



The Sun Force: Life on the Frontlines With the Peshmerga's Female Fighters

June 29, 2016 **Christine Balling** *Foreign Affairs*

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Late last year, Captain Khatoon Ali Krdr, 36, the commander of an all-female Kurdish peshmerga unit, visited a family in the village of Kocho in northern Iraqi Kurdistan to see a woman who'd had nearly everything taken away by the Islamic State (ISIS). Like Khatoon, the woman and her surviving family members are Yezidis, an ethno-religious Kurdish minority group. ISIS has long enslaved, tortured, and killed, Yezidi women. Khatoon tried to speak to the woman, but she could not answer. These days, she is mute and can only stare ahead.

The woman's family members told Khatoon that, while the woman was in captivity, ISIS members forbade her to breastfeed her newborn son. So, the child cried. Irritated by the infant's wailing, one of the captors snatched him from his mother's arms and silenced him by cutting off his head. Then, ISIS members lit a fire for roasting.

During a recent visit to a peshmerga army base located near Dohuk, on the Iraqi Kurdistan border with Syria and Turkey, I spoke to Khatoon about why she joined the peshmerga. From the base's dusty parking lot, one can look into the desert expanses of all three countries and even spot the main pipeline that carries Iraqi oil through Turkey. The base serves as a training facility for the Hezi Roj, or Sun Force unit, whose 126 Yezidi soldiers range in age from 20 to late-30s.

Khatoon remembers the exact date when she joined and formed her own all-female, all-Yezidi unit to fight ISIS. It was November 18, 2014. She told me that she is forever grateful to Kurdistan President Masoud Barzani for allowing her to do so. "As President Barzani allows his sons [of Iraqi Kurdistan] to join the peshmerga, he has welcomed and honored us, his daughters, to do the same." Khatoon trained for just over two months before becoming the Sun Force unit commander on January 15, 2015.

The Sun Force fighters, all of whom are from the now-destroyed city of Sinjar and its surrounding areas, are held to the same standards as their male peshmerga counterparts. The day I was on the base, the soldiers were being instructed on how to use an RPG-7, a shoulder-launched, anti-tank grenade launcher. Along with Khatoon, two male captains, a Muslim and a Christian, serve as the base instructors. "Differences of religion do not matter," the captain said. "Here, we are all peshmerga."

Per strict peshmerga rules, no one under the age of 18 may be recruited. Those who wish to join must have their family's permission: the parents' permission if they are alive, and if not, that of surviving older siblings. Then, a prospective fighter is brought to the base so that she understands the nature of the training and of her potential sacrifice.

According to the base commander, Major General Abubakar Abdullah Ismail, there are over 600 females waiting to join the peshmerga. However, due to lack of adequate funding from Baghdad, the peshmerga cannot afford to train them. Still, given the scant resources, the forces are exceptionally well trained. As of this writing, peshmerga fighters - male and female alike - are owed four months' back pay.

Before I was able to interview fighters individually, I was asked to address the unit and field questions from the group as a whole. "In America or Europe, are nine-year old girls sold to old men?" asked one young woman rhetorically. When I replied no, via my interpreter, the soldier added, "That is what ISIS has done to us. We need Americans [the military] to help us free our girls."

As more women raised their hands, others teared up. All of them sat erect, eyes up, arms and legs tightly crossed. (Khatoon later explained that as brave and disciplined as her soldiers were, they frequently broke down when not training, most of them having either been victims of rape or torture or having witnessed their family members endure the same, if not worse.) Another young soldier whose cherub-like face mismatched the ferocity of her voice, proclaimed, "we will not stop fighting until every meter of Kurdistan is safe... and if President Barzani sends us, we will go to any part of the world where civilians are fighting for their freedom."

The unit was dismissed to participate in a final training exercise before lunch, and I sat down with Khatoon and two of her soldiers, Yanas Sadoon Haji, 22, and Fahima Shamoo Murad, 21. Yanas told me that she was attending college in Mosul when ISIS stormed her dormitory during the week of final exams and captured her and her fellow female students. I did not ask Yanas what happened during her captivity, as the tears streaming down her cheeks were indication enough. "After three days without news from me my father told everyone in my hometown that whoever rescues me will have me as his wife." She continued, "When the peshmerga rescued us, my father said that he must give me to the peshmerga because I owe them my life. For that I am very proud." Yanas' family is now living in the Khanke Internally Displaced Persons camp in Dohuk.

Fahima's surviving family members also live in the Khanke camp. She told me that after suffering so much she knew she should join the peshmerga but was terrified of guns. Now, a year later, she wants more of them. "My father is dead, but my mother told me that it was better that I die with honor [in combat] than to be sold [as a sex slave] in Raqa... Now my mother is proud that I am a peshmerga."

On Sunday, June 26, the members of the Peshmerga Sun Force graduated. Soon they will be deployed as a unit to their hometown of Sinjar, a wasteland to which few could ever bear to return, let alone swear to defend to their death.

Before I departed the base, Khatoon asked a favor: "We [Yezidi women] have suffered a lot. But if you hear ISIS say that we are worthless cowards who cannot fight, don't believe them." Touching her peshmerga uniform, she insisted, "Put my picture on Facebook. I want ISIS to see who I am now."

CHRISTINE BALLING is Senior Fellow for Latin American Affairs at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, D.C.