

Jinwar Women's Village: Carving a Progressive Enclave Amid Syria's Civil War

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Brief Analysis

A village of women in Eastern Syria are upholding the core political beliefs of the Kurdish minority there.

The calmest she has felt in years, Fatima—in her mid-thirties and the mother of six daughters—takes a few steps toward the school buildings at the edge of Jinwar village. Prior to her arrival at Jinwar, she had worked for the past several years as the deputy manager of the Department of Labor and Social Affairs in Kobani, a Kurdish city in Northern Syria liberated from the Islamic State in 2015. Her husband, Mustafa, had fought ISIS and died in the clashes, one of the hundreds of members in the YPG, the Kurdish fighting force within the larger Syrian Democratic Forces, who lost his life to free Syria's Kurdish region in the country's northeast from the militant group.

Not long after his death in 2016, Fatima heard about a village for soldiers' widows. And for the past few years, leading up to the start of the eleventh year of Syria's civil war, she has lived here in Jinwar, a haven for Arab and Kurdish women still struggling with the impact of ISIS's occupation of much of Eastern Syria. Jinwar also welcomes female fighters from the YPJ—the all-female Kurdish fighting force within the Syrian Defense Forces—and women who are hoping to maintain their autonomy and "defeat the patriarchal mentality of society and try to separate religion from politics," as one woman put it. Fatimah emphasized the residents' mutual solidarity: "Every mother has a story full of hardships and pain, but the village makes them forget all their worries because we are all here together."

Some women have come from nearby villages where they have fled abusive households or no longer have the means to support their children. Others are the wives of martyrs who died fighting the Islamic State, like Fatimah. And still others come from an international non-Kurdish diaspora who have had run-ins with Kurdish women in countries like Spain or Germany, including Arabs, Armenians, and Circassian women.

Along the way, Fatima points out several squat school buildings nestled at the edge of the village. They are painted

light shades of blue and reddish hues. Beyond them is wild farmland and, in the farthest distance, mountains hoisted over the country of Turkey. “Jinwar is a wonderful village because it is independent and we are the rulers of ourselves,” Fatima said as she starts walking back toward the center of the village where other women have gathered. “We don’t consider ourselves strangers. We are women and we know about each others’ struggles.” Fatimah’s description lines up with the village’s official aim as presented on the commune’s website: “to provide an alternative, peaceful place for the co-existence of women, free of any and all violence” amidst the country’s civil war. “We seek to implement this way of living for the whole of Syria; not only the Kurds in Rojava need freedom, ecology and equality,” elaborated Zainab Gavary, a village resident in her late-twenties originally from Kobani. “We want the whole of Syria, including the Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, and all others to live with freedom and harmony,” she added. “We are against the disunion of Syria.”

The efforts of Jinwar do not exist in a vacuum; northeastern Syria, where Jinwar is located, is an autonomous region within greater Syria. The Syrian opposition overtook the region in 2012 after Bashar al-Assad’s forces withdrew, and while its officially overseen by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, many Kurds call it Rojava. It is arguably here in Jinwar that the revolutionary and libertarian dimensions of Rojava are best featured, even as Rojava as a whole feels pressured to compromise with both the Assad Regime and the U.S. administration while defending its borders from the threat of Turkish and Russian forces. The official narrative is that the Rojava government will continue to work beside the regime until a more stable solution presents itself, but the reality is that the center cannot hold, and pockets of sectarian separatists are forming.

This area, once the bellwether for democratic reform throughout the state, is under strain. A complicated array of opposition parties and foreign actors undermines the political and social structures, drawing on economic disparities, religious differences, and some Arab residents’ concerns over representation in the majority-Kurdish governance structures to complicate the blanket implementation of any workable governance. While intra-Kurdish dialogues over the last few weeks have sought to calm some of these difficulties, a cohesive and stable plan is far from settled. Meanwhile, the SDF has faced accusations of jailing journalists and opposition figures during its administration of Rojava—charges the SDF denies.

On the one hand, whatever reconstruction efforts that occur in the regime-controlled southwest may well apply the democratic confederalist model at work in Rojava. It has worked so far not only for the Kurds, but also the Turks and regime powers operating there. Yet still up for debate is how Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, and Turkmens will continue to navigate living together in these confederalist systems in the Northeast, even as they face the threat of a resurgent Assad regime in the wake of years of extended peace.

The women at Jinwar are intrinsically connected to this larger process of resettlement and rebuilding. Women played a vital role in the defense and liberation of Syria and now have an unprecedented opportunity to co-create a nation free from previous patriarchal norms. More broadly, the settlement embodies the belief of Kurds living in the northeast cities of the country, where some women had long ago bucked the trend of wearing hijabs. It also acknowledges the trauma of women who, in regime territory, face honor killings for lapses in “faith.” The women building Jinwar are a progressive group that represents of a new vanguard in this region of Syria.

“Everyone saw when ISIS came, Trump was nowhere in the picture to protect the people and neither were there other countries, but we defended ourselves on our own without weapons, with spades,” Gavary told me. “It was us who defended it, it was us who liberated it, and we will keep protecting it from now on. The women of Jinwar have the same thinking: they say we will not leave our homeland, we will die here, we will defend ourselves, but we will not leave.”

Jinwar—which derives its name from the Kurdish word for “women”—began construction in 2016 and opened on

November 25, 2018, coinciding with the international day of violence against women. A dirt road from the main highway winds past the village of Ateshan and terminates at a metal cattle gate with the words “Jin” and “War” marking the entrance. While it is touted as an all-women camp, two male guards are stationed at a guard house beyond the front gate. They leave at night, and women take over patrolling the village.

Though not the first of its kind, Jinwar represents one of a few all-female villages formed in response to patriarchal norms, violence against women, and the instability of countries at war. The idea of all-female separatists exists across the Americas and dates back to 1860, where “wimmin” or “woman” lands existed. But Jinwar’s approach derives from Umoja, a Kenyan village founded in 1990 as a refuge for women survivors of sexual violence.

Jinwar’s two dozen female residents and their children have populated the village’s fifty buildings, which include houses, school buildings, a growing community garden, a play yard for children, a public meeting lodge, the Aşnan bakery, My Sister’s Shop, the Şifajin natural health center and the Jinwar Academy. At the academy, women hear and give lectures in subjects such as “jineology,” a feminist teaching of the Kurdistan Workers Party founder Abdullah Öcalan and natural healing methods.

Enjoying the view, several women sit on the edge of a soccer game between children shouting and screaming merrily. Jamila, though not a resident of Jinwar herself, was visiting her widowed daughter Amira and Amira’s five children. The year between Amira’s husband’s death and finding Jinwar was one of turmoil, but Jamila said her daughter’s life is stable now, and she works in the village’s shop and bakery. Even so, Jamila opines that her daughter’s life was still better when her husband was alive, as she did not face the same types of uncertainty with which she continues to struggle today.

Badrah, sitting next to Jamila, is a night guard in the village. She has four daughters and three sons from two to eleven years old who live with her. When she lived in her home village of Shaddadiyah—before she was widowed by the fight against ISIS—she could not go outside because she was required to stay indoors as a housewife. “There was no one to help,” she said. Now she looks out at the field in which her children played beneath a blanket of blue sky.

One wall within the village displays a motto, “Until women educate and empower themselves, there won’t be freedom,” punctuated by a small flourishing of wild sunflowers. A wind chime made from *organum harmala*, or Syrian rue, likewise symbolically flutters at one house as a wind chime. A hallucinogenic plant popular throughout the region, Chechens, Syriacs, and Assyrians have used Syrian rue to treat illnesses ranging from heart pain to skin cancer. The plant has also become the symbol of Jinwar, as it stands for the removal of negative thoughts.

From the Jinwar Academy, a group of Syrian Kurdish and European women had emerged from afternoon classes. They were learning about the holistic properties of plants and herbs, like the Syrian rue. One village resident, a college student from Frankfurt, said she had learned “how great it is when women can structure their lives on their own. Everyone is together” with a common purpose in mind. Another villager who had come from the academy, Nujin Derya, from Essen, Germany, had been in the village since it officially opened in November. “When I came here, I thought I would stay maybe a few months or something,” she said, “but I really don’t know now that I got deeper and more involved here. I don’t want to leave.”

In that day’s class, the village residents were learning about creams for healing burns and wounds. They had also begun making apple vinegars and balms from olive oil, eggs, and beeswax. Derya, who is twenty years old, likens the lesson to what she wishes more people would learn from sustainable living and the power of strong community bonds to mitigate hardships.

“There are a lot of things people are thinking about [back home], but they never find solutions,” Derya said. “Some kilometers away there was ISIS. There have been a lot of women who were killed, a lot of women raped, a lot of women treated really badly. But the women just said okay, we will build this village.” ❖

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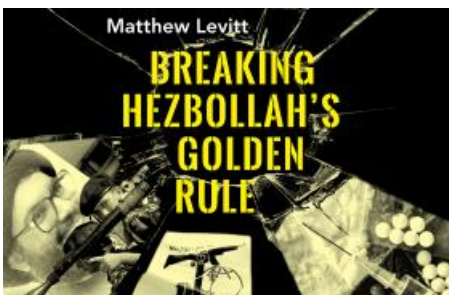
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