

# Mount Sinjar, Syria - From Genocide to Resistance: Yazidi Women Fight Back

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**Having suffered a traumatic genocide, Yazidi women on Mount Sinjar mobilize their autonomous armed and political resistance with the PKK's philosophy.**

SHENGAL - The old Kurdish saying "We have no friends but the mountains" became more relevant than ever when on Aug. 3, 2014, the murderous Islamic State group launched what is referred to as the 73<sup>rd</sup> massacre on the Yazidis by attacking the city of Sinjar (in Kurdish: Shengal), slaughtering thousands of people, and raping and kidnapping the women to sell them as sex slaves. Ten thousand Yazidis fled to the Shengal Mountains in a death march in which they, and especially children, died of hunger, thirst, and exhaustion. This year on the same day, the Yazidis marched in the Shengal Mountains again. But this time in a protest to vow that nothing will ever be the same again.

Last year, the Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) promised the people to guarantee Shengal's safety, but ran away without warning when the Islamic State group attacked, not even leaving arms behind for people to defend themselves. Instead, it was the guerrilla of the PKK, as well as the the Kurdish People's Defense Units, or YPG, and its women's brigade the YPJ from Rojava, who in spite of having Kalashnikovs and a only handful of fighters, opened a corridor to Rojava, rescuing 10,000 people.

For an entire year, Yazidi women have been portrayed as helpless rape victims by the media. Countless interviews repeatedly asked them how often they were raped and sold, ruthlessly making them relive the trauma for the sake of sensationalist news reporting. Yazidi women were presented as the embodiment of the crying, passively surrendering woman, the ultimate victim of the Islamic State group, the female white flag to patriarchy. Furthermore, the wildest orientalist portrayals grotesquely reduced one of the oldest surviving religions in the world to a new exotic field yet to be explored.

Ignored is the fact that Yazidi women armed themselves and now mobilize ideologically, socially, politically and militarily with the framework laid out by Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the PKK. In January, the Shengal Founding Council was established by Yazidi delegates from both the mountain and the refugee camps, demanding a system of autonomy independent of the central Iraqi government or the KRG. Several committees for education, culture, health, defense, women, youth, and economy organize everyday issues. The council is based on democratic autonomy, as articulated by Öcalan, and met harsh opposition by the KDP, the same party which fled Shengal without a fight. The newly-founded YBŞ (Shengal Resistance Units), the all-women's army YPJ-Shengal, and the PKK build the frontline against the Islamic State group here, without receiving a share of the weapons provided to the peshmerga by international forces. Several YBŞ and council members were also arrested in Iraqi Kurdistan.

On July 29, women of all ages made history by founding the autonomous Shengal Women's Council, promising: "The organization of Yazidi women will be the revenge for all massacres." They decided

that families must not intervene when girls want to participate in any part of the struggle and committed to internally democratizing and transforming their own community. They do not want to simply “buy back” the kidnapped women, but liberate them through active mobilization by establishing not only a physical, but also a philosophical self-defense against all forms of violence.

The international system insidiously depoliticizes people affected by war, especially refugees, by framing a discourse to render them without will, knowledge, consciousness and politics. Yet, the Yazidi refugees on the mountain and in the Newroz camp in Dêrîk (al-Malikiyah), which was created in Rojava immediately after the massacre, insist on their agency. Though some international organizations provide limited aid now, due to the embargo imposed by the KRG, almost no aid was able to cross to Rojava for years. The people at Newroz Camp told me that in spite of the the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ attempts to model the camp and its educational system according to its top-down vision, the camp’s assembly resisted, forcing one of the biggest international institutions to respect its own autonomous system. Now, education in literacy, art, theater, culture, language, history, and ideology are taught across ages, while commune-like units organize daily needs and issues in Dêrîk and Shengal.

“All these councils, protests, meetings, the resistance may seem normal. But all of this emerged within a year only and for Shengal, this is a revolution”, one Yazidi PKK-fighter said. “The atmosphere of Rojava has reached Shengal.”

Hedar Reşî, a PKK-commander from Rojava who teaches about the sociology of Shengal before and after the latest genocide, was among the seven people who fought the Islamic State group at the beginning of the massacre and was wounded opening the corridor to Rojava. The presence of women like her from four parts of Kurdistan enormously impacts the society of Shengal.

“For the first time in our history, we take up arms because with the last massacre, we understood that nobody will protect us; we must do it ourselves,” I was told by a young YPJ-Shengal fighter, who renamed herself after Arîn Mîrkan, a martyred heroine of the resistance of Kobane. She explained how girls like her never dared to have dreams and only sat at home until they got married. But like her, hundreds have joined the struggle now, like the young woman who cut off her hair, hung the braid on her martyred husband’s grave, and joined the resistance.

The physical genocide may be over, but the women are conscious of a “white”, i.e. bloodless genocide, as EU governments, especially Germany, try to lure Yazidi women abroad, uprooting them from their sacred homes and instrumentalizing them for their agendas.

Mother Xensê, member of the women’s council, kisses her granddaughter and explains: “We receive armed training, but ideological education is far more important so that we understand why the massacre happened to us and what calculations people make on our expense. That is our real self-defense. Now we know that we were so vulnerable because we were not organized. But Shengal will never be the same again. Thanks to Apo (Abdullah Öcalan).”

A Yazidi woman herself, Sozdar Avesta, Union of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK) presidency council member and PKK-commander, elaborates:

“It is not a coincidence that the Islamic State group attacked one of the oldest communities in the world. Their aim is to destroy all ethical values and cultures of the Middle East. In attacking the Yazidis, they tried to wipe out history. The Islamic State group explicitly organizes against Öcalan’s philosophy, against women’s liberation, against the unity of all communities. Thus, defeating the group requires the right sociology and history-reading. Beyond physically destroying them, we must also remove the Islamic State group-ideology mentally, which also persists in the current world

order.” One year ago, the world watched the unforgettable genocide of the Yazidis. Today, the same people who, while everyone else ran away rescued the Yazidis, are being bombed by the the Islamic State group-supporting Turkish state with the approval of NATO. Especially when the states that contributed to the rise of the Islamic State group promise to defeat it and destroy the social fabric of the Middle East along the way, the only survival option is to establish autonomous self-defense and grassroots democracy.

As one drives through the Shengal Mountains, the most beautiful indicator of the change that hit this wounded place within a year are the children on the streets, who, whenever heval, “the comrades,” drive by, chant: “Long live Shengal’s resistance –Long live the PKK –Long live Apo.”

Thanks to democratic autonomy, the children who once opened their tiny hands and asked for money when peshmerga fighters drove by now raise the same hands to fists and victory signs.

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