



# Restoring hope to humanity

The role of YPJ in the victory over ISIS

YPJ Information Center



## Introduction



WHEN around 2003, amid the Iraq War and its aftermath, news of the formation of a new Al-Qaeda affiliate emerged, it initially drew little attention outside the Middle East. That changed abruptly when this formation, namely the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), began seizing large swathes of territory in Iraq and

Syria in 2014 and declared a “caliphate.” The black flag of ISIS now flashed across screens worldwide. In particular, the extreme violence, targeted propaganda, and media-effective staging of executions drew widespread attention. In many countries, concerns grew about radicalization within their own borders, as ISIS specifically recruited people from Europe, North Africa, and other regions. ISIS conquered territories, murdered, enslaved, and eradicated all aspects of society. ISIS seemed unyielding, cruel, and invincible.

The local population and the women in Kurdistan, Iraq, and Syria felt the brutality of ISIS firsthand. The entire Middle East was in danger of being shrouded in a black veil. But resistance began to stir. A resistance from an army, that already started to change the face of the Middle East some years ago. Years before, as early as 2004, following an attack by the then-Syrian Baath regime on the Kurdish population, small units were formed to defend the Kurdish people (Self-Defense Units of Kurdistan – YXK). Following its successful organization throughout Rojava, and after gaining combat experience, the People’s Protection units (YPG- Yekineyên Parastina Gel) was officially formed in 2011 to defend the peoples of Rojava. In the time of the so called Arab Spring, women already participated in battles, particularly against

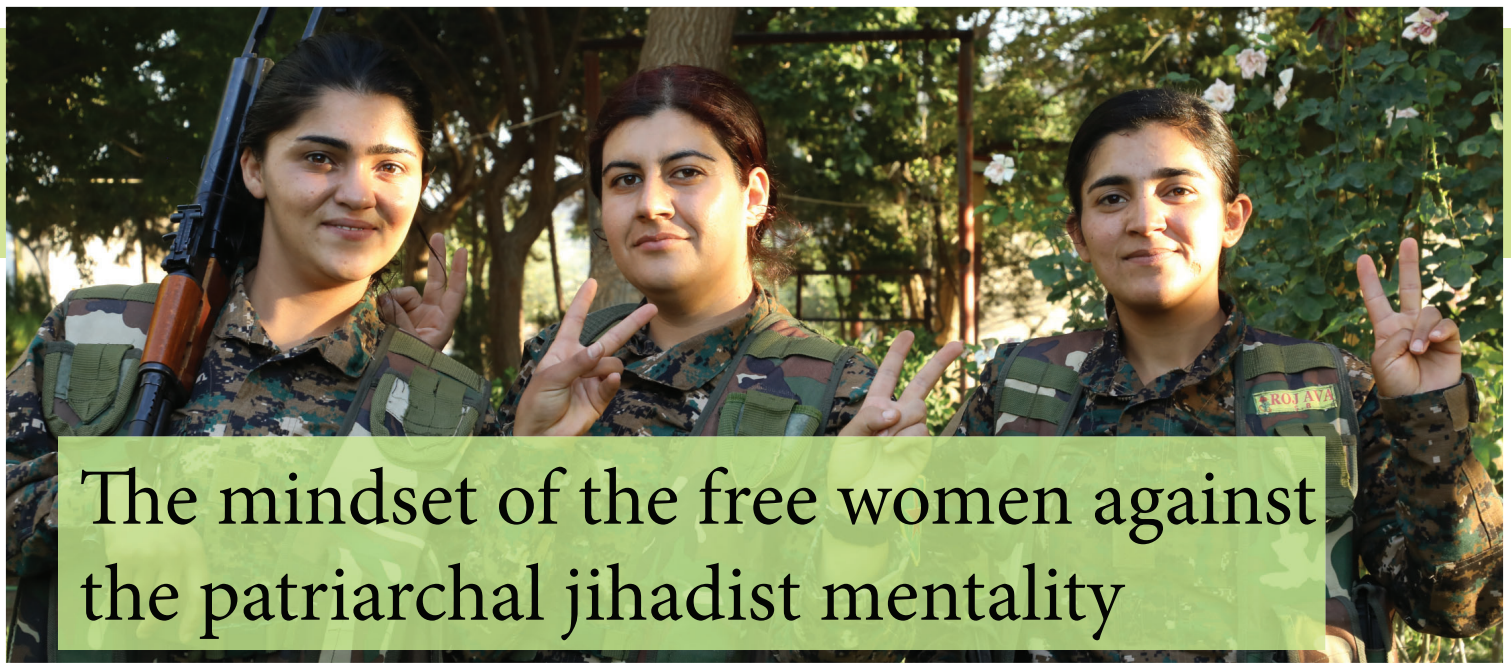
Al-Nusra, as part of the YXK and the YPG. On February 13, the first women’s only battalion was established in Afrin under the name Martyr Ruken. It consisted of 80 female fighters. In March of the same year, battalions were established in Qamishlo and Kobane. At the first conference held from April 2–4, 2013, attended by female fighters from all parts of Rojava, the establishment of the women’s defense units, YPJ, was announced. This was due the need of self-organising as women in order to be able to change the backward reception of women in society as well as to lead and to shape the revolution. Women knew that only they themselves will be able to fight for their rights. A dignified life is not something that will be given to women but is rather something that need to be fight for as women on all levels.

The date of the YPJ’s founding, 4 April, is no coincidence. 4 April marks the birthday of Abdullah Öcalan, a key visionary and vanguard in the fight for women’s freedom in Kurdistan and beyond.

Since its founding, YPJ has fought side by side with the male fighters of the YPG and, later, as part of the international coalition. However, the YPJ has always maintained its independence and remained true to its approach of not only fighting against Islamist organizations in the region but also advocating for the establishment of a democratic and peaceful life.

Therefore even before the rise of ISIS, the YPJ had thus been able to gain experience on the battlefield and within the framework of its own organization.

This brochure traces the struggle against ISIS and the vital role that the YPJ played in this fight for peace and democracy, as well as giving tribute to the fallen YPJ fighters. Without the self-sacrificing struggle of thousands of Martyrs, ISIS would not have been defeated and humanity would have been exposed to an even greater thread.



## The mindset of the free women against the patriarchal jihadist mentality

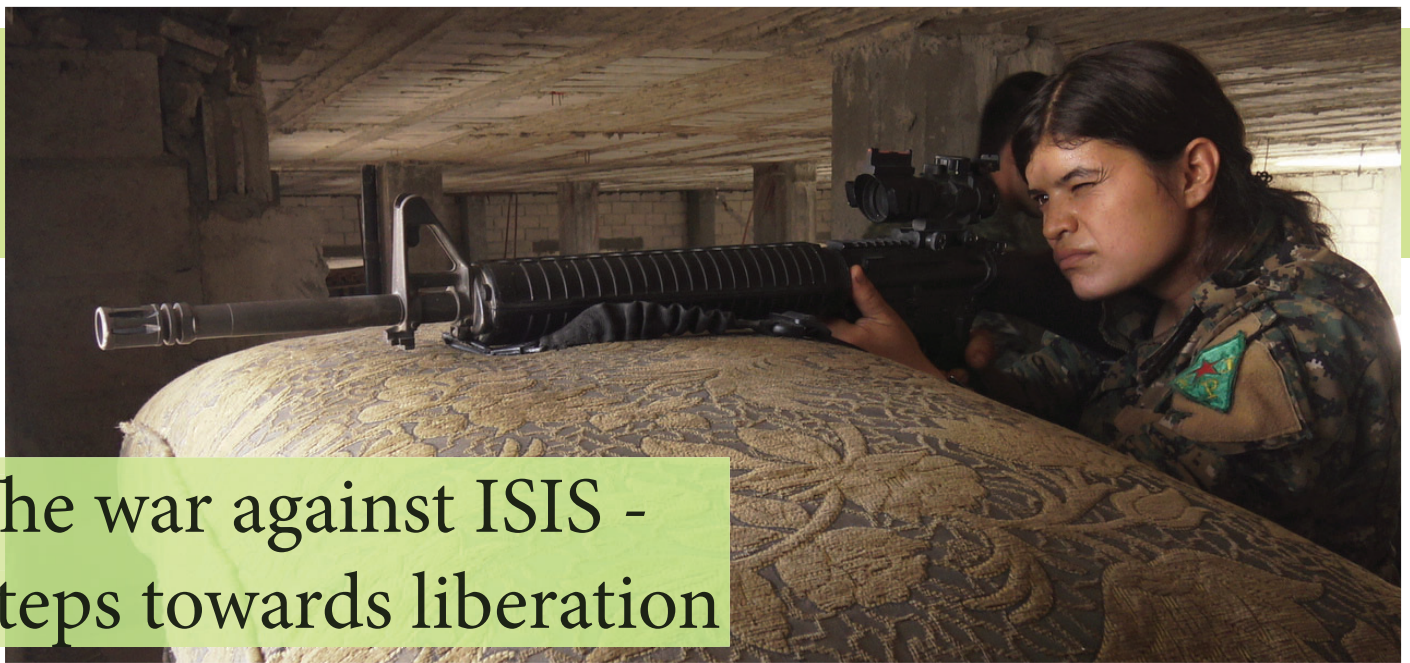
THE fight of YPJ against ISIS, it was not merely two military fronts facing off against each other; rather, two mindsets, two systems of thought, clashed. On one side is ISIS's inhuman system, which is religious totalitarianism and patriarchy. Its ideology is based on an extremely brutal interpretation of Sharia law. Women are systematically oppressed, regarded as property, and enslaved (e.g., Yazidi women). The goal is a caliphate with strict gender segregation and absolute male dominance. The YPJ counters this with the mentality of the free woman, in which women are the pioneers and the prerequisite for a free and democratic society. Accordingly, ISIS poses an existential threat to the identity of women and every democratic man—a threat to society itself. For the YPJ, the struggle against ISIS was and remains not merely the recapture of land, but the defense of the right to a self-determined, equal life. While ISIS sought to eradicate women from public life, the YPJ placed them at the center of political and military leadership and at the heart of life. The war is thus a direct clash between totalitarian oppression and revolutionary emancipation.



Berivan Qelender: Bêrivan, a mother of two children, felt martyr on May 28th 2013 when Islamist groups attacked Afrin. She was the first Martyr of YPJ



Silava Afrin: was martyred one May 29th 2013 in Sherawa district. They inspired thousands of women to continue their path until today.



## The war against ISIS - Steps towards liberation

THE rise of ISIS in 2014 posed one of the gravest challenges facing the peoples of the region, as its expansion was characterised by systematic violence, genocide, and the targeting of women in particular. Amidst this landscape, the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) emerged as a unique military and social force, which did not merely defend the land but represented a liberation project placing women at the heart of the process of resistance and change.

Sinjar in August 2014 marked a pivotal turning point in the uprising against ISIS. When ISIS swept through the region, massacres were committed against the Yazidis, and thousands of women were subjected to abduction and enslavement. At that critical moment, the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) and the guerrillas from the free mountains of Kurdistan intervened to open a safe humanitarian corridor to Rojava, saving thousands of civilians. This intervention was not merely a military operation, but a clear declaration of these forces' commitment to protecting society, and women in particular, from acts of genocide.

The role of the Women's Protection Units rapidly evolved from that of a local defence force to a key component in the war against ISIS. It gained significant momentum during the Battle of Kobane in late 2014 and early 2015, becoming a global symbol of resistance. The female fighters demonstrated a high degree of organisation and discipline, as they fought fierce battles against the ISIS at a time when the city was on the verge of falling. Kobane was a turning point, marking the shift from a defensive battle to the beginning of ISIS's retreat.

In the years that followed, the Women's Protection Units, as part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), took part in a series of military campaigns targeting ISIS strongholds in North and East Syria. The female

fighters played a pivotal role in liberating cities and towns, not only militarily, but also in reorganising civilian life and contributing to the establishment of participatory administrative structures.

This struggle reached its climax in the Battle of Baghouz in 2019, which marked the geographical end of ISIS. In that battle, the Women's Protection Units were an essential part of the operations that ended the organisation's control over its last strongholds. The victory in Baghouz was not merely the end of a military campaign, but the culmination of years of struggle, sacrifice and resilience in the face of one of the most extremist and brutal organisations.

What distinguishes the experience of the Women's Protection Units is not only their military role, but their intellectual and social project. These units have served as a model for women's liberation in a traditional society, where the female fighter has transformed from a potential victim into a vanguard in determining her own destiny. They have also helped to change the stereotypical image of women in war zones and have become a global symbol of women's resistance.

The struggle of the Women's Protection Units, from Sinjar to Baghouz, cannot be viewed merely as a series of battles, but as a historical journey that has redefined the concepts of power, liberation and the social role of women. This experience has demonstrated that resistance to terrorism cannot be separated from resistance to the ideological structures that fuel it, and that the liberation of the land cannot be complete without the liberation of the people, at the heart of which lies women.

## Steps in the struggle for liberation

**3 August 2014**  
**The Invasion of Sinjar**

ISIS launched a large-scale attack on Sinjar and committed massacres against the Yazidi people.

**September 2014**  
**Beginning of the Kobane siege**

ISIS attacks the city of Kobane from several fronts, and the Women's Protection Units engage in a decisive defensive battle.

**October 2015**  
**Formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)**

The YPJ joined as a core force within this military alliance.

**May–August 2016**  
**Battle of Manbij**

The YPJ participated in the liberation of the city, which had been a strategic center for ISIS in northern Syria

**17 October 2017**  
**Liberation of Raqqa**

The fall of ISIS's de facto capital, which marks a decisive strategic blow to the organization.

**January–March 2019**  
**Battle of Baghuz**

ISIS's last hold, which saw complex fighting due to the presence of civilians.

**7–10 August 2014**

**Opening of the humanitarian corridor**

The YPJ and YPG managed to secure a safe route for civilians to flee towards Rojava, saving thousands of lives.

**26 January 2015**  
**Liberation of Kobane**

The city is declared fully liberated after months of fighting, marking ISIS's first major strategic defeat.

**February 2016**  
**Liberation of Al-Shaddadi**

A significant military operation south of Al-Hassakah, ending ISIS's presence in one of its key oil strongholds.

**March 2017**  
**Start of the operation to liberate Raqqa**

Launch of a large-scale campaign led by the SDF

**September 2018**  
**Start of the Deir ez-Zor campaign**

Concentrated military operations to target ISIS's last strongholds in eastern Syria.

**23 March 2019**  
**Announcement of the fall of Baghuz**

The official end of ISIS's territorial control.

# SINJAR

## Genocide against the Yazidi people



On 3 August 2014, ISIS launched a large-scale attack on the Sinjar region, which was predominantly inhabited by Yazidis. The attack came following the sudden withdrawal of Peshmerga forces of the Kurdistan regional government stationed in the area, leaving civilians without protection.

ISIS advanced rapidly through villages and towns, using heavy weapons it had previously seized and directly targeting civilians. ISIS used tactics of shock and terror. Within hours, dozens of villages had fallen, and operations began involving the mass killing of men, the abduction of thousands of women and girls and the forced displacement of tens of thousands. Large numbers of residents headed towards Mount Sinjar, one of the last refuges of the Yazidi people. A well-known Kurdish proverb, often quoted by Yazidis, goes: “The Kurds / Yazidis have no friends but the mountains.” It describes the historical sense of isolation and betrayal by the outside world, in which, in the end, only their own geography and the mountains offered protection. So once again, the Yazidi people headed to the mountains. There they were besieged without water or food, in dire humanitarian conditions under threat of a complete genocide.

Although the Women’s Protection Units were not heavily concentrated within Sinjar prior to the attack, they moved swiftly in coordination with the People’s Protection Units (YPG) from Rojava in order to intervene as fast as possible. Next to the units of YPJ and YPG, also the guerilla forces YJA-Star (Yekineya Jinen Azad – Units of the Free women) and HPG (Hezen Parastina Gel – Society Defense Forces) made their way from the free mountains of Kurdistan to Sinjar. In the early days of the attack, groups of YPJ fighters advanced through dangerous mountain passes to

reach Mount Sinjar. The aim was to break the siege, protect the civilians and to organize a line of defense against the attacking forces of ISIS. The forces of YPJ and YPG were able to open an humanitarian corridor from 7 – 10 august. YPJ fighters were directly involved in securing a route through the mountains towards Rojava and protecting civilian convoys during their withdrawal. This corridor saved thousands of Yazidis from certain death. The evacuation corridor from Sinjar led to Cezaa, a village near Derik in Rojava. There a YPJ unit became surrounded by ISIS fighters. The YPJ fighters neither had a lot of experiences nor were they in any contact with their comrades, but they showed a determination to continue fighting. The sound of their voices shouting “Martyrdom, no surrender” became a sound of unbreakable will. All of them fell martyr with their finger on the trigger, proving that women too are able to fight until the very end.

Next to opening the humanitarian corridor, YPJ fighters were involved in direct clashes with ISIS in the areas surrounding the mountain and in the surrounding villages. Even they were outnumbered and not as well equipped compared to ISIS they relied on guerrilla tactics like to hit the enemy and then withdraw fast. Furthermore they had knowledge of the terrain and unit cohesion. The presence of women on the front lines had a significant psychological impact. It boosted the morale of civilians and shattered the image of ‘women as victims’, that was propagated by ISIS. It also undermined the propaganda of ISIS which regarded fighting against women as a religious affront. It is said many times, that ISIS was just afraid of the sound of the women’s voices and their trills. Especially because being killed by a woman means not being able to go

to paradise and for a fighter of ISIS mostly this is what it is all about. Due the battle of Sinjar the Women's Protection Units transitioned from a local force to a regional rescue force, understanding self-defense not only in a narrow way of defending ones own life but in a broader way of defending women and peoples in general. Therefore YPJ became a symbol of resistance against extreme violence, linking the military and humanitarian struggle. ISIS has tried with all its might, using the most brutal methods to wipe out the Yazidi people. It almost succeeded. With the intervention of YPG, YPJ and the guerrilla, hope was restored.

One thing that became clear during this war was that a people can rely only on their own strength and should not count on being rescued by a state army. The retreat of the Kurdistan-Iraqi Peshmerga clearly demonstrated this. The need for the Yazidi people to defend themselves was plain to see. Therefore one outcome of the war was the formation of self-defence units in Sinjar, the YBŞ (Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê - Sinjar Resistance Units) and the Sinjar Women's Units (Yekîneyên Jinên Êzîdxan, YJÊ). Both were founded after the massacres of August 2014 to defend the Yazidi community and the Sinjar region against any security threats. The aim of YJÊ is especially to protect women and the cultural and religious values of the region, also aiming to consolidate the role of Yazidi women in civil and military institutions. The YPJ is the strategic ally and role model for the Sinjar Women's Units, as it is a unique example of women fighting in the framework of self-defense.

Next to defending the land, both units (YJŞ and YPJ) work continuously to rescue Yazidi women and children abducted by ISIS, which has led to several women returning to their community.



Arîn Cûdî was born in 1996 in Tirbe Spi in Rojava and grew up on the conception of struggling and resistance derived from the history of resistance of Rojava people. With a high moral, Arîn joined the rank of YPJ in 2013.

After joining YPG and YPJ, Arîn took part in repelling the attacks of the mercenaries against her people in different areas in Jazira canton, Rojava. She participated in the struggle in Sinjar, opening the humanitarian corridor between Sinjar and Rojava. After she continued joining the fight against ISIS. She took part in these battles as a fighter and journalist. She was very brave in the battles against ISIS and when she was running out of her ammunition, she was carrying her camera and covering the battles.

On 31st of January, while returning from a media meeting and heading to the frontlines, a booby-trap was planted by ISIS, which exploded in her car, and she fell martyr.

## Martyr Arîn Cûdî



## When Resistance Becomes a Legend

KOBANI was not merely a battle in the war against ISIS; it was a historic moment that reshaped the balance of power and placed the Women's Protection Units at the center of the global stage as a living example of organized and conscious resistance.

Kobane is located on the Syrian–Turkish border and had been under Kurdish control since the so called Arabic spring in 2011 when the land of Syria was reshaped and the Kurdish people were able to establish self-administration. With the expansion of ISIS in 2014, the city became a strategic target for several reasons: ISIS aimed to link its areas of control between Raqqa and Aleppo and to control an important border strip.

In September 2014, a large-scale offensive began, with ISIS launching an attack from multiple fronts using heavy weapons and tanks. The army of ISIS numbered around 9,000 men. Within days, it had taken control of more than 100 surrounding villages, leading to the displacement of approximately 200,000 civilians toward the Turkish border. Turkey opened its border only partly to refugees, at the same time it prevented people—both women and men—who wanted to join the resistance from crossing the border to Kobane.

As ISIS reached the outskirts of the city, Kobani entered a phase of complete siege.

From the very beginning, the YPJ was not a supporting force, but a pivotal element on the front lines. It was fighting inside the City from street-to-street, house to house, room to room. Therefore YPJ played a crucial role in slowing the advance of ISIS which bought time for reinforcement to arrive later. Female leaders emerged on the battlefield, as fighters, commanders, organizing the defense within the neighbourhood and much more.

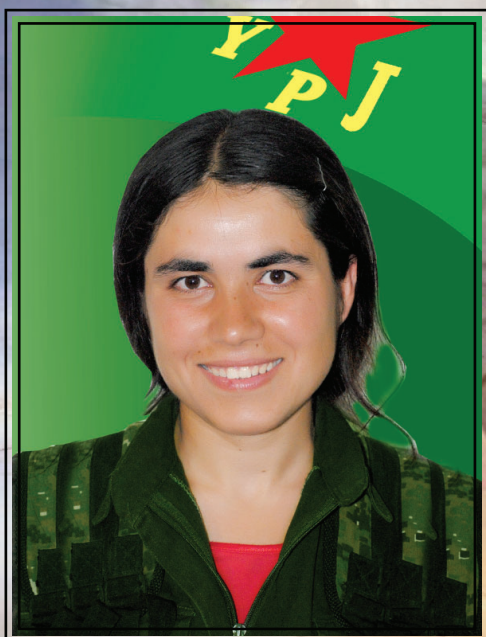
Like before in Sinjar the presence of women in combat had a significant psychological impact. ISIS considered being killed by a woman a “religious defeat” and this created a state of fear and hesitation among some of its members. For the fighters and the people of Kobane, the participation of women on the front lines was a source of moral strength. The female fighters of Kobane became an international symbol of the struggle against ISIS and redefined the role of women in armed conflict. Kobane thus demonstrated the international significance of the war against ISIS. Hundreds of women and men from beyond Rojava joined the battle. Despite enormous repression and the Turkish state's attempt to close the border, dozens and hundreds of young people from Bakur (Northern Kurdistan) crossed the border and joined the fight. In addition, hundreds of internationalists from outside Kurdistan joined the struggle. Furthermore the people from Kobane itself were the backbone of the resistance as joining the front-lines themselves or taking care of the daily needs behind the front-lines like washing clothes, preparing food, taking care of the wounded or fallen.

On January 26, 2015 Kobane was liberated as ISIS was completely expelled from the city and the YPJ and YPG forces regained control of the neighborhoods.

If Sinjar was a moment of humanitarian rescue, then Kobani was a moment of shifting from defense to offense. The war in Kobane is of great significance as it marked ISIS's first major strategic defeat. ISIS had previously been considered invincible, but that myth was dispelled with the victory over ISIS in Kobane. It was proven that ISIS can be defeated. The fighters stood their ground against a force that outnumbered and outgunned them—not because victory was guaranteed, but because defeat was not an option.

It was that historical moment that proved how willpower can redraw the balance of power. The Kurdish people have made many sacrifices for this historic victory.

In memory of the resistance in Kobane, a conference was held under the slogan “In the footsteps of the martyrs of Kobane, we support the unity of democratic peoples to ensure a free life.” This conference focused on solidarity among all social and cultural groups in Syria. On this basis, the SDF, the Syrian Democratic Forces, was founded on October 11, 2015.



Martyr Arin Mirkan

In October 2014, ISIS was approaching the strategically important hill of Mashta Nur with tanks. Seeing this and understanding the significance of this hill, the fighter Arin Mirkan carried out a suicide operation on October 5, becoming a symbol of sacrifice. She approached the attacker and set off a grenade beneath the tank, where she blew herself up amid ISIS forces to halt their advance. The tank got destroyed and dozens of ISIS fighters were killed. With her action she stopped a decisive attack and boosted the morale of the fighters, as she showed that there is a need to fight with determination and a clear mind until one's last breath because surrender is not an option. She became a global symbol of female resistance.

Martyr Peyman Tolhildan

“I will face martyrdom with a smile on my face”

During the fights with ISIS, YPJ members were fighting alongside their male comrades in the village of Serzuri. The village and the fighters themselves got surrounded by ISIS. Five of them were young women, led by the commander Peyman Tolhildan. They fought ISIS from the second floor of a school building, while ISIS was approaching with 200 men and three tanks. While they were in contact with other units, they emphasized that no reinforcement should be sent to keep the number of martyrs low, making clear that they will fight until the end. On September 16, Peyman Tolhildan said through the radio, that she will face martyrdom with a smile on her face. Shortly after, ISIS set the school on fire while the women fought until their last bullet, destroyed their weapons and under the shrill battle cry, blew themselves up. Choosing martyrdom over surrender thus became a symbol of resistance.





Martyr Rêvana Kobane

On September 27, while repelling an intense attack on the village of Kolmed, south of Kobane, the unit of Rêvana Kobane ran out of ammunition and there was no way to bring more. She had already been hit by three bullets, Rêvana made a fateful decision to become a human shield to protect her comrades and her city. She carried out a heroic act embodying the ultimate sacrifice to prevent the mercenaries from advancing and to keep the pulse of resistance alive in the heart of Kobane.

Martyr Zehra Penaber

“It was our deepest wish to see this day. Now we have seen it. But I wish that our fallen comrades could see this day as well. Just two days ago, some of our comrades fell. They, too, lived with this hope. I wish they could see this, too. But we promise that we will bring their hopes to life. Today, we dedicate this day first and foremost to the people, to all our fallen friends, to all who resisted in this struggle, and to all who stand with us now.”  
– the words of Zehra Penaber on the day of the liberation of Kobane

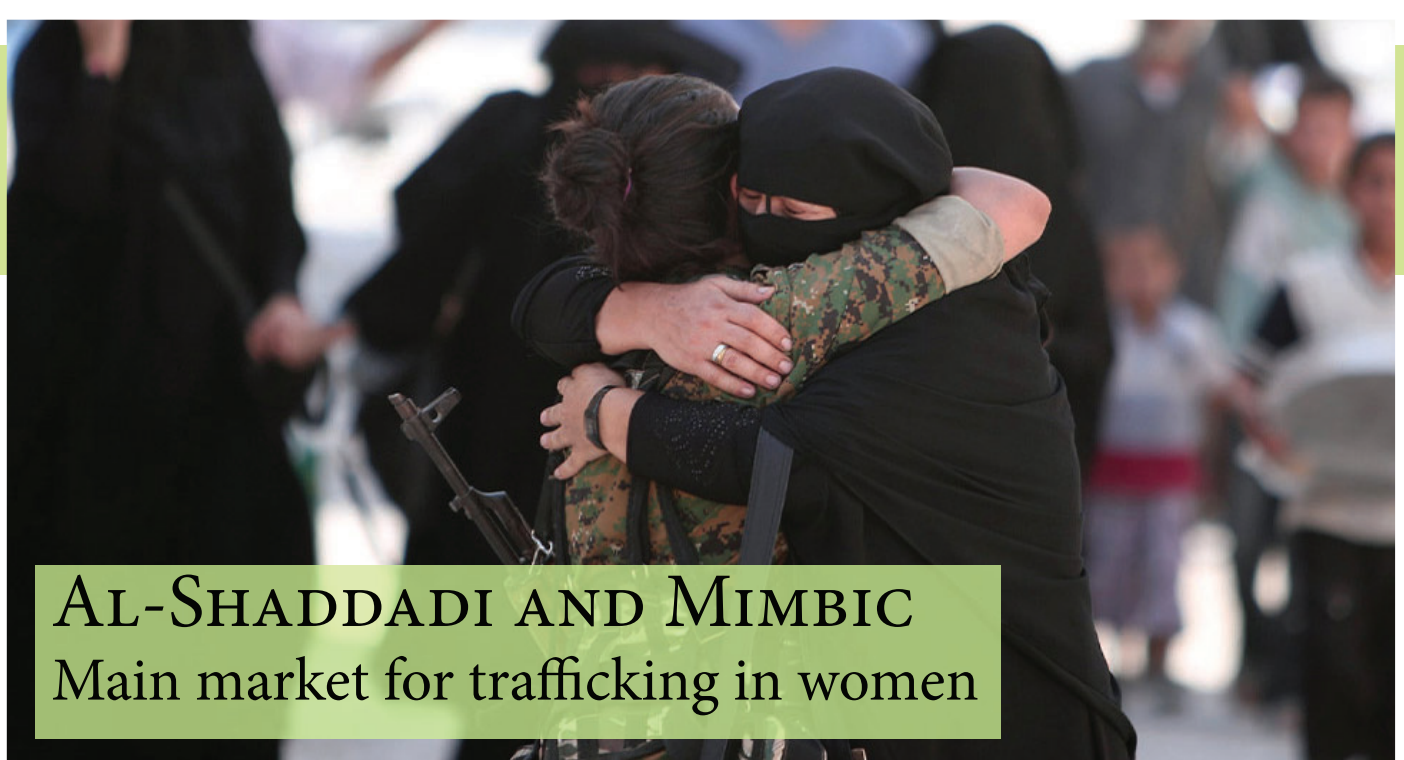
She was one of the commanders in the resistance of Kobane and fell martyr on February 3, 2015, shortly after the liberation of Kobane, in the southern part of the city.



Martyr Avaşin Tekoşin Güneş

In February 2015, ISIS launched a large-scale attack on the Assyrian villages along the Khabur River in Til Temir. YPJ and YPG forces were defending the villages to prevent ISIS from carrying out a massacre. Among them was Avaşin Tekoşin Güneş (Ivana Hoffman), from Germany. During the fight with ISIS, Ivana was martyred on March 7 in the village of Til Nasir, becoming the first internationalist martyr of the Rojava revolution.





## AL-SHADDADI AND MIMBIC Main market for trafficking in women

Following the military campaign in Al-Hol against ISIS—the first launched by the new military alliance SDF—and the liberation of the Tishreen Dam from ISIS, the forces launched a major campaign against the city of Al-Shaddadi. This city was of such great importance because ISIS had turned it into a slave market where Yazidi children and women were sold.

Following the liberation of al-Shaddadi the Manbij operation began in late May 2016. SDF forces quickly surrounded the city, cutting off ISIS supply routes. The YPJ fighters were involved both in frontline combat and in securing liberated areas. As the battle moved into the city, fighting became intense and urban. ISIS used snipers, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), tunnels, and human shields to slow the SDF advance. The YPJ and their allies had to proceed street by street, clearing buildings, always putting all effort into not harming civilians. Despite heavy resistance, they gradually pushed ISIS forces back.

One of the defining aspects of the campaign was the humanitarian situation. Thousands of civilians were trapped inside Manbij. As neighborhoods were liberated, YPJ and other SDF units helped evacuate residents and secure escape corridors. The battle lasted for more than two months, reflecting both the strategic importance of the city and the determination of ISIS to hold it.

By mid-August 2016, the SDF declared full control of Manbij. The defeat of ISIS there was a major blow to the group's logistical network and marked a turning point in northern Syria. It helped isolate ISIS strongholds further south, including Raqqa.

According to Manbij Military Council, from 1 June to 15 August 2016, 264 SDF fighters were martyred in the Minbic campaign, among them many women.



Martyr Hira Solin



Martyr Berçem Hogir



Martyr Rojbîn Cûdî



Martyr Newroz Rodî



Martyr Evrîm Çiya



Martyr Sarya Ronahi



## RAQQA

### The capital of the “Caliphate” is defeated

For years, Raqqa served as the unofficial capital of ISIS and functioned as the terrorist organization’s center for planning, administration, and propaganda. It was from here that they planned and carried out their attacks. The recapture of the city in 2017 was therefore of enormous significance, both militarily and symbolically, for all freedom-loving people.

The offensive and the final phase of the liberation of Raqqa began on June 6, 2017 and was led primarily by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which was supported by the U.S.

As before YPJ played a role in the battles for Raqqa that was both military and social. Militarily, the female fighters actively participated in the front lines: they were involved in house-to-house combat, secured liberated areas, and took part in strategic operations against ISIS

positions. In doing so, they had to fight under extremely difficult conditions, as ISIS had heavily fortified Raqqa—with mines, booby traps, and a dense network of tunnels.

Socially, the YPJ had a powerful symbolic impact. They embodied a counter-model to the ideology of ISIS, which sys-

tematically oppressed and enslaved women. The fact that women were fighting ISIS in an armed and organized manner therefore carried great propaganda and moral significance.

In addition, the YPJ played a key role in liberating women who had been held captive by ISIS, particularly Yazidi women. While fighting in Raqqa, SDF units—including the YPJ—repeatedly came across locations where women were being held captive by ISIS as they liberated neighborhoods. Among them were Yazidi women who had previously been abducted from other regions—particularly Sinjar. YPJ fighters were directly involved in these rescues, as they actively participated in house-to-house combat and secured such detention sites.



The fact that women were actively involved in liberating places where other women had been enslaved stood in direct contrast to ISIS's ideology. YPJ fighters freeing Yazidi women also became a symbol of resistance against gender-based violence specifically.

On October 17, 2017, the SDF launched an overnight attack capturing the National Hospital and further advancing towards the ISIS-held stadium, the jihadists' last foothold in the city. The stadium was later captured, marking the defeat of ISIS in Raqqa. On October 20, the SDF officially declared victory in Raqqa.

The aftermath of the war was devastating. The city was considered to be nearly 80 percent destroyed. Furthermore, ISIS left behind thousands of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and traps. For months, returning civilians faced high casualty rates from explosives hidden in cupboards, refrigerators, and under floorboards.

## IN THE LIBERATION OF RAQQA NEARLY 30 YPJ FIGHTERS FELL MARTYR



Martyr Mijdar Gabar



Martyr Özgür Amed



Martyr Berîtan Sema



Martyr Sozdar Bawer



Martyr Seal Cudî



Martyr Amara Cerablus



Martyr Amargî Tolhîldan



Martyr Arîn Ronahî



Martyr Arîn Qamişlo



Martyr Deniz Medya

In 2018, the war against ISIS was still ongoing. Even though its capital had been liberated, ISIS still held out in Deir ez-Zor and other areas. In 2018, during the war against ISIS, the Turkish state attacked Afrin, a Kurdish area in the north, using Islamist mercenaries as ground troops while attacking with airplanes. Even though a historical resistance of 58 days was taking place and the fighters of YPJ, side by side with the fighters of YPG, resisted against one of the biggest NATO armies, the Turkish state has been occupying the land of Afrin since then.

# DEIR EZ-ZOR/ BAGHUZ

## ISIS is defeated on the ground



The Battle of Baghuz in 2019 represents the final major military phase in the fight against ISIS and marks the end of its territorial caliphate. Following the first victory over ISIS in Kobane, ISIS was steadily pushed back through years of offensives. Eventually, only a small area along the Euphrates remained, with Baghuz serving as its last stronghold.

The YPJ and SDF faced an extremely complex situation: the small area was home not only to battle-hardened ISIS units but also to thousands of civilians, including many women and children. These were largely ideologically committed people who had followed ISIS to the very end. Since the SDF and YPJ were determined to avoid civilian casualties, the dense intermingling of fighters and civilians made a rapid military advance virtually impossible.

Instead, they pursued a strategy of encirclement and gradual advance. The area was completely surrounded, supply lines were cut off, and at the same time, corridors were repeatedly opened to allow civilians to flee. During this phase, YPJ units played a key role, not only militarily but also in managing the situation on the ground. According to reports, the encircled ISIS fighters were repeatedly given time to surrender and leave the area. Attempts were made to secure a surrender through loudspeakers, negotiations, and controlled evacuations in order to avoid further casualties—both among their own fighters and among civilians.

Many people took advantage of these opportunities to flee. Tens of thousands left Baghuz during the weeks of fighting, including relatives of ISIS members.

Nevertheless, a hard core of fighters remained behind, refusing to give up. They put up a fierce resistance, using tunnel systems, booby traps, and suicide attacks

to slow the SDF's advance. The fighting was intense and took place in a very confined space, supported by airstrikes from the international coalition.

In the final weeks of the battle, the territory controlled by ISIS continued to shrink until it was finally reduced to a tiny area. Despite the hopeless situation, many of the remaining fighters continued to fight, while others eventually surrendered.

On March 23, 2019, the SDF declared complete victory over ISIS in Baghuz.

With the fall of Baghuz, ISIS's territorial caliphate was finally put to an end. This victory had enormous military and symbolic significance, as for the first time since 2014, no territory remained under the organization's control.

Overall, the battle for Baghuz demonstrates not only the military strength of the SDF and its allies but also the complexity of modern conflicts, in which military objectives, humanitarian considerations, and political consequences are closely intertwined. The role of the YPJ particularly highlights that the struggle was waged not only with weapons, but also through efforts to avoid escalation and give the enemy the opportunity to surrender—even in one of the final and most brutal phases of this long war. Thus, even in the face of the greatest enemy of women and humanity, the YPJ did not lose its own humanity, but insisted on humanity.



## THE WAR IS OVER, BUT THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

On March 23, 2019, ISIS was declared defeated on the ground. This marked the end of a five-year struggle in northern and eastern Syria, where the democratic forces were ultimately able to bring light to darkness. In the areas where ISIS was defeated, self-administration was established and the newly liberated territories became part of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. The people of each town were to govern themselves according to democratic principles. A struggle for people's democracy, self-determination and women's freedom began. Women from the liberated areas joined the YPJ in increasing numbers and increasingly saw their own liberation reflected in the YPJ. Previously, the YPJ had consisted mainly of Kurdish women. This changed, and Arab women became an increasingly integral part of the YPJ, as did other members of society.

At the same time, however, it became clear that the defeat on the ground did not signify the complete end of ISIS. Many fighters managed to escape or went underground, and the organization continued its fight in the form of terror attacks. While the organization lost its territory, it retained its human network and its ideological influence and shifted its focus to new spaces: camps, prisons and underground cells.

After 2019 many ISIS fighters and their families were held in prisons or camps that remained under SDF control until early 2026. Tens of thousands of people, mostly women and children, lived in the Al-Hol camp, the biggest camp of that kind. Many of them were relatives of former ISIS fighters; some were themselves considered to still be ideologically radicalized. Unofficial ISIS rules often continued to apply, leading to violence, intimidation, and attempts to perpetuate extremist ideologies. Thus, the camp became

a human and ideological reservoir for an organization that, while no longer controlling any territory, has not lost its influence. For years, the Autonomous Administration (DAANES) warned that these camps could become places where extremist ideologies continue to take root and to be passed on to the next generation, since children were being raised in this environment, within the framework of Islamist beliefs.



The outcome of a security operation in 2022 at Camp al-Hol.



Women and children showing the ISIS sign inside Al-Hol Camp

At the same time, thousands of suspected ISIS fighters were being held in prisons under SDF control. These prisons posed an enormous security challenge. A well-known example is al-Sinaa prison in Hasakah, which was the target of a large-scale ISIS attack in early 2022. During this attack, ISIS fighters attempted to free imprisoned members, leading to heavy fighting over a two-week period and demonstrating that ISIS remains capable of carrying out coordinated operations.



Above: YPJ fighters are monitoring the situation in al-Sinaa prison in Hasakah.



Above: January 2022, Women from the civil defence forces are taking on night shifts in Heseke as the situation remains dangerous.

Right: Januar 2026, Detainees of Camp al-Hol escape through a gap in the fence.

A key problem was that many of the detained fighters are foreign nationals. The local administration and the SDF have repeatedly called on the countries concerned to take responsibility for their citizens. Although a few repatriations have taken place, the call has mostly gone unanswered. However, numerous countries of origin refuse to take their citizens back or bring them to trial. As a result, the responsibility fell solely on the SDF and the local self-administration, which cared for the thousands of prisoners under severe economic conditions.

At the same time, ISIS has transformed itself into an underground organization. Former fighters operate in small cells. They carry out attacks, assassinations, and acts of sabotage to create instability and maintain their presence. ISIS no longer controls any territory, but it remained present—in people's minds, in camps, and in prisons. The conflict is therefore no longer a geographical one, but a struggle over memory, ideology, and the future.

At the beginning of 2026, the situation in the camps and prisons changed fundamentally. With the attacks by the Syrian Transitional Government and its advance on Al-Hol, tribes rose up within the city and launched attacks on the Internal Security Forces (Asayish), who withdrew. Camp residents saw gaps in security and used this opportunity to escape. The SDF were forced to withdraw. Later, the forces of the Syrian Transitional Government arrived and took over. Fighters of the STG were filming themselves as they approached the camp. They can be heard chanting *Allahu Akbar* to cheering camp detainees, who seem to welcome the men as liberators.

After that, the situation remained unclear. A large number of the fighters, primarily those from the prisons, were transferred to prisons in Iraq under U.S. authorities; Camp Al-Hol was cleared out, and those remaining were resettled. But many questions remain unanswered currently. And it is precisely in this lack of clarity and transparency that a great danger lies.

ISIS's current presence is characterized less by the administration of cities than by a "strategy of pinpricks." Through small-group tactics, complex terrorist financing via regional hubs, and highly efficient online propaganda, the group seeks to keep its ideology alive worldwide and mobilize lone actors.





Amid the ongoing global threat posed by ISIS, the Third World War unfolding in the Middle East, the murders of women and girls that occur every day, and the loss of many values and moral standards, YPJ is like a breath of fresh, clean air amidst all the filth surrounding us. A ray of light and a moment of hope, bringing the true values of society into light. Women who, defying all societal expectations and gender roles, connect with the history of the Mother Goddess and the history of fighting women, demonstrating that, contrary to all apparent superiority of men, women with a strong will and determination can bring light into darkness. With this mindset, YPJ played a decisive and pivotal role in the fight against ISIS and thus against the misogynistic and inhuman ideology of it.

As a result, the YPJ has not only become a force in the Middle East but has also emerged as a beacon of hope for women and peoples around the world. The YPJ has demonstrated that the will of a free woman is unbreakable. Yet the YPJ is more than just a military unit. It embodies values and the hope for a better future for women in Syria, Kurdistan, the Middle East, and around the world.

YPJ now has 13 years of experience, in the military sphere, in the fight against terror and for peace, as well as in the defense and fight for a dignified life on its land. For 13 years YPJ has fought side by side with its male comrades whilst maintaining its independence as women units, preserving its distinctiveness, values and autonomy. And YPJ proved that women and peoples need to stand up and to fight for their rights on their own because no one will give them to them. To build a democratic and peaceful society lies in the hands of

women and peoples.

The beginning of 2026 and the process of integration, as it is being discussed while this brochure is being written, mark a significant shift for the Syrian Democratic Forces and YPJ. With a democratic integration as aimed for SDF, the integration of YPJ could have a great positive impact in building up a new army for all of Syria and therefore becoming a vanguard role model for women all over Syria, for the whole Middle East and beyond: an army of self-defense and not one of aggression.

Within YPJ, women from a wide variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds take their place. For this reason, YPJ can also play a pioneering role for Syria as a whole, with its diverse mosaic of ethnicities and religions. If the aim is to build a democratic Syria in which women and women's organizations play a central role and can share the values they represent with all of society, then YPJ should play a vital part in this.





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