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# When Female Fighters Lead the Charge

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Hussain Zaidou is a Syrian writer and journalist writing in Arabic and Kurdish. Besides working as a field correspondent, Zaidou has written articles with a focus on cultural and social research.



### Brief Analysis

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The first battle in northern Syria, which has a Kurdish majority and lies along the Turkish border, broke out in 2012 when several armed opposition groups crossed the border and attacked Syrian regime forces concentrated in Ras al-Ayn. After the groups took control of the city, Kurdish military units formed the People's Protection Units (YPG), which proclaimed in their founding declaration that their goal "is to defend Kurdish-majority cities." Another group was also founded: the Women's Protection Units, or the YPJ, which aimed to use armed battle as a way of liberating women from terrorism and patriarchal thinking as well as alleviating women's grievances in general.

### **Sending Women to Battle**

As the Islamic State group (ISIS) began to emerge in Syria and advance towards Kurdish-majority cities and towns in the north, the YPJ's reputation began to spread. Fighting alongside the YPG, YPJ fighters were sent to the front lines in every battle against ISIS. Around this time, the media began focusing on the YPJ's victories as well as the women of various ages who fought fiercely in its ranks and who often lost their lives on the front lines.

Once YPJ fighters had earned a reputation, particularly in their fight against ISIS, which is classified by world powers as a terrorist organization, they began to take the lead in the battle against terrorism. French President Francois Holland gave an untraditional reception to Nisreen Abdullah, commander of the YPJ, when he welcomed her at the Élysée Palace in her military uniform, which is contrary traditional palace customs. This meeting provided Abdullah with a prominent place in the YPJ on the battle front.

When the Syrian Democratic Forces, which consist of both Kurdish and Arab factions, including the YPJ, and is coordinated within an international coalition led by the United States, launched its Wrath of the Euphrates military campaign aiming to liberate the Syrian city of Raqqa from ISIS militants, YPJ fighters were again sent in to join the battle. When Rojda Felat announced that the YPJ would lead the military campaign against the capital of the so-called Islamic caliphate, female Kurdish fighters stated to the media multiple times that their willingness to take part

in the Wrath of the Euphrates campaign, which has been the largest and most important campaign that the YPJ has participated in, to help liberate the thousands of Yazidi women held captive by ISIS.

Jihan Sheikh Ahmed, a YPJ fighter who was enlisted to be the official spokesperson for the Wrath of the Euphrates campaign's operations room, said in various media interviews that YPJ fighters are the core component in Raqqa's liberation from ISIS and that they seek revenge on ISIS for holding Yazidi women captive. Every day women from different backgrounds join the YPJ in growing numbers, including Arab women, whose ranks in the YPJ have been increasing recently.

### **The Presence and Unique Position of Women in Kurdish Movements**

Among other military forces fighting in Syria, women have not played a large formal role. In the Islamic State, women have a role in the group's administrative apparatus consolidating and accounting for women, searching them at checkpoints, and acting as guards in women's prisons. During the battle of Raqqa, the Syrian Democratic Forces liberated dozens of Yazidi women from the Islamic State. Among them was a Yazidi woman named Noura, from the village of Kuju in the Sinjar area. In an interview, Khader said that she was sold three times for ISIS leaders and fighters. The worst part, she recalled, was the slave market where women - especially Yazidi women - were sold to men.

In Kurdish movements, women participate in combat training, exercise a great degree of independence, and are active decision makers in the war. Meanwhile, women have nominal and weak roles in other combat forces, such as the regime's all-female force within National Defense Forces, ISIS's al-Khansaa Brigade, and the Syriac Security Office's female force. This difference between the role and value of female fighters in Kurdish groups versus those in other factions stems from Kurdish women's increasingly visible role in daily life. Moreover, Kurdish women's valued position comes from Kurdish movements' strong belief in democracy and secularism.

To be sure, Kurdish women's roles have not been limited only to military functions. With their increased participation in politics in northern Syria, especially after federalism was proposed as a political solution to the conflict, Kurdish women have endeavored to make their presence known. In the region's administrative system, there are stand-alone women's agencies and foundations as well as active women's organizations that operate in all domains of life, whether it be in the educational sector or the economic sector, where organizations such as the Free Women's Trust and the Women's Star Conference carry out economic activities relating to trade, household management, and the informal economy.

### **Conclusion**

The dream of obtaining political and social freedom has inspired women to challenge traditional customs and join the fight against terrorism to pave the way for becoming decision-makers in the future. With this brave step, female fighters are on the forefront of the military charge in Syria. Kurdish women's participation in combat is rooted in an international force that wages a legitimate fight against terrorism and relies on the YPJ as a core component of its coalition. This should encourage the great powers to find critical solutions to the region's problems that will enable women to recover their stolen rights.

Once the conflict has ended and these rights have been realized, women should be encouraged to engage more in public and political life as well as in women's organizations to demand their rights and gain the freedoms that have been denied them. Women in Northern Syria are increasingly actively participating in civil organizations, especially those concerned with combating violence against women. They are also supported by international organizations which have programs designed to raise women awareness and development. ❖



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