

# Kurdish struggle for democracy and gender equality in Syria

*The women on the forefront of Kurdish liberation and governance*

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| Rojava | Kurdistan |

**T**he struggles of Kurdish women in Rojava Kurdistan (Northern Syria) became known to many during the brutal attacks of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) against the city of Kobane in northern Syria on September 15th, 2014. While Kurdish men and women were trying to defend the city from ISIS militiamen with limited ammunition and inadequate weapons compared to the sophisticated weapons in the hands of ISIS, Kurds worldwide took to the streets to be the voice for Rojava and Kobane. From the battle to defend Kobane onward, Western media and politicians noted the bravery of the Kurdish women that fought ISIS and its brutal treatment—including enslavement—of women. These troops under the command of Kurdish woman commander Rojda Felat defeated ISIS in Raqqa, the capital of the so-called ISIS in 2018.

Kurdish women fighters joined all military operations from Kobane to Baghouz, ISIS's last stronghold, to defeat them. In the liberated territories, one of the most striking images has been that of women tearing and burning their black burqas (black attire that covers a woman's body from head to toe) with joy. But Kurdish women's achievements are not limited to military operations. In this paper I will examine the Kurdish Women's Movement as an example of women organizing in times of conflict, analyzing their effort to guarantee gender equality post-conflict.

Before beginning this analysis, one question still resonates in many ears: How have Kurdish

women joined the fight against ISIS in such numbers, and why are women on the forefront of this struggle? What is the history behind this remarkable departure from the norm, and what can advocates of social change and feminism learn from Rojava?

The answers to these questions lie in Kurdish political, social, and military organizing in the Middle East. Kurdish women in Syria have been organizing themselves politically and militarily under the roof of the Yekitiya Star, which is an umbrella organization of the Kurdish Women's Movement in Syria/ Rojava, since 2005. According to Yekitiya Star member Ruken Ehmed, as all sorts of social organizing were banned by the Syrian Regime, women were not able to organize themselves—any social organizing had to be conducted under the roof of Ba'ath party. For example, organizing for women's rights was done under the name of "Ittihad Nisa" (Women's Movement) organization that belonged to the Ba'ath Party (Isik, 2016). Given this repressive context, right before the Syrian uprisings broke out, many Kurdish politicians were incarcerated in Syria's notorious prisons, including female Kurdish activists.

When Assad's forces left Kobane (Ayn-Al Arab in Arabic) in 2012, the Kurds took control of the city. Since then, they have been fighting for the institution of a new form of self-governance in Rojava, which took on a novel dimension with the establishment of the autonomous cantons in January 2014. In October 2015, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were established as an armed force supported by the US-led coalition to include different ethnic groups in the fight against ISIS. In December 2015, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) was established as the political wing of the (SDF), which has been supported by the US-led coalition in the fight against ISIS and gained territories formerly controlled by ISIS. The SDC operated in three administrative regions: Afrin, Jazera, Euphrates, and Raqqa. Tabqa, Manbij, and the Deir ez-Zor Regions were added to the first established regions. The umbrella name for the regions administered by the SDC is the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.



## **Kurdish women have been at the forefront of this struggle, and have made it their own**

Kurdish women have been at the forefront of this struggle, and have made it their own. The women commanders I interviewed in 2016 insist that they fight not only because they are Kurdish, but also because they are women—for them, the struggle is also against male domination within the Kurdish community and in the larger Middle East. The achievement of gender equality is one of the most important aspects of the ongoing struggle in Rojava, and an unprecedented example in the Middle East.

In a recent interview with the United Nations Nubuhar Mustefa, a Kurdish woman from the Syrian Women Advisory Board said “[the] patriarchal mentality is entrenched in societies in general and particularly in the Middle East. And it denies women from participating in general, be it in the economic advancement, political processes, or the administration of the country or in taking on decision-making positions...The participation of women at any place and time is very important.” Nubuhar Mustefa adds that in a devastated country like Syria, women’s participation in peace processes despite men’s belittling them is a sign of self-confidence and provides hope for the future of women in Syria.

For Kurdish women in Rojava, it is important to seek ways to make sure that women are not just instrumentalized for the national cause during the revolution and sent back to the home afterward—as seen in the backlashes that women faced after the revolutions in Vietnam, Russia, and France. Therefore, Kurdish women have started to organize themselves in fields that can enhance the status of women in local society. For instance, the building of new educational institutions has been a way to engage not only women but also men for long-term social change. The co-presidency system with one man and one woman that is implemented in all institutions at all levels is another important marker for long-term social change.



Lukman Ahmad

## Intellectual inspiration for Rojava (Northern Syria)

The Kurdish Women's Movement's statement on their vision of an equal society is based on the idea of democratic confederalism:

“While we fight for the liberation of women, we also address all other forms of oppression, albeit based on grounds of gender, ethnicity, class, or religion. Faced with the threat of ISIS, we believe that our greatest victory would be to build a society free from all oppression, in which those of different ethnicities and religions can live together in peace and democracy. This cannot be achieved through the continuation of the existing structures of nation-states, patriarchy, and capitalism, which led to this crisis in the first place. Instead, we are establishing an alternative to the existing systems: a ‘third way.’ This third way is called democratic confederalism. Democratic confederalism is based on the paradigm of a society built upon democracy, ecology, and women's liberation; it is a peaceful coexistence of all ethnicities and religions. It is a democratic model for direct and radical democracy, organised by the people from a grassroots level in communes and assemblies. This model, with its reliance on self-administration rather than a centralised, mono-cultural nation-state, was developed by Abdullah Öcalan, the founder of the Kurdish liberation movement.”

The grassroots social organizing in Rojava (Northern Syria) is inspired by the philosophy of captive Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan, who has been held in solitary confinement on the Turkish prison-island of Imrali since his capture in Kenya in 1998. While in prison, Öcalan's philosophy has undergone significant development, moving beyond a fairly orthodox theory of national liberation grounded in Marxist-Leninist tradition to a much more ambitious framework rooted in a renewed conception of freedom, democracy, and community.

Hence, the original aim of establishing an independent socialist nation of Kurdistan shifted to self-determination achieved through radical democracy (Akkaya and Jongerden 2016). Furthermore, Öcalan has critiqued the Kurdish Freedom Movement for struggling to establish a Kurdish nation-state on the grounds that the nation-state was the outcome of the political and social atmosphere of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and that the nation-state was then

considered to be the only form of self-determination. In his new radical ideological paradigm, Democratic Confederalism, Ocalan argues that nation-state formations will not necessarily bring democratization, since human rights, freedom, and democracy have suffered under the ideology of nation-states (Jongerden 2017).

In that regard, there are three cantons and hundreds of communes built in Northern Syria as a practical reflection of the Democratic Confederalism which organizes itself based on the needs of people forming communes in their neighborhoods, villages, towns, and cities. Each commune has a representative in the larger assemblies formed by the communes. For example, if a problem is not solved by the local commune, it will be appealed to a larger assembly represented by several communes.

Under the communal system of Northern Syria, women have also formed their own communes to address their needs and problems, taking important steps for institutionalizing gender equality in society. So, while each commune is represented under the TEV-DEM (The Movement for a Democratic Society); women's communes are represented under the umbrella of Kongreya Star as mentioned above. Each commune has five committees including health, education, problem-solving committee, economy committee, and self-defense committee.

## **Jineoloji Academies**

The deep critique of the origins of domination has clear feminist implications. Enacting this critique, women in Rojava not only joined the armed ranks of YPJ (Women's Protection Units), but opened Jineoloji Institutes and women's centers to ideologically educate women for a democratic nation. There is a Jineoloji Department in the Qamislo University in Northern Syria, not unlike Women's Studies programs in the West but with a different philosophy. The system which existed in Rojava under the Syrian regime was one where women were largely, if not entirely, absent from the economy, education, defense, and social organization. The Rojava Revolution deconstructs the former system and creates

alternatives, first of all by establishing the presence of women in every sector in which they were formerly absent.

At these institutes, women are building a movement and decolonizing the former education system by implementing an intersectional curriculum that embraces the diversity of Northern Syria.



Jineoloji.org

## What is Jineoloji?

Jineoloji as a new practical and theoretical form of knowledge emerging from the multiple oppressions of Kurdish women in the face of nationalism, patriarchy, economic hardship, state persecution, and colonialism. Kurdish women critique the 'feminist scholarly' efforts, saying that they have been made in narrow arenas and limited to scholarly work. Furthermore, knowledge production is kept under the possession of the hegemonic system and is sold for paid labor. They therefore argue that the return on scholarly work has been limited. In the *Jineoloji* book (2015) it says "jineoloji will be a form of knowledge produced at the alternative academies, where produced knowledge will be devoted to the whole society, and it also aims to infuse this knowledge into the lives of people. We, therefore, discuss new forms for academies, which will employ plain language and communication tools that every woman may have access to."

In an interview, one of the instructors in these institutes, Zozan Sima, said that women who could not find a place for themselves in the mainstream feminist waves formed different feminist waves and continued their struggle there. Although this has made a tremendous impact on feminist theory in terms of multiculturalism, it has also caused women to act unorganized, and damaged the possibility of working together on common ground. There have been occasional moments of solidarity, but a sustainable and institutionalized women's freedom movement has not been developed. There have even been efforts to escape and avoid organization.

Rather than waiting for feminist theory to include the Kurdish Women's Movement with the

goal of expanding the feminist movement, these women find it necessary to develop jineoloji, keeping this name, counting on lessons learned from the vast experience of Kurdish women, instead of naming it Kurdish feminism. Kurdish Women have sought to transfer the dynamism that has been achieved in the political and social spheres to the field of academia. Although jineoloji is not limited to the academic field, academia is one important base for it. Jineoloji finds it dangerous and problematic for feminist theorists to confine academic work to universities.

## **Autonomy and Gender Equality**

The constituency of Northern Syria includes or recognizes not only Kurds, but also Armenians, Syriacs, Arabs, Turkmen, and Ezidis. The idea of democratic autonomy is directly opposed to the ideology of the nation-state, especially as in the Middle East, where it is tightly bound to ideas of cultural and ethnic homogeneity.

The new system in Rojava is more of a multicultural, multilingual, and multi-religious system that is designed to “allow the legal participation of individuals who will be able to mobilize and organize along the lines of ethnicity, religion, gender, class.” It is a system of self-governance that rejects the model of centralized administration. This is the model of self-rule advocated also by the Kurdish movement across the border in Turkey.

On March 2016, a new administration model was built on the cantonal system declared in 2014: The Democratic Federation of Rojava- Northern Syria was declared in the areas SDF controlled in Northern Syria, which aims to be a model for post-conflict Syria and proposes a federative Syria which would be governed from local rather than centralized government and would include all different ethnic and religious groups and advocates for gender equality in every segment of society.

The region that has been known as Rojava (which means West in Kurdish and refers to Western Kurdistan) was renamed the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria removing

the name “Rojava” ([www.apnews.com](http://www.apnews.com), report by Zeine Karam). Co-Chair of the Syrian Democratic Council, Amina Omar, said in 2016 that “the formation of an autonomous administration of north and east Syria is a project proposed by the Syrian Democratic Council at its third conference held on July 16, 2018 in al-Tabqa city” ([www.hawarnews.com](http://www.hawarnews.com)).

The Syrian Democratic Council is a political wing that governs three main autonomous regions: Euphrates, Jezera, and Afrin. These regions are recognized by neither the Syrian government nor the international state. Afrin region is now under the occupation of Turkey since March of 2018. Thousands of Kurds living in that ‘peaceful’ enclave since the war broke out in Syria in 2011, now live as refugees in camps near Afrin and according to a [report](#) published by Amnesty International UK the houses of the refugees were looted in Afrin.

At Women’s shelters established in each city in Rojava, women lawyers advocate for women confronting violence, be it political, social, or domestic. There are centers called Mala Jinan (in English, “Women’s Houses”) which began in 2011, where women can seek help. Violence against women is the primary issue these houses deal with. These houses also function as centers of mediation and dispute resolution centers—if the problems cannot be solved in these houses, only then are they taken to the courts.

In my interviews with senior YPJ members Meryem Kobane and Roza Haseke, both underlined the importance of Abdullah Öcalan for the Rojava Revolution and the space that has opened for women within it, dating back to 1979, when he visited Syria for political organizing.

These women fighters prefer to call themselves “protection units.” And they say, “The revolution did not change women’s lives in one night, but gave them visibility, women are now visible!” They say female fighters were among the first martyrs of Rojava; they fight to protect their land and their people. Yet in order for women to be recognized as agents in society, the whole system needs to be changed. They say it is important to recognize that women are not just fighters in Rojava, as covered in Western media—they are present in all fields.



These women define self-protection broadly. Rather than limiting its meaning to participation in the military self-defense of the autonomous cantons, self-protection means protecting themselves against male domination and ethnic oppression, protecting their thoughts, language, and cultural rights. For the women of Rojava, these all need to be protected, and if you do not protect yourself, you will be oppressed and attacked easily. Self-protection should not just be understood as taking up arms, but organizing and fighting for your social, political, and civil rights, as well as the right to protest.

The change underway in the autonomous Kurdish regions of Syria should not be perceived just as a shift of powers from the control of one government or ethnicity to another, but as a social transformation, one which is enabling minorities to have a say and a share in the dynamics of power as a more equal society is constructed. In the larger region, there is a backlash against women's rights, and Rojava is a promising example of a pathway to gender equality that the Western world should support. As they work to build a society grounded in a systemic commitment to gender equity, the women in Rojava want to be in dialogue with international women's organizations and share their experiences.

## **Kurdish Women and War**

While men are imagined as warriors, women are associated with peace and mostly depicted as standing against conflict. Has the role of women as "peace brokers" changed for Kurdish women since they have taken up arms and actively fight in the battlefield, becoming a part of the 'violence'? When I interviewed Roza Hasake, a Kurdish woman commander from the YPJ (Yekineyen Parastina Jin-Women's Protection Units) in Northern Syria <sup>[2]</sup>, she answered my questions about the association of women with pacifism and whether she sees herself as a pacifist or not:

"The existence of peace movements gives me strength, it is very important for us. They struggle to stop the war. Yet, I see their efforts as not enough. For instance, there are wars out there, and how do they respond to that. I think their efforts

are not strong. Women who fought in Afghanistan, Libya, Egypt are not different than women in Kurdistan/Rojava (Syria). Our pain is the same, our struggle for peace is the same too. For that reason, the peace efforts should be equal for all people. When we were fighting in Kobane, millions of people all over the world rallied for us, that means we do right, we struggle for peace and these people rallied for us, supported us. Yet, the peace efforts are not enough against this ugly war...I have responsibilities, I cannot live without doing anything. We need to stop this war and protect ourselves. I wish I could do more in this struggle. There is a war in Syria, and in the neighboring countries. There are so many things to do. I am one of the comrades in YPJ, but we do not necessarily fight and stay in combat. We educate ourselves, educate other women, people and are involved in social work. Wherever people need us, we work there. We do political work too." (Isik, 2016)

She identifies herself not only as a fighter but as an educator, politician, and social worker. Her response also suggests that we need to rethink the concept of pacifism in regards to Kurdish women fighters. As the location of war has changed, so has the meaning of the spaces that women occupy. Today, conflict occurs in many different spaces and at local, national, and international levels. Women can and do transform these places. For example, the example of the Madres de Mayo, the mothers of disappeared during the Dirty Wars in Argentina, or the Saturday Mothers in Turkey, mothers of disappeared Kurds in the 1990s, are examples of women who took to public spaces during or after the war.

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