



About the Authors:

Alya Honarpisheh

Alya is a third-year student in International Relations and Organisations at Leiden University, with a binational background—half Iranian and half German. Their commitment to human rights began early, joining PLAN International's "Youth Advocates" at the age of sixteen to campaign for the rights of young refugees in Germany and across Europe. Academically, Alya has focused on migration and Middle Eastern politics, with particular interest in the roles of ethnic minorities and women in civil conflicts.

Vittoria Giudice



Vittoria Giudice is pursuing an M.Sc. in Crisis and Security Management at Leiden University (NL). Currently, she is involved in projects at the Casimir Pulaski Foundation.

About the publication:

3 Main Points:

What is at stake for Kurdish autonomy and the institutionalised project of women's resistance in northern Syria as the Syrian government reasserts control? The Syrian Transitional Government's push to regain authority threatens the Kurdish-led administration, particularly its gender-equal governance model and the YPJ, both central to the Rojava project.

Without sustained international support, the feminist achievements of Rojava risk being dismantled or sidelined in future political arrangements.

Highlight Sentence:

“However, although their military role was widely recognised, the long-term political status of Rojava remained uncertain.”

Definition:

Democratic confederalism: Abdullah Öcalan's model of decentralised governance based on grassroots democracy, gender equality and ecological sustainability.

Headline

Rojava at a Crossroads: Kurdish Autonomy and the Future of Women's Resistance in Syria.

Introduction

On 23 January 2026, a powerful protest movement emerged across the Middle East after footage was circulated showing a Syrian Arab Army (SAA) soldier desecrating the body of a Kurdish female fighter. The incident triggered widespread outrage,

particularly among women, and sparked a symbolic campaign in which women braided each other's hair as an act of solidarity and resistance. The movement began in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where [women gathered publicly to braid their hair](#), transforming a cultural practice into a political statement of defiance against gender-based violence and conflict-related brutality. The protests coincided with renewed clashes between Syrian government forces and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), following an offensive launched in territories administered by the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES). These developments represent another chapter in Syria's long-standing war, shaped by ethnic tensions, competing governance models, and regional power dynamics. This briefing analyses the historical and ethnic dimensions of the conflict while examining women's resistance movements, using the Rojava experience as a case to explore how gender, identity, and political mobilization intersect in contexts of armed conflict.

Latest developments

After the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) the new interim administration under Ahmed al-Shaara, has tried to [assert control over formerly Kurdish areas](#). Tensions escalated between the new [Syrian Transitional Government \(STG\)](#) and Kurdish forces despite a March 2025 ceasefire agreement intended to regulate security arrangements and integration into the Syrian state. On [6 January 2026](#), Syrian government-aligned forces launched a large-scale military assault after months of smaller clashes. The clashes started in the Kurdish-majority neighbourhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh in Aleppo, which had remained under the authority of the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration since the early years of the Syrian conflict. On [18 January](#), Syrian forces started entering Raqqa to deploy troops in Deir ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah provinces, engaging and fighting against the SDF. Reports suggested that tens of thousands of people were displaced during the January clashes, while many schools and community buildings have been [converted into overcrowded shelters](#) due to strained resources. After days of fighting in the country, the SDF agreed to a temporary ceasefire to negotiate the integration

and prisoner transfer. Despite the ceasefire, recently both sides have been [accusing each](#) other of violations, showing the fragility of the current peace deal.

The Kurdish movement

Historically, Kurdish communities in Syria were primarily concentrated along the northern border, particularly in the Jazira, Kobani and Afrin regions. Despite their long-standing presence, Syrian Kurds were not recognised as a distinct ethnic group and were subjected to Arab nationalist policies that restricted their language rights, land ownership and political participation. During the [al-Hasakah census of 1962](#), around 120,000 Kurds were arbitrarily stripped of their citizenship. Then, in 1973, the Ba'ath government implemented an 'Arab Belt' policy along the Turkish border, forcibly expelling thousands of Kurds from their villages and replacing them with Arab settlers.

Kurdish parties in Syria were fragmented and frequently repressed by the Ba'athist regime, which considered Kurdish activism to be a threat to territorial unity. Nevertheless, political mobilisation among Syrian Kurds developed gradually. The [Kurdistan Workers' Party \(PKK\)](#), founded in Turkey in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan, played a key role in establishing the transnational Kurdish movement, particularly in Syria. Initially rooted in Marxist-Leninist national liberation ideology, the PKK's political philosophy evolved, particularly after Öcalan's [imprisonment in 1999](#). His later writings promoted a model of 'democratic confederalism', emphasising decentralisation, grassroots democracy, ecological sustainability and gender equality as central pillars of political transformation.

The outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011 presented Kurdish political actors with unprecedented opportunities. When government forces withdrew from much of northern Syria in 2012 to focus on other battles, Kurdish organisations — including the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is ideologically aligned with the PKK — established autonomous self-administrations.

The Rise of Rojava and its All Female Militia



The Kurdish region of Rojava, also known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), was established in July 2012 in the aftermath of the Syrian civil war. The region consists of self-governing sub-regions based on [Abdullah Öcalan's ideas of democratic confederalism](#). The main governing actor is the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which set up the constitution in 2013 with the intent to promote decentralization, gender equality, environmental sustainability, and social ecology.

Alongside this governing actor, the mixed-gender militia People's Protection Units (YPG) was established to protect the northern territories. However, shortly after, and guided by Abdullah Öcalan's assertion that "the freedom of the Kurdish people can be viewed as inseparably bound to women's freedom", the all-female military unit YPJ was created in 2013 to solidify the social and military autonomy of Kurdish women. According to members of the YPJ, the creation of the all-female unit is closely connected to the ideology of "jineology," a feminist reinterpretation of history and social relations that seeks to center women in a revolutionary transformation. For the female fighters, the militia is a means to face the internal and external threats that women specifically face within the revolutionary efforts. The women play a key role in transforming societal and family gender roles by taking up arms, turning their backs on a traditional life as mothers. Ultimately, the militarization within the armed women's revolution is only part of the broader feminist ideology that is meant to alter the structures of a whole society.

The women train in the Kurdish mountains in a strict training camp organized and overseen by female sergeants, preparing the young women to go to the front in northern and western Syria. In 2014, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) expanded and occupied cities across Syria and Iraq, coming face to face with the fighters of the YPJ in Kobane. During the siege of Kobane by ISIS, the YPJ ultimately defeated ISIS, causing a high number of casualties and the retreat of ISIS fighters from Kobane. This victory drew Western media attention to the Kurdish women, creating narratives around the fighters and spotlighting them, especially because of the ideological counterweight that the women's militia embodied. [ISIS fighters fear the](#)



[YPJ fighters](#), as they believe that being killed by a woman would dishonour them and prevent them from entering paradise.

The successful defence of Kobane brought the YPJ to the attention of the international community, particularly Western governments. This led to agreements being made between the Kurdish-led forces and Western governments, establishing the YPJ as an essential partner in the wider coalition against ISIS. However, although their military role was widely recognised, the long-term political status of Rojava remained uncertain.

Al-Sharaa and The Future of Rojava's Women's Resistance

With the rise of [Ahmed al-Sharaa](#) as the president of Syria's interim government, the future of the YPJ women's unit became uncertain, leading many [Kurdish women to feel threatened](#) and to fear for their positions within the Kurdish autonomous region. As al-Sharaa and his military reclaimed large parts of the formerly US-backed Kurdish territories, the Kurds were left with no choice but to retreat. After attacks by the Syrian army and high casualties on the Kurdish side, the SDF entered into an [agreement](#) with al-Sharaa, aiming for the integration of their forces and civilian institutions into the Syrian state. Crucially, the agreement lacked any mention of the YPJ, leaving the political project embodied by the Kurdish fighters in a fragile and unstable state. Rojava's co-leadership model mandates joint male and female leadership, symbolizing gender equality enshrined in most political institutions in the Kurdish region.

Importantly, the SDF ran and monitored the prisons holding thousands of ISIS detainees. These prisons, along with important oil fields, have also begun to be transferred to al-Sharaa. As Kurdish fighters were occupied with defending Rojava against troops coming from Damascus, many ISIS fighters had the chance to flee the prisons. According to [National Interest](#) author Heyrsh Abdulrahman, the current situation mirrors dynamics similar to the 2011 withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, which led to a power vacuum and the renewed rise of jihadist forces. In public



discussions, the female fighters, once championed by the West, now seem to be forgotten, leaving Kurdish women to fend for their legacy themselves.

With the support of Europe and the US, al-Sharaa is seizing Kurdish territory while also issuing a decree on Kurdish national rights, the first since Syria's independence. Nonetheless, the recent developments in Syria showcase the end of Kurdish ambitions to create an autonomous and decentralized system in northern Syria. As a result, the durability of Rojava's unique gender-equal institutions is increasingly threatened, and the future of the YPJ and its women remains uncertain.