


Saggi

A MOVEMENT WITHIN THE MOVEMENT: KURDISH WOMEN FIGHTERS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO THE LIBERATION STRUGGLE

UN MOVIMENTO DENTRO IL MOVIMENTO: LE COMBATTENTI CURDE E IL LORO CONTRIBUTO ALLA LOTTA DI LIBERAZIONE

*Giuseppe Acconcia, Lorenza Perini**

 ORCID: GA 0000-0001-5941-8346 LP 0000-0001-5377-4382

ABSTRACT

[ENG.] In reference to Social Movement Theories (SMT) and gender studies, this article critically examines Kurdish women mobilizations, focusing on its historical context, ideological framework, strategies, organizational structure, challenges, and contributions for the Kurdish fight for liberation. Drawing on 47 interviews with female participants and fighters within the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), YPJ (Women's Protection Units-Yekîneyên Parastina Jin) and other groups, carried out in different localities in Syria, Turkey and Iran, the research will critically analyse the women movement, providing insight into its strengths, limitations, and broader implications for gender equality and social justice.

Keywords: Feminisms – social movements – women fighters – organizations – social justice.

[It.] Facendo riferimento alle teorie dei movimenti sociali (SMT) e agli studi di genere, questo articolo esamina criticamente le mobilitazioni delle donne curde, concentrandosi sul contesto storico, il quadro ideologico, le strategie, la struttura organizzativa, le sfide e i contributi per la lotta di liberazione curda. Basandosi su 47 interviste con donne partecipanti e combattenti all'interno del Partito dei Lavoratori del Kurdistan (PKK), dell'YPJ (Unità di protezione delle donne-Yekîneyên Parastina Jin) e di altri gruppi, condotte in diverse località in Siria, Turchia e Iran, la ricerca analizzerà criticamente il movimento delle donne curde, fornendo una visione approfondita dei suoi punti di forza, dei suoi limiti e delle sue implicazioni più ampie per l'uguaglianza di genere e la giustizia sociale.

Parole chiave: Femminismi – movimenti sociali – donne combattenti – organizzazioni – giustizia sociale.

* Giuseppe Acconcia is an adjunct professor at the University of Milan (ror: 00wjc7c48) and Lorenza Perini (ror: 00240q980) is an adjunct professor at the University of Padua. The essay was submitted to double blind peer-review.



CONTENTS: 1. Introduction. 2. Survivability of Organizations in Repressive Contexts. 3. Background section. 3.1 Ideology, objectives and the concept of “Jineology”. 4. The empirical study. 4.1 Methodology. 5. Findings. 5.1 Hierarchy and organization. 5.2 Women as Fighters. 6. Conclusion.



1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the Kurdish struggle for self-determination has provided women with a unique platform to challenge traditional gender norms and actively participate in all aspects of social life. Influential figures, such as Sakine Cansız and Zilan Vejin, have led the women’s movement within the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) to address gender inequalities both within Kurdish society and the broader MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. This movement combines elements of Kurdish nationalism, socialism, and feminism, promoting gender equality, women’s rights, and social justice. To challenge patriarchal norms and empower Kurdish women, the movement employs various strategies, including grassroots mobilizations, educational programs, and self-defense initiatives. The organizational structure of the movement in Northern Syria emphasizes inclusiveness and gender equality, featuring a co-leadership model and women’s committees (at the Komin level and within Mala Jin)¹. However, it faces significant challenges, including resistance to change within Kurdish society and the complexities involved in the armed struggle.

Despite these obstacles, the movement has achieved noteworthy social changes, such as establishing women’s cooperatives, promoting education and healthcare, and inspiring other feminist movements worldwide. The formation of the Women’s Defense Units (YPJ) within the broader People’s Defense Forces (HPG) in the 2000s exemplifies the commitment to both women’s liberation and the overall Kurdish struggle.

YPJ has gained international recognition for its role in combatting the Islamic State (IS) in Syria. The Kurdish women’s movement has also aimed to transform societal attitudes and practices by promoting gender equality, combating honor-based violence, and advocating for women’s rights in areas under Kurdish control. Initiatives have included the establishment of women’s councils, women’s cooperatives, and educational institutions to empower women and challenge traditional gender roles².

In more general terms, within the PKK, the women’s movement has been a crucial part of the broader Kurdish liberation mobilization since the 1980s. Women in the PKK have actively participated in armed resistance against various oppressors, including the Turkish state. It is essential to note that the PKK and its affiliated organizations have been designated as terrorist groups by several countries, including Turkey, the United States, and the European Union. The armed activities and political goals

¹ *Co-operatives and Communes: The Third Way of Rojava in the Syrian Conflict*, in *Cooperation in Mesopotamia*, 2016, <https://mesopotamia.coop/cooperatives-and-communes-the-third-way-of-rojava-in-the-syrian-conflict/>.

² E. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, *Iran’s Uprisings for “Women, Life, Freedom”: Overdetermination, Crisis, and the Lineages of Revolt*, in *Politics*, No. 3, 2023, 404-438.

of the movement are highly controversial, leading to diverse opinions on their methods and objectives.

As for Rojava, through their involvement in armed resistance, political activism, and grassroots organizations, Kurdish women in Northern Syria have made significant strides toward gender equality within their communities and have become important agents of change in the broader struggle for Kurdish self-determination. Kurdish women have emerged as a powerful force in challenging and transforming patriarchal structures in Kurdish society. Kurdish women in Northern Syria have historically faced marginalization and oppression due to traditional norms that restricted their freedoms and opportunities³.

Recognizing the urgent need to address these gender inequalities, Kurdish women in Rojava have employed various strategies to promote gender equality and women's rights. This article explores how female fighters in Northern Syria have challenged and transformed patriarchal structures in Kurdish society. It examines the key strategies used to achieve these goals mainly in Syria, with references to Turkey and Iran, as well as the significant impacts of the women's movement on the broader Kurdish society, both in the context of armed resistance and broader social transformation.

Moreover, it investigates how these contributions intersect with wider feminist movements and efforts for gender equality. By addressing these questions, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of the transformative role played by the Kurdish women's movements and their significance in the struggle for Kurdish liberation and women's empowerment.

Drawing on Social Movement Theories (SMT) and gender studies with a focus on the Kurdish region, this article aims to enhance our understanding of women's mobilizations under conditions of repression in Northern Syria. It sheds light on the roles that civil society and paramilitary organizations play in articulating various repertoires of action. To critically analyze the possibilities of women's agency in this context, the proposed research will primarily be based on interviews with women participants and fighters from the PKK, YPJ (Women's Protection Units), and other groups, conducted in different localities in Syria, Turkey and Iran.

The article is structured as follows: after the Introduction, section 2 analyses the survivability of Kurdish organizations in repressive contexts, while sections 3, 4 and 5 introduce a background on Kurdish major mobilizations in Northern Syria and in the broader Kurdish region, ideology, objectives and the concepts of Kurdish female mobilizations, the empirical study and findings in terms of hierarchy, organization and war strategies. The final section summarizes the results and suggests future research paths.

2. SURVIVABILITY OF ORGANIZATIONS IN REPRESSIVE CONTEXTS

In repressive contexts, such as Syria under Hafez and Bashar al-Assad's rule, the space available for oppositional social groups has been severely restricted⁴.

Opposition parties were banned, and independent social organizations faced strict regulation. As a result, citizens were often organized into government-controlled associations affiliated with the ruling party. This is why universities, newspapers, and organizations such as workers' and farmers' associations, as well as women's and youth rights groups, often became targets of attacks by the ruling elite. Consequently, social movement organizations (SMOs), which are vital for mobilizing collective action in

³ S. Muzafer, *The Psychology of Social Norms*, Harper, 1966.

⁴ Q. Wiktorowicz, *Islamic activism. A social movement theory approach*, Indiana University Press, 2004.

democratic countries⁵, must adapt to a constrained environment that limits their typical activities. Under authoritarian regimes, SMOs have indeed had to adjust and innovate their methods of action. They can radicalize their efforts, as seen with the Kurdish fighters, or they might moderate or internationalize their approaches. As a result, many organizations operating in repressive contexts focus less on overt political actions aimed at challenging authority and more on grassroots service delivery, which are perceived as less threatening by the political establishment⁶.

The survivability of various organizations is particularly challenged in wartime contexts. In such environments, having an equal gender representation among leadership can significantly influence the structure and future potential for institutionalization of these diverse social movement organizations (SMOs).

For instance, in the case study of Northern Syria after 2012, the presence of armed women insurgents contributed to tactical diversity, supported the organization's strategy, and helped mobilize both domestic and international audiences⁷. The significant involvement of women played a critical role in the effectiveness of these organizations during pivotal moments, and it aided in addressing gender inequalities.

The women's movement within the PKK arose in response to the marginalization and oppression faced by Kurdish women. Traditional patriarchal norms often constrained Kurdish women's freedoms and limited their access to education, employment, and political participation. Kurdish women encountered various challenges, including forced marriages, honor-based violence, and restricted access to healthcare and legal rights⁸. In the early years of the PKK's activities, women initially joined the movement as fighters alongside their male counterparts. However, they soon recognized the need to address gender inequalities both within their ranks and in the broader society. In the late 1970s, influential Kurdish women within the PKK began to organize women's groups and advocate for women's rights within the framework of the Kurdish liberation struggle⁹.

One significant milestone in the development of the women's movement within the PKK was the establishment of women's guerrilla units in Northern Syria, known as the Women's Defense Units (YPJ), in 2012¹⁰. Kurdish feminism, which initially emerged within nationalist organizations, originally developed under patriarchal structures. It gained autonomy only in the early 1990s in Iraq, following the first Gulf War, when the Kurds achieved an important degree of self-governance and some level of constitutional rights¹¹.

In recent decades, further developments have characterized the Kurdish women's movement as a response to the PKK's calls for autonomy¹², playing a crucial role in countering the oppressive policies

⁵ M. Diani, *The cement of civil society. Studying networks in localities*, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

⁶ H.P. Kriesi, *The organizational structure of new social movements in a political context*, in D. McAdam, J. D. McCarthy and M. N. Zald (Eds.), *Comparative perspectives on social movements: Political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cultural framings*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, 152–184.

⁷ C. Baser, *Women Insurgents, Rebel Organization Structure, and Sustaining the Rebellion: The Case of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, in Civil Wars and their Aftermath*, No. 3, 2022, 381-416.

⁸ I. Käser, *Gender and Kurdish Politics: A Comparative Study of Turkey and Syria*, Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics, 2021.

⁹ I. Käser, *Gender and Kurdish Politics*, cit.

¹⁰ M. Çiçek, *Did the Women of the YPJ Simply Fall from the Sky?*, 2015, <https://defterares.blogspot.com/2015/01/did-women-of-ypj-simply-fall-from-sky.html>.

¹¹ N. Begikhani, *Kurdish Women and National Identity: the case of Kurdish women*, 2003, <https://www.scribd.com/document/55014170/Kurdish-Women-and-National-Identity>; M. Alinia, *Honor and Violence against Women in Iraqi Kurdistan*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

¹² E. Aydinli, *A Paradigmatic Shift for the Turkish Generals and an End to the Coup Era in Turkey*, in *Middle East Journal*, No. 4,

of the Turkish state. Under the name of YPJ in Syria, this movement has provided a platform for women to actively participate in armed resistance, challenge traditional gender roles, and demonstrate their capabilities as fighters.

Alongside armed resistance, the Kurdish women movement has also focused on organizing women's councils, cooperatives, and educational institutions. These initiatives aimed to empower women, raised awareness of their rights, and challenged the patriarchal structures within Kurdish society. Women's councils have become spaces for women to discuss and address their concerns, make decisions collectively, and combat gender-based violence and discrimination¹³.

The experiences and struggles of Kurdish women within the PKK gained international attention, particularly during the fight against the Islamic State (IS) in Syria¹⁴.

The YPJ's role in combating IS and the prominence of female fighters, such as the iconic commander Arin Mirkan, highlighted the strength and resilience of Kurdish women in the face of oppression and violence¹⁵. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the PKK and its affiliated organizations have faced criticism and controversy, including accusations of authoritarianism and human rights abuses. The armed activities and political objectives of the movement have been highly debated, with differing critical perspectives on its military strategies¹⁶. Despite the challenges and debates surrounding PKK and YPJ, the efforts of Kurdish women have significantly contributed to raising awareness about gender equality and challenging patriarchal norms, thereby empowering women within Kurdish communities. The struggle for Kurdish self-determination and the fight for women's liberation have become interconnected, demonstrating the importance of addressing gender inequalities within broader movements for social justice and freedom¹⁷.

3. BACKGROUND SECTION

This research investigates the evolution of Kurdish women's movements, particularly in the urban districts of Kobane and Tall Abyad in Northern Syria after 2012. This focus is due to the significant level of politicization and mobilization among Syrian Kurds in recent years. Additionally, fieldwork research has been conducted in Diyarbakir and Sanandaj, in Turkey and Iran, reflecting the increasing mobility of Kurdish women fighters in the region.

The conflict between Turkey and the Kurds has its roots in the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent partitioning of the Middle East by colonial powers. A significant turning point that intensified this conflict was the military coup in Turkey in 1980. Since then, the Turkish Kurdish

2009, 581-596; P. Bedirhanoglu, et al., *Turkey's New State in the Making. Transformations in Legality, Economy and Coercion*, Bloomsbury, 2022.

¹³ Ö. Çaha, *The Kurdish Women's Movement: A Third-Wave Feminism Within the Turkish Context*, in *Turkish Studies*, No. 3, 2011, 435-449.

¹⁴ N. Chorev, S. Babb, *The Crisis of Neoliberalism and the Future of International Institutions: A Comparison of the IMF and the WTO*, in *Theory and Society*, No. 5, 2009, 459-484; K. Sheikho, *Kurdish Women Organizations: Awareness and Politics*, in *Syria Untold*, 2017, <http://www.syriauntold.com/en/2017/04/kurdish-women%CA%BCs-organizations-spreading-awareness>.

¹⁵ A.A. Holmes, *What are the Kurdish Women units fighting for in Syria?* in *The Washington Post*, December 23rd 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/12/23/what-are-the-kurdish-womens-units-fighting-for-in-syria/?utm_term=.03bfa7d6d1f9.

¹⁶ V. Federici, *Quanto è sostenibile il Rojava?*, in *Limes*, No. 7, 2017, 99-108.

¹⁷ A. Hoffman, *Breaking Through Western Media's Monolithic Image of Female Kurdish Fighters*, July 8th 2015, <https://muftah.org/breaking-through-the-monolithic-image-of-female-kurdish-fighters-in-the-western-media/#.WdJrz1u0PIV>.

movement has predominantly focused on armed struggle, while the Turkish state has concentrated on militarization to suppress any attempts at autonomy from minority groups¹⁸.

The military coup of September 12, 1980, followed by military rule until 1983, was pivotal in Turkey's political and economic history. Under military dictatorship and the governance of the Motherland Party, Turkey's official ideology evolved into an Islamocentric nationalism, blending Turkish nationalism with Sunni Islam.

This Turkish-Islamic "synthesis," which emphasized authoritarian policies and social control while leveraging cultural and religious themes, appealed greatly to Turkish politicians.

However, the ongoing political and economic crisis remained unaddressed. On one hand, the impacts of neoliberal policies and, on the other hand, the militarization linked to identity issues, particularly the Kurdish cause, contributed to the rise of political Islamism¹⁹. The military adopted a new strategy of total militarization concerning the Kurdish issue, extinguishing any hopes for an inclusive peace process.

In this increasingly critical scenario, the army intervened again on February 28, 1997, criticizing the anti-secular policies of the then-ruling welfare party, which had been backed by the US. The military apparatus also altered its previous supportive stance towards the Turkish-Islamic "synthesis," while continuing the neoliberal policies established in the 1980s and maintaining the policy of a monolithic, majoritarian democracy inherited from Turkey's right-wing conservative tradition²⁰.

From the 1970s onwards, the ambitions of leftist parties and the Kurdish cause became closely intertwined. The fighters of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) identified as anti-feudal communists before embracing Kurdish nationalism. In 1979, various Kurdish political groups left urban areas and moved into Turkish Kurdistan. The true repression began after the 1980 military coup, as the Turkish Kurdish movement sought self-organization, emphasizing the military aspects of the Kurdish issue. Among those activists who fled Turkey after the coup was Abdullah Öcalan, the historical leader of the Turkish Kurds. He found refuge among the Syrian Kurds and the Damascus authorities until 1998, after being expelled from Lebanon post-Israeli invasion and spending time in Iraq in 1983. Those who remained in Turkey endured severe repression. Since 1984, attempts to form a united resistance front have bolstered the armed struggle of Turkish Kurds, but they have also faced intensified repression from the Turkish military. In 1998, Öcalan was compelled to leave Syria, having been handed over by the then-Syrian President Hafez al-Assad due to Turkish pressure. This period marked a complex phase in the PKK's political strategy, despite Öcalan's calls for a peaceful resolution and an end to armed struggle dating back to 1999.

That same year, guerrillas were killed by the Turkish military while attempting to cross the border in accordance with ceasefire conditions. Ultimately, trust in a credible peace process unraveled, leading to guerrilla warfare between 2007 and 2008 following failed military operations targeting the PKK's headquarters in the Qandil Mountains of Northern Iraq²¹.

In 2013, a significant moment occurred with Abdullah Öcalan's letter from prison for Newroz (Kurdish New Year) and the announcement of ten points aimed at advancing the peace process. This created a temporary opportunity for improved relations with Turkish authorities. However, this progress was

¹⁸ E. Aydınli, *A Paradigmatic Shift for the Turkish Generals and an End to the Coup Era in Turkey*, in *Middle East Journal*, No. 4, 2009, 581-596.

¹⁹ P. Bedirhanoglu et al, *Turkey's New State in the Making. Transformations in Legality, Economy and Coercion*, Bloomsbury, 2022.

²⁰ E. Babacan et al, *Regime Change in Turkey. Neoliberal Authoritarianism, Islamism and Hegemony*, Routledge, 2021.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

undermined by Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) for electoral gains just before the 2015 elections, which resulted in the pro-Kurdish Left Party (HDP) entering the Turkish parliament for the first time. Following this, the formation of an HDP delegation, known as the Imrali Committee, aimed to negotiate with officials in Ankara. This process, accompanied by the ten points for the peace process—including disarmament—was announced on February 28, 2015, at the Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul by HDP deputy Sirri Surreya Önder, and facilitated a brief *détente* with the Turkish authorities.

In contrast, after the end of French colonization, Syrian Kurds living in the provinces of Jazira, Afrin, and Kobane faced exclusion from Northern Turkish Kurdistan and became isolated due to the rising Arab nationalism in neighboring areas²². Additionally, the Hasaka Census of 1962 left thousands of Syrian Kurds without citizenship, effectively excluding them from the labor market. During this period, several local pro-Kurdish left-communalist parties were established alongside 32 smaller leftist political groups. However, these groups garnered minimal support until the United States provided aid to Iraqi Kurdish fighters (*peshmerga*) between 2003 and 2005. With the 2012-2013 uprisings, Syrian Kurds joined the opposition to the Assad regime under the framework of the Damascus Declaration issued in October 2005. However, during the 2011-2012 uprisings in Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) chose not to align with either the Kurdish coalition (KNC) or the Arab opposition groups. Instead, it began implementing Abdullah Öcalan's theories of democratic autonomy²³, creating self-defense groups and organizing an armed wing known as the YPG/YPJ.

In contrast to mid-20th-century guerrilla warfare approaches (e.g., those of Mao and Guevara), Kurdish communalists offered a nonviolent critique of hierarchical and capitalist societies. In Northern Syria, popular assemblies were organized, and local councils formed that addressed ethnic and gender differences in cooperation with the PKK. Throughout its struggle in Syria, the PYD has maintained an autonomous stance, supporting neither Assad nor the rebel opposition, but adopting pragmatic and situational strategies that best served its cause²⁴. On one hand, moderate Arab opposition groups have often appeared hostile to the demands of Syrian Kurds, frequently accusing the PYD of collaborating with Assad against the Free Syrian Army (FSA). On the other hand, the PYD has accused all anti-Assad militias of coordinating with the Turkish army²⁵.

During the 1979 Revolution, also the Iranian Kurds played a significant role as key protagonists. However, with the onset of the Iran-Iraq War (1981-1989), Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini suppressed all other groups involved in the anti-Shah protests, including the Kurds and the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDP-I), which was supported by the Socialist International. The movement's leaders, Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou and Sadegh Sharafkandi, were assassinated, and thousands of Kurds lost their lives following summary trials on charges of being dissidents.

In the Kurdish regions of Iran, there is substantial support for Turkish Kurdish parties. Many Kurdish fighters have joined the Party for Free Kurdistan (PJAK) in the mountains of Abidan, especially after the KDP-I was banned. Additionally, numerous PKK bases exist in the Iranian mountains. Some

²² J. Jongerden, *Governing Kurdistan: Self-Administration in the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq and the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria*, in *Ethnopolitics*, No. 1, 2019, 61–75; H. Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria: Political parties and identity in the Middle East*, I.B. Tauris, 2015.

²³ M. Bookchin, *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy*, Verso, 2015.

²⁴ G. Acconcia, *Il conflitto curdo-turco*, Rcs Libri, 2024.

²⁵ G. Acconcia and L. Perini, *The Arab Uprisings (2011-2021): Protests, Gender and War*, Routledge, 2022.

of these fighters have gone to Syria to collaborate with the YPG and YPJ against the Islamic State. The escalation of conflict in Turkey and the anti-PKK campaign initiated by Ankara have led to increased Paskaran attacks on Kurdish fighters, making the situation more challenging. Within this context, the mobilization of Iranian Kurdish women has become a central focus of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, which began in Iran on September 16, 2022, following the tragic death of the young Kurdish woman, Mahsa Amini.

In recent decades, PKK and YPJ have shifted towards seeking a peaceful resolution²⁶ with central authorities in Ankara and Damascus. After widespread protests against compulsory headscarves have resulted in a new wave of repression against Kurdish movements by both Turkish and Iranian authorities in Iranian Kurdish provinces, the PKK made a unanimous decision on May 12th, 2025 to follow its leader’s advice and pursue a complete dissolution of the organization²⁷.

3.1 Ideology, objectives, and the concept of “Jineology”

The term “Jineology” is derived from the Kurdish word “Jin,” which means “woman.” It was coined by Abdullah Öcalan in order to refer to the study and understanding of women’s issues and the struggle for gender equality²⁸. Jineology is a concept developed within the broader Kurdish liberation movement and aims to address the root causes of women’s oppression while promoting their emancipation. According to Öcalan, Jineology is a multidimensional approach that combines social theory, historical analysis, and political practice to challenge patriarchal structures and establish a society based on gender equality²⁹.

It recognizes the interconnectedness of gender, class, and ethnic struggles and seeks to overcome the hierarchical and oppressive power relations present in contemporary society.

Jineology emphasizes women’s participation in all areas of life, including politics, economics, culture, and education. It challenges and aims to transform traditional gender roles, norms, and practices that perpetuate women’s subordination and discrimination³⁰. Through education, awareness-raising, and organization, Jineology seeks to empower women, promote their agency, and provide them with the tools to confront and overcome the barriers they face. Within the Kurdish movement, Jineology has significantly impacted the role of women, both in the armed struggle and in society at large³¹. It has led to the establishment of women’s councils, cooperatives, and educational institutions that provide platforms for women’s voices, decision-making, and empowerment.

²⁶ S. Žižek, *Abdullah Öcalan is the Mandela of our time*, 2025, https://open.substack.com/pub/slavoj/p/abdullah-ocalan-is-the-mandelaof?utm_source=share&utm_medium=android&r=rqgxi.

²⁷ B. Mc Kernan, *Why has PKK leader called on group to dissolve – and why does it matter?*, in *The Guardian*, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/27/why-has-pkk-leader-called-on-group-to-dissolve-and-why-does-it-matter-turkey-abdullah-ocalan>.

²⁸ M. L. Düzgün, *Jineology* in *Journal of Middle east women’s studies*, 2016, 284-287; H. Cetinkaya, *Justice, rights-politics, and the coloniality of knowledge production: critical lessons from Rojava and the Jineoloji movement towards liberating life*, in *The International Journal of Human Rights*, latest articles, 2025, 1-26.

²⁹ M.L. Düzgün, *Jineology*, cit.

³⁰ A. Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism*, Transmedia Publishing Ltd., International Initiative Edition, 2011.

³¹ Ö. Çaha, *The Kurdish Women’s Movement: A Third-Wave Feminism Within the Turkish Context*, in *Turkish Studies*, No. 3, 2011, 435-449; D. Dirik, *Feminism and the Kurdish Freedom Movement*, in *Kurdish Question*, 2015 <http://kurdishquestion.com/oldarticle.php?aid=feminism-and-the-kurdish-freedom-movement> (edited version of the presentation *Dissecting Capitalist Modernity—Building Democratic Confederalism*, Conference in Hamburg, Hambourg University, April 3-5, 2015); D. Dirik, *The Kurdish Women’s Movement: History, Theory, Practice*, Pluto Press, 2022.

Women's participation in the armed branches of the Kurdish movement, such as the Women's Defense Units (YPJ) in Northern Syria, is also influenced by the principles and ideology of Jineology³². Jineology has gained attention not only within the Kurdish movement but also in broader feminist and academic circles³³. Its focus on women's agency, self-defense, and collective organization has inspired discussions and debates on women's liberation and gender equality³⁴. However, it is important to note that Jineology is a concept associated with the PKK and its ideological framework, and interpretations and applications may vary across different contexts and perspectives. Overall, Jineology represents a comprehensive approach to addressing women's issues and promoting gender equality within the Kurdish liberation movement³⁵. It emphasizes the necessity of understanding and challenging power dynamics and oppression to create a more equitable and just society for all.

Additionally, the armed struggle waged by Kurdish female fighters posed significant challenges for the women's and feminist movements within the organization³⁶. The movement has faced repression and violence, which has directly affected female activists. Female fighters have been imprisoned, killed, or subjected to various forms of violence in Turkey. The pervasive climate of repression and conflict can make it difficult for women's and feminist movements to operate freely and advance their goals³⁷.

Furthermore, the focus on the YPJ's fight for Kurdish autonomy can overshadow the attention given to its feminist goals. In both internal and external discussions about the YPJ, the focus is often on the political struggle rather than specific goals for gender equality³⁸. This can lead to limited recognition and support for the women's and feminist movements within the organization, hindering their progress and impact.

Overcoming deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, navigating the complexities of armed struggle, and combating the overshadowing of feminist goals are all obstacles that require persistent efforts to achieve lasting change and gender equality within Kurdish society and the broader context³⁹. The Kurdish women movement has played a significant role in challenging and transforming patriarchal structures within Kurdish society. By addressing gender inequalities and advocating for women's rights, the movement has sought to dismantle oppressive norms and empower Kurdish women. The key strategies employed by the movement to promote gender equality and women's rights include grassroots mobilization, education, and self-defense initiatives.

Grassroots mobilization has been a central strategy used by the women's movement within both YPJ and PKK. Through organizing and empowering women at the community level, the movement creates spaces for women to voice their concerns, participate in decision-making processes, and challenge gender-based violence and discrimination⁴⁰. This strategy aimed to foster solidarity among women and raised awareness of women's issues, ultimately challenging patriarchal power structures within Kurdish society.

³² M.L. Düzgün, *Jineology*, cit.

³³ M. Casier and J. Jongerden, *Understanding today's Kurdish movement: Leftist Heritage, martyrdom, democracy and gender*, in *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, No. 14, 2012.

³⁴ S. Ataoğlu, *Kurdish women's movement*, Research report, Marmara University, 2014.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ A. Novellis, *The Rise of Feminism in the PKK: Ideology or Strategy?*, in *The Journal of Critical Global South Studies*, No. 1, 2018, 115-133.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ H. Çağlayan, *Women in the Kurdish Movement. Mothers, Comrades, Goddesses*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2020.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ I. Kaser, *The Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement: Gender, Body Politics and Militant Femininities*, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

Education has been another crucial strategy used by the women's movement. The establishment of women's academies and training camps by the YPJ in Rojava has provided Kurdish women with opportunities for education, skill development, and critical thinking. By promoting feminist consciousness and challenging traditional gender roles, these educational initiatives have played a significant role in transforming societal attitudes and norms that perpetuate discrimination against women. Furthermore, the inclusion of women in armed resistance has been a notable strategy employed by the women's movement within the YPJ. By actively participating as fighters alongside male comrades, women challenge traditional gender roles and break the notion that armed struggle is exclusively male territory⁴¹. This inclusion not only expands women's participation but also challenges societal perceptions of women's capabilities and roles within Kurdish society.

The contributions and impacts of the women's movements on the Kurdish society have been multifaceted. Within the context of armed resistance, the participation of women as fighters has expanded their roles and challenged gender norms, inspiring generations of Kurdish women to join the struggle for their rights and the broader fight for Kurdish liberation⁴².

In terms of social transformation, the women's movement within the YPJ has made significant contributions. The establishment of women's cooperatives has provided economic empowerment and financial independence for Kurdish women, breaking free from traditional gender roles and fostering solidarity among women⁴³.

Additionally, the movement has raised awareness about gender equality and women's rights, challenging patriarchal structures within Kurdish society⁴⁴. These contributions intersect with broader feminist movements by providing valuable examples of women's agency and activism, contributing to the global discourse on women's empowerment and social justice. The Kurdish women movement has been instrumental in challenging patriarchal structures, promoting gender equality, and empowering Kurdish women. Through grassroots mobilizations, education, and inclusion in armed resistance, the movement has made significant contributions to Kurdish society, both within the context of armed resistance and in terms of broader social transformation. These contributions intersect with broader feminist movements by providing insight and experiences that contribute to global efforts for gender equality and social justice.

Thus, it is possible to affirm that the Kurdish women's movements are based on an ideology that combines elements of Kurdish nationalism, socialism, and feminism⁴⁵. These movements believe that the liberation of women is inseparable from the broader struggle for Kurdish liberation Öcalan 2013⁴⁶. They actively promote gender equality, women's rights, and social justice, prioritizing grassroots mobilization, education, and self-defense as essential strategies⁴⁷.

⁴¹ I. Kaser, *The Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement*, cit.

⁴² N. Al-Ali, and I. Käser, *Beyond Feminism? Jineoloji and the Kurdish women's freedom movement*, Cambridge University Press, 2020.

⁴³ J. Jongerden J. and G. Kaya, *Gender and Identity Construction: Women of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey*, Brill, 2012, 173-195.

⁴⁴ I. Kaser, *The Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement*, cit.

⁴⁵ D. A. Snow, *Framing and social movements*, in D. A. Snow, D. della Porta, B. Klandermans and D. McAdam (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013; N. Al-Ali and I. Käser, *Beyond Feminism? Jineoloji and the Kurdish women's freedom movement*, Cambridge University Press, 2020.

⁴⁶ A. Öcalan, *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution*, International Initiative Publishing, 2013.

⁴⁷ N. Al-Ali and I. Käser, *Beyond Feminism?*, cit.

Their objectives include challenging traditional gender norms, increasing women's political participation, and eliminating violence against women. At the heart of these movements is the conviction that women's liberation and Kurdish liberation are deeply intertwined. They emphasize that achieving true freedom for the Kurdish people requires addressing gender inequality and dismantling the oppressive structures that marginalize women⁴⁸. By advocating for gender equality, these movements seek to ensure that women have equal opportunities and rights in all aspects of life. Grassroots mobilization is a crucial aspect of their ideology and strategy. They focus on organizing and empowering women within the community, encouraging active participation and collective action⁴⁹.

Through community involvement, these movements aim to raise awareness about women's issues, build solidarity, and foster a supportive environment for women's rights activism. Education also plays a vital role in their approach. They strive to inform both women and men about gender equality, feminism, and the significance of women's rights. By challenging traditional gender roles and promoting feminist awareness, they seek to transform societal attitudes and norms that perpetuate discrimination against women.

In the case of Rojava, the action of the women's organization called Kongreya Star, is essential for understanding the feminist approach to establishing peace, which requires actively rebuilding social relationships. Founded in 2005 as Yekitiya Star (Union of the Star), in February 2016, on the occasion of its sixth congress, it was renamed Kongreya Star (Congress of the Star). Women in Rojava engaged in social, political, or military activities are also members of Kongreya Star, and their aim is to politically educate the entire society. To this end, they periodically visit women in their homes to involve them and make them aware of the revolution and its principles, offering them training courses on the theme of communes and councils, and distributing newspapers, both in Arabic and Kurdish, containing articles on the history of women and analysis of the so-called "democratic family" and any new laws passed on family issues. The women of Kongreya Star also investigate and document cases of domestic violence, cases in which husbands abandon their wives and do not pay alimony and child support, and cases of early marriage⁵⁰.

The Mala Jin, or Women's Houses, also work on this issue. Often housed in the same building as Kongreya Star, women can go there to seek protection and help and to discuss their problems. A fundamental turning point was the approval, in October 2014, of the Women's Law, consisting of 26 articles, written by Kongreya Star and approved by Desteya Jin, the office of the Executive Council dedicated to women. This measure abolished honor killings, i.e., the substantial right of a husband to kill his wife accused of adultery, forced marriage and marriage with minors, marriage with blood relatives, polygamy, and reparatory marriage. It also abolished discrepancies between men and women in terms of inheritance, made it possible to divorce within a month and remarry within six months, and allowed children over the age of fifteen to decide independently which parent to live with⁵¹. In this sense, it is clear that Jineoloji is not merely "women's studies" but an alternative knowledge system developed

⁴⁸ S. Ataoğlu, *Kurdish women's movement*, 2014, cit.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ M. Knapp, A. Flach and E. Ayboga, *Revolution in Rojava. Democratic autonomy and women's liberation in Syrian Kurdistan*, Pluto Press, 2016, 118-122.

⁵¹ B. Güneş, *The Multilayered Nature of Peace Building. Peace and Democratic Society Building from a Jineoloji Perspective*, 2025, <https://jineoloji.eu/en/2025/12/08/3-the-multilayered-nature-of-peace-building-peace-and-democratic-society-building-from-a-jineoloji-perspective/>.

against the totalitarian and male-dominated structure of modern society. It proposes the reconstruction of knowledge on historical, mythological, philosophical, sociological and ethical foundations. So it is in this framework of action that self-defense is an important goal of these movements. They recognize the necessity of protecting women from violence and actively work to eradicate various forms of violence against women, including domestic violence, honor killings, and systemic oppression⁵². By promoting self-defense and self-empowerment, they aim to create safer environments for women and confront the structures that enable gender-based violence⁵³.

4. THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

4.1 Methodology

This research investigates the evolution of Kurdish women's movements, particularly in the urban districts of Kobane and Tall Abyad in Northern Syria. This focus is due to the significant level of politicization and mobilization among Syrian Kurds in recent years. Additionally, some fieldwork has been conducted in Diyarbakir and Sanandaj, in Turkey and Iran, reflecting the increasing mobility of Kurdish women fighters in the region.

In order to select YPJ fighters for the interviews, higher-ranking commanders served as gatekeepers. Our first interaction was with YPG Commander Diane at the Tall Abyad frontline in June 2015, just days before the liberation of the town from IS supporters. He had spent his youth in Lebanon and was in contact with Abdullah Öcalan during Öcalan's exile to Syria (1980–1998). He had previously served as a YPG commander during the 2014 battle for the liberation of Kobane. He actively contributed to the selection process of the female interviewees.

Shortly after, we met YPJ Commander Rangin at the YPJ headquarters in Kobane, also in June 2015, after the liberation of Tall Abyad. Rangin joined the YPJ in 2013 and had previously managed a local cooperative focused on women's rights.

In the initial stages, both commanders were instrumental in organizing the interviews. They both guaranteed safe access to the fieldwork research for the interviewers. Their role was to select female members of the YPJ, regardless of their prior involvement in grassroots movements, using a 'snowball-sampling' technique. This allowed participants to recommend others for the study, which aimed to analyze the evolution of local social movements before and after the IS occupation of Kobane in 2014, the reasons and extent of mobilization and demobilization within these movements in the context of peace and cooperation with other opposition groups, the levels of political participation, the dynamics between male and female group members, and the transformation of civilian movements into a paramilitary and subsequently a fully armed force. At the conclusion of the interviews, we conducted debriefing sessions with the gatekeepers to discuss group dynamics and the findings from the sessions.

The interviewees expressed security concerns about their participation, leading to the decision to

⁵² N. Begikhani, H. Wendelmoet, N. Weiss, *Theorising women and war in Kurdistan: A feminist and critical perspective*, in *Kurdish studies*, No. 1, 2018, 18-24.

⁵³ V. Dean, *Kurdish female fighters: the Western depiction of YPI combatants in Rojava*, in *Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation*, No. 1, 2019.

anonymize all participants, each of whom was assigned an identification number. The interviews were held in distinct sessions at the Tall Abyad frontline, the YPJ headquarters in Kobane, as well as in Diyarbakir and Sanandaj. From the outset, there was significant interest among the female fighters. However, several challenges arose later in the research process. Issues included access to the field during combat, scheduling around soldiers' daily shifts, concerns about landmines, and the Turkish authorities' aggressive refusal to grant official permissions to enter Syria. Initially, access to both male and female fighters was mediated by unit commanders who encouraged their full participation in the research, despite the ongoing battle against IS. Over time, the interviewees became independently involved in the study.

Thus, this research is based on 47 semi-structured interviews with Syrian female participants, comprising younger individuals (24) and elders (23), including Kurdish fighters (28) and non-fighters (19). The interviews, conducted in English and Kurdish with the help of a translator, involved members of the PKK (14), YPJ (Women's Protection Units - Yekîneyên Parastina Jin) (25), and other groups, such as the Democratic Union Party and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (8). The research was conducted between 2014 and 2019 in various localities: Syria (Kobane and Tall Abyad), Turkey (Diyarbakir), Iran (Sanandaj).

5. FINDINGS

5.1 Hierarchy and organization

In the context of the war in Northern Syria, voluntary networks of self-defense groups, forged in an increasingly hostile environment of political participation, evolved into a more structured military force to confront the growing emergence of jihadist fighters. This process entailed a stronger level of hierarchical organization and the institutionalization of daily practices, at both the military and civilian levels, that would probably never be needed in a less chaotic context. These soldiers were working to manage and defend Kobane and its surroundings, sometimes with similar tasks or duties that overlapped with the security and political apparatus. Commander Diane confirmed this when he defined his unit as «soldiers for the government of Kobane and the protection of the border»⁵⁴.

This situation determined the need for a very structured division of duties and a continuous mobilization of the local Popular Committees that still work simultaneously as service providers and self-defense groups. For example, groups of armed and unarmed men and women have been present at the crossroads of small alleys, helping ordinary citizens reach their homes during the night due to the almost complete lack of electricity. These often are the *beremî*: nonprofessional volunteers in plain clothes, involved in Popular Committees, and protecting their villages, towns, or neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the YPG/YPJ are male and female professional fighters in military uniforms engaged in armed attacks to protect their borders. *Asayîş* is the internal security or police, made up of both men and women, dressed in military uniforms, separate from the YPJ. «First of all, there are local self-defense units (*beremî*), then professional fighters, and finally resistance units. Often, men leave self-defense units to join the YPG/YPJ», as Commander Diane explained⁵⁵.

⁵⁴ Interviewee 1, Tall Abyad, 2015.

⁵⁵ Interviewee 1, Tall Abyad, 2015.

As with many female fighters, Commander Rangin was not involved in the Popular Committees or within the internal police units (*Aşayış*) before joining the YPJ. «I joined the YPJ initially at a professional level. Many others began as *heremi*. I did not work within the Popular Committees before joining the YPJ», a female YPJ fighter explained⁵⁶. The actual experiences of the other fighters within this unit were different, as confirmed by our interviewees. Some participants never reached professional status, and they still are part of a unit as local self-defense volunteers, while others were *heremi* before joining the YPJ: «*Not all of us will be YPJ for all their lives. I began as a person in my neighborhood defending and controlling our area [heremi]*»⁵⁷.

On the other hand, Commander Rangin was involved in the Popular Committees before joining the YPJ: «I have been working for Rojava before joining the YPJ»⁵⁸. Rangin defined herself as a revolutionary: «I am ready to fight everywhere. I am a woman of the revolution»⁵⁹. Given her long training with the PKK's commanders in Lebanon, she defended the PKK and its principles rooted in women's liberation: «The PKK fought for land and freedom. They fight for the concept of freedom for women and the human being»⁶⁰.

Regarding the composition and age of the members of this YPJ unit, it is mixed in terms of ethnic origin, although Kurdish fighters have often been accused of excluding other ethnic groups (Graeber 2017)⁶¹. These soldiers are very young, both men and women, and unmarried. After joining YPG/YPJ, they cannot marry each other. This is not the case at the *heremi* level: «There are both Kurds and Arabs. We fight together [men and women]. Everything happens in friendship, but the soldiers cannot marry. For women fighters, to be part of the YPJ is more important than marriage. However, the local components [*heremi*], as nonprofessional self-defense groups, are often married people»⁶².

Especially within the female units, the evolution of these self-defense groups has not necessarily led to the formation of a conventional army: «We are like every other army; we depend on the ideology of Abdullah Öcalan. But we are not only an army. We are a defensive army»⁶³.

However, it is still problematic to state exactly at what stage of the Syrian war these groups changed their nature and transformed themselves from nonviolent defenders into armed defensive units: «At the beginning of the uprisings, we did not carry weapons. We depended only on the support of ordinary people, not on weapons»⁶⁴, as a female PKK fighter explained.

This often happened when the Syrian regime withdrew from the northern regions between 2012 and 2013. During this period, the commanders of the YPG/YPJ officially announced their armed struggle. As Commander Rangin recalls: «After the liberation of northern Syria by the Syrian regime, we took many weapons. Everything changed. At the end of 2012, we announced the beginning of our armed struggle. Later, in the Jazira and Kobane provinces, we seized weapons. Only in 2014, we received several Kalashnikovs from abroad, while some foreigners joined our units»⁶⁵.

⁵⁶ Interviewee 4, Kobane, 2015.

⁵⁷ Interviewee 5, Kobane, 2015.

⁵⁸ Interviewee 2, Kobane, 2015.

⁵⁹ Interviewee 2, Kobane, 2015.

⁶⁰ Interviewee 2, Kobane, 2015.

⁶¹ In October 2015, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were founded. They represent a multi-ethnic and multi-religious alliance that includes Kurds, Arabs, Assyrian, Armenian, Turkmen, and Circassian fighters.

⁶² Interviewee 2, Kobane, 2015.

⁶³ Interviewee 5, Kobane, 2015.

⁶⁴ Interviewee 2, Kobane, 2015.

⁶⁵ Interviewee 2, Kobane, 2015.

In the initial participation of local volunteers in self-defense groups, the concept of legitimate defense was vital. «If someone attacks you, you have to attack them for legitimate defense, positive or active defense. If the attacks intensify, we intensify the attacks, too. The target is to protect ourselves before the enemy attacks», a YPJ female fighter explained⁶⁶.

This seems to be not only a military aim but also a political one for these YPJ members. For example, when these soldiers liberated Tall Abyad from IS (2015), they lifted the flag of their army as a symbol of political and military power in Kobane Canton. «Sometimes we attack militarily, but we resist politically. The political and military defenses overlap», as a YPJ fighter explained⁶⁷.

Most of the interviewees were politically or emotionally involved in the Syrian civil war before joining the YPJ. It seems that if, at an initial stage, they joined local committees only intending to protect their homes from a lack of security, following the emergence of IS and its permanent occupation of Kobane, the same individuals would be highly motivated to be part of the armed struggle. Some were motivated by the killing of a relative by the jihadists: «I was a member of the democratic youth of PYD before joining the YPJ. My mother works for a local institute that supports the families of martyrs», a YPJ fighter highlighted⁶⁸.

«One of my brothers is a martyr», a YPJ fighter said⁶⁹. «I came from Lebanon to Syria when I found out about the IS attacks», another YPJ fighter explained⁷⁰. «I worked for PYD before joining YPJ», a female fighter explained⁷¹. «The PKK is expanding and becoming stronger in the region. And this scares the imperialist forces»⁷², said a YPJ fighter. «They do not want the Kurds to be free and autonomous, but to remain as slaves», said a YPJ activist who moved from Rojava to fight in Iraqi Kurdistan after the Turkish bombing of the PKK (2015)⁷³.

The main reason to be part of the fight against the jihadists appeared to be to protect their land from IS: «IS is our biggest problem»⁷⁴, a female PKK fighter said. «We fight to protect our land. We fight against IS to free our land and for our rights. This does not mean fighting only for the Kurds, but for the freedom of everybody»⁷⁵, a YPJ female fighter explained⁷⁶. «I fight because I want my family back. They escaped to Turkey after the IS attacks»⁷⁷, a YPJ fighter stated.

However, this has nothing to do with religious motivation: «They [IS] do things in the name of Islam, but this is not right. No religion says to shoot another man. They are not humans; they are monsters. They do not represent Islam»⁷⁸, commented a YPJ female fighter.

The Assad regime did not have a better reputation among these YPJ soldiers, although they were more careful in their judgments: «He [Assad] was controlling us»⁷⁹, a YPJ fighter stated. Regarding fe-

⁶⁶ Interviewee 23, Kobane, 2015.

⁶⁷ Interviewee 24, Tall Abyad, 2015.

⁶⁸ Interviewee 25, Kobane, 2015.

⁶⁹ Interviewee 37, Tall Abyad, 2015.

⁷⁰ Interviewee 33, Tall Abyad, 2015.

⁷¹ Interviewee 38, Tall Abyad, 2015.

⁷² Interviewee 39, Tall Abyad, 2015.

⁷³ Interviewee 40, Diyarbakir, 2016.

⁷⁴ Interviewee 41, Tall Abyad, 2015.

⁷⁵ Interviewee 42, Tall Abyad, 2015.

⁷⁶ Interviewee 39, Tall Abyad, 2015.

⁷⁷ Interviewee 43, Tall Abyad, 2015.

⁷⁸ Interviewee 18, Kobane, 2015.

⁷⁹ Interviewee 15, Kobane, 2015.

male fighters, they seemed to have as their first objective the defense of their people and women in more general terms: «We fight to protect our people»⁸⁰, a YPJ fighter explained. «I fight for the Kurdish people and the martyrs»⁸¹, a YPJ female fighter said.

Many of those YPJ fighters considered IS and Turkey to be allies: «The jihadists are monsters, and Turkey had a great responsibility to help them»⁸², stated a female PKK fighter. «IS is the first enemy of women»⁸³, a YPJ fighter explained. «In Shingal, the jihadists were so aggressive against women; it is our duty to fight them»⁸⁴, a PKK fighter said. As a YPJ soldier added: «After three months of training, I can fight all over the Kurdish region. I am fighting for the freedom of my land»⁸⁵.

Many of these female fighters felt abandoned by their so-called foreign allies. For example, the commander of this YPJ unit did not consider the support given at that stage by the airstrikes of the US-led coalition as effective. As Commander Rangin stated: «If the coalition would like to bomb a cigarette, they do. But if we ask them to bomb an IS target, they often do not listen to our requests»⁸⁶.

However, at the lower level, the interviewees considered the US strikes helpful while highlighting that the real enemies were the Turks: «They [the US-led coalition] are helping us»⁸⁷, a YPJ fighter said. «Our [Kurds' biggest enemies are the Turks»⁸⁸, a PKK fighter explained. Turkey supports IS. They opened the borders to let the IS fighters escape when we attacked them»⁸⁹, a female fighter affirmed. «The US coalition is helping, but they could do much more»⁹⁰, a YPJ fighter said.

However, the engagement of the YPJ soldiers did not end with the liberation of Rojava from IS after the liberation of Raqqa (2017). «During and after the liberation of Kobane, we had to free and control the townhouse by house, road by road. Jihadists were always 10 miles from us. Later, we have been involved in the liberation of other parts of the canton to connect it with Jazira Province»⁹¹, commander Rangin explained.

Finally, some of those female fighters appeared to be willing to continue as civilians, and others as combatants in different mobilized areas, such as Rojhalat (Iranian Kurdistan). «I will be a combatant after the war, too. I will work for my town and my country»⁹², a YPJ fighter asserted. «I joined YPJ, but this will not continue until the end of my life, as I am not a professional soldier»⁹³, a YPJ fighter highlighted. «I strongly support the ongoing fight of the Kurdish Iranian women within the 'Women, life, freedom' movement»⁹⁴, a PJAK female activist stated.

Nonetheless, all of them will pursue the defense of their political behavior as imbued by Öcalan's books and experiences. «Only Öcalan's philosophy brought us to this level. He allowed us to know who

⁸⁰ Interviewee 16, Kobane, 2015.

⁸¹ Interviewee 17, Kobane, 2015.

⁸² Interviewee 6, Kobane, 2015.

⁸³ Interviewee 7, Diyarbakir, 2016.

⁸⁴ Interviewee 8, Diyarbakir, 2016.

⁸⁵ Interviewee 9, Diyarbakir, 2016.

⁸⁶ Interviewee 2, Kobane, 2015.

⁸⁷ Interviewee 11, Tall Abyad, 2015.

⁸⁸ Interviewee 12, Tall Abyad, 2016.

⁸⁹ Interviewee 13, Diyarbakir, 2016.

⁹⁰ Interviewee 14, Diyarbakir, 2016.

⁹¹ Interviewee 2, Kobane, 2015.

⁹² Interviewee 29, Kobane, 2016.

⁹³ Interviewee 38, Kobane, 2019.

⁹⁴ Interviewee 44, Sanandaj, 2019.

we were. He made us understand our culture»⁹⁵, a PKK female fighter noted. «Öcalan's theory is for all nationalities»⁹⁶, a YPJ fighter said.

5.2 Women as Fighters

Despite critically assessing the militarization of Kurdish women in Northern Syria, as a result of the interviews, female fighters (YPJ) in Rojava appeared to be very well trained by their supervisors, as confirmed by Commander Rangin: «The more educated women often enter directly as professional combatants. In meetings, we spend time discussing and self-criticizing. To fight, women must know why and what to fight for. For this reason, we begin with ideological and academic preparation, because every YPJ fighter must know her self»⁹⁷. However, according to the commander of this YPJ unit, there are more men than women working as local volunteers (*beremi*): «There are more men than women at the first level of involvement. Women usually join at a professional level»⁹⁸. Therefore, there is a very noticeable participation of women, compared to Popular Committees in other MENA countries, within both self-defense groups and resistance units. They are all imbued with feminism and are highly politicized⁹⁹.

As Commander Rangin explained describing daily practices of women's participation in a context of war: «We depend on ourselves and benefit from the experiences of everyone. Women at home protect the essentiality of women. Our fight is as women (no matter if Kurdish, Syrian or European) and for a nationality that identifies with democratic autonomy and is opposed to the concept of state. During the fighting for Shingal, for example, women went to save other women. At Til Temir, the YPJ fighters went to save Arab women. We went to save dozens of captive women in villages occupied by IS»¹⁰⁰. «We stand for feminism, gender equality, and workers' rights», a female HDP militant highlighted¹⁰¹.

According to the interviewees, the equality between men and women fighters is an essential part of the political formation of the combatants, as well as their sexual awareness. «Love is essential; it is part of everyone's instinct. The philosophy of death is a way of life. In past times, everyone knew death could come quickly; now it is different, and this disconnects us from nature and does not allow us to accept the idea of death. Religion exploits death: if you are a martyr, you go to heaven. For us, love and death are in contradiction», Commander Rangin explained¹⁰².

This discourse is closely related to an often-idealized military and communitarian lifestyle: «When we discuss this, it is to search for a new military, communitarian and quotidian life. Women are not meant to have only children. We want to reform and renew the community. Thus, we also talk a lot about sexuality»¹⁰³. According to Rangin, this approach does not result in conflicts with the hierarchy or with male commanders: «Some men do not accept that their commanders may be women. If in this context women are soldiers, it is not in vain. We have to fight against the concept that many male comrades have

⁹⁵ Interviewee 47, Kobane, 2015.

⁹⁶ Interviewee 45, Kobane, 2015.

⁹⁷ Interviewee 2, Kobane, 2015.

⁹⁸ Interviewee 2, Kobane, 2015.

⁹⁹ M. Knapp, A. Flack and E. Ayaboga, *Revolution in Rojava*, cit.

¹⁰⁰ Interviewee 2, Kobane, 2015.

¹⁰¹ Interviewee 3, Diyarbakir, 2015.

¹⁰² Interviewee 2, Kobane, 2015.

¹⁰³ Interviewee 2, Kobane, 2015.

of women. When we talked about this with a YPG soldier, it often happened that he changed his mind and understood that the men's units exist because the YPJ exists and not vice versa»¹⁰⁴.

As confirmed by our interviewees, the main difference between men and women fighters, as YPG/YPJ soldiers, is that the former appeared to be more educated, some of them having completed secondary school or wanting to study at university after leaving the YPJ. The YPJ's headquarters in Kobane were very well organized and clean compared to male units. Some of these women fighters were previously married and later decided to join the YPJ: «Sometimes we are forced to refuse the request to join the unit of female fighters because some women wanted to leave their children alone to be part of our group. In the local Women's Houses [Mala Jin], there are crèches and other facilities for the children of the fighters. Many couples, both men and women, are fighting in their respective units while there are families in which men are ordinary workers and women are fighters»¹⁰⁵.

In addition, women who wear the hijab are also accepted: «If she [a potential YPJ fighter] is convinced to wear it, we do not complain. Many YPJ fighters wear the hijab. In the Commanders' Council, women are wearing the hijab»¹⁰⁶.

Therefore, according to the interviewees, women are the key to understanding the peculiar system of both political management and security defense in Kobane. As Commander Rangin highlighted: «The YPJ is not a military auxiliary. Many of our female fighters have been blown skywards by mines; they are commanders (the majority of them) of male units. There is plenty of autonomy regarding this. We have mixed battalions; in almost all battalions, there are co-commanders. In every army, men attack without considering the values of this community, while women, as fighters, give up doing so. For example, if Kurdish fighters do not commit ethnic cleansing after the capture of a city, this is mainly because our influence prevents errors from being committed»¹⁰⁷.

6. CONCLUSION

This research focuses on the Kurdish women movements in Northern Syria, which has provided an unprecedented platform for women to challenge traditional gender norms and actively participate in all aspects of Kurdish society. Kurdish women have historically been central to both armed and unarmed organizations, particularly during significant upheavals and military campaigns.

This was especially evident after 2012 in the context of the war in Northern Syria, where women engaged in grassroots mobilizations and participated in armed struggles to protect their neighborhoods against the growing threat of jihadist fighters. From the PKK to the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) and other regional Kurdish groups, women's movements have played an essential role in paramilitary organizations. These women's groups were crucial in forming armed entities after the Syrian regime withdrew from Northern Syria in 2012, as commanders of these units officially announced their armed struggle.

This process led to a stronger hierarchical organization and the ongoing institutionalization of practices at both military and civilian levels, marked by significant women's participation within self-defense

¹⁰⁴ Interviewee 2, Kobane, 2015.

¹⁰⁵ Interviewee 2, Kobane, 2015.

¹⁰⁶ Interviewee 2, Kobane, 2015.

¹⁰⁷ Interviewee 2, Kobane, 2015.

groups and resistance units. Initially, the female fighters joined local committees to protect their homes due to security concerns, but they later became increasingly motivated to take part in the armed struggle, especially with the rise of ISIS fighters and their persistent occupation of Northern Syria.

By examining the women's movement as a long-term phenomenon in Syria, but also in Turkey, and Iran, we gain a clearer understanding of the importance of women's participation in mass uprisings, which were responses to military repression of peaceful and violent protests by grassroots organizations.

After 2012, the context of war also emphasized the growth of hierarchical structures in reaction to the outbreak of full-scale war in Syria and recent mobilizations in Iran. The women's and feminist movements in Rojava are rooted in a framework that combines Kurdish nationalism, socialism, and feminism. Their ideologies and objectives focus on achieving gender equality, women's rights, and social justice through grassroots mobilization, education, and self-defense. They are dedicated to challenging traditional gender roles, increasing women's political participation, and eliminating violence against women as integral parts of a broader struggle for Kurdish liberation, long before the formation of the YPJ.

In conclusion, the Kurdish women movement in Northern Syria has recently evolved significantly, influenced by a rich historical context and ideological objectives centered on equality and liberation, embodied in the concept of Jineology. Despite facing criticism for being militaristic and exclusionary due to their armed activities, the women's movement has made remarkable contributions to the Kurdish struggle and the newly formed organizations in Kurdish provinces. Their strategies have combined both armed resistance and social mobilization, showcasing the resilience and determination of Kurdish women.

The organizational structure of the women's movement within the YPJ is characterized by its autonomous and inclusive nature, allowing women to actively participate and lead. However, the movement faces numerous challenges, including patriarchal norms, social resistance, and opposition from jihadists and oppressive regimes. Despite these obstacles, the women's movement within the YPJ appeared to persevere, inspiring and empowering women not only in the Kurdish context but also serving as a source of inspiration for women's movements worldwide. Their ongoing struggle for gender equality and liberation remains an integral part of the larger Kurdish movement's pursuit of self-determination and social justice.

Future research will further analyze the impact of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) takeover in Syria in 2024 and Abdullah Öcalan's statement regarding the disarmament and dissolution of the PKK in 2025 on female Kurdish mobilizations in the country and the broader MENA region.