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Jihadi brides:

What you see is what you get?


The portrayal of female foreign fighters
in the French and Dutch media

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Executive Summary

No terrorist organization has attracted as many female foreign fighters as Islamic State. About 13% of EU foreign fighters were women. The media play a significant role in the shaping of the discourse and socio-political debate about their possible return. This paper argues that, as perception theories are interrelated, they should be combined in scientific analysis to fully capture their meaning. Accordingly, critical security studies, (neo-)orientalism and feminist theory are applied to the media portrayal of European female foreign fighters in French and Dutch newspapers. Through a mixed-methods approach of critical discourse analysis and manual content analysis, the paper provides an in-depth understanding of media portrayal.

The paper reveals how women become ‘hypervisible’ in this conflict, due to gendered and orientalist assumptions which also provide a fertile ground for practices of securitization. When women challenge the socially constructed standards of femininity by engaging in the masculine domain of terrorism, they provoke an enhanced level of shock. Gendered assumptions mainly result in their underestimation. They furthermore challenge the orientalist dichotomy between the West and the East, which cannot explain why liberated, European women would join an organization that is associated with suppression and barbarity. Women are central to these dichotomies and portrayed as outsiders to European societies.

The media desperately stick to dominant perception frameworks through which they attempt to qualify these ‘deviating’ women and thereby sustain the socio-economic order and ideological legitimizations attached to it. The consequences can be far-reaching: not only for the treatment of female foreign fighters, but also for European Muslim communities in their entirety as well as the effectiveness of EU member states’ counter-terrorism policies.

Introduction

Large protests following the Arab Uprisings led to the outbreak of a civil war in Syria in 2011, which caused severe instability in the neighbouring region. The civil war got fragmented into several civil groups, among which terrorist organisation 'Islamic State of Iraq and Syria' (ISIS) (Chatterjee 2016: 201-203). EU member states were confronted with large refugee flows, several terrorist attacks and the departure of foreign fighters to territory ISIS proclaimed as its state in 2014: the 'Caliphate' (Braun 2018: 315).

A significant and unprecedented number of them are women: around 13% (4761) of EU foreign fighters (Cook & Vale 2018: 22; Braun 2018: 312; Peresin 2015:21). Now that ISIS is officially defeated (McKernan 2019), the possible return of female foreign fighters is highly debated in EU member states (Braun 2018: 314). The increasing female involvement in terrorism and the under-examination of female foreign fighters and terrorists adds to the importance of further research in this field (Auer et al.: 2018: 9; Davis 2017: 16; Reynolds & Hafez 2017: 22).

This paper examines the media portrayal of ISIS' female foreign fighters from EU member states in the French and Dutch newspapers. First of all, debunking biases and assumptions can help to improve counter-terrorism policies (Brown 2018: 3) and combat increasing islamophobia (Berbers et al.: 2015: 799). Research on media portrayal in female terrorism remains critical as they are one of the most dominant sources of information on terrorism. As previous research has often been limited to one perception theory, this paper argues perception theories are interrelated and it therefore combines them to fully capture the meaning of media narratives (Auer et al.: 2018: 7-8, 14). Finally, new qualitative and quantitative data will be presented, obtained through a mixed-methods approach.

Literature review

I – ISIS' female foreign fighters

Foreign fighters are defined by the United Nations Security Council as: "Individuals who travel to a state other than their states of residence or nationality for the purpose of preparation of, or participation in terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of

terrorist training” (UNSC 2014: 4-5). Literature adds religious or ideological motives: “non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil war whose motivation is ideological or religious rather than financial” (Malet 2013: 9; Peresin 2015: 23; Reynolds & Hafez 2017: 2-3). Women are drawn to terrorism by the same motivations as men, which are primarily ideological and religious, but also include sentiments of alienation from the country of origin (Davis 2017: 130; de Leede 2018: 8; Loken & Zelenz 2017: 45).

Female jihad is the interpretation of women’s ideological contribution to jihad. Von Knop (2007: 411) distinguished three waves of female jihad, applicable to ISIS (Winter 2015: 5). These waves range from supporting their husbands and raising the ‘next generation of fighters’ with ISIS’ values, to a more public role of recruiter, fundraiser, morality police, doctor or religious teacher (Peresin & Cervone 2015: 500). The role of recruiters and violent morality police for ISIS was fulfilled mainly by Western women (Ennaji 2016: 550; Spencer 2016: 83-84, 96; Yilmaz 2017: 27). In the third wave, women would participate in combat for tactical purposes. ISIS did provide weapon training to its women, but there is no sufficient evidence for its use of female combatants (Cohn 2013: 165; Peresin 2015: 23; 32) or this use would be very limited (Winter & Margolin 2017: 25; Winter 2018: 10-11).

Women critically contribute to the goals and functioning of ISIS, but counterterrorism policy makers have tended to underestimate them (Cohn 2013: 166; OSCE 2018: 64-65; Spencer 2016: 74). It is feared returnees might strengthen local networks, in which women are critical for recruitment (Reynolds & Hafez 2017: 2; UNSC 2018: 7). Returnees have also been linked to recent terrorist attacks in EU member states (Braun 2018: 231; European Council 2017: 4).

II – The media

Despite their active contribution in conflict, women are either downplayed or ignored in news coverage and scientific or policy analysis (Enloe 1989: 3). Yet, Sjoberg described the “hypervisibility” of ISIS’ women in the media (2018: 296-298). The media are the main vehicle through which citizens obtain information about terrorism, producing both knowledge and fear. Media discourse largely frames the public and political debate and legitimizes certain measures addressing the issue concerned

(Berbers et al.: 2016: 800; Da Silva & Crilley 2016: 2-4). Reporting on terrorism has increased over time and terrorist themselves have become a legitimate media source (Yarchi 2014: 676).

Newspapers set agendas and frame issues by choosing which voices are being heard and given credibility (Delcour & Hustinx 2017: 266). They construct the society and identity of their readers, but also construct themselves in relationship to them with to keep them attached (Baker et al.: 2013: 6). Politicians, the media themselves, but also terrorists can benefit from media coverage of terrorism (Jackson et al.: 2011: 53). Media narratives can create a feeling of control by offering stereotypical explanations for a complex and disturbing issue (De Graaf 2012: 16; Nacos 2005: 437). Through a process of selection and prioritization, critical voices or alternatives can be excluded (Jackson et al.: 2011: 54-56).

Previous research has found female terrorists or female foreign fighters portrayal as: victim (Berbers et al.: 2015: 806; Chatterjee 2016: 202), naïve, in love (Loken & Zelenz 2017: 50; Nacos 2005: 441), monsters/masculine (Jacques & Taylor 2009: 505; Nacos 2005: 444; Sjoberg 2018: 298), adventurers (Berbers et al.: 2015: 809), feminists (Margolin 2018: 3; Nacos 2005: 443), personal motivations rather than political (Jacques & Taylor 2009: 505; Naaman 2007: 936; Sjoberg 2018: 302; Yarchi 2014: 677), focus on physical appearance (Nacos 2005: 438), sexually deviant (Bjorgum 2016: 94) or whores (Sjoberg 2018: 298). It is often emphasized that they were drawn to terrorism by male family members or family background (Bjorgum 2016: 94; Davis 2017: 44; Naaman 2007: 944; Sjoberg & Gentry 2007: 31).

III – Theoretical framework

Three IR theories are combined in this analysis: Critical Security Studies, Orientalism and Feminist Theory. Firstly, Critical Security Studies emphasize the socially constructed nature of security through language (Browning & McDonald 2011: 237-238). An issue can become ‘securitized’ when it is presented as an existential threat and accepted by the public as such, irrespectively of whether it concerns a ‘real’ threat. An issue then moves from the field of politics to the field of security, in which the matter is often addressed with exceptional measures, which can be un-creative, undemocratic and in violation with rule of law and human rights (Buzan et al.: 1998: 21-23, 27, 34;

Peoples & Vaughan-Williams 2010: 76-78; Weaver & Wilde 1998: 24-26). Critical Security Studies aim to change socio-political order by expressing normative judgement (Krause & Williams 1997: xi; Waever & Wilde 1998: 35).

Secondly, Edward Said's Orientalism is based on the idea of a division between the East or 'Orient' and the West or 'Occident' (1997: 4). Orientalist discourse is generally expressed by opposing "us" versus "them", assuming both sides are homogenous and can be defined in extremes of threat and peacefulness (idem: 78). The West is associated with superiority and secularism and the East with inferiority, backwardness and exoticness (Kerboua 2016: 21; Said 1997: 4). Through this lens, Islam equals violence, fundamentalism, suppression of women and in later neo-orientalism also threat, terrorism and threatening democracy (Huntington 1993: 22; Kerboua 2016: 21-22; Said 1997: 4; Yilmaz 2017: 33). Those who produce knowledge about the Orient are always subjective and serve to maintain or legitimize Western hegemony, colonial rule and intervention (Said 1997: 24-25, 30; Kara 2017: 3023-3024).

Finally, Feminist Theory understands gender as a social construction that shapes individual identities and contains a structural power relation (Cohn 2013: 4). It reveals the emotional and psychological characteristics that are held to be essentially 'feminine' or 'masculine' in societies and cultures (Steans 2006: 8). Masculinity is associated with rationality, courage, violence, war and protection. In opposition, feminism is associated with emotions, innocence, passivity, non-violence and peace (Cohn 2013: 11-12). Female terrorism is therefore perceived to be an anomaly (Blanchard 2003: 1300). Moreover, the 'Muslim woman' is a particular case, as women have been at the centre of colonial binaries as markers of difference (Charrad 2011: 422). Here, the Muslim woman, assumed to have no agency at all, is often contrasted with the liberated, Western woman (Khalid 2011: 21-22; Sjoberg & Gentry 2016: 26).

Methodology

This paper examines how European female foreign fighters of ISIS are portrayed in the Dutch and French media. The sample focuses on newspapers as they are significant players in media discourse and are generally viewed by the public as authoritative, credible and reliable sources. Therefore their recipients tend to accept beliefs, knowledge and opinions provided in their discourses (Van Dijk 2001: 356-357). The

research restricts itself to female foreign fighters coming from EU member states. France has the highest absolute number of female foreign fighters of Europe, the Netherlands knows the highest proportional number (Bakker & de Bont 2016: 837). Up until now, France announced it considers to repatriate some of them for trial in France (Chrisafis 2019), whereas the Netherlands refuses to facilitate their return (NOS 2019).

In total, 173 articles were selected from the two most-read national daily newspapers from across the political spectrum (ACPM 2018; NOM 2018). For France, 87 articles were derived from newspapers *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*. For the Netherlands, 86 articles were selected from *de Volkskrant* and *de Telegraaf*. All items were collected through the database Nexis Uni and the search engines on the newspaper's websites. Broad keywords were used in order to avoid being suggestive.¹ The selection of articles was limited according to the time scope from 1 January 2015 till 1 March 2019, which corresponds to the financial and territorial losses of ISIS mid-2015, which led to the first flows of returnees (Cook & Vale 2018: 22) and to the official defeat of ISIS by the Syrian Democratic Forces in Baghuz (McKernan 2019). Also, articles of low-relevance for the research question were removed.

For this research, two interpretative methods were deployed that, rather than looking for underlying causes, interpret the power of discourse to constitute reality and the effects thereof. They expose the plurality of the multiple discursive constructions. On the one hand a critical discourse analysis (CDA) inspired by Wodak's *Discourse Historical Approach* was conducted. This approach focuses on the concepts of power, ideology and history (Wodak 2002: 12) and with particular attention for all background information and historical context (Wodak 2011: 359). CDA not only describes existing realities, but also evaluates and explains them in order to provoke emancipation (Fairclough 2012: 9-10; Wodak 2002: 8, 10, 12). CDA involves the close examination of linguistic phenomena such as: word choice, sentence structure, metaphors, argumentation strategy, implicature and silences (Baker et al.: 2013: 20; Van Dijk 2001: 355, 358).

¹ The keywords used for the French newspapers were: 'jihadiste française', 'femmes djihadistes', 'femmes état islamique' and 'femmes Daech'. The keywords used for the Dutch newspapers were: 'vrouwen Islamitische Staat' / 'IS-vrouw', 'vrouwen jihad', 'vrouwen kalifaat' and 'syriëgangster'.

With the qualitative data analysis programme *Atlas.ti* a manual content analysis was furthermore conducted to show to what extent the empirical data support a particular interpretation or conclusion (Marxwell 2013: 128). The content unit chosen is a single word or sentence (Halperin & Heath 2012: 319). A code book was created, which contains 14 codes that operationalize the three IR theories of the theoretical framework.²

	Category	Feminist theory	Orientalism	Critical Security Studies
1	Naïve/adventurers/blinded by love	X		
2	Sexual desire/defect	X		
3	Weak, passive victim	X	X	
4	Difficult youth	X		
5	Drawn to terrorism by men	X		X
6	Cruel, violent husband		X	X
7	Masculine/ruthless	X		
8	Monsters/social outcasts	X		
9	Mothers	X		
10	No 'real' European		X	X
11	Liberated West vs. backward East		X	
12	Beautiful, nice, normal	X		X
13	Veiling practices		X	X
14	Wolf in sheep's clothing			X

Figure 1: Operationalization three IR theories into code book categories.

This mixed-methods approach strengthens the reliability and validity of the research as it captures both the sensitivity of discourse analysis as well as the stronger

² The categories are based on previous research on media portrayal of female foreign fighters or female terrorists and on the discourse analysis previously conducted in this research.

replicability and objectivity of the content analysis. Moreover, its complementarity allows for obtaining information on different aspects of the phenomenon which contributes to a comprehensive understanding (Marxwell 2013: 102, 137).

Analysis

Jihad for love

The first frame portrays the female foreign fighters as naïve, looking for adventure or travelling to the Caliphate based on romantic motives. For example by referring to stereotypical characteristics or dreams of young girls: “giggling” (de Volkskrant, 9), “little caliphate girl” (de Volkskrant, 26) or as “jihadi brides”. The term ‘bride’ implies they are young and innocent. They would romanticize marrying a martyr: “Aïcha from Maastricht fell madly in love with the Dutch ex-military Israfil Yilmaz. At the time he is considered to be some sort of Islamic Robin Hood or Che Guevara” (de Telegraaf, 26). Moreover, they would commit suicide attacks or terrorist acts out of revenge, by means of retribution, or to be reunified with their dead husband, which is expressed by calling them ‘widows’: “She would have been the widow of a man who ‘would have made history’” (Le Monde, 15). Through the use of an anti-climax, it is described how the enchantment was broken upon arrival: “Not the palace from Arabian Nights that was promised to her” (Le Figaro, 3).

Furthermore, the frequent referral to female foreign fighters as ‘mothers’ (frame 9) firstly makes the implicit assumption of women as peaceful because of their maternal instinct: “How can you love your children so much and still be so violent?” (de Volkskrant, 18). Secondly, it explains female violence by a desperate link to motherhood, thus by emotional motivations. Their unconditional love for their children would thwart their ability to think rationally.

So, both frames deny women’s agency, as they assume women act in dependence of their relationships with men and on the basis of their emotions. Secondly, they overlook that marriage and giving birth are an ideological contribution according to the female jihad (Loken & Zelenz 2017: 59). They also deny the strategic value of marriage as a tool for the preservation of ISIS’ networks. The result of this lack of understanding the phenomenon is underestimation: “It is unlikely, taking into account

their naivety (...), that they would actually take action one day. The violence of their thoughts is sufficient however to illustrate the power of ISIS' propaganda on fragile souls" (Le Monde, 7).

Victims of circumstances

Besides from calling the female foreign fighters literally 'victims' (frame 3), victimization is suggested by the assumption that the women were brainwashed through ISIS' recruitment. This is expressed through wordings like: 'lured', 'seduced', 'manipulated' or 'tricked', whereas male foreign fighters are described to be 'recruited' (Loken & Zelenz 2017: 65). They would be easily lured by things 'women want' (Sjoberg 2018: 302). An example: "A teenage girl, a lost young woman, an easy prey, who has been hippy, gothic" (Le Figaro, 35). This assumption illustrates how susceptible and easily influenceable this woman was and results in underestimation.

Apart from the weakness of the women in general, they are often portrayed as victims of their circumstances. Here, joining ISIS is presented as something that 'happens' to the women, rather than as their choice. For example their difficult youth (frame 4). Journalists delve into their family history, domestic situation and childhood to explain 'what went wrong' (Auer et al.: 2018: 4). The women are described for example to have had "teenage years without hope" (Le Monde, 7) or as "vulnerable girls, mostly from dysfunctional families" (de Telegraaf, 9). Moreover, they would have been forced (frame 6) or convinced (frame 5) to join ISIS by their violent husband. The first corresponds to the orientalist stereotype of the Muslim man as violent and suppressing. For example: "He was really a beast. Torturing people continuously, that was deeply ingrained in him" (de Telegraaf, 48). In reality, the majority of both men and women are recruited for ISIS through relatives, friends and acquaintances. Nevertheless, this is only emphasized for women (Nacos 2005: 442). This portrayal results in the securitization of a marriage with a Muslim man as a prelude for the women's departure (Brown 2011: 711).

Another 'circumstantial' reason offered for their terrorist acts is their sexual deviance in terms of desire (whores) or defect. By mentioning their many boyfriends in the past, the absence of a father figure and their sexy clothing, it is implied the women would

crave for male attention and praise. They would be susceptible to manipulation, which incites them to marry a fighter (Brown 2011: 713). Besides, Muslim women are considered to be even more dependent of this attention, as they are considered more dependent of men in general (Sjoberg & Gentry 2008: 16). Another expression of this frame is that female violence is explained by her failure to meet the ‘normal’ standards of sexuality (Auer et al.: 2018: 4). For example: inability to have children (de Telegraaf, 10), sexual abuse in the past (de Telegraaf, 22; Le Figaro, 37; Le Monde, 31), abortion (de Telegraaf, 48) or sexual disease (Le Monde, 31). This frame again obfuscates women’s real motivations for joining ISIS, labelling them as irrational and dependent of men. Finally, it is shown by their sexual past how they deviate from the ideal of the ‘European woman’ (Brown 2011: 713). They are made outsiders.

Not one of ‘us’

Women are described either as no ‘true’ Europeans anymore, or as never having been European, despite being born and raised in France or the Netherlands (frame 10). For instance by writing they “have no future here anymore” (Le Figaro, 38) or they are labelled as “unsuitable to live in the Netherlands” (de Telegraaf, 38). Sometimes it is made clear they have never really fitted in: “She still finds living in a Western country “a test”” (de Telegraaf, 17). The media connect to their Islamic identity instead of their European (Brown 2011: 705). Here, veiling practices are referred to emphasize their difference from Europeans or it is explained they never accepted Western values or traditions: “They never accepted our democratic rule of law, but now that they are cornered, they are suddenly willing to appear in court” (de Volkskrant, 21). This quote implies the neo-orientalist assumption that Islam is inherently undemocratic, doesn’t respect the sovereignty of state power and is therefore a threat (Mavelli 2013: 161-162). It is implied the female foreign fighters would practice a ‘bad’ type of Islam that is not European, meaning not moderate but fundamentalist and not private but public (Ramadan 2010: 24-25).

The distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims dates back to the colonial era. The label of non-Europeanness which marks the women as ‘intruders’ to European societies, reinforces the perception that their possession of a European passport makes them particularly dangerous (Brown 2011: 710). They are not considered citizens that

the European states bear responsibility for. The measure of revocation can result in violations of international law, of which the statelessness of British foreign fighter Shamima Begum is an example. The frame ignores that Islam is actually part of Europe and European history and treats Islamic fundamentalists as part of the Islamic mainstream, consolidating the assumed connection between Islam and terrorism. A link that is almost never actively disrupted by the media.

The perception of Islam as threat also results in the securitization of the practice of veiling (frame 13), viewed as an emblematic of fundamentalism, before departure and after return. The women are described to suddenly start wearing a veil or niqab and it is emphasized how this dress covers them entirely, which renders them even more unknowable to the public sphere (Brown 2011: 715): “Victoria, who started wearing a niqab a couple of weeks before her departure” (de Telegraaf, 11). In Western societies where the active, publicly visible practice of religion is very limited, religious expressions such as prayer, dress and fasting are very soon perceived as extremism or excess (Ramadan 2010: 24). Securitization of religious practices legitimizes measures such as the prohibition of the headscarf or other limitations to the freedom of religion.

Secondly, the veiling practices symbolize Muslim women’s subordination. The news articles portray the West as liberated, progressive and modern, as opposed to the barbaric, backward East (frame 11). Sexual freedom, drugs, alcohol, tight clothes and parties are used as metaphors for the West: “Between Wodka and niqab” (Le Monde, 3). The Middle East and Islam are presented as barbarian and primitive, still within the stage of conflict and religion that the EU surpassed: “My patient was a very beautiful blond girl. Her husband was a big, dark ISIS-fighter. With bad teeth” (de Volkskrant, 18).

Also, a seeming paradox is presented: “It is hard to understand that the Western model is less attractive to a woman than the one of the Islamic State” (Le Figaro, 13). This builds on the assumption that the West has progressed towards a post-modern stage with its feminist revolutions. Now, European women would fully enjoy liberties and rights. The East is thought to be the opposite case: “We are talking about an understanding of Islam in which the woman is an eternal minor” (Le Figaro, 14). Sometimes, the women’s departure is explained as a deviant expression of feminism.

The underlying reasoning is that it is not surprising that Muslim women commit terrorist acts in order to emancipate themselves from the largely male-dominated, suppressing Muslim societies (Nacos 2005: 244). By sticking to these perceptions, the media keep polarizing, marginalizing the Muslim community and ignore that one of the main motives of the women is actually a sentiment of social exclusion and alienation from their home countries (Davis 2017: 130; de Leede 2018: 8).

An uncontrollable threat

The media view the women as a threat to their countries of origin, which is presented either more explicitly or in a more subtle way. As women challenge the societal gender norms by entering the ‘masculine’ domain of terrorism, the media presume they have to be masculine (Nacos 2005: 444; Jacques & Taylor 2009: 505). They are considered tough in an uncontrolled, vindictive and extremely coldblooded manner (frame 7): “She applauded in front of the television for 9/11” (Le Monde, 4) or “drunk of anger” (Le Figaro, 25). Moreover, they are sometimes portrayed as more determined or aggressive than men (Le Monde, 7, 9). The reasoning behind this is that the women would feel they have to prove they belong (Nacos, 2005: 444).

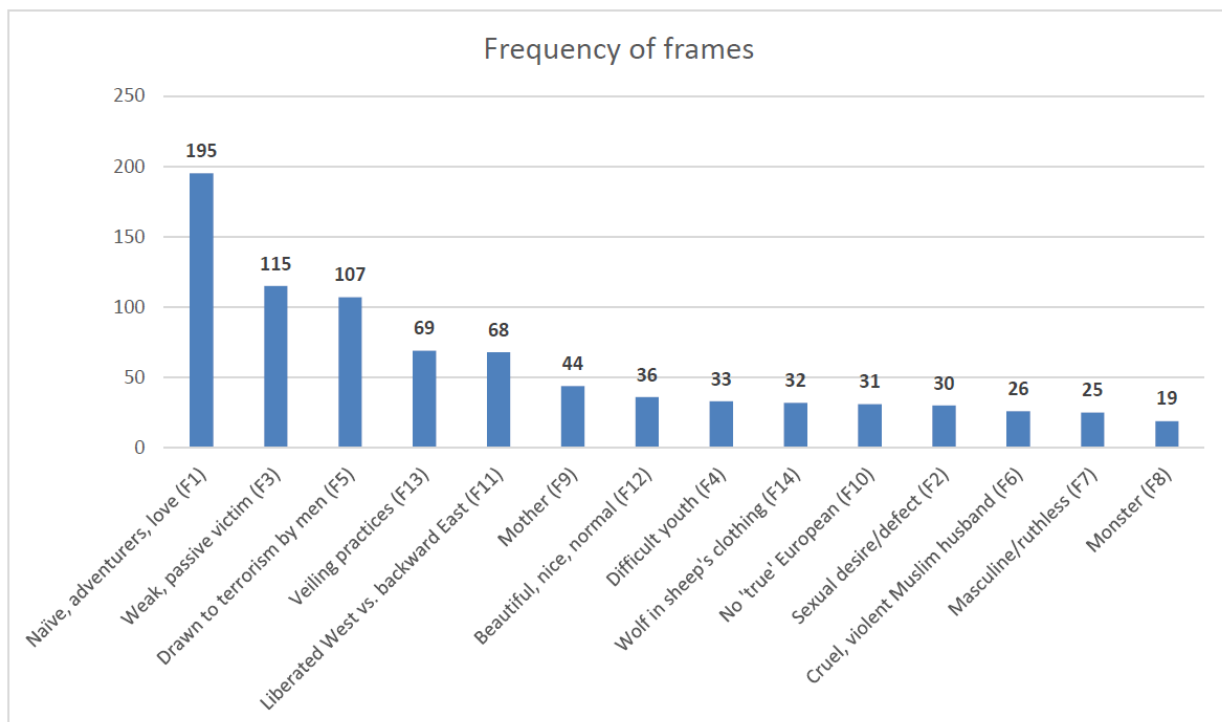
As female terrorism is considered to be an anomaly, it is reasoned the women are ‘monsters’ (frame 8): social outcasts with psychological disturbances (Brunner 2005: 32; Gentry & Sjoberg 2015: 127). They are portrayed as irrational, uncontrollable and lacking agency. According to *Le Figaro*: “about one third has mental problems” (36) and some are described to have “suicidal tendencies” (Le Monde, 7, 11).

A more indirect way of presenting the female foreign fighters as a threat is by illustrating the women seem the furthest away from a terrorist: good students, with average hobbies and beautiful appearances (frame 12): “She listened to Coldplay and read Harry Potter” (de Volkskrant 4). Often characteristics that are associated with femininity, which show that the women don’t deviate from gendered standards (Naaman 2007: 936). Female terrorists seem almost always good-looking, to dramatize the contrast with their violent acts (Nacos 2005: 439-440): “With the looks of a top model she entered the court room (...) Behind her dark eyes she hides a secret that she still hasn’t revealed” (de Telegraaf, 24). This has a frightening effect, as even

those who seem ‘normal’ and ‘one of us’ can be terrorists. By portraying them as wolfs in sheep’s clothing (frame 14) or “ticking time bombs” (de Telegraaf, 41), it is gradually revealed that they are not what it seems and suspicious: “The stories of the women are similar (...) and cannot be checked, whereas it is clear that the content has been aligned with family and lawyers” (de Volkskrant, 19).

General discussion

As shown in figure 2 below, the gendered frames derived from feminist theory are most dominant in media discourse. This mostly results in underestimation. Furthermore, the female foreign fighters are more often portrayed indirectly as a threat. The orientalist frames reinforce the gendered frames and both of them reinforce



securitization, which can be derived from their level of co-occurrence.

Figure 2: Frequency of the frames coded in the total of newspaper articles in absolute numbers. Source: constructed by the author.

Events such as an attempt for an attack in Paris by four women seem to have raised more awareness on the female contribution over time. Suddenly, they are referred to as “fanatics” and said to have a “new role” (Le Figaro, 22, 23, 24, 25; Le Monde, 9). It is clear that the newspapers use sensational language and dramatizing discursive techniques to attract the reader’s attention. Besides, because some newspapers have

appointed a small group of journalists to report on the topic, suddenly a hand full of people becomes 'expert'. Moreover, media attention is something that terrorist organizations employ to cause fear (De Graaf 2012: 14-15) as female foreign fighters increasingly become an actor in shaping the discourse (Yarchi 2014: 676).

More importantly, the women have an interest in presenting themselves as victims and innocent in interviews in the face of possible court hearings or return. See for example: "I am a victim, says Meream. (...) I was only a housewife, taking care of two little children" (de Volkskrant, 17). This projected self-image is sometimes faithfully adopted by the media, but they still refute the significance of these supporting roles for the functioning of ISIS and ideological motivation behind it. Nonetheless, the frame of 'wolf in sheep's clothing' has shown that more often the author implies between the lines that the female foreign fighters nevertheless cannot be trusted. As the woman does not fit within the feminist stereotype of the victim, because she was involved in terrorism, the alternative explanation given is that she must be extremely bad: a hidden monster.

In terms of social equality, power structures and political measures, the discourse has consequences for the female foreign fighters, but also the larger French and Dutch Muslim communities. The element of 'history' plays a role in this regard (Wodak 2002: 12), because the discourse builds on long-existent cultural themes and thus has more resonance. The extensive reporting of individual stories has on the one hand the effect that the reader will sooner consider a hard response to be legitimate (Berbers et al.: 2015: 800). On the other hand, it is problematic when these personalized stories are presented as representative for all female foreign fighters or the entire Muslim community. So as an unintended by-product, negative stereotyping about Muslims is worsened by the press (Backer et al.: 2013: 257-258).

As for ideology (Wodak 2002: 12): the discourse contributes to sustaining the socio-economic order of femininity, West vs. East-dichotomies and Western 'war' stories. The media locate the female foreign fighters within or outside of the established categories of perception in order to keep understanding the phenomenon through the lens of the dominant ideology. In this way, it aims to show that the dominant social order and narratives are in fact not challenged by these women. This does not only

sustain the Western hegemony in the world order, but also keeps downgrading women as a full-fledged actor in international relations.

This discursive strategy also explains why securitization frames are relatively less salient, as feminist and orientalist frames have separated the males from the females. Males have long been securitized by the discourse on the war on terror, whereas women have served here as justification of the war to the constituency in western countries (Chatterjee 2016: 202; Naaman 2007: 934). The orientalist frames have portrayed Arab women as suppressed to support the goal of bringing about democratic reform. The feminist frames claim that women are in need of rescue. The orientalist frame portrays them still as different from us, but they are still not put in the same box as men because they serve as a justification for the war.

Both left-leaning and right-leaning newspapers overall use the same frames with similar frequency. Although some do so more explicitly than others, it shows how powerful these constructions are. The right-leaning newspapers tend to portray the women more often in feminist frames and use slightly more orientalist frames, but this can be largely explained by the fact that a populist newspaper (i.e. *de Telegraaf*) was included in the sample.

Finally, the French and Dutch media discourse is largely similar. Dutch papers tend to portray female foreign fighters more often as naïve or passive victims, whereas the French more often emphasize their relationships with men and their motherhood. This might be explained by the slightly more traditional character of the French society, attaching more value to family roles and marriage. Orientalist assumptions are more present in the Dutch media discourse. This difference might be explained by the fact that France has historically more experience with the Middle East and Islam through its colonial past. Yet, references to veiling practices are made similarly frequent, despite the several 'Islamic veil affairs' France has already known since the 1980s which started in the Netherlands only two decades ago. Further research is needed to demonstrate actual causal relations. Lastly, the French papers tend to view female foreign fighters slightly more often as a direct threat, whereas the Dutch portray them more indirectly as a threat. This might be explained by the fact that France has been much more confronted with terrorist attacks than the Netherlands.

The simplistic portrayal to fit female foreign fighters into dominant perception structures can lead to over- or underestimation. Overestimation is expensive, underestimation can be dangerous. Securitization builds on deeply-ingrained stereotypes and can result in ‘panic politics’ of undemocratic and uncreative responses. Yet, underestimation denies their ideological engagement (Loken & Zelenz 2017: 67) and their strategic value within ISIS (Margolin 2018: 15). For counterterrorism policies to be effective, they need to take into account the diversity of the female foreign fighters (Margolin 2018: 15).

Conclusion

The analysis of left-leaning and right-leaning newspapers in France and the Netherlands has shown the multiple, largely consistent and powerful discursive constructions of female foreign fighters by the media. Through (neo-)orientalist perceptions, they are portrayed as outsiders to European societies, despite their French or Dutch nationalities, removing the responsibility of countries of origin. Muslim women are considered to be suppressed and function as a yardstick within orientalist dichotomies between the ‘secular, liberated’ West and the ‘barbaric, backward’ Islam to legitimize ideological narratives, but also strongly challenge these by exchanging the West for the Caliphate.

The same goes for feminist theory, which shows how the media attempt to position the female fighters in or outside socially constructed standards of ‘femininity’ to proof their anomaly and deny their agency. Content analysis showed that the discourse mainly underestimates them, as gendered frames of naivety, victimization and dependence of men are dominant.

These outcomes correspond largely with the frames found in previous research. The orientalist and gendered perceptions interact, reinforce each other and provide a fertile ground for securitization. The signifiers of radicalization that derive from these assumptions can translate into far-reaching and undemocratic responses to female foreign fighters that collide with EU rule of law and human rights standards, but also in limitations of Muslim communities’ freedom of religion and discrimination.

In order to move the debate forward in a productive and human way, it should be reframed: moving from ‘offering them a second chance’ to ‘the best way to prosecute and de-radicalize these citizens’. This demands for creative and tailored approaches that treat women the same as men, acknowledge their plurality and critically address the position of Muslims in EU societies.

Further research could investigate the role of religion in female terrorism and jihad. Moreover, it could delve into why societies such as France and the Netherlands have produced relatively many foreign fighters. Also, further interesting comparisons could be made with other EU or MENA countries. Finally, further examination of how terrorist actors can promote their messages through foreign media and the connection between media portrayal of female foreign fighters and opinions amongst their readers or politicians offer interesting ways to proceed.

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