

“WOMEN, LIFE, FREEDOM”

The Feminist Revolution of the Kurdish YPJ



On April 4, 2013, prompted by the eruption of the Syrian Civil War and the encroachment of ISIS into Kurdish territory, the Women's Protection Units was established. More commonly referred to as its acronym "YPJ," (*Yekîneyên Parastîna Jin* in Kurdish), this all-female militia is one of the main two armed forces in Rojava, a de facto autonomous region in northeastern Syria also known as Western Kurdistan. This paper explores the dual objective of the YPJ and the factors which have enabled the group's resounding military, social, and political success. This essay seeks to demonstrate that the YPJ has been widely successful at waging a struggle against the conditions of inequality imposed by the dominant patriarchal system of the region due to its founding ideology, which places female liberation at the center of the broader Kurdish national movement. The YPJ has achieved resounding progress both on the battlefield against ISIS and within Kurdish society. Furthermore, this paper argues that through the establishment of an all-female militia in the Middle East, the YPJ has forged a revolutionary feminist movement whose message has reverberated across the world.

*Written by Madelyn Evans
Edited by Ioanna Tzima*

On April 4, 2013, prompted by the eruption of the Syrian Civil War and the encroachment of ISIS into Kurdish territory, the Women's Protection Units was established.¹ More commonly referred to as its acronym "YPJ," (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jin* in Kurdish), this all-female militia is one of the main two armed forces in Rojava, a de facto autonomous region in northeastern Syria also known as Western Kurdistan.² The YPJ, along with the all-male YPG ("People's Protection Units"), serve as parallel forces under the armed wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and part of the broader military umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).³ The SDF is a unified fighting force composed of Kurdish, Arab, Turkmen, Assyrian and Armenian militia which militarily seeks to defeat ISIS and other Jihadist groups in the Syrian Civil War.⁴ Politically, the SDF aims to create a secular and autonomous democratic country in northern Syria.⁵ The YPJ, through operating under the framework of the SDF military alliance, has carved out its own path within the Syrian Kurdish Resistance fight. Spearheading both the Kurdish Female Movement and the battle against ISIS, the YPJ seeks to advance women in social, economic, and political domains of life with their leading motto "*Jin, Jiyar, Azadi!*" ("Woman, Life, Freedom!")⁶

This paper will explore the dual objective of the YPJ and the factors which have enabled the resounding military, social, and political success of the group. First, this essay examines the interconnected military and ideological goals of the YPJ, including their aims to defeat both ISIS and the patriarchal mindset that underlies it. Next, this paper will analyze the success of the YPJ in achieving these objectives, assessing the victories they have achieved both on the battlefield and within Kurdish society. In order to measure the extent to which the YPJ has achieved social and political progress, the current laws, political representation, conditions of education and employment, and social norms in Rojava will be evaluated. Finally, this paper will examine the main factors which the YPJ's resounding progress can be

traced to, including the implications of the YPJ's founding ideology and support from the West, both militarily and ideologically. Overall, this essay seeks to demonstrate that the YPJ has been widely successful at waging a struggle against the conditions of inequality imposed by the dominant patriarchal system of the region due to its founding ideology, which places female liberation at the center of the broader Kurdish national movement. Moreover, this paper will argue that through the establishment of an all-female militia in the Middle East, the YPJ has forged a revolutionary feminist movement whose message has reverberated across the world.

Main Objective of the YPJ: Waging a War on the Patriarchy

Since the beginning of the Rojava revolution in 2012, the militarization of women has become essential in the Kurdish struggle for national liberation.⁷ After the arrival of female PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) combat veterans in 2013, the YPJ was formed as an autonomous women's force separate from the larger YPG.⁸ Understood as a necessity to preserving both the existence and identity of the Kurdish movement, the establishment of the YPJ was followed by the creation of YPJ centers and female defense academies in every district in Rojava.⁹ Today, in the semi-autonomous regions of Kurdistan, approximately forty percent of all combatants are women.¹⁰ The YPJ is predominantly comprised of Kurdish fighters, but also includes females from different ethnic groups in northern Syria, local Arab women, and Western volunteers.¹¹

The organization, although spearheading a military campaign, is primarily waging an ideological war. Importantly, the YPJ has a dual objective; it seeks to defeat ISIS militarily and, fundamentally, it aims to deconstruct the patriarchal positions which underlie ISIS itself.¹² In undertaking a struggle against the dominant patriarchal and capitalist system, the YPJ seeks to liberate women from conditions of inequality and oppression imposed on society around

the region.¹³ The basis of the YPJ's objective can be traced to the ideology of the PKK and its founder, Abdullah Öcalan, which places gender equality at the center of the revolution and the new Kurdish state.¹⁴ The ways in which Öcalan's founding ideology has helped open the way for a Kurdish feminist movement will be explored below.

The duality of the YPJ's military and ideological goals are interconnected because their overall objective is based on the belief that the liberation of women is fundamental for the eradication of ISIS.¹⁵ According to YPJ Comrade Heval Aryan, many YPJ fighters understand ISIS to be "the outcome of the male dominant system."¹⁶ ISIS practices femicides and follows a specific ideology of patriarchy, sexism, and oppression.¹⁷ Under the circumstances of ISIS' offensive, women are not perceived as human beings with rights and freedoms, but "as objects to be raped and enslaved."¹⁸ According to YPJ commander Rojda Felat, ISIS sees women as property and the capitalist system present in the region maintains the patriarchy; both perpetuate the norm that "it is legitimate to use, abuse and persecute women."¹⁹ These female units thus aim to overturn patriarchal norms in the region and empower women to break free of traditional gender roles.²⁰ In many aspects of Middle Eastern society, the power and right of women to fight for themselves in battle is a contested and controversial belief.²¹ The YPJ seeks to dispel these beliefs by demonstrating through combat that women have their own will, are autonomous beings, and are able to defend themselves.²²

Finally, the YPJ, as part of the wider Kurdish national movement, fights to protect their land and people.²³ For female Kurds, their struggle for freedom as women is interconnected with their emancipatory struggle as a nation. The YPJ embodies the shared Kurdish national vision of a secular polity which safeguards women's rights, freedom, and democracy.²⁴ However, as *female* Kurdish fighters they face intersectional struggles beyond obtaining statehood, including abuse, rape, and forced migration due to the Syrian Civil War and the Islamic

State's Siege of Kobani.²⁵ The female Kurdish identity is crossed by the intersection of gender, ethnicity and class, which forms and complexifies their organized struggle. Moreover, the presence of the female figure in a political context of armed conflict challenges the traditional boundaries of international politics, as well as alters the composition of gender roles between public and private spheres.²⁶ The Kurdish feminist identity thus is distinct in the fact that it constitutes both the "oppressed nation" and the "oppressed gender."²⁷ These identities, which reinforce one another, bolster the YPJ's commitment to its objective of fighting against both ISIS and the conditions of inequality imposed on their society.

Military Success of the YPJ

The first component of the YPJ's objective – defeating ISIS in combat – has been widely successful. The YPJ's efforts in driving ISIS fighters from their Syrian strongholds have captured global headlines, introducing millions around the world to the plight of the Kurds in Syria and beyond.²⁸ The YPJ, fighting alongside the all-male YPG, has been instrumental in a number of successful and strategically important missions in the region.²⁹ In 2015, for example, the YPJ was absolutely crucial in the battle to take back control of Kobani in Syria from ISIS.³⁰ In the battle, eighty percent of all the fighters were women and their involvement stretched "from the coordination team to the units on the front line."³¹ YPJ commander Azima described the role that women played in the liberation of Kobane as "heroic" and one which "left its fingerprint on history."³²

The YPJ spearheaded another monumental military campaign from 2014-2017 in Raqqa, which culminated with the liberation of the city from ISIS occupation on October 17, 2017.³³ The YPJ-led SDF operation was a turning point in the war against ISIS because Raqqa had been the de facto capital of ISIS since 2014.³⁴ The historic campaign emancipated thousands of captive Yazidi women and children, helping civilians to es-

cape gangs and reach safe zones.³⁵ Symbolically, the YPJ officially announced its victory over ISIS in the al-Naim Square, a place where ISIS gangs previously committed mass executions.³⁶ Marking the magnitude of the victory as a beacon of freedom for women and the peoples of the region alike, YPJ Commander Nesrin Abdullah declared, "We dedicate the liberation of Raqqa to all the women of the world."³⁷ The YPJ thus has been very successful in organizing themselves against ISIS, which has consequently showcased the power and strength of an all-female militia to the world.

Social and Political Success of the YPJ

The second component of the YPJ's objective – fighting for female liberation and gender equality within their society – has made significant progress over the past several decades. This female militia has become the most visible symbol of the democratic Kurdish experiment in women's rights and equality.³⁸ Fighting in an all-female unit has not only empowered Kurdish women by their victories on the battlefield, but has strengthened women's gender consciousness.³⁹ When assessing the extent to which the YPJ has achieved their aim, it is important to note that the struggle for women's equality is not an objective which can be achieved by reaching a certain target, but rather an ongoing goal.⁴⁰ YPJ Comrade Heval Aryan points out how "Freedom has no limits... change is always present in this process."⁴¹ In this regard, the extent to which the YPJ has achieved social and political progress thus far will be measured



through assessing the current laws, political representation, conditions of education and employment, and shifting social norms in Rojava and across the region.

The Rojava Charter, the founding document of Rojava, is a striking indicator of the legal protections which women have gained.⁴² The Rojava Charter of the Social Contract for self-rule states that "women have the inviolable right to participate in political, social, economic and cultural life," and, further, affirms that "men and women are equal in the eyes of the law."⁴³ The Charter also mandates "public institutions to work towards the elimination of gender discrimination."⁴⁴ Women sit at the center of the document because of the general acceptance within the Kurdish movement that the level of women's freedom determines the scope of democracy and freedom in a country.⁴⁵ The changing laws within Kurdish society are also evidence of significant advancements towards gender equality. Legislation now bans polygamy, child marriage, domestic violence, and dowry.⁴⁶ Women have also been given the right to divorce, to keep their children and homes after a marital separation, and to inherit property on an equal basis with men.⁴⁷ These new laws override long-observed Shariah law provisions which gave a woman's testimony in court "only half the weight of a man's."⁴⁸ While laws do not change traditions overnight, they have chipped away at them.⁴⁹

Women have also gained a significant amount of political representation, which has led to increased participation and has had substantial consequences on socio-economic dynamics.⁵⁰ By law, every government institution in Kurdish-controlled Syria has a male and female co-president.⁵¹ Furthermore, government boards and committees must be equally mixed by gender, and women's institutions are led by only women.⁵² The implementation of quotas and the principle of co-presidency has ensured that gender balance is asserted at all levels of political council, including in cities under Kurdish control which are predominantly Arab.⁵³

Change is also evident within the sphere of education and employment. At the newly established Rojava University in Qamishli, the subject of *jineology*, or the "science of women" is now taught, making women's rights a fundamental part of the program.⁵⁴ Driving schools and firearms courses to teach civilian women how to defend themselves have also been created in several cities.⁵⁵ Ilham Ahmed, a female Syrian-Kurdish politician from the Democratic Union Party, explains how by "educating young children to believe in equality between men and women," they are gradually changing their society.⁵⁶ Women are widely represented in various fields of employment, including health, media, the economy, language training, art, and culture.⁵⁷ Across northern Syria, women serve as defense ministers, guards at checkpoints, traffic cops, and senior officers of local security forces.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the organization Star Congress, which operates throughout Rojava and Syria, focuses on economic opportunity and development and upholds the notion that strong associations of women are necessary to confront the existing male-dominated institutions and mentalities.⁵⁹

The fact that women are building their own place in society is evidence of shifting social structures and a transformation of traditional social norms.⁶⁰ The agenda for women's liberation has been pushed to the forefront of their society, exemplified by a banner in the city center of Qamishli which declares, "We will defeat the attacks of ISIS by guaranteeing the freedom of women in the Middle East."⁶¹ Even in the town of Manbij, which is overwhelmingly Arab, conservative, and tribal, the Kurdish minority has witnessed a "real acceptance" of their efforts to enact gender equality.⁶² Overall, the fact that women sit at the center of the fight, the law, and politics is evidence that the YPJ has made extraordinary progress towards a society in which women can participate in every domain not by the permission of men, but "by the will of women."⁶³ In freeing themselves from the exploitative male regime in military, political, social, and cultural as-

pects, women have begun to carve their own place within society.

Factor for Success: The YPJ's Founding Ideology

The resounding progress the YPJ has made in defeating both ISIS and patriarchal institutions of oppression can primarily be traced to the theoretical underpinnings of the organization's founding ideology. The YPJ, along with the YPG and its allied groups, look to PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan as their ideological leader.⁶⁴ Öcalan advocates an ideology of liberation and gender equality which lies in the concept of *jineology*. *Jineology* is broadly defined as "the science of women" and is built on the principle that a society can call itself free "only with the actual freedom of women and with a real consciousness surrounding them."⁶⁵ The science uses alternative paradigms to analyze the ways in which gender hierarchies have been created and institutionalized in the spheres of culture, politics, history, philosophy, and economics, and it aims to revise the study of these fields from the "female perspective."⁶⁶ Öcalan argues that the theorization and implementation of *jineology* is necessary for the entire society because the "hegemonic masculinity" must be deconstructed in order to achieve the liberation of both women and men.⁶⁷ Furthermore, Öcalan contends that women's liberation is fundamental for the establishment of democracy and, thus, the ideology places gender equality at the center of both the movement and of the democratic-building process.⁶⁸ Women who join the YPJ must spend at least a month studying the political theories of Öcalan, making the feminist ideology deeply embedded within the workings of the movement.⁶⁹

The YPJ's founding ideology's central placement of female emancipation carries many important implications for the overall success of the movement. The recruitment of female combatants has represented an explicit rejection of patriarchal gender norms and has given women a means of mobilizing themselves into organizations and politi-

cal parties which bolster female empowerment.⁷⁰ Another significant outcome is that women's centrality in fighting and defending their people has given them a substantial role in shaping their own rights and re-configuring society. There is a clear link between the existence of the YPJ and the shifting role of women in society because female participation in Rojava is a "victory won by the blood of YPJ martyrs."⁷¹ In other words, the YPJ have proven the validity and success of their existence not only through their rhetoric but through their blood and sacrifice.⁷² The militarization of Kurdish women has shattered traditional understandings of femininity and masculinity, permitting an active transformation of societal norms.⁷³ The physical fight itself is only part of the YPJ's wider process to reach their territorial, political, and social freedom.⁷⁴ It is evident that the concept of jineology which underpins the organization's founding ideology has been the requisite for placing female liberation at the center of the broader Kurdish movement.

Factor for Success: Western Military and Ideological Support

A second important factor which explains the success of the YPJ has been the group's support from Western states, both in terms of military aid and an ideological recognition of the Kurdish struggle. Firstly, the United States and other Western powers including France and the United Kingdom have provided crucial on-ground support to help the YPG and YPJ coalition defeat ISIS.⁷⁵ During the Kobane siege in 2014, for example, the US provided airpower which struck key targets and dropped military supplies at a moment when the YPG were being pushed back and it looked like ISIS would achieve victory.⁷⁶ Western intervention turned the tide in the war against ISIS and highlighted the importance of the committed partnership between the US and the Syrian Democratic Forces.⁷⁷ Momentous military victories against ISIS, such as the one in Kobani, have introduced millions around the world to the plight of the YPJ and the Kurds in Syria. The increased visibility of the YPJ's efforts

has led to further foreign support beyond the United States. For example, female volunteers from Western countries have signed up to fight with the YPJ, and countries such as Sweden have sent troops to the region to train Kurdish forces.⁷⁸ Margot Wallström, Sweden's former foreign minister, was at the forefront of the initiative and under her leadership, Sweden adopted a feminist foreign policy.⁷⁹ A feminist foreign policy is one which promotes gender equality and women's empowerment at its center, making the YPJ's efforts for female liberation ones which closely align with Sweden's broader foreign policy goals.⁸⁰

In addition to military support, the YPJ has also gained ideological acceptance from the United States and Western Europe, leading to a Western recognition of the female Kurdish struggle that has furthered their revolution's visibility. The popular representation of the YPJ in the images of women fighters which have circulated the media counterposes the generalized Western portrayal of the Middle East⁸¹ as barbarous, villain jihadists.⁸² The YPJ fighters embody "a new model of the woman in the Middle East," which has spurred a rise in international enthusiasm for their struggle.⁸³ They enforce a secular Western vision and their ideals of feminism and democracy appeal to a Western audience.⁸⁴ Although the recognition is conditional in that it seeks "to divorce the feminist approach embraced by the [YPJ] from its very specific political narrative and then reconnect it with Western liberalism," this recognition has nonetheless been significant in amplifying the voices of Kurdish women.⁸⁵ Overall, it is evident that both the positive representation of the YPJ in Western media and military support from Western countries have bolstered the military success and the visibility of the female Kurdish struggle, leading to a more widespread recognition of their identity.

Conclusion

Over the course of this paper, the dual objective of the YPJ was examined, both in terms of its military campaign against

ISIS and its ideological war against the patriarchal impositions within society placed on women. The YPJ's success in achieving these goals was then assessed. The YPJ's instrumental role in multiple crucial offensives against ISIS demonstrates the broad extent to which the militia has accomplished its military aims. In terms of the YPJ's social and political aims, the transformation of society within Rojava – encompassing gender quotas, the legal protection of women's rights, the instruction of feminism in universities, and more – demonstrates the resounding progress the group has attained towards the struggle for female emancipation and gender equality. The YPJ's success was primarily traced to the theoretical underpinnings of Öcalan's founding ideology of jineology, as well as support from the West, both militarily and ideologically. The struggle for resistance and recognition within the region proves to be an ongoing endeavor, however the Kurdish women's movement has proved both their physical and ideological strength. As the revolution in Rojava pursues, the feminist fighters of the Kurdish YPJ will continue to fight for female liberation, shattering traditional gender norms both on the battlefield and within society.

Endnotes

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