

Women As a Legitimacy-Building Tool in US Foreign Policy: The Case of Women’s Protection Units (YPJ)

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ABD Dış Politikasında Bir Meşruiyet İnşa Etme Aracı Olarak Kadınlar: Kadın Savunma Birlikleri Örneği

Öz

ABD dış politikasında kadının konu edilmesini inceleyen çalışmalar temel olarak dış politika yapım sürecinde kilit rol oynayan Kongre, Dışişleri Bakanlığı ve Ulusal Güvenlik Konseyi gibi kurumlara odaklanmaktadır. İşbu konu edilmeyle ilgili çalışmalar kadınların politika yapım sürecinde oynadığı rolleri, almış oldukları görev ve sorumlulukları toplumsal cinsiyet temelli yaklaşımlarla açıklamaya çalışmaktadır. Bu türden çalışmalar önemli olmakla birlikte kadının ABD dış politikasında konu edilmeyle ilgili yanıtlanması gereken bir diğer soru, onun dış politikada bir meşruiyet aracı olarak kendisine yer bulup bulamayacağı veya hangi durumlarda bir meşruiyet aracı olarak ABD’nin dış politika gündeminde kendisine yer bulabileceğidir. Makalenin temel amacı, YPJ (Yekineyen Parastina Jin, Women’s Protection Units/Kadın Savunma Birlikleri) gibi bir militarist örgütün kendisine ABD dış politikasında niçin yer bulabildiğinin araştırılmasıdır. Araştırmanın verileri konuyla ilgili literatür taramasına ek olarak, Mart 2011 ve Mart 2022 yılları arasını kapsayan ana akım ABD gazeteleri, the Washington Post, the New York Times ve the Wall Street Journal ve ABD’deki think-tankların düşünce yazıları, raporları ve değerlendirmelerinin analizlerinden elde edilmiştir. Makale, ABD yönetimlerinin YPJ’yi Suriye’de IŞİD’e (Irak ve Şam İslam Devleti) karşı verilen mücadelede kendi stratejisini meşrulaştırma aracı olarak kullandığını ve bunu daha önceki dış politika hedefi olan Ortadoğu’da demokrasinin geliştirilmesi hedefi içerisinde konumlandığını iddia etmektedir. Makale, aynı zamanda ABD yönetimlerinin kendi askerleri aracılığıyla doğrudan bir müdahale yapmak yerine, YPJ ya da YPG (Yekineyen Parastina Gel, People’s Protection Units, Halk Savunma Birlikleri), gibi militarist örgütlerle Suriye’de askeri temelde ve güvenlik öncelikli bir işbirliği içerisine girerek hedeflerini gerçekleştirilmeye çalıştığını göstermektedir. Her ne kadar ABD yönetimleri ile YPJ arasında ideolojik farklılıklar bulunsada YPJ’nin IŞİD’e karşı “kahramanca savaş veren bir

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kadın örgütlenmesi” imajı ABD'nin bu ideolojik farklılık sorununun üstesinden gelmesine yardımcı olduğu gibi YPJ'yi Suriye'deki hedeflerini gerçekleştirme adına bir meşruiyet aracı olarak kullanımını da kolaylaştırmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: ABD Dış Politikası, Kadın, Suriye Sivil Savaşı, YPJ, IŞİD.

Abstract

Studies regarding the topic of women in the US foreign policy mainly concentrate on the place of women with a particular attention to institutions that play a significant role in the foreign policy making process such as Congress, State Department and National Security Council. The topics in these studies are mainly the roles, positions and responsibilities of women in the foreign policy-making within the gender-based approaches. While roles or influence of women in policy-making process is quite an important topic, there is also a raising question whether the topic of women might find a place themselves as a legitimacy-building tool in the US foreign policy or in which circumstances women could have a place in the US foreign policy agenda. This article purposes to investigate why a militarist Kurdish women organization, the YPJ (Yekineyen Parastina Jin, Women's Protection Units) can find a place for itself in the US foreign policy agenda under the topic regarding women. Data has been collected through the mainstream newspapers of the US, the Washington Post, the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal, and the pieces of US think-tanks with regard to its counterterrorism strategy against ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham) in addition to the related media outlets between March 2011 and March 2022, and academic literature over the topic. The article argues that US administrations have used the YPJ as a legitimacy-building tool for their counter-ISIS strategy in Syria by locating it in the broader policy objective, the democracy promotion in the Middle East. The article indicates that US administrations have worked with ground partners like the YPJ and YPG (Yekineyen Parastina Gel, People's Protection Units) in the context of a military-based and security-prioritized alliance instead of having an external military intervention. Although there have been ideological differences between US administrations and the YPJ, the images of “women as heroes/warriors that bravely fight ISIS” have helped the US to overcome ideological differences and utilize the YPJ for legitimizing its counter-ISIS strategy and policy objectives in Syria.

Keywords: US Foreign Policy, Women, Syrian Civil War, YPJ, ISIS.

Introduction

On 10th September 2014, President Barack Obama declared his counter-terrorism strategy against ISIS. According to this declaration, there would be a US-led international coalition to conduct airstrikes over ISIS targets. There would also be a need for ground partners to fight ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The Obama administration would follow a limited intervention strategy by sending only some service members for helping the ground partners (The White House Office of Press Secretary, 2014). A few weeks after this declaration, ISIS siege on Kobane (In Arabic, Ayn al-Arab) took place and occupied the agenda of US foreign policy. Since the early stages of the Kobane siege, in accordance with the aforementioned strategy, the US began interacting with the YPG and YPJ, the military wings of the Democratic Union Party (PYD, Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat), the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK, Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan), which is designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey, EU countries, and more importantly by the US itself.

The women had no place in the agenda of the US foreign policy regarding Syria before ISIS siege on Kobane. However, publicity of the siege itself and the US interaction with the YPG brought the Kurdish militarist female organization, the YPJ, to the radar of the US. Therefore, this article investigates main reasons why a militarist women organization can find a place for itself in the US foreign policy and why US administrations work with a militarist Kurdish women organization like the YPJ. The article also seeks answers for the following questions:

- What were the policy objectives of the US administration in the fight against ISIS and why the US foreign policy agenda forced/urged the country to support a militarist Kurdish female organization?
- What have been US administrations doing with the YPJ in the Syrian Civil War?

The article is mainly based on the analysis of mainstream newspapers such as the Washington Post, the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal between March 2011 (from the outbreak of the Syrian conflict) and March 2022. In doing so, the keywords “the Syrian Kurds”, “YPJ”, “YPG” and “PYD” have been used. Such an analysis has facilitated identifying the images of women in the context of the Syrian civil war as well as the YPJ’s role during the operations against ISIS in northeast Syria. The pieces of US think-tanks with regard to US counter-ISIS strategy in Syria in addition to the related media outlets as well as academic literature over the subject have been analyzed to explain what the US administrations have been doing with the YPJ during the Syrian Civil War.

Accordingly, the article argues that US administrations have used the YPJ, as a legitimacy-building tool for their counter-ISIS strategy in Syria as well as in the context of the broader policy objective of the US in the Middle East, which was democracy promotion. It has been provided by the article that US administrations have worked with the ground partners like the YPJ and YPG in the context of the military-based and security-prioritized alliance instead of having an external military intervention. Although there have been ideological differences between US administrations and the YPJ, the images of women as heroes/warriors seem to have helped US administrations to overcome ideological differences and utilize the YPJ for legitimizing its counter-ISIS strategy and objectives in Syria.

To answer the aforementioned questions, the next section discusses topics regarding women in the US foreign policy and tries to open a space for this study by approaching the utilization of a militarist Kurdish female organization by the US as a legitimacy-building tool for its foreign policy purposes. The following section focuses on the images of women during the Syrian civil war in order to indicate how these images overlapped with the US expectations and policy objectives in Syria and increased the tendency of the US administration to support the YPJ. Then, the article analyzes the US and its cooperation with the YPJ in the context of the civil war, particularly in the fight against ISIS. The final section discusses the importance and implication of this case for the US foreign policy.

Women as a Legitimacy Building Tool in the US Foreign Policy

The question regarding the place of women in the US foreign policy has been one of the serious discussions as well as a growing research field mainly problematized by gender-based studies and approaches (Hoak, 2021; Brenner, 2009; Hoff, 2007; Eichenberg, 2003) and the ones that attempted to draw attention to the problem of gender equality in the US foreign policy (Bigio and Vogelstein, 2020). Although the Obama administration attempted to prioritize the issue of gender equality in this field and introduced some policies regarding the status of women and girls globally (Bigio and Vogelstein, 2020), these attempts have not seemed to be quite successful. Another important matter is that what type of topics one can see when it comes to the topic of women in the US foreign policy? In this regard, it is possible to encounter topics such as the place, impact, roles and positions of women in different levels and bodies of US foreign policy.

In terms of their topics and approaches to women in the US foreign policy, studies can be divided into three categories. The first category mainly analyzes the roles, positions and most importantly responsibilities of women in the process of US foreign policy-making. There have been some in-depth analyses that prioritize the occupation of high-level positions by the US women in the State Department and National Security Council (Hoak, 2021; Hoff, 2007).

These studies compare, for instance, policies and roles of the first female Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, and the head of the National Security Council and Iraq Stabilization Group, Condoleezza Rice, during the Bush Administration (Hoff, 2007). Some others, on the other hand, tend to analyze the roles and impact of individual woman or women organizations with a specific focus in the decision-making process of US Congress (Angevine, 2017; Goss, 2009). It is also possible to encounter with research interested in the topic of women in the US foreign policy, which examine women labor in US think-tanks (Rietzler, 2022). Research in this field also question reasons for the lack of existence of women in the US foreign policy, and particularly, in the field of National Security (Hoak, 2021), and search for either the impact of US congresswomen in the foreign policy decision-making process (Angevine, 2017) or main reasons for the disengagement of women organizations with congressional debates regarding the foreign policy (Goss, 2009).

Studies of the second category over the place, position and responsibilities of women in the US foreign policy give priority to gender differences in relation to the foreign policy matters. Accordingly, a small number of studies analyze gender-based reactions, particularly the reaction of US women, towards the use of military force during the Gulf War as well as military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq in the context of public support for the use of military force (Eichenberg, 2003). These studies differ from the ones in the previous category, and instead of approaching the issue of women in terms of their roles and position in the US foreign policy/decision-making process either in Congressional bodies or in governmental institutions, they strive to understand public opinion over the taken and implemented decisions by assessing the reactions of men and women towards the use of military forces and potential gender-based differences in these reactions. So, they mainly investigate the subject regarding the public support to assess the opinion of US public through differentiating reactions of male and female and assessing female ones with their main reasons and details.

Research in the last category pay attention to the topic of discourses of women or women organizations in the US foreign policy. Accordingly, the point of main analysis is that how and why discourses of women or feminist movements can find a place themselves in the US foreign policy with a case of the Bush administration in the context of general foreign policy discourses of US for serving some other foreign policy objectives (Brenner, 2009). Although almost all of the aforementioned studies have attempted to analyze the topics regarding the roles, positions and impact of women in the US foreign policy or in the process of policy-making, none of them have approached to the women or women organizations as a tool for policy legitimization, which could help US administrations to legitimize their foreign policy strategies or objectives. Only Brenner's (2009) analysis has come close to show how feminist discourses can be used to serve other US foreign policy priorities. However, this research has

been far from the analysis of the topic of women or women organizations, which can be applied as a legitimacy-building tool for either specific or broader policies of the US administration. Either related to the Obama administration's steps to solve the problems regarding gender equality and increase the role of women in the US foreign policy since 2009 (Bigio and Vogelstein, 2020) or being independent from it, there is a need for analyzing the topic of women as a legitimacy-building tool in the US foreign policy. The YPJ case in this article will fill such an identified gap by analyzing why a militarist Kurdish woman organization can find itself a place as a separate topic in the US foreign policy, particularly legitimize its policies and foreign policy agenda in Syria. Before that, it is quite significant to understand what type of images of women there have been in the context of the Syrian civil war. The following section, therefore, will focus on the images of women during the civil war.

The Syrian Civil War and the Images of Women

The images of women in the context of the Syrian civil war are more connected to the rise of ISIS in 2014. Since then, there have been two types of images, women as victims and women as heroes/warriors depending on their position or approach towards ISIS. The image of women as victims can also be divided into three categories and be addressed accordingly. In the first category, there are images of either Arab or Christian women under the control/mandate of ISIS, who had to obey its rules such as the prohibition of women from working, and who had to suffer from its implementations through some punishments (Albayrak and Corker, 2014). This image was demonstrated through the happiness of some women following the taking Manbij from ISIS since the women took off their veils and felt that they did not have to wear them anymore because it had reflected one of the compulsory imposition of ISIS over women (Raydan, 2016).

In the second category, the images of women as victims focus on the Yezidi women, and mainly draw attention to ISIS atrocities against them. After the capture of Mosul by ISIS in June 2014, ISIS targeted the Sinjar region of Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq (KRG) in August 2014. This assault occupied the agenda of US foreign policy. During this occupation, ISIS had some atrocities against the Yezidi women. While attempting to extradite the Yezidi people from their regions and settlements, there were serious accusations that ISIS tried to sell the Yezidi women and children as sex slaves. As victims of ISIS, the Yezidi women faced sexual assaults and these points were expressed by US policymakers in the Capitol Hill as problems to be sorted out or to be paid close attention by the US administration (The House of Representatives, 2015).

In the last category for the image of women as victims is about the brides of ISIS. The common view with regard to these women is that they are ideological victims of ISIS. The classical and well-known example of this image was represented through the case of three school girls, the 15-years old Amira

Abase, the 16-years old Kadiza Sultana, and the 15-years old Shamima Begum from London. These girls were radicalized through social media and travelled Syria to join ISIS in February 2015 (Shaban, 2020:535-536). Although their travel occupied the agenda of the world politics as ideological victims of ISIS, another important point regarding these victims is the possibility of their return to home countries as radicalized people or brides which would bring the question of whether these people should be accepted by their home countries. This was seen through the case of Shamima Begum. After being found at a Syrian refugee camp in 2019, she lost her citizenship and was not allowed to return to the UK yet (Anadolu Agency, 2021). Recently, the happenings, particularly the mysterious killings of people or aid workers in the Al-Hawl Camp of Hasaka, which hosts many ISIS-affiliated female members such as wives or widows of ISIS (Soz, 2022), also feeds these negative images as well as the images of women as ideological victims of ISIS.

The second type of image regarding women presents them as heroes/warriors. This image is also identified with the position of women against ISIS. While the aforementioned images were more about women who physically suffered from ISIS or who are ideological supporters of ISIS, this one is mainly associated with the opposition of women against ISIS, either practically or ideologically. In this context, the images of women were represented as protectors or rescuers of the victims of ISIS, particularly the Yezidi women and as an anti-thesis of ISIS through the Kurdish female fighters of the militarist organization, the YPJ. The YPJ was established in 2013 as a women branch of the YPG (Egger, 2019). Alongside the YPG, the YPJ is the military wing of the PYD, the Syrian affiliate of the terrorist organization, the PKK, which had a de facto autonomous administration following the withdrawal of the Syrian government forces from northern Syria in July 2012 (Gunter, 2014:1).

As underlined above, the images of Kurdish female fighters were presented as heroes/warriors who bravely fought against the barbaric terrorist organization, ISIS. This type of presentation traced back to their role in rescuing the Yezidis from ISIS in Sinjar. As argued by the US newspapers, the YPJ alongside the YPG, came to rescue approximately 150.000 Yezidis by opening a security corridor to lead them cross into the Syrian territory (Glavin, 2014). Similarly, the media personalized such heroic images through individual stories of female Kurdish fighters such as an Iranian one, Zind Ruken. Ruken was praised as a hero because of taking some responsibilities while rescuing the Yezidis from the atrocities of ISIS in Sinjar (Bradley and Parkinson, 2015). Such personalization also continued through positive references in the explanations or stories of the Yezidis who managed to escape from ISIS brutality and sought shelter under the PYD administration. For instance, 29-years old Mirza, who took shelter in northern Syria, praised the help and role of YPJ fighters came to rescue Yezidis from ISIS by underlining that he had never seen such a braveness or women playing such a role in his Yezidi community (Enzinna, 2015).

The image of women as heroes/warriors is also represented through their ideological and practical differences from ISIS. In this regard, such an image began to emerge with the ISIS siege on Kobane in September 2014. The Syrian Kurds, particularly, the YPG-YPJ, are shown that they are ideologically different from ISIS and that they are closer to the West in the context of the debate, the civilized “us” and the barbaric “them”. Mainly, the PYD administration was perceived as a more secular political administration compared to ISIS, which was a significant point to be considered by the US administration (Rubin, 2014). During and after the Kobane siege, this topic and images of YPJ fighters were regularly emphasized by referring to their ideological loyalty to the PKK and its leader Abdullah Ocalan (Trofimov, 2015; Bradley and Parkinson, 2015; Enzinna, 2015). As one of the main implications for such a difference is shown through the PKK; and as a result, the PYD-YPG and YPJ’s prioritization of gender equality and distancing themselves from religion (Bradley and Parkinson, 2015).

Consequently, the braveness of Kurdish female fighters as heroes or warriors came through their ideological differences from ISIS and in practice their ideological strength which led them to follow their own path in accordance with their ideological goals, to protect their people, land and administration in the north and eastern Syria (Albayrak and Corker, 2014). This purpose and image were also presented as a self-sacrifice of Kurdish female fighters in the fight against ISIS. For instance, a Kurdish woman, Arin Mirkan, joined the fight to defend Kobane and detonated herself in order not to be taken as a prisoner somewhere close to ISIS’ checkpoint through which she managed to kill some ISIS members (Shoumali and Barnard, 2014; Sert, 2014). Following this, some other Kurdish women joined the lines of YPJ to defend Kobane against ISIS because of the positive and encouraging impact of the braveness of Arin Mirkan. Amongst them, there was a teacher, Warsin, who voluntarily joined the fight against ISIS and passed away. However, Warsin’s death motivated some other Kurdish women, Dilar and her friends, to take part in the “Martyr Warsin Brigade”, named after the death of this teacher in order to honor her for her action of self-sacrifice according to the US newspapers (Albayrak and Corker, 2014). Similarly, Kurdish women, named Kobane (Albayrak and Corker, 2014) and Derik (Enzinna, 2015), were sanctified as symbols of heroes, who considered losing their lives with a purpose of realizing their ideological goals, protection of their lands and political administration through personal self-sacrifices.

In practical implication of women as heroes and an anti-thesis of ISIS, the images mainly concentrated on the statues of women in the Kurdish community, particularly in the practice of the PYD’s model of governance through its administrative and military units. In this context, approaches, policies and implementations of ISIS and the PYD-YPG-YPJ towards women were compared with other communities and countries in the Middle East and the approach of PYD was demonstrated as the one similar to the Western societies. This is because ISIS punishes women in the case of not obeying its rules, reinstates

slavery (Albayrak and Corker, 2014), and does not hesitate to behead or kill them (Shoumali and Barnard, 2014). But, the PYD-YPG-YPJ provide them chances to voice themselves and establish their political and military units through the implementation of the co-presidency system (Glavin, 2014; Enzinna, 2015).

Although such ideological and practical differences of Kurdish women and PYD-YPG-YPJ from ISIS are the results of the writing pieces of the PKK leader Ocalan, and even these pieces have some inspirations from the Marxist ideology, against which US fought during the Cold War period, these images have helped the US to overcome its ideological differences with the YPJ, and to legitimize its counter-ISIS strategy being in a military alliance with a militarist Kurdish female organization without having an external military intervention. Relating to this point, the images of YPJ fighters as heroes and brave women in the US media were seen and these fighters were praised by CNN International as women of the year in December 2014 (CNN International Business, 2014). Then, the US provided support to ground partners in Syria when it perceives it is necessary to do so including firepower or airstrikes over ISIS targets. So, what have US administrations been doing with the YPJ in Syria? The next section will focus on that point.

US and YPJ in the Syrian Civil War

The Syrian conflict started with the protests against the Bashar al-Assad regime in March 2011 within the context of so-called Arab Spring. Following the outbreak of the Aleppo battle between the Syrian military opposition and the regime forces in July 2012, conflict turned into a civil war (Kusilek, 2019:2-3). In the chaotic atmosphere of the civil war, the Islamist military groups such as the Al-Qaeda affiliate, Al-Nusra Front, Syrian Islamic Front and Syrian Islamic Liberation Front managed to seize some territories in northern Syria (Ibid: 4). By leaving from the Iraqi branch of Al-Qaeda, ISIS rose in Syria since 2013 (Al – Tamimi, 2013:19). Unlike other Islamist military groups seeking a jihad against the Assad regime, ISIS claimed an international jihad (Philips, 2018:132). Accordingly, ISIS wanted to establish an Islamic State, expand its territories and spread its caliphate regime across the world (Al – Tamimi, 2013:19). The capture of Mosul by ISIS in June 2014 (Gunter, 2015:104-105), its atrocities or crimes against humanity including the beheadings of American journalists, James Foley and Steven Sotloff, in front of the cameras (Demir, 2023:171) and happenings in August 2014 regarding the Yezidis in Sinjar region of the KRG (Rhodes, 2018:291) put ISIS at the center of US foreign policy agenda. After the capture of Mosul, the Obama administration urged US Congress to provide a 500-million-dollar budget for its counter-ISIS strategy with an implication that it would work with the Syrian opposition to defeat ISIS in Syria (Kurt, 2019:84). Additionally, with the invitation of the Iraqi government, the US began conducting air strikes over ISIS targets and it conducted approximately 150 airstrikes in Iraq by September 2014 (The White House Office of Press Secretary, 2014). With the rise of ISIS, the main

policy purpose of the Obama administration in Syria shifted from the Assad regime to defeating ISIS (Yacoubian, 2017: 25).

Following the entrance of ISIS into the US foreign policy agenda, the Obama administration built its counter-terrorism strategy on the following points. First, it established a US-led international coalition to conduct air strikes on ISIS targets (Kurt, April 2019:14). Second, the administration needed ground partners to fight ISIS in Iraq and Syria (Ibid). Third, it would follow the limited intervention strategy by sending some service members to help ground partners (The White House Office of Press Secretary, 2014). While the Iraqi central army and Kurdish Peshmerga forces were main ground partners in Iraq (Paasche and Gunter, 2016), through the train-and-equip program the Obama administration aimed at training and equipping the members of Syrian military opposition as ground partners in Syria (The White House Office of Press Secretary, 2014). The initial policy objectives of the counter-ISIS strategy were defined as having very limited US forces on the ground with little risks and costs and partnering with local people or organizations to fight ISIS (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021:11). The former US Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter-ISIS, Brett McGurk (2019:69-72) also expressed other objectives of the counter-ISIS strategy in Syria. They were to help local partners for retaking their territories from ISIS, to run the US-led stabilization programs for facilitating the returns of displaced people to their former territories and to ensure that local partners could organize their own relations and function their own administration in the aftermath of ISIS in which the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) would play an important role.

The US and YPJ relationship in the context of the Syrian Civil war began during the Kobane siege of ISIS through US interaction with the YPG. When the ISIS siege on Kobane occupied the agenda of the world and particularly the US foreign policy agenda, the Obama administration started interacting with the YPG, the military wing of the PYD, which controlled the Kobane canton as the Syrian affiliate of the PKK in Turkey. According to the US officials, the reluctance of Turkey to take some steps against ISIS in Kobane and divergent priority of the Syrian military opposition, which was the overthrown of the President Assad, led the US to act pragmatically and interact with the YPG (Demir, 2023: 182). Additionally, the YPG's role in rescuing the Yazidis from ISIS in Sinjar and Lahur Talabani's relations with the YPG as a leader of the Suleymaniyah-based Counter-Terrorism Group (CTG) that closely worked with the US during and after the 2003 Iraq war facilitated the US interaction with the YPG and YPJ (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021:48-49). Starting from the end of September 2014, the warplanes of the US-led international coalition began conducting airstrikes over ISIS targets around Kobane (Firat News Agency, 2014). The first publicized US airdrop of weapons and ammunitions to the YPG started in October 2014 during the Kobane siege, and the US airdropped "twenty-four tons of arms and

ammunitions” and “ten tons of medical supplies” to the YPG until October 2015 (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021:78).

With the help of airstrikes of the US-led international coalition and support of the US, the YPG and YPJ managed to win the Kobane battle against ISIS. This did not only increase the reputation of the YPG across the world but also bolstered the images of Kurdish women fighters of YPJ amongst the Western audiences. Then, more female figures voluntarily joined the YPJ (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021:79-80) even from the foreign countries (The Guardian, 2017). It meant that the YPJ began finding a place for itself in the US foreign policy agenda as a topic and a female unit of the YPG. The US supported YPJ as a ground force in the fight against ISIS alongside the YPG and YPJ took many responsibilities such as “light infantry, sniper and heavy weapons” (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021:85). It is quite clear that following the interaction during the Kobane siege, the US has worked with such a militarist Kurdish women organization as an anti-thesis of ISIS and has utilized such an organization not only as a proxy actor (Thornton, 2015) but also for legitimizing its counter-ISIS strategy, which was to support ground partners, either male or female ones in Syria. Then, the images of the Kurdish female fighters as “heroes and brave women” were presented and praised by the US Media as done by the CNN International, which choose the YPJ fighters as women of the year in December 2014 (CNN International Business, 2014).

The YPG’s ground operations against ISIS in northern Syria, particularly in the Arab majority areas, continued with the air strikes of the US-led international coalition during the summer of 2015 (Anadolu Agency, 2015). This is because the YPG and US officials agreed that ISIS could be defeated through operations in the Arab majority area. There was need for an Arab majority forces that the US had already started combining Arab tribal groups in northeast Syria since the summer of 2015 under the framework of the Syrian Arab Coalition (SAC) (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021:95-97). As a consequence of the negotiations between the SAC, the YPG and US officials, an umbrella organization, the SDF, was formed on 10 October 2015, which had become a mechanism for US assistance to the Kurdish and Arab forces in the fight against ISIS (Ibid:97). The YPJ was one of the main components of the SDF, which was assessed as “an extremely progressive” body in accordance with the American standards by considering the roles and responsibilities of the YPJ’s senior officials, commanders and fighters in this body (Burton, 2017). Additionally, the inner circle of the SDF, named as the General Command, consisted of Newroz Ahmed, a YPJ commander, alongside Mazloum Kobani Abdi, the YPG commander, and Newroz played a central role as a logistician, planner and the head of YPJ, which was also respected by the Americans (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021:119). These people as female and male counterparts organized the administrative work of the de facto autonomous administration in north east Syria, they controlled the financial resources such as oil sales of this administration and managed the distribution of

arms supplied by the US as well as the management of the media and intelligence of this administration (Ibid:120-121).

The YPJ alongside the YPG as components of the SDF had some responsibilities during the US-backed ground operations against ISIS in Syria, which were compatible with the aforementioned US policy objective of helping local partners to retake their territories from ISIS. In this regard, the first US-SDF operation was the Al-Shadadi in Hasaka (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021:115). YPJ fighters also joined this operation which was visualized through the pictures of some women fighters at a roof of a building in order to demonstrate their existence and roles during the operation as well as their place in the US policy within north east Syria (Wilgenburg, 2016). Following the Al-Shadadi operation, there was also the Manbij operation, which was believed by the US that Manbij was a strategic place for ISIS and it had been a passage for ISIS members to travel the European capitals and organize terror attacks as seen in Paris in November 2015 and in Brussels in March 2016 (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021:118). It appears that in addition to having a place amongst leading boats in the frontline with the YPG members, the YPJ also played a central role during the Manbij operation. The YPJ figures, Nalin Afrin and Newroz Ahmed, had responsibilities to organize the flow of the Kurdish forces (Asayesh) and other forces into the areas taken from ISIS behind the frontline attacking forces (Ibid:127, 124).

The aforementioned operations took place during the Obama administration. Following the capture of Manbij from ISIS in August 2016, the US administration commenced targeting Raqqa, the so-called capital of ISIS. However, the Obama administration left the decision regarding Raqqa to the Trump administration (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021:142-43). Although the President Trump criticized the policy and counter-ISIS strategy of President Obama and underlined that he would change Obama's strategy, he kept working with the bureaucrats of the Obama administration like the Special Envoy Brett McGurk and CENTCOM commander Joseph Votel in Syria approximately two years (Kurt, 2019:99-104). The Trump administration also supported the YPG-led SDF as a ground partner for the Raqqa Operation (Ibid:109-110). According to US Report of the Department of Defense Office of Inspector General (2017:6), which was shared with US Congress, it was also President Trump's decision to directly arm the YPG to take Raqqa from ISIS. The YPJ had some responsibilities during the preparation process and operation itself named the Operation Euphrates Wrath. While preparing for the operation, as part of the SDF command staff, the members of YPJ like Newroz Ahmed and Sozdar Derik controlled the US-provided weapons and ammunition (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021:146). The SDF managed to mobilize the YPG and YPJ from the entirety of northern Syria including Afrin, Kobane and Hasaka, and even the YBS (The Sinjar Resistance Units, Yekineyen Berxwedana Sengale) from Sinjar to take Raqqa from ISIS with an attribution to the symbolic meaning to it as well as with a

purpose of unifying the factions of its so-called Democratic Autonomous Administration (Ibid:150-155). There were also YPJ units, which included the Western volunteers like the British citizen Kimberley Taylor during the Raqqa Operation as Raqqa had a symbolic importance to those who believed that by fighting against ISIS they had been fighting for humanity (The Guardian, 2017).

As seen above, the YPJ took part in the operation and played a role with the support of the US. In this regard, Newroz Ahmed, the well-known YPJ figure, was in the inner circle of the Raqqa Operation Team with Mazloum Kobani Abdi (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021:156). She also took the responsibility as a chief of operations and logistics amongst the front commanders (Ibid: 157). Similarly, other publicly known YPJ figures like Rojda Felat, Klara Raqqa and Zinarin Kobani played some central roles in the western side of Raqqa (Ibid:157). According to some policy analysis papers, YPJ fighters led the frontline fight in the city center of Raqqa with the coordination of the SDF and they managed to rescue many Yezidi women from ISIS with a belief and motivation to take a revenge of the Yezidi women who suffered from the atrocities of ISIS since August 2014 (Zaidou, 2017). The YPJ fighters also directed the Tabqa Operation as part of the Raqqa campaign from March 2017 to June 2017. While Rojda Felat took the main responsibility as a senior front commander, she was joined later by other publicly well-known figures Klara, Amude, and Zinarin (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021:159).

Following the capture of Raqqa from ISIS, the US demanded from the YPJ and YPG-led SDF to turn their focus on Deir al-Zour (Said, 2017). There was also the ongoing Operation Jazira Storm against ISIS in the region of Jazira (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021:184). Among these debates and preparations for Deir al-Zour Operation, Turkey conducted the 2018 Operation Olive Branch in Afrin. Therefore, the YPG-YPJ components of the SDF withdrew from the counter-ISIS campaigns for Deir al-Zour and Operation Jazira Storm (Ibid: 184). According to US advisors to the SDF and US commanders, the YPJ commander, Newroz Ahmed, shifted her focus from the Deir al Zour campaign to Afrin by taking a responsibility to transfer the YPG ammunition to Afrin. Similarly, the YPJ and YPG withdrew from the Deir al-Zour campaign to focus on Afrin. So, US officials underlined that the withdrawal of the YPG -YPJ had indicated that the only Arab version of the SDF, the SAC, could not be effective against ISIS (Ibid: 185-190).

The YPJ has also been working with the Biden administration during some ground operations against ISIS cells as a component of the SDF. It was part of the US-backed operations, named the Operation Security and Humanity, with the internal security units of the PYD-controlled areas, the Asayesh. During these operations, the YPJ forces were presented and advertised as heroes, who managed to rescue Yezidi women from ISIS cells in al-Hol camp in northeastern Syria, as ISIS had been holding these women in the camps since August 2014 (Rudaw.net, 2022). Today, the al Hol Camp in Hasaka has become a matter of

security concern as the camp includes overall 57.000 refugees who are mainly families or victims of ISIS and approximately 80 % of them are women and children (Crombe and Moffitt, 2022). This point also strengthens the role of YPJ in cooperating or working with the US in the context of counter-terrorism as well as contributing to the stabilization programs of the US in the region. This also indicates that working with the US and the US-led international coalition, the YPJ expanded its influence in the Arab majority areas of Syria in addition to their domination in the north and eastern Syria. This helps US facilitate controlling some territory and having existence in Syria and the US utilizes the militarist Kurdish female organization not only as a proxy force against ISIS but also to legitimize its counter-ISIS strategy in the context of its broader foreign policy goal, the promotion of democracy in the Middle East.

The YPJ alongside the YPG as part of the SDF also serve the US policy objective of stabilization of the taken areas from ISIS in order to prepare a ground for people's return to their homes by leading the local partners to organize their own relations and function their own administration in these areas. In this regard, while the SDF General Command provided "back-clearing" services to the taken areas during the ongoing operations, after capturing the areas the same body seems to have provided stabilization by forming military and civilian councils for the service of people (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021:128, 201). For this purpose, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) was formed in the fall of 2018 with its military and political regions (Ibid:201). This administration led by the political leadership of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC, Meclisa Suriya Demokratik), the political wing of the SDF. Through its military and civilian councils, which include women administrators, AANES functions as a central mechanism for the coordination of the local security in north east Syria (Ibid: 201). In the context of the stabilization programs, the US protects the oil fields that belong to AANES, assists the administration to refine its oil and supports the SDF's control of oil revenues in AANES (Ibid:206). According to US officials, despite the fact that the YPG (and YPJ) was not willing to fight ISIS in the Arab majority areas, the US forced them to go and fight ISIS in Raqqa and Deir al-Zour in order to let it participate in the security management role in the taken areas from ISIS (Ibid: 208). This is because US officials believe that the YPG-YPJ were quite systematic and that they managed to bring some local services to the captured areas from ISIS, rebuild infrastructure of these areas through constructing bridges, establishing medical clinics and providing water to villages (Ibid: 209-210).

For the US, in addition the warrior culture, one of the main reasons for working with the YPG in the context of the stabilization of areas taken from ISIS was the role of women, particularly within the administrative and military bodies of the PYD administration, which was perceived progressive compared to other communities in the Middle East (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021:128, 251). This point is also compatible with the broader policy objective of the US

administrations in the Middle East, the democracy promotion, as these Kurds (the YPG-YPJ) are not religious and women have a very prominent place in their organizations (Bradley and Parkinson, 2015). While assessing the Obama administration's strategy during the Kobane siege, the New York Times also underlined that the Obama administration's support and protection of the YPG-YPJ Kurds as vulnerable minorities against ISIS are based on these Kurds' position towards women. Because both men and women are trained together and women fight alongside the men against ISIS (Landler et al., 2014). It appears that the roles, positions and responsibilities of women in military and civilian councils also impressed US officials and encouraged them to work with the YPG and YPJ in Syria against ISIS (Demir, 2023: 162).

Consequently, these aforementioned points indicate that the YPJ has not only played a role as a proxy ground force but also as a legitimacy-building tool for the counter-ISIS strategy of the US and US administrations preferred backing local partners against ISIS instead of sending its own soldiers or Special Forces. As a result, the US stuck with the YPG-YPJ and the SDF, and managed to control some territory in northeastern Syria in this way (McGurk, 2019:69-72). As seen above, the US also attempted to legitimize its support to the YPJ in the context of its broader foreign policy objective, promoting democracy in the Middle East. So, what this case indicates regarding the topic of women as a legitimacy-building tool in the US foreign policy? The next section will discuss this point.

Implications of the YPJ Case: Women as a Legitimacy-Building Tool in US Foreign Policy

In the existing literature regarding the topic of women in US foreign policy, there have been studies analyzing how and why discourses of women or feminist movements can find a place for themselves in US foreign policy. A specific case investigates the utilization of discourses of women movements by the Bush administration for serving some other US foreign policy objectives (Brenner, 2009). Although this study, to some extent, has come close to explain the pragmatic utilization of discourses of feminist women organizations for serving some foreign policy objectives, there is need for a study, which approaches the topic of women or women organizations as a legitimacy-building tool in US foreign policy. The case of YPJ, therefore, fills this identified gap by analyzing why a militarist Kurdish women organization can find itself a place in the US foreign policy, as part of legitimizing the US objectives in Syria. This case addresses the following points regarding US foreign policy.

First, the case demonstrates that US administrations could work with a Kurdish militarist female organizations like YPJ, alongside its male units and that they attempt to legitimize this strategy to realize their policy objectives in Syria. Such objective and strategy are to defeat ISIS through local (proxy) partners instead of sending its own soldiers, troops, and only providing weapons, ammunition, or a small number of Special Forces when it is necessary, which is a

politically cheap approach according to US officials (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021: 235). Second, the case indicates that US administrations could also work with non-state proxy organizations (both male and female) in the context of the stabilization of areas taken from ISIS to maintain the existence or US influence through the US-led stabilization programs. In this regard, male or female non-state actors can become US proxies, the legitimization tools for the US-led stabilization programs as well as its existence in Syria.

Third, the case clearly shows that when their policy objectives or priorities necessitate, US administrations could work with an ideologically different organizations from themselves. The YPJ and YPG are, indeed, ideologically opposite to the US due to their loyalty to the Marxist and communist-rooted writings of the PKK leader Ocalan (Bradley and Parkinson, 2015). Marxism and Communism were the ideologies, which the US fought throughout the Cold War period (Ibid). However, US administrations followed a pragmatic strategy for fighting ISIS in Syria in collaborating with such organizations. In order to legitimize this strategy of working with an ideologically opposite Kurdish female militarist organization, US administrations seem to have applied the images of women in the Syrian civil war which presented these Kurdish female fighters as “heroes/warriors” and “ideologically separate actors from ISIS”. Particularly, the role of women in the community of PYD-YPG-YPJ has been a legitimization mechanism for US administrations and US officials to overcome these ideological differences. Particularly the framing of the mainstream US newspapers of the YPJ and YPG as organizations that are ideologically different from ISIS and the ones that are closer to the West have facilitated overcoming ideological differences between the US and the YPJ. In this regard, the YPJ and YPG were presented in the civilized side of the debates as “us” against ISIS, the barbaric “them”.

This approach seems to have also served the broader US policy objective in the Middle East, the democracy promotion. From the perspectives of US officials, they work with Kurdish militarist organizations, which are progressive in terms of their view and respectfulness to the roles and positions of women in their society (Burton, 2017) and this was not so common in other societies of the Middle East (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021: 251). It is quite clear that US administrations and officials use these points to legitimize their cooperation with the YPJ and YPG as components of the SDF in the fight against ISIS in Syria as they argue that these organizations represent a kind of democracy in the middle of chaotic environment of the Syrian civil war. In this way, these militarist organizations have served the US-led stabilization programs and policy of ensuring that local partners could organize their own relations and function their own administration in the aftermath of ISIS (McGurk, 2019: 71) within the areas taken from ISIS through their administrative skills as well as providing positions to women in their administrative and military units.

Finally, this case illustrates that US could cooperate with militarist organizations like YPJ, which has an ideological affiliate with the PKK, which was listed as a terrorist organization by the US in 1997. In this regard, US has easily ignored its NATO ally Turkey's concerns regarding the YPJ and YPG. US officials also attempt to find a way for legitimizing the US support to these groups by arguing that the YPJ-YPG are Syrian organizations and that they are different from the PKK (Knights and Wilgenburg, 2021: 246-49). All these points demonstrate that when it necessitates, US administrations could follow pragmatic steps and could work with organizations, which are ideologically different from themselves. The main priority over here is to realize US policy objectives in the targeted countries, and organizations or seen in the case of Bush administration (Brenner, 2009), discourses of movements which serve these purposes can easily become legitimacy-building tools for the policies of US administrations.

Conclusion

This article has investigated main reasons for why a militarist Kurdish women organization, YPJ, can find a place for itself in the US foreign policy and why US administrations work with it. The article has also sought answers for the questions of why the foreign policy agenda of US urged it to support such a militarist organization and what the US has been doing with the YPJ during the Syrian civil war. The article argues that US administrations since the President Barack Obama have utilized the YPJ as a legitimacy-building tool for their counter-ISIS strategy. This was also compatible with the broader policy objective of US, democracy promotion in the Middle East. The article provides some insights that US administrations have worked with ground partners like the YPJ and YPG in the context of military-based and security-prioritized alliance instead of having a direct external military intervention. Accordingly, the images of women as "heroes/warriors" in the mainstream US newspapers have provided a proper ground for US administrations to utilize the YPJ for legitimizing their strategy and objectives against ISIS in Syria. The results indicate that although there was an ideological differences between US administrations and YPJ, officials have tried to overcome such issues by locating the YPJ as an anti-thesis of ISIS. Such an approach, to some extent, have legitimized interacting or working with the YPJ from the perspective of US. This has also demonstrated the choice of US officials to work with a ground partner (a proxy force) in fighting a terrorist-threat instead of sending its own soldiers as a cheap strategy. This could mean that regardless of ideology or gender, US administrations could work with male or female militarist organizations to realize their foreign policy objectives.

This article provides a new perspective to debates over the topics regarding women in the US foreign policy by analyzing why a militarist Kurdish women organization can find a place itself in US foreign policy and how it could

serve as a legitimacy-building tool for specific policy objectives of US in a foreign country and can also be used to serve a broader policy objective, democracy promotion. Findings of this article also support Brenner's (2009) research which has analyzed the entrance and utilization of discourses of women or feminist movements by the Bush administration. In this regard, this article concludes that not only the discourses of women or feminist movements but also women themselves or a militarist women organization can be utilized to serve either some other specific objectives or broader policy objectives of the US.

There is also need for a further analysis regarding the role or position of women within the military institutions of US in terms of whether they have equal responsibilities and roles like their men counterparts. The question, to what extent women take responsibilities or occupy positions in these institutions compared to their male counterparts, or male citizens of the US need some answers. This is quite an important point since it has been provided with this article that US utilizes the PYD and YPG's argument regarding the position, role, status or responsibility of the Kurdish women in the political, administrative and military units to legitimize its interaction with these organizations. Similarly, US officials strive to defend their interaction or support to these militarist organizations by arguing that the US works with relatively democratic forces that they embrace the idea of gender equality. However, to what extent US administrations consider gender equality in their military institutions, and provide some responsibilities to women while implementing its counter-terrorism strategy to fight terrorist threats like ISIS is a matter of discussion through further research. Such a new research is more likely to contribute to debates regarding gender equality in the US foreign policy first underlined by the President Obama as a policy priority in his first period and could provide a chance to assess to what extent US administrations managed to achieve this objective.

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