religious ideology and the individual herself. In words of Ariella

Azoulay (2008, p. 120), “[m]embership in the collective is based on each one’s renunciation of exclusive ownership of his or her image and on each one’s willingness and right to be photographed and become a photograph”. In this regard, the exercise of photography in the situation of civil and national division informs the exercise of citizenship that imposes the duties upon the subjects who are called to expose their affiliation to the ‘appropriate’ national ideology.

If we look at the illustration of a female fighter, posted as a front image on the Syrian pro-opposition Facebook page (www.facebook.com/KtybtSmyhBntAlkhyat), we can observe how the rhetoric of citizenship is played out in relation to a female member of religious military group. What is important to note is that the image has the generalized character of a woman and therefore it does not visually expose any female flesh but rather conforms to the idea of female who is considered as being ‘proper’ for the national imaginary of this particular Syrian religious rebel group. The necessary attributes of such a woman is the adherence to the fundamental values of Islam as manifested through the head and face cover and the visibility of her political views which are strongly differentiated via Sunni slogan between the “us” and “them” who are considered to be the allies and the enemies respectively. The position of this digital illustration on the Facebook front page of Syrian opposition imprints the female image with the seal of affiliation to the particular nationalist ideology, emphasizing the fact of recognition of such a woman as a citizen, whose citizenship yet shall be granted through the process of exercising her duties before the imaginary nation.



Figure 1.3: The illustration of armed muqatilat, posted by an unknown person on the Syrian pro-oppositional Facebook front page, beside a written vow to oppose all enemies of Islam: Jews, Russian Communists, rawafid (literally “rejectionists,” a derogatory term for Shiite Muslims) and other infidels (found on Al-Monitor website).

Such condensation between the rhetoric of citizenship and the construction of ‘appropriate’ femininity transforms the photographed female body into a cultural product through which their communities aim to construct desirable political realities of their (future) nations. In this regard,

photography in particular, and media in general, play a crucial role in establishing the national zone and status giving an individual the right to claim his/her membership or (future) citizenship through the images they offer for the support of the national project. As such, the photographed act becomes the guarantee of aspirational membership that an individual can negotiate by means of his/her body. Ariella Azoulay (2008, p. 124) calls it “a global form of relation [...] that is not entirely obedient to global logic, even as it enjoys the channels of exchange and association the latter creates”. This global form of relation, as for the author, offers an individual the unrestricted space for experiencing membership without fear of exclusion. Yet, the way in which the woman establishes her relation to the political power is defined through her heterosexual bonding to men whose nationalistic logic dictates the conditions of attaining such status of citizenship. Therefore, while negotiating their bodies through the process of photography, female combatants project the nationalist sexual normativity of their political ideologies, thereby defining the production of desirable citizenship.

Hence, both photographs are an example of how the identities of female fighters become re-defined and mediated within the particular political frameworks that dictate the conditions of (in)visibility to the respective female bodies. Lina Khatib (2013, p.6) calls it a process of mediatization “through which mediated cultural products [gain] importance as cultural referents” As such, the reliance of a political power on the image as a visual evidence of its sustainability illustrates the importance of a mediated female body for the construction of desirable political reality. In this respect, the process of mediatization does not only contribute to the development and maintenance of national projects, but also provides women with the civic personhood (Azoulay, 2008) that enables them to perform their own narrative of political agency, even though this agency is exercised under the patriarchal national imperative. Consequently, photography plays a crucial role in re-defining the civil status of women giving them an opportunity to construct their civic subjectivities in relation to the power which controls them. Yet, the danger of such political agency lies in its service to the heterosexist nationalistic ideologies that entail the reproduction of strategies which manipulate female visibility for the maintenance of the same symbolic order. In this respect, we can read both photographs of female fighters exposing their culturally marked bodies as both – as constructing the female citizens as a display of particular nationalist logic behind this idea of citizenship.

Having illustrated how photographs of Syrian female combatants become instrumentalized by the Syrian state and opposition as a tool of group or nation building, I then highlighted the construction of ideal female images that are crafted through persistent negotiations of “modern” and “religious” femininity. Within frameworks of gendered and heterosexist politics founded on the traditional use of women as symbolic markers of their communities (Yuval-Davis & Anthias 1989, Moghadam 1994), female fighters’ images are produced to resonate within the nationalist aspirations of their groups. Framing female soldiers either in terms of secular or religious values allows the Syrian state and opposition respectively to continue the establishment of exclusive citizenship, the logic of which is rooted in the patriarchal order of both political powers. As such, female fighter’s presence in the political dimension of the Syrian civil conflict remains a problematic question, for it entails the reproduction of gendered and national hierarchies that contribute to the perpetuation of exclusive ideologies. Having demonstrated the disparate representation of female fighters’ images within the local context of Syrian war, I would like now to analyze the same practice within the global context of Western media that by differently portraying female soldiers aims to secure its moral superiority in relation to the non-Western world. By tracing female fighters’ representation within these two contexts, I aim to show that our overall conceptions of militant women are not initiated by intimate connections but by oppositional perspectives in local and global politics that while offering different representations of female identities assures the survival of its patriarchal order.

Chapter 2

Disparate Representations of Female Fighters and the Making of Western Democracy

The role played by women in the three-year-old Syrian conflict is complex and often confusing: while some sources describe their presence as “symbolic” (The New York Times, 2013), others present them as a dangerous weapon (The Daily Mail, 2013) employed by both the Assad regime and the Syrian Opposition in their civil struggle. Such a dual view on women’s role in armed conflicts is grounded within cultural traditions of portraying militant women either as helpless victims whose agency cannot be recognized (Victor 2003, Bloom 2005, Berko 2007) or as perpetrators who are just as capable of violent actions as men are (Fitzroy 2004, Luciak 2001). The contradiction of this approach lies in the production of contrasting female identities whose characteristics become defined in opposition to each other that in turn perpetuates the binary framework of “victimhood” and “agency” reinforcing conventional gender stereotypes. As result, notions of women’s political participation become co-opted into either the narrative of emancipation or of religious militancy. As I demonstrated in the first chapter, such contradictory narratives attempt to rewrite the female fighters’ identities in ways that force them to fit familiar prevalent nationalist and religious ideologies. Since these narratives are biased by the conflicting political contexts in which they are produced, the contradictory representation of female soldiers continues to mark the women’s bodies as “objects of contest” used by the dominant order for the purpose of sustaining its oppositional patriarchal logic (Deylami 2013). Having already illustrated how female fighters’ identities become differently narrated in the local context of Syrian Civil War, I would like in the second chapter to explore female soldiers’ representation within the global context when hegemonic power, represented here by the Western media, portrays militant women in accordance with Western moral imperatives that through different framing strategies of representing militant women intends to contest “backward” Islamic culture and foreground its own, “civilized” one. By bringing these two analyses to bear in the same academic work I wish to highlight the issue of female fighters’ representation as the reflection of world politics that by offering disparate portrayals of female fighters aims to secure its patriarchal logic within both local and global settings.

As in the case of Facebook, broadly used in local contexts of the Syrian struggle, Western broadcast media shows a particular interest towards female combatants and the nature of their struggle. The recent phenomenon of female “foreign fighters”⁶, who leave their home countries whether as wives, friends or relatives of male combatants to participate, in this case, in the current Syrian conflict, sparked growing interest with Western media with regard to notions of female combat as revealing disparate representations of militant female figures within Western culture (The New York Times 2013, BuzzFeed 2013, www.mirror.co.uk 2014). Ironically, the Western portrayal of female combatants resonates with the Syrian pro-government and pro-opposition strategy of producing their “appropriate” images of women who are sacrificed for and are loyal only to their ideologies. As such, the representation of female fighters within the Western context becomes trapped into the same oppositional framework of “us” and “them”, yet is articulated through the Western idea of freedom and democracy. Consequently, the Western production of images and texts about female combat “gives the appearance of psychological narrative control over the notion of [militant women]” that is negotiated in compliance with the binary logic of patriarchal Western discourse (Rajan, 2011, p. 31).

This chapter aims to highlight the stated problem through the medium of photography and its deployment in a Western context where one group of Syrian female combatants such as Kurdish female fighters are presented through an emancipated agenda that is recognizable to the Western audiences while another group, for example, female jihad, is presented in a way that reinforces the subjugation of women within Islam affiliating them to their husbands and relatives. I examine here two photographs, both depicting different groups of Syrian female fighters, and elucidate Western narrativizations that attempt to represent these types of militant women in opposition to each other. Drawing on Western notions of the use of women as symbols of modernity (Spivak 1988, Chatterjee 1989, Abu-Lughod 1998), I aim to show how Western discourse around female combat reflects the broader establishment of dominant imperialist power that seeks, on one hand, to contest “backward”⁷ Islamic culture and, on the other, to foreground its “modern” and “civilized” character. This is not to say that the binary logic of the West is solely imperialistic. Rather, it is to contend that the representations of female fighters in Western media are framed in ways that constitute a contestation between West and East framed by Edward Said’s theory on Orientalism within the framework of which the Orient constitutes everything what West is not⁸.

In order to analyze the way in which the images of female fighters are utilized to further the Western narratives of democratization, I will refer to the medium of photography deployed widely in different forms of electronic media. Yet, my particular focus in this chapter falls on the news photography employed by the broadcast media for producing reports and bulletins. As I have already pointed out in the previous chapter, the reliance of photography on the individual illustrates the significance of human body for the production of “appropriate” national identities (Khatib 2013, Azoulay 2008, Oliver 2007). Women are “particularly vulnerable to this ideological packaging, constructed [rather] as visual imagery than as sources of information about critical events in their communities” (Wilkins, 1995, p. 50). The value the female figure embodies in the news photograph is measured through its symbolic meaning that does not so much foreground an event, as organize the interpretive frame for understanding this event within the boundaries of a specific culture (Hariman and Lucaites 2007). The images of female fighters used for news production are numerous, of course, but the following two are notable for their representative nature that is manifested both through their ideological content and their framing, and the implications of both for the visualization of this content. The photographs do not just stand for one or another group of female fighters; they rather evoke associations of Western public in relation to photographed female soldiers framed whether as “freedom fighters” or as “religious monsters”. Through their circulation on the same news portal and the elucidation of the same issue of female combat in the context of Syrian war, they visually underwrite Western contradictory narratives about female fighters and their ambiguous perception by Western public. Thus, by examining these photographs in relation to each other, I can explore their disparate framing and deconstruct the salient images of female fighters represented on them.

The photographic images of female fighters I analyze here can be found on the news portal of Deutsche Welle (DW), the German international broadcaster, whose aim is “to convey the country as a nation rooted in European culture and as a liberal, democratic state based on the rule of law, as well as to promote exchange between the world's cultures and peoples” (www.dw.de). Although the broadcaster functions as an autonomous public corporation, it does not operate exclusively on its own terms. The organization’s objective, cited above, clearly indicates the established position of *Deutsche Welle* as a significant instrument of German diplomacy (Zoellner, 2006), for the emphasis on the German tradition “rooted in European culture” as well as the

“liberal, democratic” nature of their state informs the organization’s political agenda, which is in turn strongly linked to country’s ideology. The translation of their services into thirty languages points to the wide dissemination of their journalistic material and to the expansion of their views across national borders. Measuring its audience size is rather difficult, however the evaluation of Zoellner (2006) assumes around 65 million listeners, 28 million viewers per week and 5 million online users per month. These numbers point to the substantial popularity of this broadcaster indicating its potentially far-reaching influence.

Both photographs have been published accompanying articles that address the issue of female combat in relation to the ongoing Syrian civil war. The first image and its respective article (Figure 2.1) were made by Kathrin Erdmann for *Deutsche Welle* in February, 2014. Working as freelance journalist she made an audio report on Kurdish women fighting in Syria and published the article with the photographs taken by her in the region. As such, we can talk about the practice of engaged reporting which implies participation of the journalist in the actions observed. In this regard, the framing of the visual testimony becomes subjected to the author’s individualized location in time and space and this is what limits the spectator’s access to the event. The photograph in question depicts the Kurdish female fighters during their training in the Kurdish part of Syria. The female members of the People’s Defense Unit (YPG) stand in the first rows of the battalion on a sandy stretch of ground behind a small hill. Their ages can be seen to be diverse ranging from middle age to much younger women. Predominant expressions on the women’s faces are those of solemnity and tension. The majority of them are dressed in military suits with flak jackets on and Kalashnikov rifles in hand. Notably however, some women do not wear military uniform but Western style dress like jeans and jumpers. The female bodies are erect, their right hands positioned on the rifles and their looks are directed forward (but not at the camera). The oblique angle of the photograph shows us the battalion only from the left corner obscuring the setting and other, people as well as their shadows on the right side. This angle also opens the view on the back rows of the military unit showing figures of men standing behind the women. The medium shot of the photographic image displays the bodies of women standing in the first row from their heads down to their feet. The shadows extending in front of soldiers’ bodies and the bright day light point out the fact that the photograph was taken in the second part of the day:



Figure 2.1: Kurdish female fighters fighting the Islamists, found in the online article of Kathrin Erdmann that was published on February 19, 2014 on DW (Deutsche Welle) website.

The photograph was published in the article under the title “Women Join the Kurdish Fight in Syria”. At first sight the text looks rather factual, for it provides the information on the YPG and other Kurdish military groupings across Turkish, Syrian, Iraqi and Iran borders. Yet, the focus of the article falls on the female members of the People’s Defense Unit and their motivations to join this military organization: already in the short introduction we read that “they” (Kurdish soldiers) “fight Islamists” in the region (<http://www.dw.de>). Later in the text this rhetoric is developed in relation to “peace and democracy” that one of female soldiers is “ready to die for” (Ibid). It is interesting to note how the author brings up the issue of age when she says about one female soldier that “she looks young for her 18 years” (Ibid). On the one side, the journalist admits the girl’s young age while on the other side, she emphasizes that “her 18 years” is not so young anymore. What also attracts the attention is how the parallel between the Kurdish and Arabic women is drawn when the author quotes one Kurdish female fighter saying: “We have the chance to be role models for Kurds and for other ethnicities – for instance, Arab women” (Ibid). The article ends with the optimistic statement that “women will decide the future” referencing the large number (40 percent) of female soldiers in the Kurdish party and their strong position in relation to

the male member of the parliament “who doesn’t contradict” (Ibid). As such, the overall message of this photograph is inseparably linked to the rhetoric of liberating struggle within the framework of which Kurdish female fighters are portrayed as disciplined and devoted soldiers who are “ready to die” for the women’s cause.

The second photograph (Figure 2.2) was made by the *dpa Picture-Alliance*, a German company which functions as a stock image bank offering a diverse selection of visuals on themes such as economics, politics, sport, art, history, nature, travelling, lifestyle, wellness, entertainment etc. One of the conditions under which the company offers its visual material is the demand to use the image in which people are recognizable only in connection with the accompanying text and in a way that does not extend beyond the scope of respective visual (www.picture-alliance.com). In this regard, the image acquires meaning before being sold to the publisher whereas article accompanying it just adds up to its sense. As for the chosen photograph, it was published in 2014 in an article of freelance journalist Martin Koch. Although this image interpellates with the same topic of female fighters fighting in Syria, the manner in which it is framed and represented to a Western public eye differs strongly from the previous one (Figure 2.1). This particular photograph shows three female images, centre of which shows a young girl framed by the figures of two older women whose age we cannot accurately gauge due to their covered bodies and faces. All of them are veiled but whilst the head, face and body of older females are covered fully, the face and torso of the child are open. The Arabic slogans imprinted on the headwear of elder women are Arabic acronyms which in translation mean “Islamic Resistance Movement for Palestine”. The Arabic slogan on the girls’ head cloak signifies the Islamic Shahada which is essentially a Quranic expression “There is no god but God and Muhammad is the prophet of God” used by different Islamic groups as their flag. The covered female fighters have the protective vests on and hold the weapon in front of their bodies.

The figures of the two elder women serve as a frame for the female child in the centre of the photograph. Such a framing visually magnifies the women’s bodies invoking a feeling of discomfort, and at the same time highlighting the figure of the young girl in between them.



Figure 2.2: The jihadist female fighters carrying the guns during the march. The photograph is made by the dpa Picture-Alliance and published in the article of Martin Koch on the website of Deutsche Welle in March, 2014.

Moreover, the close camera angle make the size of their march appear larger than it probably is in reality, for we cannot see how many people are behind them. Yet, we can identify possibly some members of the public against the blurred background and the contours of high buildings which could point to the demonstration taking place in a city. The focus of the shot falls on the face of a young girl whose figure is positioned on the eye level of the photographer. The text under the image “some very young women can be attracted to the jihadist cause” also highlights the issue of youth.

Before we even manage to read the title of the respective article “Experts Fear Increase of German Female Fighters in Syria”, the word “terrorism” printed in blue attracts our attention. In the subtitle we find a short introduction that raises the issue of a German “teenage girl” fighting on the “Islamist” side in Syria suggesting this involvement increases “the associated terror threat” in Germany (www.dw.de). The article further provides information on the phenomenon of female jihad and the interest some German young women may develop towards it. However, though the subtitle indicates the issue of a particular German teenage girl travelling to Syria, we cannot find clear information on her individual reasons for joining Jihad except that “[her] case has a

particularly strong impact because [...] she is the youngest woman from Germany to have traveled to such a conflict zone and declared herself prepared to actively take part in the fighting” (Ibid). As we can see already, the issue of age, specifically youth, is very much highlighted through the image as well as through the text. The importance of child’s figure has its roots in the Western tradition of presenting child as “object for sentiments” (Zelizer 1985, Dubinsky 2007) to which Western discourse assigns such qualities as innocence, fragility and naïveté. In this regard, the social category “child” functions rather as a cultural construct embedded into the Western paternalistic system of relationships and essentialized as its denominator of maturity. Yet, in the context of this image the representation of a young girl together with two elder women does not only draw on the imaginary of a child as innocent and vulnerable but also points to the mother-daughter trope that is deeply entangled with the theories about women’s subjectivity and how it is developed through mother-daughter relationship. The gendered characteristic of this relationship is intimately tied to the generational aspect of learning to become a woman, either physically or socially, through the figure of mother (Hirsh 1989, Thurer 1994). In this regard, mother and daughter become interrelated subjectivities whose bond is shown as so attractive and sensual that it seems natural that two women cannot but “be fused into one entity” (Hanson, 2006, p. 89) and that daughter cannot but choose the same “dangerous” path of a mother. Besides, by connecting these two figures, Western discourse tends to establish “the differences between “good” and “bad” mothers: good mother who protect their children [...] and bad mothers [...] who engender the deaths of children” (Rajan, 2011, p. 275), thereby constructing the image of a “monstrous” mother whose “monstrosity” becomes reinforced through the symbolic of a child as innocent and easily indoctrinated.

Another issue which pops up in the article is the question of motivations women develop for joining jihad. On the one side, the author recommends that we approach the phenomenon of female jihad with caution saying that “the photos primarily indicate that these women like to be seen with weapons” and adding that there is “no convincing evidence” of their active participation in the armed struggle (www.dw.de). On the other side, he frames their personal reasons for joining militant groups as: “revenge for the loss of a husband or a close relative”(Ibid). By doing so, the author interpellates to the popular Western narrative of connecting female combat to personal vendetta (Meyers 2003, Bloom 2005) when a woman’s desire to seek vengeance or to regain

personal or family honour is considered as one of the main reasons of female participation in the armed struggle. Such views on female soldiers are rooted in the tradition of relegating women to the private sphere projecting patriarchal expectations upon them. As result, the personal motivations, ascribed to their militant participation, makes these women look “improper” and “stray” within the traditional patriarchal order what entails the interpretation of their actions within the framework of “fallen victims” which need to be rescued from the submission to their husbands (Naaman 2007, Rajan 2011). Moreover, when connecting the issue of female jihad with personal motivations, the author brings as an example the case of "black widows" from Chechnya, though in his title he states the problem of female jihad in relation to the Syrian context. The same generalization takes place in the case of images: invited to receive the information on German female fighters in Syria, we are faced instead with the photographs of Palestinian female jihadists. Such general reading of female fighters’ motivations does not only deny their political agency but blends all Muslim female identities into one “derogatory” and “monstrous” figure of the East.

As it becomes clear from this analysis, both photographs are framed by the discourses of “freedom-democracy” and “jihad-Islam” articulated through the oppositional logic that contrasts the image of an “emancipatory” woman with the image of the “religious” one. Specifically, the force of such discourse relies strongly on the use of gender, defined in terms of “appropriate” and “inappropriate” female bodies, to construct a democratic and secular West against the theocratic and Islamic East (Abu-Lughod 1998, Rajan 2011). In this regard, the photographs function as a visual tool for producing the Western rhetoric of modernization by means of contrapositioning the “modern” woman and the “religious” one, thereby establishing the bipolarity of their political agencies. The contrasting framework of these photographs is established through the strategy of publishing these two images along with the articles on the same news portal but in relation to different issues: emancipation of Kurdish female fighters against the “evil” of female jihadists.

Following this line of thought, it is therefore possible to say that the visual representation of female fighters’ images in the Western media undergoes the process of political codification in the name of ruling power. In the case of the first image (Figure 2.1) we deal with the Kurdish female fighters who are described in the article as “fighting the Islamists”. The focus of the camera on the first row of female soldiers and the subtitle of the article suggest a Western emancipatory lens through which these women are viewed and approached. Their Western military suits,

trainers and uncovered heads interpellate to the Western ideas of how an emancipated woman should look. Moreover, the tense lining up of many Kurdish female soldiers in front of the camera creates a feeling of discipline and order what stands in opposition to the individually marching figures of jihadist fighters (Figure 2.2). The role of distance from where the shot has been taken is also of great importance: while the Kurdish female fighters are photographed from a neutral distance keeping the spectator in his/her comfort zone, the close-up shot of the second image makes female jihadists look very intensive and imposing in relation to the viewer. Another important issue which I have already mentioned above is the age of female combatants: while in the case of the first image (Figure 2.1), the author's statement "she looks young for her 18 years" points out the Kurdish girl's maturity, the second photograph confronts us with the central figure of a young girl whose presence among the elder military women hints at the rhetoric of manipulation of young minds with the ideas of Islam and jihad drawing on both - general imaginary of children as innocent and the danger of taking after the "monstrous" mother. Yet, despite such a framing and the choice of the photograph (Figure 2.2), the second article does not provide any insight or backstory of the girl showed. The same happens with the issue of female fighter's motivation which is touched upon in both articles but articulated in opposing ways. While the second article clearly links the wish of female jihadists to join the combat to the issue of revenge for the loss of a husband and a relative or to the propagation of Islam, the first article does not give us the detailed information on Kurdish women's individual reasons to join YPG but rather delineates their struggle as anti-jihadist one, thereby annihilating the information on their personal motivation and foregrounding the political constituent of their fighting.

The contradictory framework of both photographs and of the articles reflects the oppositional logic of Western power that while distancing the "religious" female fighter from the "emancipated" one constructs their disparity. As I highlighted in the introduction, the juxtaposition of these two characters allows the dominant power to pursue its "civilized" mission by making woman's image central to the process of democratization (Oliver 2007, Deylami 2013). In this regard, the Western power appropriates an emancipatory rhetoric in order to justify the military action of one female grouping and to undermine the fight of another one in the eyes of its public. Consequently, the photographed bodies of Kurdish female fighters (Figure 2.1) become forwarded as a visual testimony of exported democratization whereas the image of covered female jihadists is

employed as a symbol of women's circumscription and deviance. The connection between democratization and the issue of women's emancipation defines the force of the Western discourse that relies on the use of female body and the female image as such in securing its "civilized" values. The danger of this process lies in the propagation of democratic views through ideas of Western feminism that within such a binary framework is "sold out" as the question of women's liberation merely reduced to female sexual freedom.

In the context of the Syrian civil conflict the rhetoric of emancipation tends to produce new disciplinary norms and practices that become internalized by female members of the Kurdish military groups in their own struggle against the religious fundamental "enemy" which turns out to be a common one, for it is fought by the West as well. As such, the focus on emancipatory politics makes Kurdish female combatants look like freedom fighters who are granted the Western right to bear arms in their striving for emancipation. The Kurdish women's combat suit, military boots/trainers and the uncovered head, functioning as an icon of a modern female body incorporated into the Western view on 'appropriate' femininity, present a striking contrast with the fully covered bodies and faces of female jihadists. In this respect, the photography contributes to the reinforcement of one female body as a token of modernity propagated by the West and to the reification of another as a symbol of a "backward" and "dangerous" tradition. As Lila Abu-Lughod (1998, p.7) put it: "Notions of modernity have been produced and reproduced through being opposed to the nonmodern in dichotomies ranging from the modern/primitive of philosophy and anthropology to the modern/traditional of Western social theory and modernization theory[...]". Thus, the figures of Kurdish women become correlated to the notions of modernity and freedom accentuated through women's military dress and confident posture in front of the photocamera. Their "civilized" image stands out against two religious figures in black who are depicted in the Western discourse "as most oppressed by having to [be] under cover" (Oliver, 2007, p. 51). In this regard, the process of showing the Kurdish women's uncovered and westernized bodies by contrast with the "women of cover" informs the discourse of sexual freedom that becomes associated with women's freedom as such (Oliver 2007). Western military dress and the amount of uncovered body thus tend to bear the sign of female sexual image imprinted upon the Kurdish fighters by the Western ideas of sexual liberation. Whether this Western sexual image allows Kurdish women to celebrate their own bodies or endows them with

the right to protect this body with weapons, their political agency becomes disciplined in terms of Western subject positions which are projected as being global.

Following this line of thought, I therefore assume here that the photograph of military, empowered Kurdish women lined up in the first row of a military unit works to construct the image of women's freedom forwarding the management of their agency, particularly their sexual agency, as the imprint of Western democratization. The focus of the article on the emancipatory character of Kurdish women's struggle thus overshadows the circumscription of female subjectivity within the hegemonic Western discourse. As Gayatri Spivak (1988) put it, "[i]mperialism's image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as object of protection from her own kind. How should one examine the dissimulation of patriarchal strategy, which apparently grants the woman free choice as subject?" Spivak's argument suggests that Western notions of freedom and liberation are correlated to the imperialistic forces that interpret woman in relation to the Western hegemonic interest: as objects that need to be protected from non-Western forces and as free subjects that are defined in terms of Western choice. In this sense, the camera and the discursive frame of the article produce the image of a female fighter whose choice of western emancipation as the ultimate goal of struggle informs the overall survival of Western hegemony with its values and style of life.

In the case of the second photograph (Figure 2.2) the idea of woman's freedom is rearticulated through the covered bodies of female fighters whose religious identities stand in contrast with Western emancipatory values. Consequently, the covered women serve as antithesis in relation to their pro-Western Kurdish counterparts. This contrasting framework of their representations is visualized through the photographic focus on the women's environment that functions as a framing of women's choices. If in the case of the first photograph (Figure 2.1) we see the Kurdish female fighters represented as a part of a military unit where men and women probably fight alongside each other, the second image (Figure 2.2) does not open any clear background to us depicting veiled female figures in black as "monsters" whose agency is very doubtful. In this regard, the open background of the first photograph suggests that the Kurdish women made their individual choice to join the combat and fight on a par with men, while the background of the second image does not give us any clue to female jihadists' choice to march somewhere with the weapon in front of their bodies. Moreover, this lack of choice is also

articulated through the textual information of the second article where the author clearly links the participation of female jihadists in combat to their will to take revenge for the loss of a husband or a relative, thereby denying them any political agency.

The photographed figure of a young girl (Figure 2.2) emerging from behind the female jihadist's back also contains symbolic meaning in relation to the religious context of this photograph. On the one side, the girlish character foregrounds and ultimately cements the lack of political choice of these religious fighters, for it points to their impossibility to make choices due to their probable young age. On the other side, it reinforces the notion of a "monstrous" Islam that uses children as a means of its propaganda. The conjunction of these two dimensions – the visual register of "monstrous" female jihadists carrying weapons and the elicitation of their young age – "surfaces excessive amounts of terror in the Western lens" (Rajan, 2011, p. 60), thereby intensifying the rejection of these figures by the Western public. As such, the photographed figures of female jihadists (Figure 2.2) become not only stripped of their political and social motivations to join the combat but are used as a tool to cement the "monstrous" image of Islam through the subversion of which the Western world can establish its "modern" and "democratizing" civilization.

As we can see from this analysis, the contraposition of the Kurdish female soldiers and the jihadist female fighters rests upon the depiction of their realities in terms of mutually exclusive features: while one group is described as sexually liberated and civilized, the other one is represented as veiled and dangerous. Yet, despite such a different representation of these female combatants, the political message of their images is subjugated to the same discourse of Western democratization that by opposing both photographs attempts to control the "appropriateness" of one female image and the "inappropriateness" of another one. In this regard, the image of the western dressed Kurdish female fighters, lined up in the same military unit with men, is defined against the image of covered and religious affiliated Islamist fighters whose political agency is subverted through their supposedly young age and "monstrosity" of their religion. As result, the group of Kurdish female fighters is seen as being empowered while the group of female jihadists is described as victims of their traditions, thereby establishing the Western notions of modernity and non-modernity along with notions of the civilized and uncivilized (Oliver 2007).

The danger of this contradictory narrativization of female combatants within the Western discourse lies in the consistent consolidation of imperialist patriarchal logic in relation to the

woman's agency. Representing the military practices of female jihadists as being uncivilized and dangerous, Western power reassures its public in the righteousness of its democratization that is forwarded as the only way to fight the "backwardness" of the non-West. Thus, by constructing the contrasting framework within which the "modern" woman is defined against the "uncivilized", the dominant power attempts to overshadow its own forms of coercion and discipline that are imposed upon the Kurdish female fighters through their affiliation to the Western values of freedom and emancipation. In this regard, both photographs function as visual tools that broadcast Western media utilizes for the cementation of its disparate views which the photographic medium and the discursive frameworks of both articles imprint upon the images of female fighters.

As shown in this chapter, the visual narrative strategies deployed by the Western media for the purposes of portraying two groups of female fighters resonate with those of Syrian local actors: while the figures of Kurdish female soldiers are presented to the Western public through the "emancipatory" lens, the figures of female jihadists are portrayed as "backward" objects of fundamentalist religious enterprises. By negotiating the appearance of two kinds of militant women, Western media produces a parallel negotiation of political power both groups of women represent in their slogans and actions – the YPG westernized military setting against the "monstrous" jihadist combat. As in the case of Syrian pro-government and pro-opposition female fighters analyzed in the first chapter, the images of Kurdish female soldiers and jihadists become framed in the same disparate ways projecting in this case the prevailing ideology and the moral codes of the Western world. Consequently, female fighters emerge as monolithic categories differentiated solely through the political aspirations of their groups or nations and not through their individual agencies and motivations. In this sense, the disparate representation of female fighters does not only reflect the subjugation of female identities to the patriarchal logic but also highlights the continued practice of political contestation employed in both, local and global settings.

Conclusion

Having examined the use of photographic images within the context of Syrian civil war, I have demonstrated how the visual manifests itself in the construction of narratives about female fighters needed for the corroboration of nationalist and imperialist agendas. On the examples of Western social and broadcast media I further illustrated the ways in which images of female fighters become framed and articulated within dominant patriarchal discourse. As shown, in both featured cases (local and global) states, oppositional groups and hegemonic power are engaging in political struggle through the medium of the photographic image, one that whilst portraying a female subject turns to function as a means of control over the production of “appropriate” femininity. In this sense, female fighters’ identities become constructed as disparate categories that the conflicting parties attempt to align with their distinct political agendas and national narratives. As a result, the photographic representations of female combatants turn to function as the visual tools with the help of which the ruling powers aim to construct their legitimacy and to further their political projects.

With regard to the long-established tradition of presenting women as cultural bearers of national identities (Moghadam 1994, Yuval-Davis 1997, Parashar 2009), I have demonstrated how four photographs of female fighters foreground patriarchal practices of appropriating female images for the sake of national or ethnic groups. Bearing in mind the tradition of viewing the camera as an accurate instrument of documenting reality (Sontag 1989, Azoulay 2008, Berger & Naaman 2006), I have highlighted the ways in which the photographs of female combatants, made by professionals as well as by ordinary individuals, tend to function as examples of visual figurative discourse reproduced, altered and variously framed in the course of political struggle. Representing female combatants through such ambiguous visual practices aims first and foremost at highlighting the “(in)appropriateness” of a definite female image linking it to “the iconic cultural registers of femininity” central to a particular political ideology (Rajan 2011, p.3). Consequently, the individual body of a woman becomes the locus of a collective value designed to meet the needs of the group (Yuval-Davis 1997, Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, Alison 2009, Naaman 2007). In this regard, appropriations of female fighters’ photographs are used in ways that substitute individual female agency for a collective one, which becomes projected as normative and “proper”. It is especially pronounced during conflicts or political tensions when various opposing parties tend to ground

particular female images as the ideological symbol of the (future) nation. The differently constructed narratives about these women render them mutually exclusive foregrounding the agency of one woman at the cost of another. As result, photographs of militant women, deployed in nationalist and religious contexts, tend to reduce the female gender to traditional contextualizations of collective femininity imprinted on the body of an individual woman.

In the first chapter I have reflected on how the images of Syrian female combatants are used as tools to shore up the political spaces of Syrian state and opposition within which female identities become re-narrated in terms of their group ideologies and beliefs. Two Facebook photographs of Syrian female fighters were selected to illustrate the visual narrative techniques that intend to transform the feminine identities of militant women into familiar and “appropriate” forms of femininity needed for the propagation of either pro-government or pro-opposition values. The appearance of photographed female fighters, materialized in dress codes and bodily practices, illuminates how ideal female bodies have been crafted through constant negotiations of “modern” and “religiously” marked femininity. These idealized images of female militants induce persistent inquiries into the process of constructing nationalist subjectivities through the gendered and heterosexist politics of representation founded on the tradition of using women as symbolic markers of their communities (Yuval-Davis & Anthias 1989, Moghadam 1994). Within the framework of such representational practices the female body appears “not as itself, but as a sign” (Mirzoeff, 1995, p.2) that becomes a repository of metaphorical meanings with which political powers populate newly built national spaces. As result, the bodies of female fighters become integrated into the process of engendering the (future) nation and nationalizing its citizens.

In the second chapter I have demonstrated how female fighters’ identities become capitalized by Western power in the desire to propagate its “civilized” mission to the non-Western world. Having analyzed two photographs of female fighters published on the news portal of *Deutsche Welle*, I deconstructed the binary framework of Western media that by contraposing the images of Kurdish female fighters and female jihadists attempt to secure its dominant imperialist position in relation to the religious and Islamic East. As shown, emancipatory rhetoric, popular within the boundaries of Western culture, has been deployed in relation to Kurdish female soldiers visually portrayed as the symbols of Western femininity: uncovered in Western attire and militarily employed on a par with the men. Meanwhile, the figures of female jihadists have been presented

as objects of fundamentalist religious enterprises unable to make their own political choices. The relevance of both images to news reporting is explained through their contrasting framework within which the “emancipatory” image of the Kurdish female fighter is defined against the “religious” image of Muslim woman whose visually and textually constructed “backwardness” places additional value on women’s freedom in the West. Moreover, depicting all jihadist female fighters as victims of their “backward” cultures (relegating them mostly to the private realm) helps Western power to obscure the manipulation of female bodies in its own cultural space within the boundaries of which the woman’s oppression is seen as a thing of the past and thus not Western.

Therefore, the female body becomes again and again instrumentalized as the medium through which the ruling power aims to symbolically articulate the attitudes and perceptions, embedded into its social life. The means of doing it vary from the construction of verbal narratives to the display of visually contextualized images that subsequently “become a form of social containment” (Zarzycka 2014, p. 240). Yet, while written and spoken texts attempt to negotiate female identities in a rather obtrusive way, the power of the visual lies in its efficacy to implicitly communicate meaning (Greenwood 2012). The perceived veracity of photographs makes the viewer accept the images “as direct representations of reality rather than evaluating them as human-made creations” (cited in Greenwood, 2012, p. 621). Moreover, photography allows power to frame its political messages through the choice of the object in front of the photographic camera that in the process of visual reproduction turns to function as iconic. As in the cases of photographs of uncovered and veiled female bodies, the former one becomes transformed into the icon of modernity, whereas the latter one functions as an icon of suppression and danger. The symbolism of these images is especially pronounced during conflicts or political resistance of dominant powers that by reproducing symbolic photographs control the form of collective agency. In this regard, the four female images analyzed in this work, two of which appeal to the narrative of modernization and two other to the narrative of religious rejuvenation, run the risk of universalizing the gendered characteristics of women that are rooted in patriarchal, heterosexist and bipolar culture.

However, considering photography as a mere instrument of dominant power would be a big mistake for the visual does not only manifest itself through the practices of sustaining a dominant world order but also offers strategies for the negotiation of individuals’ agencies within

this very order. The reliance of power on the individual body as a visual tool of its legitimacy points out the significance of the human figure to projects of making collective spaces. In this regard, the visual tends to authenticate the physical presence of an individual in his/her political environment. For a woman being present in such political space defines her force of resistance to conventional patriarchal perceptions on femininity. As in the case of female fighters, who by offering their bodies to the cause of nationalist or religious projects directly challenge their patriarchal ideologies, for instead of remaining within the home space they engage in military operations, “attracting unprecedented level of local, national, and international attention”(Rajan, 2011, P. 25). As such, their visual presence enables female soldiers to perform roles that resonate with the prescribed patriarchal norms and that make women experience alternative forms of civic participation, thereby assigning a new meaning to their identities. In this respect, photography plays a crucial role in re-defining conceptions of female civic identity that by legitimizing public authority gains the chance to affirm the female self. Yet, this potentiality of the photographic act shall not diminish the need of critical engagement with the visual material enacted upon female bodies, for only exigent reading of photographs can elucidate the gendered practices of women’s representation offering us new instruments for the deconstruction of bipolar patriarchal logic.

Notes

1. In the context of this work the terms “proper” and “appropriate” are used to describe attributes and characteristics which are deemed acceptable for women to display according to the nationalist and religious perceptions of their groups.
2. Under ‘cultural rejuvenation’ I understand here the process of cultural revival and enrichment when neglected culture or traditions regain the new meaning and importance among its bearers.
3. “Vampira” is a term coined personally by the author with the reference to mythologically constructed Gothic vampires characterized by their seductive and deadly nature.
4. The local and global contexts are defined in this work through the location and distribution of respective images: local is applied to Syrian setting where Syrian state and opposition produce and distribute female fighters’ images, and global is applied in relation to the Western media that instrumentalizes female soldiers’ images for the news production.
5. My use of term “modern” references here the orientalist notion of ‘civilized’ highlighted by Edward Said in his work *Orientalism* (2006). Within his conceptual frame, “modern” stands for “emancipated”, “educated”, “liberated” etc, while “backward” stands for “barbarous”, “degenerate” and “uncivilized”.
6. As explained by ICCI (www.icct.nl), “foreign fighters” are non-citizens of conflict states who travel to conflict zone and join insurgencies there. It is a popular term that nowadays is mostly used in relation to Syrian fighters who come from abroad to Syria to join the civil struggle there.
7. The term “backward” is applied here as a generalized construct that does not signify a particular country but East in general, as articulated in the orientalist studies.
8. When talking about prevalent Western representations of women I apply Said’s view on the contestation between West and East (Orient according to the author) that is rooted in the colonial era and constitutes the tradition of the West to promote common European views on self-superiority in relation to “backward” and “uncivilized” people of the East.

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