

# Peshmerga Female Fighters: From Frontline to Sideline

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## Brief Analysis

While women have served in Peshmerga forces for decades, female Peshmerga have primarily found themselves maintaining border security, protecting women's shelters, and providing medical and communication services throughout history. Female fighters rarely carried out **combat-related duties** (<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/originals/2014/08/iraq-kurdistan-female-regiment-peshmerga-fight-is.html>) and stayed far from the front lines where their male comrades were stationed.

However, with the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) in June 2014, cultural taboos and restrictions previously surrounding women broke down. Female Peshmerga assumed more active combat roles and ultimately joined the front lines of the battle against IS. These women fought bravely and demonstrated to both potential recruits and their superiors that female Peshmerga were a valuable asset to combat forces. Yet with the fall of IS, women are uncertain whether their contributions will be recognized or whether they will be forced to return to the restricted roles of the past.

Prior to being formally integrated into the forces in 1996, women fighters have been able to serve alongside the Peshmerga since the 1970s. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) formed the first all-female unit in 1996, and this unit alone has grown to include more than **five hundred fighters** (<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/220620151>). Members have since moved on to assume high-ranking military positions, up to the rank of colonel.

Yet decades of formal participation in Peshmerga did not provide women with the opportunities to branch out of the limited roles designated for them. Instead, it was the prolonged fight against IS that finally enabled women to assume active combat roles on the frontline. In June 2014, the first female Peshmerga were deployed to the Basheer front. During August of the same year, female fighters also took part in the operation to recapture the Mosul Dam. After the dam had been recaptured, **ten female Peshmerga**

**([https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/1043902/Gorman\\_georgetown\\_0076M\\_13622.pdf?sequence=1](https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/1043902/Gorman_georgetown_0076M_13622.pdf?sequence=1))** continued to guard it – a sign of Kurdish women's changing role in combat in the war.

In 2016, with the plans to liberate Mosul underway, close to **1000** (<https://abcnews.go.com/International/women-war-meet-female-peshmerga-fighters-taking-isis/story?id=39142160>) female members of the Peshmerga Zeravani unit received intensive two-month training from Italian coalition forces at a Kurdish base outside of Erbil. That same year, female Peshmerga became part of the mission to secure the city of Kirkuk and nearby oil fields, eventually **reclaiming the oil production** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-oil-attack-idUSKCN10B05F>) facilities at Bai Hassan in Kirkuk from IS.

Participating in the fight against IS by joining the Peshmerga became both an act of necessity and a point of pride for Yazidi

women as well. These women voluntarily joined Peshmerga ranks following the Sinjar massacre in August 2014, when thousands of Yazidis were killed and abducted by IS forces and forced to flee to the Sinjar Mountains. In January 2015, Former Yazidi singer Khatoon Khider, a survivor of the massacre, obtained formal permission (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/12/women-warriors-khatoon-khider-yazidi-isis-battle-iraq>) to set up an all-female Yazidi battalion by the Kurdistan Regional Government and became the commander of the Force of the Sun Ladies Brigade. By early 2017, the Sun Brigade consisted of nearly 200 Peshmerga-trained women (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/12/women-warriors-khatoon-khider-yazidi-isis-battle-iraq>) between the ages of 18 and 38. Moreover, in 2016, 127 Yazidi Kurdish women (<http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/opinion/40364a84-355b-4381-a5b5-b0eff13b24e9>) completed a 45-day intensive basic training course at a Peshmerga Tiger base in Peshkhabur in the Zakho district.

The fight against IS has indisputably demonstrated female fighters' exceptional combat skills and leadership. Colonel Nahida Ahmad Rashid, who is currently the highest ranking female commander (<https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-08-07/meet-female-colonel-leading-kurdish-forces-battle-against-isis>) in the Peshmerga, is but one example. And for their part, many women are interested in taking on combat roles. For the first time in 18 years, the all-female unit has had to turn down women applicants due to a lack of training capacity.

Yet with the fight against IS approaching its end, the future of female Peshmerga fighters and women's representation in Kurdistan remains unknown. One positive model for the future is the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) of Syria, an all-female military organization established in 2013. The YPJ provides a clear example of female fighters successfully breaking traditional gender barriers in Syrian society and obtaining a more lasting freedom through their collective fight against IS.

For many in the YPJ and other female military organizations, all-female units have provided women with the opportunity to liberate themselves from men's dominance and have created environments where both women's rights and gender equality have flourished. Indeed, power in Rojava (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-01-13/north-syria-women-find-freedom-in-fight-against-islamic-state/9307292>) is currently equally divided between men and women. While the question of whether this equality will remain in a more stable Rojava remains, the involvement of women in both military and political positions bodes well for their future involvement in civil life and potential future shifts in public opinion on the role of women overall.

Yet female Peshmerga fighters in Iraq now fear that trends may be shifting in the opposite direction. In a number of interviews conducted by the author at a Peshmerga base during March and April 2018, female Peshmerga fighters expressed concerns as to whether they will retain their freedom after the fight against IS concludes. Even in spring, the barrack's tiny white cabins baked in 113°F heat. The women who live in these bases rely on the strong social solidarity formed in their units, yet in some ways they are trapped in their cabins. Despite their training, their work is now limited to guarding their own bases, often chopping vegetables at night for the base's cafeteria. Unlike male Peshmerga fighters, the women are required to remain on base on days when they're on duty, and many are concerned that this model is what participation in the Peshmerga will come to look like after the full defeat of IS.

One soldier in particular expressed fear for the future of her unit. She lamented that some women were deciding to leave due to boredom and the unavailability of services inside the bases. She was also growing frustrated at the lack of trust expressed by the government even after the female Peshmerga units had already proved themselves: "I, my husband, and my entire family believe in my abilities. Yet it seems that the government does not."

Another female Peshmerga stated that, "when no one dared to enter Kirkuk, we forced IS out together with the male Peshmerga." In contrast, however, "now we are being used for media coverage and nothing else. We demand gender equality, further rights, and the same attention to women Peshmerga than our male partners." These women viewed their participation in the Peshmerga as a sign of broader social equality; the KRG now has an opportunity to build on the successes of female combat units against IS to create longstanding and positive social change. Having women in close-combat units can help lead to a more positive perception of women's roles in other public positions. Moving forward, it is indispensable to afford women even greater roles than they assume now in order to demonstrate the benefits of women's equal participation in institutions such as the Peshmerga forces.

The Kurdistan Regional Government currently has a unique window of opportunity to continue the policies towards female Peshmerga that enabled these combatants to participate in the fight against IS as equal members rather than support staff. However, if female forces are left to languish in their former positions, this opportunity will be lost.

The underrepresentation of women in public life and limited number of roles available to them should be addressed by laws and policy changes focused on promoting gender equality. With equal civic responsibility comes equal performance of civic duties, which serves all. The Kurdistan Regional Government, Peshmerga leaders, and civil society organizations all are accountable in driving for change to ensure that women remain in combat units.

The YPJ's example demonstrates that Iraqi Kurdistan can also become a success story in enhancing the role of women militarily, politically, economically, and socially—but women must be given an equal opportunity. ❖

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