

Battlefield commander in Syria: ‘Under the control of a husband? I prefer to be here’



“

We, as a women’s army, have been tasting freedom for years . . . We’ve been marginalised for a long time and we don’t accept it any more . . . We don’t accept a patriarchal mentality to be imposed over us

■ From top: a soldier walks through an underground tunnel in the city of Kobani, northeast Syria; Commander Zananir Kobani in an underground bunker beneath Kobani; a covered street in Kobani; and a statue of Arin Mirkan, a YPJ fighter who blew herself up to avoid being captured.

PHOTOGRAPHS: SALLY HAYDEN



Sally Hayden
in Kobani, northeast Syria

From a tunnel on the border with Turkey, a Kurdish-affiliated commander recalls the fight against Islamic State and discusses Syria’s new regime

The entrance to the tunnel began in a nondescript side building. A female soldier lit the way with a torch. The walk took us down dozens of steps, into the city’s depths and through snaking tunnels. It lasted roughly 10 minutes, though it was impossible to be certain, as we were barred from bringing our phones with us.

Eventually, we entered a more developed area, carpeted floor lit by fluorescent light. It appeared to be both a living and command area. We were ushered into a room with a big screen on one wall, showing views from 16 CCTV cameras located across the northern Syrian city of Kobani.

We were there to meet a top commander. She introduced herself by her “war name”, Zananir Kobani, and said she was affiliated with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition and the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ). She had short dark hair, and wore jeans and a green jumper with the slogan “Good things take time” written on it. Around her were women fighters in civilian clothing, polite but potentially fearsome.

The commander said she couldn’t go outside without taking “precautions” because she could be hit by a Turkish drone. However, she added: “Being chief commander, I go everywhere.” She wouldn’t reveal what the “precautions” are. But “being inside doesn’t mean I don’t have eyes outside”, she said, gesturing at the CCTV screens. The views were in colour or black and white.

More than a decade of war has changed everyone in this region. Syria’s conflict fractured lives and communities, building them back in different and unexpected ways. Kobani is 40, the same age as an Islamic State bride who I met the day before, but the direction her life took was remarkably different.

Before Syria’s war began in 2011, Kobani was “studying and staying home”. But, she decided, “I wanted to defend my homeland”, particularly against the threat of Islamic State, also known as Isis.

“Across the world women are enslaved, oppressed, but in [the city of] Kobani it was more, a very conservative society, and my reaction was to become a member of this army,” she said.

“I started to think about democracy, minority rights . . . The [Assad] regime oppressed women, the society before oppressed them. I saw this army was giving women rights so I joined.”

Women were being “subjected to rape, sold in slave markets” by Islamic State members, but they were also “at the front” of the military offensive against the extremist Islamist group, which estab-

lished its short-lived caliphate in northern Syria and Iraq before it was declared territorially defeated in early 2019.

Women signed up despite a lack of experience, recalls Kobani. “We lost a lot and many civilians were killed.”

The city of Kobani became symbolic of the fight against Islamic State, and a statue memorialising Arin Mirkan, a YPJ fighter who blew herself up to avoid being captured, still stands tall – wings on her back and one hand outstretched – on a central roundabout.

Kobani fought in many battles, including in Raqqa and Manbij, and was badly wounded twice – once on her face and once on an arm.

She oversees thousands of soldiers, mostly women, she said. The SDF has about 115,000 members, including police, according to Farhad Shami, its media head. Of those, about 15,000 are women, with Kobani saying they include “Kurds, Armenians, Arabs: all the groups”.

The US-backed SDF and associated Kurdish-led de facto autonomous administration have been controlling an area of about 46,000sq km – about 25 per cent of Syria’s territory. But the situation is changing quickly. Turkey and Turkish-backed militias, pushing to gain ground from northeast Syria, launched a new offensive against them as the Assad regime fell in December.

In late February, Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan – imprisoned in Turkey – made a historic call for the PKK to lay down its arms and dissolve. Turkey considers the SDF to be an extension of the PKK. SDF commander Mazloum Abdi said Ocalan’s announcement was “not related to us in Syria”, but added: “If there is peace in Turkey, that means there is no excuse to keep attacking us.”

On March 10th, the SDF and Damascus announced that they had also signed a deal. It recognised the Kurdish minority and would reportedly mean the SDF handing over control of border posts as well as oil and gasfields. It came at a crucial time, as the interim Syrian government struggles with the fallout from sectarian killings alleged to have been carried out by militants aligned with it.

Many specifics of the new agreement remain unclear, with a Syrian official telling Reuters news agency that committees will figure out the details. What it means for long-term prospects of peace in the region are not certain either, but sources told The Irish Times that fighting between the SDF and Turkish-backed militias has not stopped.

‘Drone battlefield’

Turkey and the Turkish-backed militias have been making regular use of drones: checkpoints and a market area in the city of Kobani are sheltered under covers, to block surveillance and reduce their capacity for targeted attacks. The SDF also has a unit making drones, creating what Kobani calls a “drone battlefield”.

“Before, our war was against Daesh [Islamic State], but since 2018 the fighting has changed. Now we are fighting the Turks,” said Kobani during the interview last month. “It’s a matter of to be or not to be . . . we will not let the Turks occupy.”

Beginning in 2019, the SDF also started to create a network of underground tunnels, Kobani said, claiming they now have thousands across the region. “We were aware we had to create a new life, an underground life.”

The commander said she is busy all the time, meeting soldiers and visiting the front lines. “I’m a chief commander, but I live like a soldier. We do whatever is needed, transport wounded people,



“The frontline was roughly 30km away from where we sat underground. Fighters sleep in the bunkers, get water from pumps and use generators and batteries for electricity

organise funerals for martyrs . . . We have to defend, we have to protect the people.”

The front line was roughly 30km away from where we sat underground.

Fighters sleep in the bunkers, get water from pumps and use generators and batteries for electricity (all of the city is struggling with a lack of electricity because the conflict has damaged infrastructure).

Kobani is paid a salary, but when asked how much, she responded: “We don’t care about this stuff.” She said fighters get enough to live, to help out those who need it. “Everyone is committed.”

Recruits who join the YPJ need to “get on well with people, have principles and discipline, obey orders and do training”.

They also “read books about feminism, socialism, unique women characters who got martyred throughout history. Ocalan’s writing talks about women’s rights. Aristotle, Nawal El Saadawi . . . Marx”. Kobani said women can get married, but don’t fight if they have children. “If someone wants to quit, get married and have a different life, we deal with it.”

She has no marriage plans. “To be under pressure and to be under the control of a patriarchal husband? I prefer to be here,” she said.

Amid all her sacrifices, she is highly concerned about the new leadership in Damascus. She referred to the “victory conference” held in late January where about 18 armed factions agreed to dissolve into a new Syrian army, while Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) leader Ahmad al-Sharaa was declared interim president. The attendees were “only men . . . there were no women”, Kobani noted.

HTS evolved out of al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Al Nusra, though Sharaa has made efforts to underline that it has changed.

Earlier this year, there was outrage after a video, reportedly from 2015, went viral online. It appeared to show the newly appointed transitional Syrian minister of justice Shadi al-Waisi overseeing the execution of two women accused of “corruption and prostitution” in Idlib.

A Kurdish civil society activist, who asked not to be named, also pointed to the widespread outcry following comments made in December by the interim government’s head of women’s affairs. Aisha al-Dibs, the first woman appointed to the transitional government, said women should not “go beyond the priorities of their God-given nature” and know “their educational role in the family”.

“Such statements have raised concerns among Syrian women regarding potential restrictions on their ability to work and participate in development and progress in the new Syria,” the activist said.

“Certainly, women in northeastern Syria, especially those of Kurdish descent, have enjoyed the freedom to work, live and shape their own destinies. This is evidenced by the active participation of both Kurdish and Arab women in political, military and educational initiatives in recent years, which persists to this day.”

Women have been heavily involved in demanding change and pushing for human rights across all of Syria, which meant they were also imprisoned and tortured under the Assad regime.

In February 2024, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reported that 8,493 women were still detained or forcibly disappeared by the regime, and 878 more women were still detained or forcibly disappeared by all armed opposition factions, including 45 by HTS.

The report said 526 women were still detained or forcibly disappeared by the SDF itself. In August, the SNHR said its data suggests that the SDF – which overseas prisons and camps where people

suspected of links to the so-called Islamic State are held – “routinely use unproven allegations, such as ‘affiliation with Isis’, ‘security threats’, and ‘terrorism’, as pretexts to justify the detentions they carry out in a widespread manner”.

The report also documented sexual violence against women, saying it had documented more than 7,500 incidents by regime forces between March 2011 and December 2023, almost 2,500 incidents by Islamic State forces, and 15 by the SDF.

But, in Kobani’s opinion, the way SDF promotes “equality” between men and women “could be an example for the new Syrian army”. She said the alternative risks women like her being taken “back to zero”.

‘Tasting freedom’

“It’s very obvious for everyone that we [women] are the decision-makers,” Kobani said. “Before [the war], being a girl in your house, even to go to the shop you had to take permission from your mother, your brother.”

She said girls’ education was limited and finishing secondary school was rare. Now, “I’m managing a battlefield, I’m leading an army. What [Sharaa] wants is surrender, [for us to] put down arms. We don’t accept this, we have achievements . . . The population also won’t accept it”.

Kobani said she would be willing to go to war with the new government if necessary. “We have good preparations and we’re ready to defend ourselves. The only difference we have is our spirits, our determination,” she said.

“We, as a women’s army, have been tasting freedom for years . . . We’ve been marginalised for a long time and we don’t accept it any more . . . We don’t accept a patriarchal mentality to be imposed over us.”

Though it is Kurdish-led, the SDF includes fighters from other backgrounds. By chance, in the city of Hasaka, I met two Arab SDF veterans, injured fighting Islamic State, who are now in wheelchairs. “We’re all brothers: Kurds, Arabs, Syrians. The SDF embrace all these groups,” said Mohammed Hassan Mohammed (28), who added that the teachings of Ocalan had convinced him of the importance of gender equality.

Wladimir van Wilgenburg, a Dutch journalist and author of multiple books on the Kurds, said he understands from the latest deal that the SDF will likely remain as a separate bloc militarily. That means “if this agreement is followed there will be no problem” in terms of women’s rights.

But a confederation of women’s organisations has since spoken out, saying they are worried that women’s rights were not addressed in the deal’s eight points.

On Thursday, Sharaa signed a temporary Constitution that makes Islamic jurisprudence “the main source” of legislation in Syria for the next five years, while guaranteeing women’s rights and freedom of expression, Reuters news reported. What that will look like in practice remains to be seen.

Speaking before the new agreement between the SDF and Damascus was announced, Kobani said she trusted the SDF not to make decisions that would marginalise women.

“If anything happens, we’ll continue the resistance and the struggle . . . Women are the majority of the Syrian people so they must have a say,” she said.

“I don’t accept being oppressed, being forgotten,” Kobani continued. She said she has committed her “life for the Kurdish cause and for our rights . . . This fighting, these ideas, ideologies, we want this to be a model for all the Middle East, all the world”.