

Military training offers Yazidi women chance to fight back

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*(The Christian Science Monitor)* With the setting sun turning mountain slopes and dry fields into amber, a Yazidi girl struggled to launch a rocket propelled grenade.

Her superior and classmates egged her on, but the exercise was sapping the strength of Tolhenden, a stocky 15-year-old with a gold tooth.

“Steady, steady—fix your target,” her instructor said from a short but safe distance.

The first rocket failed to launch. When she tired and lowered her weapon, the instructor rushed over to adjust her rocket and posture. He switched the missile, imparted a few more words of encouragement, and retreated as his pupil braced to fire.

A deafening bang and swoosh were the sounds of success.

“I can’t hear anything anymore! My head hurts,” shouted Tolhenden, scrambling down a dirt mound, clearing the way for two other Yazidi women nested on rooftops to unleash their own salvos. The adrenaline rush immediately wiped out any trace of fatigue. “I want to do it again,” she told her fellow trainees. “It’s easy.”

This is what the military training of Yazidi women and girls looks like today in the ghost villages of Sinjar, the northern Iraqi mountain where a year ago the so-called Islamic State’s brutal massacres of this small religious minority galvanized the world’s attention and set in motion the creation of a U.S.-led anti-IS coalition.

The training, under the supervision of veteran PKK-linked Kurdish fighters, holds out to the Yazidis the possibility of revenge for the IS massacres of their men and enslavement of their women and girls. But it also offers the opportunity for revolutionary change in traditional Yazidi society.

A year ago it was fighters from the PKK with the help of its Syrian Kurdish offshoots who opened a humanitarian corridor connecting Syria to Iraq that helped save thousands of Yazidi lives. In December, a new force was established: the Sinjar Resistance Units.

### **PKK leader's egalitarian views**

All these factions follow the ideology of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, whose egalitarian views have translated into combat roles for Kurdish women. Engaged in a protracted conflict with Turkey, the separatist PKK—shorthand for the People's Protection Units—is considered a terrorist organization by many governments, including the U.S.

But in Sinjar, the PKK and its affiliates are seen as nothing short of saviors. They are viewed far more favorably than the Iraqi Kurdish government's Peshmerga fighters, who abandoned Yazidis to their fate but now constitute the largest and best-equipped force in the area. The Peshmerga, in a bid to boost their image, recently launched their own training program for Yazidi women.

"Many genocides have happened to the Yazidi people because they didn't have a special force to protect themselves," said Rokan, a member of the Sinjar Resistance Units, or YBS, from Sinjar City, where Kurdish forces are still struggling to rout the IS. "We are seven brothers and sisters, and we have all joined YBS with our father's blessing."

Rokan is training in the abandoned village of Kerke, a cluster of mud houses where rock piles mark where IS left behind explosives. Not all the trainees and fighters are Yazidis, although YBS was established with that community in mind. Some are Kurds from Iran, Turkey, Syria, and other parts of Iraq.

While the recruitment of Yazidi men raises no eyebrows, the recruitment of women and girls has caused more of a splash. "In the beginning it was so hard for mothers and fathers to be separated from their daughters," said Yekbun Basret, a Kurd from Turkey, overseeing co-ed weapons training. "Now they understand the girls are fighting for their land and to save Yazidi lives."

### **'Revolution' for Yazidi women**

Rapperin, a Kurd from the northern Syrian town of Afrin who has fought all over the region, oversaw the first phase of the women's ideological and military training. The program was designed to ease the transition into military life and dismantle the patriarchal principles governing their communities.

Yazidis practice a secretive religion with pre-Islamic roots. Members have to be born into the faith, which holds that God entrusted the world to seven angels. Sunni militants such as IS view them as infidels and devil worshipers, a reference to the so-called peacock angel that Yazidis pray to.

“A Yazidi woman leaving home is a revolution,” said Rapperin, a graying but fit matron with smiling eyes. “The difficulty is partly due to religion, but it is also an issue of trust because the Yazidis have suffered so many genocides. There are families who volunteer their daughters; with others we have to negotiate. Once the girls taste freedom, they don’t want to go back.”

In her last graduating class—12 Yazidi girls aged 18 or younger—most had run away from home to join. The main driver of recruitment, she said, is the desire for revenge. Once in a blue moon, she receives a “lightweight” recruit: a girl who is simply looking for a boyfriend, an offence that earns expulsion.

“Anyone that comes here who is under 18 gets training but is not deployed,” the trainer said. In neighboring Syria, Kurdish factions have come under sharp criticism for using child soldiers.

Delvin, who said she is 16 but looks younger, avoided early marriage by joining the cause. “My father told me it would be better for me to get a boyfriend and marry than join the army,” she said. “In just one day here, I learned more than I had in all my life—about [Ocalan’s] ideology, how to liberate women and free Yazidis.”

Berivan, a sage 17-year-old with bright blue eyes, added her thoughts.

“For more than 5,000 years, women have been culturally under the control of their families,” she said. “Everyone here is at the same level. No one is higher or lower. When we are at home, we have to follow the rules of the house. All the girls have to get married and start a family.”

The conversation is cut short when a pick-up truck comes to collect a group for frontline deployment. One girl quickly gets down on all fours to scribble a goodbye

letter. The farewells take place in a flurry of handshakes and glassy-eyed hugs. Pairs break away for a final cigarette and groups come together for that last photo.

The trainers say there have been no casualties in female ranks, but death is never far away. A triad of photos on the wall pays tribute to three fallen male comrades, including a young Iranian Kurd who trained many of the girls before taking his final step on a mine.

That loss still shakes Zilan, who mastered heavier weapons under his supervision.

“I will take revenge from this enemy who took away my best friend,” she said.

Zilan was among the first Yazidis to start training in the Syrian town of Derik last year. The teenager has served more than five months on front line positions and refused to leave for Germany with her family this summer.

“Let IS be afraid,” she said, tilting her chin up. “After you’ve seen everyone massacred before you, there is no fear left.”