“Em ji agir hatin û em ê vegerin agir.”

“We came from fire, and we will return to fire.”

— Ancient Kurdish proverb

Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) guerrillas on an armed patrol in the countryside of Makhmur.
Makhmur, Erbil Governorate, Iraq, March 3, 2015

WE CAME FROM FIRE

PHOTOGRAPHS OF KURDISTAN'S ARMED STRUGGLE AGAINST ISIS

JOEY LAWRENCE

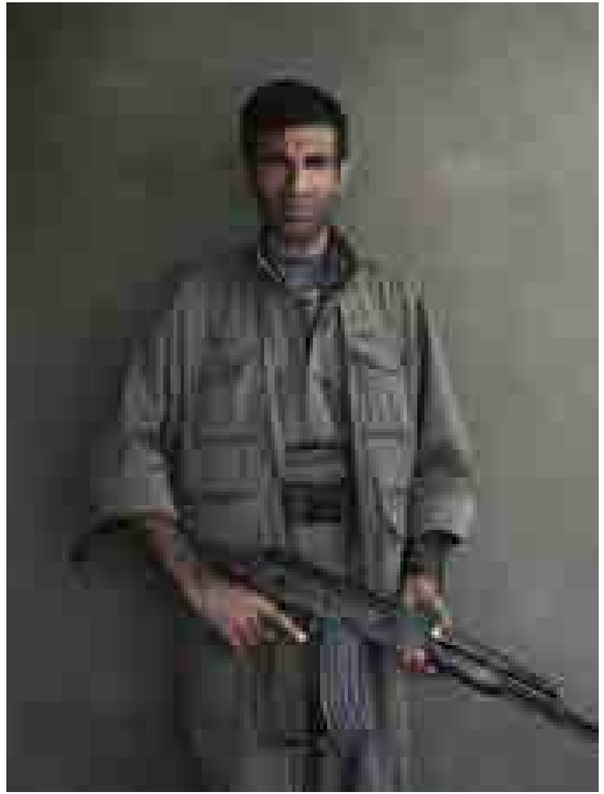
powerHouse Books
BROOKLYN, NY

Commander Berivan (center, standing) and her unit of PKK guerrillas.
Makhmur, Erbil Governorate, Iraq, March 3, 2015

Kurdish guerrillas watch their comrades partake in a team-building exercise at a military training camp. Qandil Mountains, Iraqi Kurdistan, March 15, 2015

Shimal on patrol with her Kalashnikov rifle. Makhmur, Erbil Governorate, Iraq, March 3, 2015

Portrait of Sarya with rocket-propelled grenade launcher.
Makhmur, Erbil Governorate, Iraq, March 4, 2015



Portrait of PKK guerrillas (left to right) Reber, Ronahi, Seyîdxan, and Ruken.
Qandil Mountains and Makhmur, Iraqi Kurdistan, March 2015

The peaks of Shengal Mountain, a disputed zone between Iraq, Kurdistan Regional Government, and Êzidî self-administration. Shengal, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 11, 2016

Alisher, a PKK guerrilla.
Makhmur, Erbil Governorate, Iraq, March 3, 2015

Ammunition captured following a raid on an ISIS position by PKK guerrillas.
Makhmur, Erbil Governorate, Iraq, March 3, 2015

Gulbehar, a PKK guerrilla.
Makhmur, Erbil Governorate, Iraq, March 3, 2015

Berivan, a commander of the Free Women's Units (YJA-STAR), the armed female wing of the PKK. Makhmur, Erbil Governorate, Iraq, March 3, 2015

Cigerxwîn Demdît and Armanc Welat, PKK guerrillas, descend a mountain corridor. Shengal, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 11, 2016

The abandoned vehicles of Êzidî civilians fleeing genocide at the hands of ISIS.
Shengal Mountain, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, March 11, 2015

Kurtay Serhed observes a bazaar, damaged from ISIS suicide car-bomb attacks.
Shengal, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 22, 2015

A failed ISIS suicide car-bomb.
Shengal, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 22, 2015

Fighters of the Shengal Resistance Units (YBŞ) carry the body of their fallen comrade,
Manur. Shengal Mountain, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, March 12, 2015

Manur's family members weep over his casket during a military funeral procession.
Shengal Mountain, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, March 12, 2015

Fighters of YJA-STAR (left to right) Evîndar Cûdî, Shevjîn Herekol, Hêja Botan, Nûdem, and Berçem Penaber. Shengal, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 22, 2015

Weapons captured from ISIS following a successful raid by YBŞ and PKK. The inscription reads "Lions of the Caliphate." Kolik Mountain, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 27, 2015

Evîndar and Nûdem, PKK guerrillas.
Shengal, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 22, 2015

Cudi Serhed, commander of frontline operations in Shengal for People's Defense Forces (HPG), the armed wing of the PKK. Shengal, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 22, 2015

An Êzidî burial site at Xanikê, originally built in 1246, which contains the tomb of Sheikh Abul-Hassan. Xanikê, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 8, 2016

Babê Çawîš, a high priest of the Êzidî Spiritual Council.
Lalish, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 8, 2016

Xwedêda and his daughter Ixlas, survivors of the Êzidî genocide.
Lalish, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 8, 2016

Berivan, a volunteer fighter of Êzîdxan Women's Units (YJÊ), the female wing of the YBŞ, with disheveled Islamic State flag. Shengal, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 23, 2015

A mass grave of elderly women from the Êzidî religious minority executed by ISIS.
Kocho village, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 10, 2016

Alleged ISIS fighter Muhammad Mubarak al-Helli from al-Bahah, Saudi Arabia, prisoner of
Rojava Anti-Terror Units (YAT). Undisclosed location, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, November 20, 2016

Alleged ISIS "Dokumacılar" cell member Savaş Yıldız from Adana, Turkey, prisoner of Rojava YAT.
Undisclosed location, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, November 20, 2016

A YB$ fighter explores the hidden entrance of an underground cave base formerly used by ISIS.
Kolik Mountain, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 29, 2015

PKK guerrillas and YB$ fighters return after an exhausting night-long battle against ISIS.
Kolik Mountain, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 27, 2015

Warshin, a survivor of the Êzidî genocide and volunteer YJÊ fighter.
Kolik Mountain, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 28, 2015

A deceased ISIS fighter killed during clashes against YBŞ and PKK guerrillas.
Kolik Mountain, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 27, 2015

Mehlo, a Peshmerga soldier, and Rustem, a PKK guerrilla, share a military position.
Shengal, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 10, 2016

A water tower overlooking the liberated city of Shengal.
Shengal, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 10, 2016

A Peshmerga soldier surveys damage caused by ISIS attacks.
Shengal, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 10, 2016

A desecrated Christian church formerly under the control of ISIS.
Shengal, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 11, 2016

Perwîn, a volunteer YJÊ fighter, inside an abandoned Christian church.
Shengal, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 11, 2016

PKK guerrillas pose near their trench position outside Makhmur Refugee Camp.
Makhmur, Erbil Governorate, Iraq, March 4, 2015

Silava and Berivan share a laugh in an abandoned ISIS base.
Shengal, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 23, 2015

Portrait of Berivan with hat.
Shengal, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 23, 2015

Tekoshin, a sniper of YJA-STAR.
Makhmur, Erbil Governorate, Iraq, March 3, 2015

PKK guerrillas use binoculars to monitor the slopes of Kolik Mountain during an operation.
Kolik Mountain, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 27, 2015

Newal, a fighter of the YJÊ, and Shêbo, a volunteer policeman for a Êzidî refugee camp.
Shengal Mountain, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 25, 2015

Êzidî elders Bapîr Hesen Seîd, Faris Salih Faris, and Xidir Sado Faris, volunteer guards for their refugee camp. Shengal Mountain, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 24, 2015

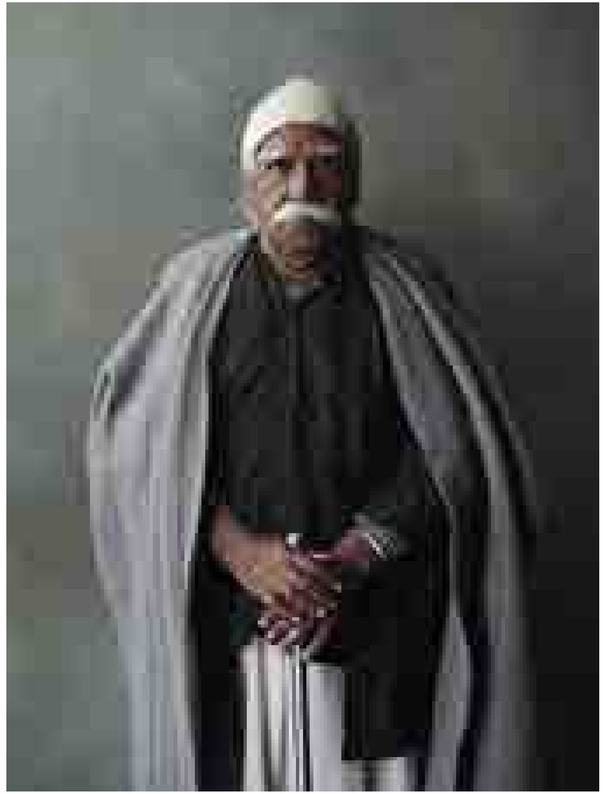
Yasir and Izet of the YB$ keep warm by a campfire.
Shengal Mountain, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 25, 2015

A painted portrait of Abdullah Öcalan, philosophical leader of the PKK, displayed inside a YBŞ base. Shengal Mountain, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, March 12, 2015

Female fighters of the YJÊ gather outside their base for military training. Shengal Mountain, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, March 12, 2015

Gelhat Kobanî, a PKK guerrilla fighting alongside the Êzidî volunteers of YBŞ.
Plains of Kolik, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 27, 2015

Portrait of Xeyrî, a young poet beloved among the displaced Êzidî community in Newroz Refugee Camp. Dêrik, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 13, 2015



Portraits of survivors of the Êzidî genocide (left to right) Sehdo Xelef, Cihan and her daughter, Shelan, and Xewle.
Newroz Refugee Camp, Dêrik, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 13, 2015

Clothes hang to dry in an uncompleted concrete structure lived in by Êzidî refugees.
Zakho, Dohuk Governorate, Iraqi Kurdistan, March 6, 2015

A Êzidî woman cooks her family a meal in a makeshift oven.
Zakho, Dohuk Governorate, Iraqi Kurdistan, March 6, 2015

The Shia shrine of Sayeda Zeinab, the destruction of which was filmed for an ISIS propaganda video. Shengal, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 10, 2016

Portrait of Berxwedan Şengal, a volunteer fighter of the YJÊ.
Shengal Mountain, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, March 12, 2015

Portrait of Evrim Şengal, a volunteer fighter of the YJÊ.
Shengal Mountain, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, March 12, 2015

A large memorial statue dedicated to the martyred female fighters of Rojava overlooks a city roundabout. Kobanê, Kobanê Canton, Rojava, Syria, November 13, 2016

Idris, a student of the new self-administrated school system, is learning in his native language of Kurdish for the first time. Kobanê, Kobanê Canton, Rojava, Syria, November 13, 2016

Amude, Memo, and Salar play on a destroyed ISIS tank after school. Kobanê, Kobanê Canton, Rojava, Syria, November 13, 2016

Arab and Kurdish members of People's Protection Units (YPG) in a frontline position.
al-Hawl, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 4, 2015

Xeyri, fighter of the YPG.
Al-Hawl, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 4, 2015

YPG fighters resupply rocket-propelled grenade rounds to a frontline position.
Al-Hawl, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 4, 2015

YPG members survey the bodies of ISIS fighters killed during a clash.
Al-Hawl, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 5, 2015

The Black Standard, a flag commonly flown by jihadists, left behind in an abandoned ISIS base. Tell Hamis, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 9, 2015

The hand of a deceased ISIS fighter killed during clashes against the YPG in the countryside of Tell Tamer. Tell Tamer, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 7, 2015

Faisel of the Shammar tribal militia al-Sanadid Forces, which is part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition. Al Hishah, Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 14, 2016

Polat Derik Shamari, a YPG fighter and former member of the Shammar tribal militia al-Sanadid Forces. Al-Hawl, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 5, 2015

YPG and Women's Protection Units (YPJ) fighters celebrate the liberation of Tell Hamis while riding in a patrol truck. Tell Hamis, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 9, 2015

ID photos likely used by ISIS to make forged identification cards for clearing checkpoints. Tell Hamis, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 9, 2015

Jîn, a YPJ fighter, with rocket-propelled grenade launcher. Al-Hawl, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 3, 2015

YPG and YPJ fighters sing around the warmth of a campfire to celebrate their victory in Tell Hamis. Tell Hamis, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 9, 2015

YPG fighters honor their fallen female comrade Diljin Nergiz with her portrait taped to their truck-mounted machine gun. Al-Hawl, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 4, 2015

Zilan, a fighter of the YPJ.
Al-Hawl, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 5, 2015

Sorxwin, a fighter of the YPJ.
Tell Hamis, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 9, 2015

A YPG fighter takes a break during an operation, to get a drink of water.
Tell Tamer, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 7, 2015

"Fat Jack," an American volunteer YPG fighter from San Antonio, Texas.
Tell Tamer, Jazira Region, Rojava, Syria, March 7, 2015

Agiri aims his PK machine gun toward an ISIS position on the frontline south of al-Hawl, Syria. Al-Hawl, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 4, 2015

Zehara, a fighter of the YPJ.
Al-Hawl, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 5, 2015

Qehreman Cudi, a YPG fighter from the Jubouri tribe.
Al-Hawl, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 6, 2015

Xebat Alwerdiye, a YPG fighter from the Amesayel tribe.
Al-Hawl, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 6, 2015

A deceased ISIS fighter killed during clashes against the YPG in the countryside of Tell Tamer. Tell Tamer, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 7, 2015

Nejbîr Ferhad, a fighter of the YPJ.
Al-Hawl, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 3, 2015

An injured SDF fighter walks toward the frontline.
Al-Twelaa, Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 16, 2016

A Kurdish woman cries during the funeral of British volunteer YPG fighter Konstandinos Erik Scurfield. Semalka border crossing, Tigris River, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 14, 2015

The casket containing the body of British volunteer YPG fighter Konstandinos Erik Scurfield, who used the nom de guerre "Kemal." Semalka border crossing, Tigris River, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 14, 2015

A neighborhood of Kobanê left in ruins by American airstrikes during clashes against ISIS. Kobanê, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 13, 2015

Agid, a YPG fighter, sits atop a destroyed ISIS tank.
Kobanê, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 13, 2015

Agid, a veteran of the battle of Kobanê.
Kobanê, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 14, 2015

A building formerly used as an Islamic State shariah court.
Al-Hawl, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 2, 2015

YPG members on a nightly patrol, ensuring ISIS does not infiltrate back into liberated neighborhoods. Tell Hamis, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 7, 2015

Portrait of Dilan, a fighter of the YPJ.
Tell Hamis, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 9, 2015

Portrait of Didar, a YPJ commander.
Tell Hamis, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 9, 2015

Portrait of Ugab, a fighter of the YPG.
Tell Hamis, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 9, 2015

Portrait of Sorxwin, a fighter of the YPJ.
Tell Hamis, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 9, 2015

Portrait of Mexlum, a fighter of the YPG.
Tell Hamis, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 9, 2015

Kurdish children wave the Rojava flag during an International Women's Day celebration. Qamishlo, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 7, 2015

Kurdish women in cultural clothing dance during an International Women's Day celebration.
Qamishlo, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 7, 2015

A camera operator, streaming footage to a local Kurdish channel films an International Women's Day celebration. Qamishlo, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 7, 2015

A Kurdish woman bakes bread using a traditional clay oven.
Makhmur Refugee Camp, Erbil Governorate, Iraq, March 4, 2015

Jiyanda Welat, a fighter of the YPJ, breaks into laughter while on the frontline.
Al-Hawl, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 5, 2015

Qamishlo Asayish look across the border fence toward Nusaybin in a tense stare-down with the Turkish military. Qamishlo, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 7, 2015

Female Asayish officers look in the direction of Turkish soldiers. Qamishlo, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, March 7, 2015

Burning oil wells in Qayyarah, Iraq, lit ablaze by ISIS before their retreat.
Qayyarah, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, October 25, 2016

Kharim and his guardian, Nadak, beside a burning oil field.
Qayyarah, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, October 25, 2016

Black smoke engulfs the air surrounding the entire city of Qayyarah as a lone car drives through a residential neighborhood. Qayyarah, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, October 26, 2016

Children play in the mid-afternoon against a sky of black smoke. Qayyarah, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, October 26, 2016

Hana Caclar and her children stand inside their burned home.
Hajj Ali, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, October 24, 2016

Zaer Ibrahim, eight, poses with his homemade toy rifle.
Qayyarah, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, October 25, 2016

Iraqi firefighters and civilian volunteers battle an oil well fire during a desperate operation
to extinguish the flames. Qayyarah, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, October 26, 2016

Nader Yassim coordinates hoses to run water to firefighters.
Qayyarah, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, October 26, 2016

A family watches from their rooftop as firefighters struggle to extinguish a wall of flames creeping closer to their home. Qayyarah, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, October 26, 2016

Rami Akan photographed on the roof of his home. Qayyarah, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, October 26, 2016

A YPG member performs his morning chores on a rooftop camp on the frontline in the Raqqa countryside. Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 16, 2016

Murat Amed, a YPG commander, laughs as he is having his portrait taken.
Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 16, 2016

An Abdullah Öcalan decal is visible on a YPG military vehicle at dusk.
Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 15, 2016

Commander Murat Amed prepares a breakfast of hamburger meat, cheese, olives, bread, and tea for his unit. Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 16, 2016

Rojda Felat, the lead YPJ commander of the "Wrath of the Euphrates" operation, coordinates the locations of SDF units before an inspection of the frontline area. Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 16, 2016

Apê Nemir ("Immortal Uncle"), a local hero of Kobanê and the oldest YPG volunteer. Ain Issa, Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 15, 2016

Portrait of General Commander Rojda Felat of the SDF.
Al-Twelaa, Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 16, 2016

Ahmed Zakwan, a rebel fighter of the Army of Revolutionaries, reloads his PK machine gun in a farmhouse that faces a small hamlet under the control of ISIS. Ain Issa Southwestern Front, Raqqa Governorate, Syria, December 11, 2015

Iskander Khaled, a rebel fighter of the Army of Revolutionaries, inserts bullets into an ammunition belt. Ain Issa Southwestern Front, Raqqa Governorate, Syria, December 11, 2015

Badawi, a rebel fighter of the Army of Revolutionaries.
Euphrates River, Sarrin, Kobanê Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 10, 2015

A soldier of al-Sanadid Forces, a Shammar Arab tribal militia.
Al-Hawl, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 6, 2015

Abo Saqer, a rebel fighter of the Sehid Abdo Duska Brigade of the Army of Revolutionaries.
Euphrates River, Sarrin, Kobanê Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 10, 2015

Wahid, a rebel fighter of the Army of Revolutionaries.
Euphrates River, Sarrin, Kobanê Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 11, 2015

A soldier of al-Sanadid Forces, a Shammar Arab tribal militia.
Al-Hawl, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 6, 2015

Mohammad Abo Adel, a general commander of the Army of Revolutionaries, in a position intended to counter ISIS boats that sneak across the river. Euphrates River, Sarrin, Kobanê Canton, Rojava, Syria, December 10, 2015

An SDF fighter loads a PK machine gun, in a firing position facing a contested road. Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 17, 2016

SDF fighters monitor a position facing a road partially under the control of ISIS. Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 17, 2016

Zilan and Arin, members of the YPJ, prepare weapons in an ammunition storage shed. Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 15, 2016

Using binoculars and scopes, SDF fighters watch for ISIS infiltration and suicide vehicles on the frontline. Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 16, 2016

An SDF commander prepares his unit to enter the ISIS-occupied village of Tal al-Saman. Tal al-Saman, Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 17, 2016

SDF commanders coordinate coalition airstrikes and troop movements using digital tablets.
Tal al-Saman, Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 17, 2016

SDF military positions are displayed on a digital tablet.
Tal al-Saman, Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 17, 2016

Abu Sayaf, a commander of the rebel group Liwa Shuhada al-Raqqa, explores an ISIS tunnel. Tal al-Saman, Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 17, 2016

An SDF commander from Raqqa walks toward ISIS-occupied Tal al-Saman during an operation. Tal al-Saman, Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 17, 2016

SDF fighters enter ISIS-occupied Tal al-Saman on foot to fight. Tal al-Saman, Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 17, 2016

Arin and Zilan, fighters of the YPJ.
Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 15, 2016

Local men of al-Hishah queue to return home.
Al-Hishah, Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 14, 2016

Civilians of al-Hishah celebrate as they drive home after their city was liberated from ISIS by the SDF. Al-Hishah, Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 14, 2016

A barber's tools running off the power of a small generator in a camp for displaced civilians. Jeddah camp, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, October 26, 2016

Iraqi man gets the long beard he was forced to grow by ISIS shaved off. Jeddah camp, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, October 26, 2016

Displaced Iraqi civilians return home after presenting their ID cards at a military checkpoint. Hajj Ali, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, October 26, 2016

Mohammed al-Ali, a sixty-five-year-old SDF volunteer from the countryside of Raqqa. Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 17, 2016

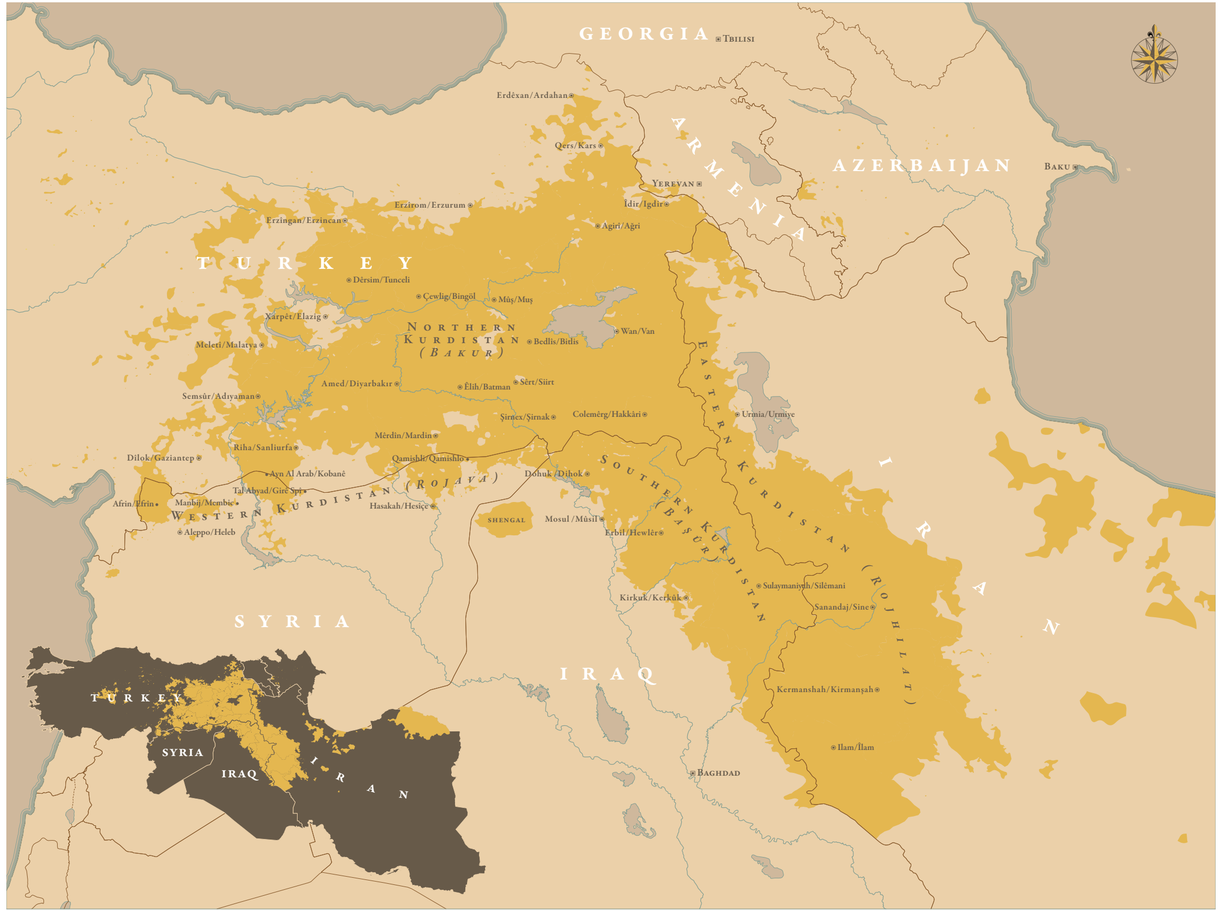
Cihan Shekh Ahmed, official spokeswoman of SDF's "Wrath of the Euphrates" operation.
Ain Issa, Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 16, 2016

General Commander Rojda Felat leads her YPJ unit toward a frontline position.
Al-Twelaa, Raqqa Governorate, Syria, November 16, 2016

ESSAYS AND PERSONAL JOURNALS

"We want our mothers to stop crying."

— Sorxwin, a fighter of the YPJ



Ethnographic map depicting Kurdish-majority inhabited areas, 2017

LAND OF THE KURDS

THE FORGOTTEN NATION

The ancient homeland of the Kurds—an ethnic minority of forty million people—is carved up across the modern-day borders of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, the great European powers divided up the former Ottoman territory. The ensuing treaty—the Treaty of Sèvres—promised the Kurds their own contiguous and sovereign entity for the first time in modern history. However, three years later, after a series of military victories by the former Ottoman Brigadier General Kemal Pasha (now known as Atatürk), the great powers had to relent to Turkish pressure and replace Sèvres with the Treaty of Lausanne. This new treaty established the new Republic of Turkey and squashed Kurdish hopes for a state of their own. The land of the Kurds would be divided between four different countries, splitting tribal lines, villages, and even families.

The Kurds found themselves forcibly assimilated into the fabric of ethno-nationalistic states or perceived as stateless nomads without documentation. As second-class citizens, their language was banned and any distinct cultural activities were outlawed. Oppression by state powers led many generations of Kurds to abandon fruitless politics and embrace armed struggle. This gave thousands of Kurds military and political experience against better-equipped enemies—yet a full, lasting independence recognized by the international community has not yet been achieved.

As the latest conflict in Iraq and Syria, starting in 2011, spiraled out of control, state powers that once kept the Kurdish ethnic minority down found themselves spread thin, fighting against both rebellions and jihadist insurgencies; they were forced to retreat from Kurdish areas and dedicate resources to government heartlands. However grim, the crisis and dismantling of perceived nation-state borders presented Kurds with a golden opportunity.

The once-persecuted rose to secure power in the vacuum. In Iraq, the Kurds liberated resource-rich zones from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham—commonly translated as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—that were formerly disputed with the Iraqi government. In Syria, a revolution inspired by a controversial guerrilla movement was born: one that at its core champions the rights of minorities and women. In a rare moment in history, Kurds found themselves with a chance to become authors of their own destiny.

Jan Êzîdxelo, Kurdish researcher, at the Êzîdî burial site of Xanikê

THE THEORIES OF ÖCALAN

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is an organization that has waged a bloody thirty-plus-years war for Kurdish rights against the Turkish State, which continues to this day. The PKK's military wing of guerrilla fighters consider themselves a vanguard force to protect Kurdish people and other minorities, and that's what brought their fighters to enter the battlefield of Iraq and Syria to establish new fronts against radical jihadist groups like ISIS.

The PKK's influential cofounder and leader, Abdullah Öcalan, who is also known as "Apo," which means "uncle" in Kurdish, is beloved among many Kurds as both a revolutionary leader and philosopher. To others, Öcalan remains a darkly contentious figure, and the PKK is listed as a terrorist organization.

Founded in 1978, the PKK started as a separatist movement against the Turkish State, based on Marxist-Leninist principles, and has continued to evolve ideologically over the decades. During the 1970s, many leftist political parties were formed in Turkey, but the PKK was among the most well organized and was the most aggressive against its rivals. As one of the few groups bold enough to speak out on behalf of minorities, the PKK gained considerable popularity among Kurds as a powerful tool against the oppression of the Turkish State.

In 1984, the PKK embraced armed struggle against the Turkish State, beginning a war for Kurdish independence. The Turkish government responded with extreme violence, for it felt that any recognition of Kurdistan threatened the very fabric of Turkey itself, which was founded on ethno-nationalistic principles. To be a citizen of Turkey, minority groups had to abandon any forms of ethnic self-identification or face total destruction. The PKK fought both the Turkish military, and Kurds aligned with the Turkish State such as feudal land owners, village guards, and tribal militias funded by the government. As a result of the conflict, nearly forty thousand people died—mostly Kurds at the hands of the government.

Over the years, ceasefires would come and go, but the conflict would always heat up again in southeast Turkey. Thousands of young Kurds joined the ranks of the PKK's armed forces, becoming guerrillas based in remote mountain camps. Each recruit takes on a nom de guerre and leaves behind their family, whom, especially if in Turkey, they will likely never see again. It is common to hear Kurdish families whispering of having "three children at home, and one in the mountains."

Self-critique and introspection following the brutal clashes throughout the 1990s led the PKK to reform its tactics and end goals. Öcalan sought to wean the PKK away from an exclusively militaristic approach toward one that included urban organizing, electoral coalitions, and negotiations with the Turkish government. In 1995, the PKK signed the Geneva Convention, in effect condemning terrorism and reframing the armed struggle in terms of human rights and self-defense.

The PKK's large female cadre also greatly influenced evolution within the party. The female guerrillas' pursuit of equality had granted them more autonomy and leadership experience both on and off the battlefield, and made women's rights a central theme in the Kurdish revolution. The women used their organizational experience to influence civil society in waves of demonstrations and protests in Kurdish regions of Turkey beginning in 1993. In 1995, independent women's militias were established.

After being forced from his operational center in Syria, Öcalan was captured in 1999 while on the run in Nairobi, Kenya and has been in a maximum security prison on Imrali Island in Turkey ever since. Confined to his cell in virtual isolation, Öcalan delved into political theory, requesting and receiving hundreds of books on sociology, philosophy, and political theory. The authors Öcalan encountered would greatly influence the future role of the

PKK flag with portrait of Abdullah Öcalan

PKK, in particular the work of the American social theorist Murray Bookchin. Bookchin advocated ecologically sensitive, decentralized power-sharing in local communities as the basis of all decision-making, suggesting general assemblies at the local level were the true path to democracy rather than the centralized leadership typical of socialism.

The PKK would eventually depart from their claims of independence from Turkey to instead fight for government reforms and recognition of Kurdish autonomy within the existing state borders. Öcalan critiqued the Marxist-Leninist roots of the organization and introduced the theory of *democratic confederalism* as a new way forward in 2005. Democratic confederalism advocated for self-administration in Kurdish areas, which could operate in duality with the Turkish state, as well as the other parts of Kurdistan. In Öcalan's eyes, it was the concept of a "nation state" itself that now had to be rejected. He believed that whoever controlled the state was doomed to monopolize both power and violence. In order to slowly replace the structure of the state over time, Öcalan envisioned a highly decentralized network of grassroots assemblies, democratically elected councils, and even citizen militias that could break up the concentration of power. In theory, this would radically change how resources are allocated, how disputes are adjudicated, and how personal freedoms are guaranteed. Democratic confederalism was described as not just for Kurds, but as a system that could be replicated by any

population in the Middle East. This collective mass of small units could "confederate" with one another to form a new kind of local power that challenged the authority of centralized states.

Although Öcalan remains behind lock and key in Turkey, in Kurdistan his visage flies "freely," emblazoned on flags, framed portraits, wall clocks, necklaces, and iPhone cases. This divination has lifted Öcalan to an almost prophet-like status, and nobody questions his influence, even though he has not been able to fully lead the PKK for the past nineteen years.

Öcalan's ideas have inspired many movements in all four parts of Kurdistan. These new organizations are independent and decentralized from the PKK leadership, which is now based in the Qandil Mountains of Iraq; but they still very much share a common ideology—a "Kurdish hive-mind" of Öcalanism, or "Apoism." Apoism has manifested itself socially, politically, and also in various armed groups, who view Öcalan's writings both as a blueprint for self-determination and as a style of armed resistance.

With the advent of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the disintegration of the Syrian state itself would offer further grounds for Öcalan's theories to be set in motion.

THE ARAB SPRING

It is a commonly held belief that when the Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest the corruption of his government on December 17, 2010, a new chapter of history in the Arab world began. Bouazizi's action would spark the Tunisian Revolution, overthrow Tunisia's longstanding president, and inspire civilians in neighboring states to try and do the same. Demonstrations and riots spread throughout the region in a domino effect that outside observers did not anticipate, becoming known as the Arab Spring.

In the following months, hundred of thousands of people took to the streets of Egypt, Libya, and Morocco, among other countries. Protesters demanded democratic reforms, railing against corruption, human rights abuses, and suppression of minority groups. Some demonstrations led to quick reforms; others were heavily repressed; a few turned into conflicts. Young people were the ones most motivated to see real democratic change. It became the goal of a generation, but such aspirations were soon to be hijacked by much more organized, well-funded, and sinister actors.

Syria began to draw the attention of the world. We watched as demonstrations led by student activists, civil opposition parties, and Islamist groups against President Bashar al-Assad's regime escalated into civil war. After the protest movements were attacked violently, civilians and military defectors transformed themselves into localized armed groups to fight back against the regime. Each armed group had a unique name, commonly using nationalistic or religious terms. This hodgepodge of armed rebel groups became known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), an umbrella term for a wide spectrum of groups with very different political goals lumped together only by their will to overthrow the Assad regime.

Seeing an opportunity to crush the Assad government—an old rival often at odds with the Western and Gulf sphere of influence—Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United States, Israel, the United Kingdom, and other NATO-aligned European powers all acted in their own way against the crumbling Syrian state. Intelligence services sent vast amounts of weapons, money, and other materials to the rebels. Western and Gulf states chose their own champions in the war. Some FSA groups received support for their religiosity or links to Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, or jihadist organizations like al-Qaeda. Other FSA groups received support from the United States for their self-proclaimed secular-leaning outlook.

Turkey purposely left its border wide open, welcoming refugees fleeing the intensifying clashes, but also providing a military staging ground for all spectrums of the FSA. Not only Syrians took advantage of the porous border: It became a gateway for tens of thousands of international jihadists to openly enter Syria and fight alongside the FSA against the Syrian

A shopkeeper in Damascus displays a portrait of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad

Hafez al-Assad, father of Bashar al-Assad, displayed on a building in Damascus.

government. These foreign fighters filled the ranks of al-Qaeda's Syrian franchise, the al-Nusra Front, the Salafist Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham, and later, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). A Syrian jihad was born.

Assad's regime fought back with an iron fist, ruthlessly pummeling areas under the control of the opposition and using collective punishment to destroy the lives of civilians. Long before the conflict, arbitrary imprisonment and extensive torture at the hands of the regime was commonplace, but now a new level of cruelty had emerged. From the Syrian government's perspective, the fine line between rebels and the flock of jihadists who bolstered their fighting force on the frontlines was blurred and all opposition groups were declared terrorists. Families on both sides of the war suffered and starved under siege. The conflict sparked a mass migration of refugees seeking shelter in Europe and beyond.

The chaos that followed the retreat of the Syrian state paved the way for the more organized Islamist group, which had decades of combat experience from previous wars and existing funding sources to firmly embed themselves within opposition areas. Corruption and infighting plagued the opposition, and unification attempts ended in failure. For years, FSA groups collaborated openly with the al-Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham, and ISIS in offensives against the Syrian Arab Army, providing the shock troops necessary to dominate the battlefield.

At the start of 2014, tensions between ISIS and the other factions reached a breaking point. Amid clashes, ISIS withdrew from Syria's west but imposed sole control of much of Syria's east. There, it established the institutions and bureaucracy of a jihadist state, all to serve ISIS's own rank-and-file and civilian subjects—whom ISIS considered the community of righteous Muslims. ISIS would expand both its political and military dominance over the rebels and force all groups who did not willingly absorb into its structure out of key cities, such as Raqqa in January 2014. ISIS's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi eventually declared all who did not join as apostates.

From summer 2014 onward, ISIS launched a rapacious campaign of expansion and conquest. In June, it swept through Iraq and overran the country's second-largest city, Mosul, facing little resistance from a demoralized, terrorized Iraqi military. It pillaged the Iraqis' U.S.-supplied military vehicles and weapons stocks, adding to their arsenal of arms already raided, purchased, or gifted to them from subservient Syrian rebel groups. ISIS joined its new Iraqi territory with Syria's east to unilaterally create a cross-border sectarian proto-state, from which it could attack in all directions. ISIS had profoundly destabilized the modern Middle East, opening wide sectarian fissures and shaking the legitimacy of its states.

ISIS used the capture of Mosul as an opportunity to reinforce to their devout followers and online cheerleaders the rather grandiose idea that some divine prophecy was at work—and an ancient Islamic Caliphate was being reestablished.

THE KURDISH SPRING

During the protests that swept the region in January 2011, Kurdish populations were among the first to revolt in Syria. This was not surprising: Much like in neighboring countries with Kurdish populations, Kurds were seen as second-class citizens in the Syrian Arab Republic.

As the largest ethnic minority in Syria—some 10 to 15 percent of the population—the Kurds are treated by the government with both deep suspicion and discrimination. While smaller minorities in Syria were given status, the Syrian Ba'ath regime viewed the Kurdish population as too large to risk empowering with representation in politics, yet small enough to keep down. The regime outlawed speaking the Kurdish language in public, as well as all related cultural activities.

In the 1970s, the Syrian Ba'ath regime had enacted a forced resettlement program that changed the ethnographic makeup of predominantly Kurdish regions. Tens of thousands of Kurds were forced from their Syrian homeland south of the Turkish border, and Arab populations were moved in. In the same period, over 120,000 Syrian Kurds were stripped of their citizenship, and were classified as foreigners or undocumented citizens not privy to the services of the state, including access to education and employment. Future generations would continue to suffer under these same policies.

In April 2011, the Assad government, losing control of the population following the large-scale demonstrations and riots sweeping the country, reversed some of these policies. The Syrian government vowed to issue identity cards back to a small portion of the stateless Kurds, but could never fully reconcile given the growing dissent within the population. The country was in crisis; it was too little too late.

In July 2012, the Syrian Arab Army abandoned Kurdish enclaves of Syria to dedicate their dwindling resources to other areas of the country at war. Kurds were now free of the repressive nature of the Assad regime, but at the same time, they were left on their own to defend themselves from the al-Qaeda-linked rebel groups ravaging the land. Even though the Syrian Kurds were predominantly of Sunni faith, the secular nature of the community in general was perceived as heretical by Sunni fundamentalist groups like ISIS, and were therefore targeted for conversion or extermination.

With the regime in retreat, Syrian Kurdish political dissidents in exile associated with the Democratic Union Party (PYD) swiftly returned home to reorganize the fractured society. Formerly underground cells of Syrian Kurdish fighters surfaced and gathered weapons on the black market. Other guerrilla fighters trained by the PKK with decades of experience battling Turkey's well-equipped military also emerged in Syria. They became the commanders of a ragtag mix of local volunteers, shaping the movement according to the ideas of their ideological leader, Abdullah Öcalan. The power vacuum that emerged in Syrian Kurdistan presented a new opportunity to influence the tide of the war.

Weapons captured from ISIS by the YPG

Thus, the People's Protections Units (YPG) and their all-female wing, the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), were born. Other spectrums of Kurdish political voices either abandoned the region and fled across the border, or were forced out by the domination of the new power structure.

It was not surprising that the Kurds who had studied Öcalan would ultimately be the ones to organize and defend the society, as the region had been a prime recruitment ground by the PKK since the days of Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez. The students of Öcalan had already begun to develop parallel social and political structures tacitly under the gaze of the state, and they were in position to assume power when the occasion presented itself.

At the same time, the Syrian Arab Army's retreat was self-serving. As foreign fighters were flooding into Syria from Turkey, the regime left the Kurds—Turkey's insurgent enemy—to fight jihadist groups along the border. Clashes between the YPG/J and the Syrian Arab Army happened on many occasions, but a pragmatic neutrality would always be restored. Both sides knew that opening fronts against one another would weaken themselves, and both feared the future country falling into the hands of jihadists. It seemed neither the Syrian government nor the Turkish-backed rebels could guarantee minority rights for the Kurds, and the YPG/J chose a delicate third path in the war.

For the first time the term *Rojava* could be uttered in public. (Rojava, which means "the west" in the Kurdish language, refers to the part of northeastern Syria that makes up west Kurdistan, and also is used to describe the setting sun.) The newly empowered Rojava Kurds immediately began establishing organs of popular governance, from neighborhood communes and academies to citywide councils to a regional administration spread across three different cantons: Afrin, Kobanê, and Jazira. In January 2014, the three self-governing cantons declared themselves as autonomous zones. Each institutional body was at least 40 percent women and led by a male and female cochair. Each also had quotas for minority ethnic groups and religions, following a pluralistic and nonsectarian revolutionary social contract.

Though Rojava was under embargo from its hostile neighbors, female organizers began to establish cooperative workshops and agricultural projects aimed at empowering women.

They sought to break the traditional role women had played in the male-dominated society. With a feminist revolution sweeping the land, many more women were inspired to take up arms themselves.

Male and female fighters of the YPG/J fought together as equals on the frontlines. Behind them, liberated areas were secured by newly established local police forces—Asayish—and neighborhood security patrols. All of these defense and security forces considered themselves manifestations of the decentralized system. They viewed themselves as citizen's militias unified by a military council following Apoism, but claimed allegiance to no specific political party. Although the YPG/J would remain predominantly Kurdish, there were Arab, Syriac, and Turkmen recruits as well as small minorities from the diverse population of northeastern Syria who also joined their ranks.

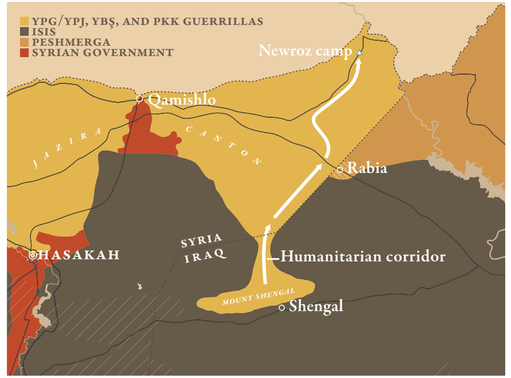
The YPG/J would prove themselves to be one of the first forces capable of stopping the ISIS advance in Syria. In October 2013, the YPG/J defeated ISIS in Til Koçer, a strategic city bordering Iraq, and would continue to push into hostile frontiers along the Turkish border. Most of these battles were unreported in the Western press, and the war between the Syrian Kurds and the radical Islamists was generally viewed as a sideshow to the greater war between Assad and the rebellion. A year later, all that would change.

GENOCIDE AT SHENGAL

In Northern Iraq, the Peshmerga, military forces loyal to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), also found themselves swept into the new war against ISIS, though it had initially sat on the sidelines, unwilling to enter what it deemed primarily a sectarian struggle between Iraq's Sunni and Shia.

The Kurdistan Region in Iraq gained its autonomy as a federal entity following decades of hard-fought armed struggle against the Iraqi government. A successful uprising against Saddam Hussein's forces during the First Gulf War in 1991 and the establishment of a humanitarian no-fly zone solidified Kurdish self-rule in Northern Iraq. Following the toppling of Saddam's regime, the Kurdistan Region would eventually be recognized in the new Iraqi Constitution of 2005, with nationalist Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani elected as its president. The region is dominated by two key Kurdish parties: the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), concentrated in the north on the border with Syria and Turkey, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), based farther south.

Both Öcalan and KRG President Barzani are considered heroes among Kurds, but such praise is split between political ideologies, and a long history of both betrayals and opportunistic partnerships frames the relationship of the two Kurdish rebels. Both men



Map of the narrow humanitarian corridor used to rescue Êzidîs, early August 2014

were considered terrorists by the regimes they led armed struggles against for Kurdish rights, but their wars for a free Kurdistan were never waged together in unity.

The followers of Öcalan criticize the KRG model for building a Kurdistan based on a capitalist mini-nation-state that thrives off corruption and tribal nepotism. Barzani's followers, in turn, criticize Öcalan for failing to deliver Turkish Kurds to autonomy and view democratic confederalism as a pipe dream, not a viable solution. As both the Rojava and KRG models rise in power, only time will see which outlasts the other, or if a Kurdish unity will eventually join what are currently considered west and south Kurdistan.

The Iraqi Kurds' vital economic ties to the Turkish government soured relations even further with the Syrian Kurds, with the KRG pressured to embargo their border with Rojava, cutting off the critical flow of fuel trade, humanitarian supplies, and other material goods. As a result, Rojava was isolated on all sides while fighting a devastating war, and at times KRG politicans even echoed Turkey's officials on their stance regarding the YPG as nothing more than terrorists linked to the PKK. But what happens in trenches among individual Kurds is a different matter.

During their brutal offensive in the summer of 2014, ISIS set foot into Kurdish regions of Iraq, and the Peshmerga initially crumbled under the pressure. ISIS was

mere kilometers away from the capital of Erbil before U.S. President Barack Obama authorized American airstrikes, giving the Peshmerga the opportunity to reorganize and launch successful counteroffensives. In a rare display of unity, old rival Kurdish parties collaborated against a common enemy: In August 2014, reinforcements of PKK guerrillas came down from their headquarters in the Qandil Mountains and entered the new theater of war in Iraqi Kurdistan. They fought alongside both KDP- and PUK-aligned Peshmerga in areas of Iraqi Kurdistan such as Makhmur and Kirkuk. Together, they halted the jihadist advance.

The initial collapse of the Peshmerga forces led to the harrowing genocide of the Êzidî (Yazidi) religious minority of the Shengal (Sinjar) Mountain area. When ISIS attacked Shengal in August 2014, the Peshmerga abandoned their posts and left thousands of Êzidî families unprotected and at the mercy of the jihadists. According to ISIS's fundamentalist ideology, waging genocide upon the non-Abrahamic religion of the Êzidî was not a sin. The result was a massacre of thousands of men and at least seven thousand women and children being kidnapped and used as sex slaves. The survivors fled to the mountains, where they stayed with no food or water for days. The massacre has been since recognized as a genocide by the United Nations.

From nearby Rojava, just north of Shengal Mountain, a small unit of YPG fighters stationed nearby were alerted to the horrific events unfolding. Without waiting for an official order, they entered the besieged mountain with just light weapons. Further reinforcements of YPG/J fighters managed to fight through a narrow route in ISIS territory in which Êzidî families trapped on the mountain could escape to the safety of Rojava. Scenes on local Rojava television emerged of Peshmerga retreating with their heavy weapons and military vehicles, and YPG fighters running past the convoys toward the ISIS-occupied mountain with just AK-47 rifles in hand.

A couple of days later, PKK reinforcements reached the YPG/J in Shengal, further securing the humanitarian corridor, saving thousands of Êzidî lives, and transporting them to the safety of Rojava. Upon entering the city of Shengal at the foot of the mountain, the Kurdish forces fought back ISIS members house-to-house, neighborhood-to-neighborhood, creating frontline positions in strategic zones of the city. They became heroes among much of the Êzidî population, who now saw the fleeing Peshmerga units as traitors.

Much to Barzani's dismay, many among Shengal's population would attempt to adopt the decentralized blueprint of Öcalan. The Shengal Resistance Units (YBŞ) were established and trained by PKK and YPG/J commanders, continuing on the fight in Shengal alongside a reorganized contingent of Peshmerga. Later on, a familiar theme would arise: an all-female wing of the YBŞ would also be established—the Êzîdxan Women's Units (YJÊ). The area would remain a disputed zone between rival Kurdish factions flying flags with Barzani's and Öcalan's faces on them, but with individual fighters working together in the same trenches against a common foe.

KOBANÊ

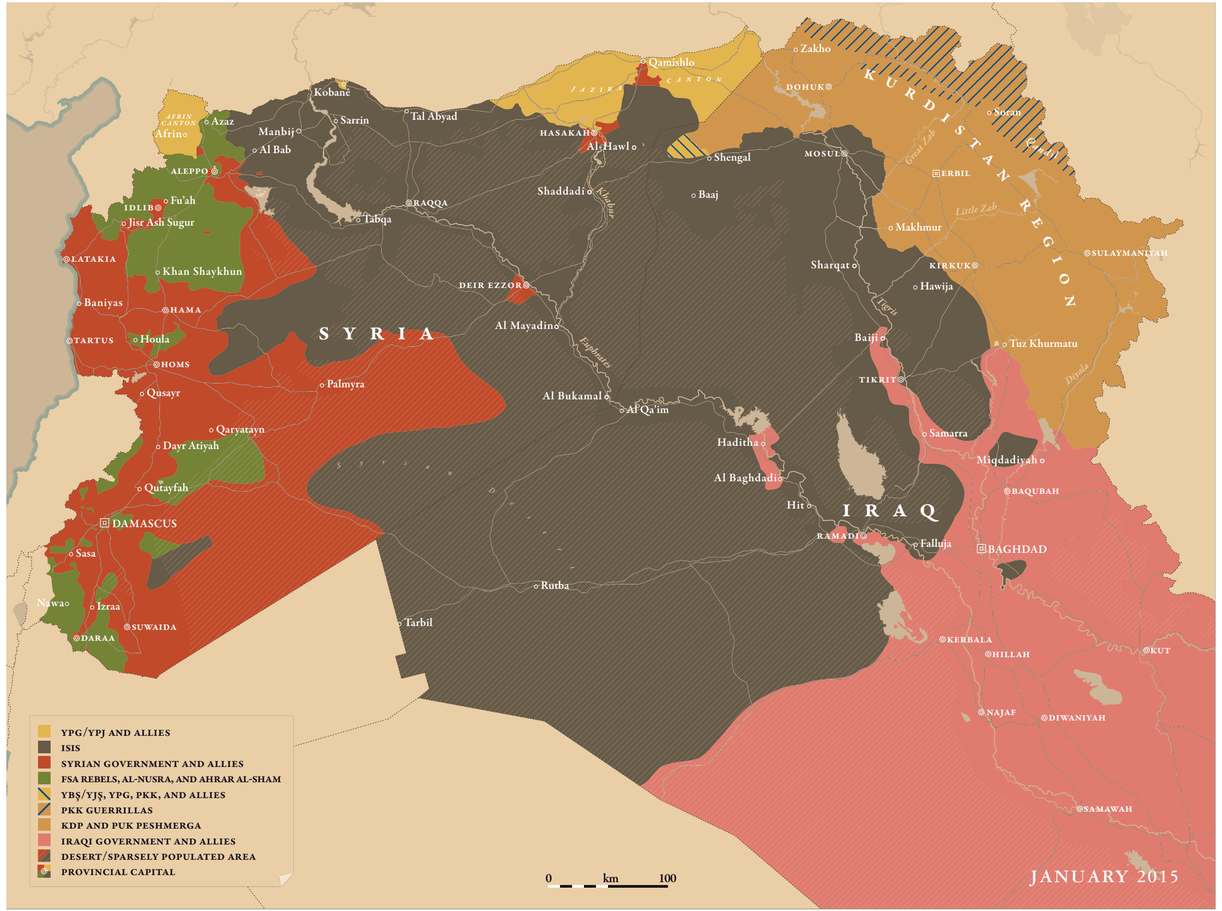
ISIS, with its ego inflated due to sweeping victories across both Syria and Iraq, launched a devastating campaign on the Syrian Kurdish city of Kobanê in October 2014. ISIS now had absorbed a patchwork of militias and rebel groups under its black flag, as well as thousands of foreign fighters who entered via Turkey's porous border with Syria. Some predominantly Arab FSA rebel groups refused to collaborate with the extremists, and joined the Kurds in defending Kobanê, the start of what would make up the core of a future alliance between Kurds and majority-Arab rebel groups.

With the Turkish border now at their back, the defenders of Kobanê were cornered into just a few neighborhoods as ISIS pounded their positions with advanced weaponry and looted tanks. Rather than intervening, the Turkish military sat and watched from its border. The Turkish government knew that if the YPG/J were to be victorious, their own repressed Kurdish population could be inspired to make similar demands for autonomy, or worse, rekindle the same armed struggle that had challenged the Turkish military for decades. ISIS had become a convenient proxy force for Turkey, capable of both fighting Assad's regime, and destroying the ambitions of their old Kurdish enemies.

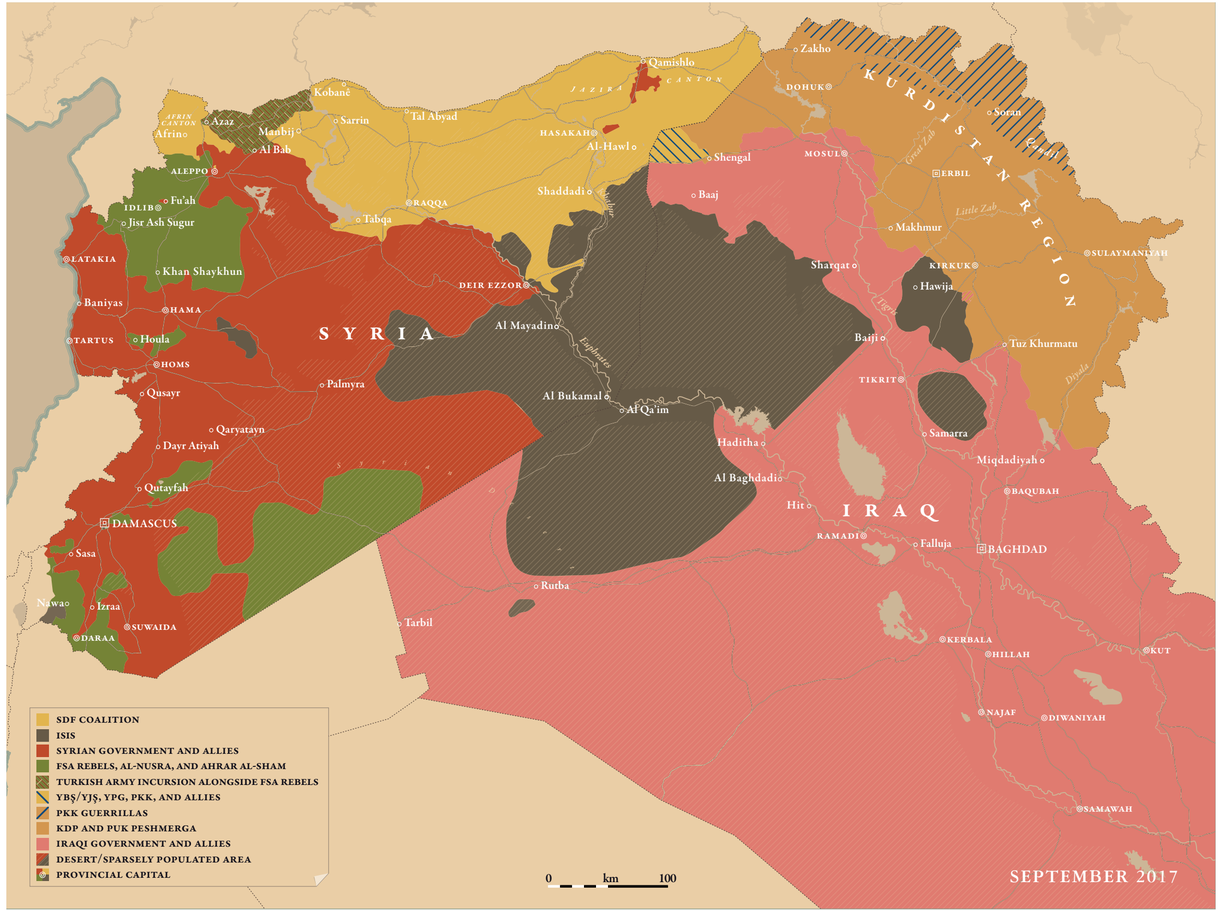
Across the border in Turkey, civilians accused their government of aiding ISIS in the fight, and unleashed unrest in the shape of both protests and violent riots. Volunteers held hands to create a lengthy human chain to prevent the smuggling of fighters and weapons to the ISIS campaign. It seemed like the borders that severed Kurdistan were crumbling.

Much to Turkish President Erdoğan's dismay, President Obama authorized airstrikes to support this unlikely new ally in Kobanê. A small reinforcement of Peshmerga was approved to access Kobanê via Turkish soil to lend their support and help coordinate airstrikes with the American warplanes in the sky. Anti-interventionists in the West had their beliefs challenged as they watched the brave women of the YPJ suffer heavy losses fighting a brutal enemy that a previous intervention itself had helped manifest. In another paradox, the YPG/J, with their Öcalan-inspired anti-capitalist theory, benefited significantly from American airpower paid for by U.S. tax dollars.

Against all odds, the YPG/J and their rebel and Peshmerga allies eventually declared victory over the city. While international television cameras watched, they had proven to the world that ISIS wasn't the unstoppable boogeyman its propaganda had suggested. The achievement came at great cost of human life and infrastructure, but the portraits of the YPG/J's martyrs would fuel more victories and mobilization, turning them into one of the most effective infantry forces fighting ISIS, reversing the bleak fate of Kurdish regions of Syria.



Areas of control by armed groups in Iraq and Syria, January 2015



Areas of control by armed groups in Iraq and Syria, September 2017

WEAPONIZED PHOTOGRAPHY

The recent war in Iraq and Syria had become a globalized conflict, except rather than a world war fought with state armies, it was fought by proxy, with the blood of the local people. The world had become entwined in the conflict in ways never before imaginable, and events were both amplified and distorted by propaganda from all sides.

In a hyperconnected world, Arab Spring activists communicated in real time; they organized themselves through Facebook and Twitter and showed the world how their governments responded in violence with photography and video clips shot with mobile phones. It was fascinating to be able to follow the thousands of different user accounts created in that period. Both secular and religious actors tried to galvanize people through technology.

Beyond the frontlines, there was an active war of disinformation occurring. Both the Syrian Arab Army and the Free Syrian Army targeted civilians, yet in the Western media, it was mainly the atrocities of the Syrian regime that dominated the airwaves.

My camera sitting among various YPG weapons

The obvious bias made many independent journalists wonder if the mainstream media was somehow in cahoots with the U.S. government's agenda of pushing regime change. At the same time, the Syrian government's police-state-like control over media resulted in refusal of entry for most Western journalists, allowing the rebels to have complete domination over the narrative of the war in the West. Lobbying groups and think tanks funded by foreign states seeking to control the outcome of the Syrian civil war also pushed a blatantly pro-rebel agenda, underplaying the power of al-Qaeda-linked groups on the ground.

The Western press had a hysterical obsession with ISIS, sharing their grisly videos and oftentimes spreading propaganda for the terrorist group. ISIS media was described as "slick and sophisticated" by media pundits. While it's true the media capabilities of ISIS were vast, the videos were no different from the quality of videos that the rest of the YouTube generation was uploading to the internet—it was the level of brutality in the videos that was new. ISIS conducted psychological warfare on its enemies with videos of beheadings and the violent vendettas settled upon any who opposed it. ISIS carefully constructed its ruthless reputation using its media wing, and anyone with an internet connection could be lured into its trap. Yet, to its own audience, ISIS media projected a utopian Islamic Caliphate—a grand project uniting the Sunni community. Their propaganda videos were shot and subtitled in a diverse number of languages, becoming a key recruitment tool for new jihadists and their families to join the Islamic State. Watching vast ISIS convoys of Toyota Hiluxes with black flags waving in the wind was like viewing Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film *The Triumph of the Will* shot by a teenager with a DSLR. It was clear that the same tools being used to share ideas freely were also being exploited by groups with extreme messages. In some cases, onlookers became radicalized enough to travel to Syria themselves and fight.

In the early days of the Syrian conflict, you could follow every single side of the war on Twitter, including the jihadists. It was a rare window into the crisis, filled with the grinning selfies of foreign fighters, their kittens, and combat images with garish iPhone app filters generously applied. Such communication will surely become a staple of war in the future, but in the Syrian conflict, previously muffled voices were heard clearly for the first time.

There was Israfil Yilmaz, or @chechclear, a social-media-savvy Dutch jihadist of Turkish background. Yilmaz roamed among the various Islamist groups in Syria, offering both local and foreign fighters training he had received as a former soldier in the Royal Netherlands Army. Yilmaz was a media darling who spoke of himself as a kind of jihadi Robin Hood who had come from abroad to defend Sunni Muslims from the tyrannical regime of Bashar al-Assad. He would eventually go on to join ISIS, where his true motivations were revealed: seeking to impose an Islamic State upon the Syrian people. On his Tumblr account, Yilmaz posted snapshots of his bleeding hand, wounded from a YPJ sniper. In later posts, Yilmaz shared the famous images of Afghan Mujahideen by photographer Steve McCurry, claiming divine inspiration from their jihad against the Soviet Union. Ironically, both the Afghan Mujahideen and some of Yilmaz's Islamist rebel comrades were being tacitly supported by the CIA to overthrow a Russian-allied government. Yilmaz was eventually reported as killed by a coalition airstrike in January 2017.

Syrian-government-loyalist Twitter account-holders who posted in English offered testimonies of the war that directly contradicted things heard on CNN. From these accounts, one could learn about the massacres of Christians at the hands of the al-Nusra Front and the rebel looting of Syria's major economic center of Aleppo. Some prominent pro-Assad accounts among the Syrian diaspora had dark senses of humor, and used visual memes to spread messages beyond their normal flock.

In 2013 the online "Assadists" began taunting their opponents with "the Curse of Assad," a meme that counts down the many foreign leaders who had called for Assad to go, yet had been forced out of office or humiliated in scandals while Assad continued to hold on to power. Over the years of the war, giant red *X*s were digitally scribbled over the portraits of David Cameron after his resigning due to the results of Brexit; Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, after becoming a scapegoat for Turkey's failures in Syria; Hillary Clinton, after losing the presidential election to Donald Trump; and Senator John McCain, after being diagnosed with a brain tumor.

Kurdish Twitter, or #TwitterKurds, used the English language as a common tongue to connect the large Kurdish diaspora spread out over Europe. They would share heroic-looking photographs of Kurdish fighters and try to make sense of the labyrinth of acronyms of the various armed factions. This is how I became aware of the Kurdish resistance in Syria in late 2012, which at the time was engaged in clashes with both the Syrian Arab Army and Turkish-backed rebel and jihadist groups in the city of Serê Kaniyê.

In November 2012, one of the first videos emerged online of the YPG/J announcing their ranks visually to the public. A camera crane slowly rose over rows of battle-ready troops holding AK-47 assault rifles. I would learn years later from a young man who formerly worked in the media department of a local television station that things were not exactly as they appeared in the video. He explained to me that fighters from all over Rojava were told to show up wearing all black clothing, as the militia had no official uniform at the time. He admitted that only the people standing near the front rows closest to the camera actually had guns, as they were in short supply. He quoted Sun Tzu's *Art of War*: "appear weak when you are strong, and strong when you are weak."

Early in the war, internet access on mobile phones was a rare commodity for most of the population of Rojava. YPG/J commanders encouraged those who did have internet access not to share ISIS's gruesome videos, wary of them having a demoralizing effect on their under-equipped fighters.

On Twitter, detailed maps and analysis of battles shared among the Kurdish diaspora accounts often attracted the eyes of Turkish nationalists, who would use every opportunity to snap back and cause an online flame-war. In late 2014, during the siege of Kobanê, a horrific photograph of an ISIS fighter holding the head of a YPJ female fighter circulated across social media. Both ISIS supporters and Turkish nationalists found common ground in using the power of images to wage psychological warfare against their Kurdish enemies online. It was hard to say to what extent all of this impacted things on the ground, or if it was merely a distortion for observers away from the battlefield. All one could do was try to follow along, and know that somewhere out there, versions of these events were unfolding in real time.

A CURIOUS PHOTOGRAPHER

I could read all the articles, books, and social media accounts in the world about what led to the war in Iraq and Syria, but that doesn't constitute experience. The reality was that a burning curiosity—or shall I say a compulsion—drove me to observe what was happening on the ground with my own eyes, independently and unfiltered by the media I had lost trust in.

Since I became interested in photography as a young kid, all of the photographers I had looked up to and who had inspired me had inevitably covered conflicts. I had seen striking photojournalism spanning the generations of war in Kurdistan—but the portrait project I envisioned was different. I felt the public (myself included) was becoming fatigued

with images of war. War, particularly when it's not happening on one's shores, can feel far away and unrelatable. However, if a certain shift of style is enacted, then the viewer may actually pay heed. This is what makes portrait photography unique from more purist strands of documentary photography. Raw photojournalistic work is important because the camera becomes an outside observer; the viewer may never really ever "meet" the subjects but we get a sense of the outside events shaping their lives. However, the realm of portrait photography is an entirely different medium of expression—the core of the image relies on human interaction, which most often requires trust, empathy, and an unsaid responsibility to the subject you are photographing.

Honestly, a sense of selfishness was also motivating me. It felt as if history was unfolding in Kurdistan, and photography was a way to throw myself into the midst of it. The camera became a passport to be temporarily among the people at the heart of the war. In the past, I had photographed personal projects highlighting the plight of minority groups, but never in a war environment. In Ethiopia and Indonesia, I had spent time with indigenous groups whose ancestors had suddenly found themselves within the borders of a state which they had no say in forming, and no political representation among the dominant power structure. The Kurdish plight seemed oddly familiar. Even though the ISIS propaganda had succeeded in scaring me shitless, I came to the conclusion that a project on Kurdish culture required a focus on Kurdish fighters—the armed defenders of a distinct heritage and language. There was something special about their struggle that, at the time, I could not properly articulate. I just felt like it had to be explored in depth, and documented in a way outside of the constraints typical of mainstream journalism. There was no rational newspaper, magazine, or online publication that would have sent me in place of their much more experienced staff. But frankly, that was okay, because I also wanted to be entirely in control of my own affairs—especially security. As such, the project—and the results of this project, including this book—became an independent, and self-funded, pursuit.

Getting to Kurdistan and navigating the area, however, would be a challenge. It felt like a vague, crazy, far-off idea that was beyond my reach. That was the case until I watched another journalist's film, which I have been kindly asked not to describe in too much detail due to some political sensitivities. The journalist seemed to have unprecedented access to the region, which was noticeably different from the typical press tours of Peshmerga bases I had seen so often online. The journalist was clearly directly embedded within guerrilla groups, escorted by their convoys, and traveling great distances over a long period of time. This was exactly the way I desired to work, and I knew there had to be someone unseen behind the camera helping to orchestrate all of this. The question was—*Who was it?*

On past trips, I had depended on talented "fixers"—local guides and translators who act as a reliable bridge between photographer and culture. If I were to truly embed myself within the war, I knew I needed a Kurdish fixer with a deep understanding of the situation, as well as access to contacts on the ground that could guide me on my journey, much in the way the inspiring journalist apparently had.

I watched the film intently. As the credits rolled by at the end of the video, my eyes caught the names of two translators: Jan and Ipek Êzîdxelo. I curiously typed "Ipek Êzîdxelo" into Facebook's search bar, and it summoned a profile of a smiling woman with a pixie haircut and traditional Kurdish clothing. I took a quick scan of her photos and there was Jan beside her—a man in his mid-thirties with dark hair and an olive complexion. I wrote Ipek a quick message, not knowing what would result from my query.

Thus began a series of chats that eventually led up to a Skype video call. One afternoon, a pixelated couple on my computer screen sat on a couch, relaxed, staring back at me. "Hellloooo, Joe!" they exclaimed when the internet connection became clear, shortening my name and sounding like a friend who had known me for years. The smoke of their cigarettes spiraled upward as they chatted with me in perfect English through multiple connection interruptions.

Jan and Ipek had left Afrin, a Kurdish enclave in northwest Syria, to study in Sulaymaniyah. When the war broke out, they found themselves landlocked. They were hoping that one day the YPG/J would connect the fractured regions between ISIS-held territories, so that they could drive straight home. Until then, the way was impossible. It's hard to describe, but there was something sweet about the way the couple talked about their homeland. Instead of describing the violence unfolding every day, their words were realistic and yet infused with an uncanny level of optimism. There were no brutal statistics interlaced in their words, but rather a focus on the everyday life experience of the Kurds. It was clear that I was speaking to people who were viewing the events at a very human level. As a portrait photographer new to this experience, I felt I would be in good hands.

"You should come. Kurdistan is beautiful this time of year," Ipek mused. Jan's speech was more academic—his mannerisms reminding me of a professor speaking to a class. "Have you ever been to the Middle East before, Joe? Of course we can see everything, but all I can say is you have to be patient here."

I'd like to think I have a good gut instinct about people. Yet, admittedly, I still hesitated. After viewing the ruthless way ISIS had treated captured journalists, I was paranoid. After all, many of those journalists had been betrayed and sold by their fixers. I wanted to make sure the couple I was speaking to on Skype were definitely the ones in the other journalist's film, but for their own security, Jan and Ipek did not appear in any of the footage. After scanning through the other journalist's documentary one last time, I noticed one instance where the camera drifted to the side during an interview—the cameraman's slight shake of hand. In just three frames, there was Jan's face—the same face I had been talking to on Skype. As yet another precaution, I wrote the filmmakers and a few days later I received a response raving about Jan and Ipek, and how they were now considered friends. At that point, I felt as assured as I could ever be, and the idea of traveling to Kurdistan went from vague to very, very real.

Over the course of three different trips to Kurdistan, my gut instinct would prove to be right, and Jan and Ipek would become close friends. Each time, Jan traveled with me while Ipek stayed behind to coordinate with their contacts for us, all while maintaining her studies at university. Jan was the only person I could speak English to for sometimes up to forty days at a time, and more times than not, the situation called for us sharing the same room and every meal together. You can learn a lot about a person in this kind of situation, and they can learn a lot about you. As an Aleppo University graduate in linguistics, Jan spoke all dialects of Kurdish fluently, Arabic with a number of accents, English, and a little bit of Turkish. In the same sentence, he could quote Friedrich Nietzsche and Abdullah Öcalan.

My level of respect grew with each shared moment, but it wasn't always easy. Sometimes Jan was frustratingly quiet, not saying much for days. Other times he would drink coffee and go on a caffeine-fueled rant on the foundations of Kurdish culture and not shut up for hours. He would ask me questions he already knew the answers to, purposely luring me into a theoretical trap, and then criticizing my naïveté of foreign affairs. In almost every case, he was right.

On many occasions, entering Syria via Iraq—either by being granted access or smuggling one's self across the border—required days of waiting. When I thought Jan was doing nothing to help us, I would complain that we were wasting our time and not getting enough photographs. Imagine the whiny voice of a foreign photographer attempting to control his own environment in the chaos of the Syrian war; I'll admit, sometimes that was me. I'd eventually learn that Jan was always working behind the scenes in his own delicate and deliberate style. Suddenly, obstacles would part, permissions would be granted, and everything I had asked to see would materialize. "Mister, you need to have patience. There is a Kurdish way. You are learning it, but too slowly," Jan would reproach. Seconds later he would feel bad and add, ". . . But at least you are trying."

Some days were like a buddy-comedy film. "Hurry up, old man," I joked as we climbed a mountain between the border of Iraq and Syria. Jan had fallen behind on the treacherous walk, huffing and puffing, reaching for his cigarette. "I may be old, but I'm still with it!" he'd holler back, intensifying his speed in defiance and pacing ahead of me.

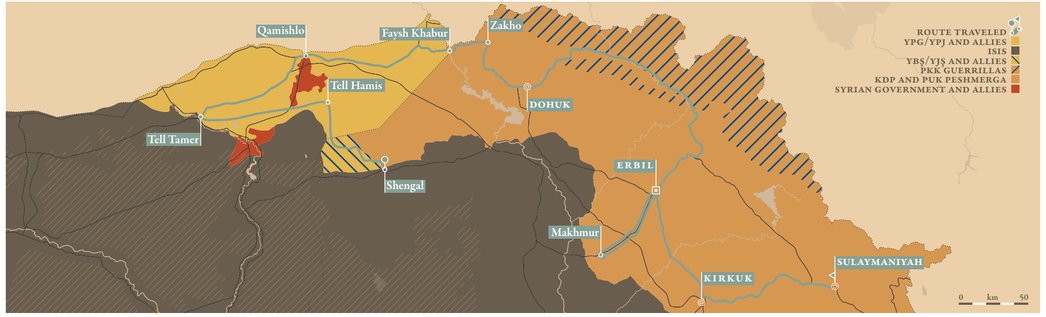
Jan didn't talk about himself much, but occasionally he revealed mysterious details of his past by accident, like when the Syrian regime tried to assassinate him as a young man for being a known organizer in Kurdish affairs. "You have to understand, Joe . . . Kurds have a hole in their hearts. Imagine after hundreds of years of this, what gets built up psychologically and passed down among generations." Jan's victimhood would quickly turn to defiance. "After the battle of Kobanê, Kurds were never the same. If they think we will ever surrender, they are wrong. We'd rather die. Ask any fighter here if you don't believe me."

Spending time with Jan gave me a clear view of the war through a Kurdish lens. It was obvious he respected PKK, YPG/J, and Peshmerga fighters, but longed for Kurdish unity in politics.

"Don't you think all this Öcalan stuff everywhere is kind of weird, like they are worshipping him as a prophet?" I asked Jan on my first trip, as a portrait of the founder of the PKK dangled from a vehicle's rearview mirror. "No, it's normal," he replied. I asked the same question on my second trip, once we knew each other a lot better, and the reply was much different. "Of course it is a little bit strange. I thought that once too. But may I ask you—what does the Prophet Muhammad have to do with these people? The answer . . . is nothing. Just let them have a Kurdish prophet. Is that too much to ask for? Öcalan is like a Kurdish Nelson Mandela to us. Nobody will ever take that away." I can confidently say that without Jan and Ipek, no photograph in this project would have been possible.

Jan and I in Kobanê

JOURNEY ONE



ALONG THE PATH OF THE OLIVE OIL

New York City, February 28, 2015 It was already nighttime when the taxi rolled up to the entrance of my studio in Brooklyn. My friend and colleague Caleb helped me pack the trunk with all my gear.

Too much shit as usual. We both hopped into the cab. The sound of the car doors closing punctuated the stillness of the air. It was quite a few hours before my plane would depart JFK Airport, but I wanted to give myself plenty of time to check in; I knew that there was a good chance I would be questioned about my itinerary. In just a few hours, I'd be boarding a plane to Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan, with a layover in Istanbul for a few hours.

Upon reaching the airport, Caleb helped me lug my six cases of well-packed photography equipment to the sidewalk and then bring them over to the check-in counters. He departed shortly thereafter; I would be taking this trip alone.

The adventure truly began as soon as I reached the check-in counter at JFK Airport. The Turkish Airlines attendant swiped my passport, and suddenly a paleness spread across her face. She abruptly got up from her position at the counter with my passport without any explanation. I pretended to not know what was going on, but deep down I knew. About fifteen minutes later she returned with two gentlemen. At first glance, you wouldn't have been able to identify them from any other person at the airport. They wore everyday clothes, but then they pulled badges out from underneath their shirts. They were Homeland Security agents. My passport was flagged.

I felt the eyes of fellow passengers staring while I was being questioned in the middle of the airport. Nonetheless, the guys were professional and knowledgeable, and they asked reasonable questions, considering where I was going. Their language was personable yet tactical. They were hunting for details.

"That's a strange itinerary you have; what are you planning on doing in Iraq? What kind of photography do you do? So no one is sending you? You're freelance? How does freelance photography work?" These were just some of the things that I was asked beside the check-in counter.

I knew I had no incriminating evidence to hide, so I leaned against my equipment cart in a relaxed manner. I showed them some of my work on my phone. As I swiped across the screen showcasing everything from my recent shoots with the U.S. Army to National Geographic Channel, I could tell that their fixed gazes were not focused on my work, but more on how my hands appeared—were they shaking? I was let go after thirty minutes of questioning. As a matter of principle, I thanked them for their service and was on my way.

It's not surprising my itinerary was suspicious. In 2015, media attention focused on the flow of foreign fighters joining jihadist groups in both Iraq and Syria. Tens of thousands of people from countries all around the world had left their homes to join the ranks of ISIS.

I can see how a twenty-five-year-old traveling solo via Turkey—the most common entry point into Syria—whose clothes are mostly black, might sound some alarm bells. As Homeland Security walked away, I wondered if this would become a regular routine every time I traveled. (It did.)

Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan, March 2, 2015 My lonely chair in the sky granted me almost twenty-one hours to ponder my own motivations about the trip until I finally arrived into Sulaymaniyah around 3:45 a.m. I was greeted by Jan and his journalist friend Ayub, both of whom were initially quiet, observant, and very helpful. It was nice to meet the man behind the Skype session, but it was very hard to gauge his character. It would take effort to cut through Jan's apparent shyness.

The airport looked rather modern, but it became clear to me that I had landed in a country at war. We were not allowed to drive a vehicle up to the airport gates due to the fear of car bombings, so the three of us took my photography gear to a little airport bus that drove us outside the airport terminal. Once there, we loaded each case into Jan's friend's car, which was much too small. We had to roll down the window to stick one of my cases out and the three of us sat uncomfortably shoulder-to-shoulder in the front with Ayub at the wheel. I had carefully packed so many individual bags in case the airline broke something in transit, and I assured Jan that we would be hitting the road with a much reduced kit. I needed to break the ice, so I made it clear that I was fully aware that thanks to my crowding, the driver's hand had to reach beneath Jan's ass every time he shifted a gear. They laughed. In that moment I knew I was in good hands, and the coyness of the two men slowly began to drift away.

The night's darkness was only broken by the orange sodium-vapor lights of the city. The entire area was nestled between vast mountain ranges—Sulaymaniyah's very own sentinels, which have inadvertently protected the city in both historic and modern times. By the time we reached Jan's house it was 5:00 a.m. We sat together on his living room floor while Ipek still slept. A plastic mat was rolled out with plates of Kurdish cheese, flatbread, peppery spices, and olive oil.

"Do you see this olive oil?" asked Jan. "How it arrived here is actually . . . a miracle."

He continued, "It was sent from my family in Afrin. To get it here, the olive oil had to pass through hundreds of checkpoints. From the YPG, to Ahrar al-Sham, to ISIS, then here. Kurds, criminal gangs, foreign jihadists. Everyone knows about Afrin olive oil."

What better way to describe the erratic mess the war in Syria had devolved into following the protest movement of 2011? A patchwork of hundreds of armed groups wrestling for control of the country. Yet, Jan's olive oil still managed to reach him—sporadic commerce still somehow found a way to flow in between violent clashes.

It was the risky job of some poor truck driver, desperate for any work at all in the crumbling Syrian State, to take loads of goods across the embargoed country. We can imagine the driver waving goodbye to a Kurdish fighter stationed at the last checkpoint on a highway, driving along no-man's-land, and then suddenly pulling up to the next checkpoint featuring the flag of the next armed group. So long as permission was granted, the truck driver could continue onward to whatever fate the next checkpoint offered. Any material sent from one side of the country to the other ended up being exponentially more expensive, as "revolutionary taxes" and/or bribes were expected at each and every stop.

At times, the Kurds on the receiving ends of checkpoints would discover materials banned from trade routes—perhaps smuggled weapons and bomb-making materials for ISIS sleeper cells within cities under their control—or even worse, they would get blown up by a suicide bomber in the surprise start to an offensive, kicking off an advance of jihadists from the other end of the highway. Trade could be resumed eventually, but after the clashes the checkpoints might end up in different places. Human beings were not free to flow the same way as the Afrin olive oil.

"You can say the war is like a giant game of chess. But everyone knows this is the best olive oil in the region, believe me."

As I soaked up the oil with bread, Jan asked me questions about my photography in Ethiopia. I got the sense from his technical questions that he was trying to have a better idea as to how I might portray Kurdish fighters.

"My photography is portrait-driven, and although there is a lot of equipment here, I take simple pictures," I said, still chewing on the bread. "I want to take portraits that visually portray the conflict, but they don't necessarily have to show fighting on the frontlines. What else is there that may give visual clues of war?" "You can find flags, bombed-out buildings, destroyed cars," Jan responded in a hushed tone so as not to wake his sleeping wife.

The conversation soon turned into discussing our plans for the next two weeks. "If we go to Kirkuk, you'll see ISIS's black flags still hanging. One thing I would like to show you," he continued, "is the evidence of the genocide against the Êzidî."

With a plan in place, we went to get some sleep for a few hours, but admittedly I was far too excited to get any shut-eye. I lay on my side watching the Netflix show *House of Cards* on my laptop, but couldn't keep my focus. Instead, my mind raced with the thought of going to visit a PKK base in Makhmur Refugee Camp—our first destination.

It was 9:00 a.m when everyone awoke to start the day. I met Ipek, who was as bubbly as she was during our conversations on Skype. We spent an hour sitting on plastic chairs outside, chatting. "If Jan acts like your dad on the trip, telling you don't do this, don't do that . . . don't worry about it, he does the same to me," she laughed.

Jan rolled out a giant laminated map of Iraq and Syria on the living room floor. We would leave west from Sulaymaniyah toward Kirkuk, hook northward to Erbil, and descend back down westward to Makhmur. After spending some time there, we would horseshoe around the northern parts of Iraq via Dohuk and Zakho to avoid ISIS-controlled regions. Then, we would enter Syria via a river crossing. Areas in Rojava with frequent clashes like Tell Tamer were ideal places to photograph frontline fighters, but this was yet to be determined, as the security situation could change day by day. Afterward, we would head south and enter the city of Shengal by the mountain range of the same name, taking the same corridor the YPG/J and PKK had opened from Rojava. If this seems confusing, it is. A simple Google Maps itinerary would lead you on the quickest route: directly through Mosul and into an ISIS checkpoint. (Unfortunately, Google Maps doesn't have an "avoid ISIS" button, as it does for traffic and tolls.)

Jan and I said farewell to Ipek. There was no melodramatic goodbye—this was normal life for them. "See ya when you get back, and stay out of trouble," Ipek said as she waved goodbye.

MAKHMUR

Makhmur, Iraqi Kurdistan, March 2, 2015 The drive to Makhmur wasn't a simple matter of cruising down the highway. Every twenty minutes there was a security checkpoint operated by Peshmerga soldiers. When entering larger cities, the soldiers would insist on inspecting everything in our car, especially because I had more than a few suspicious-looking hardshell cases of camera gear, including a radio-triggered battery generator for my flash unit. Yet upon seeing my identification card—a cheaply laminated press card for journalists—their tone usually changed. "You're from Canada?" asked a Peshmerga guard. "Tell your government to send us better weapons."

Portraits of shahids*, or martyrs, in Makhmur Refugee Camp*

As the darkness of night fell upon us, we had no choice but to slow down our pace even further as we got closer to Makhmur. Jan explained to me that driving fast at night near a frontline area invokes suspicion, especially as detonating vehicles full of explosives at checkpoints is an infamous tactic of ISIS.

Our vehicle pulled up to the final checkpoint at the entrance of Makhmur Refugee Camp and stopped at a wooden barrier that blocked the road. Our headlights illuminated the shape of a person emerging from a small cinder-block outpost beside the barrier. Rather than a Peshmerga soldier in full camouflage fatigues, what emerged was a plump old man with a white mustache dressed in the traditional earth-tone uniform of the PKK, rifle in hand. As he walked closer to us cautiously, my eyes locked on the night guard's uniform. I had only seen such clothing before on the internet and in books. Though using traditional Kurdish clothing was once forbidden in Turkey, the PKK adopted an otherwise standard Kurdish outfit as their military uniform, but modified it with an array of zippered pockets. Wearing the shirt, vest, and baggy pants is viewed by many as a symbol of resistance. The night guard leaned his head next to our unrolled window, eyes darting back and forth.

"Good evening, comrades," the night guard said in a friendly voice, a smile spreading across his face. He had received a call from the general commander of the camp, a woman named Mediya, and he had been expecting us.

Our car was led up a dusty street to a community center within the heart of the Makhmur Refugee Camp. The settlers of the camp had made their way here in the early '90s during the peak of violence between the PKK and the Turkish Army. The Turkish government had waged a horrific campaign targeting villages sympathetic to the PKK, razing them to the ground and forcibly displacing tens of thousands of civilians. Many fled to Kurdish regions of Saddam's Iraq, where some settlers were granted a patch of desert outside the city of Makhmur where barely anything grew. Although Makhmur was a refugee camp by definition, the civilians had been here for so long that infrastructure had been established: a crisscross of power lines connected each sand-colored concrete house along the street and air conditioning units hung out the windows. In a display of allegiance, the letters "PKK" were spray-painted on many of the walls down the narrow streets. Nearby, a memorial hall commemorated the fighters and civilians who had died in clashes, framed portraits hung in remembrance by family members and friends of the fallen.

After the grueling journey to the settlement, and years of war in Iraq following the American invasion, violence found a way to haunt the people of Makhmur once again. In August 2014, ISIS convoys had entered Makhmur city itself, just outside the refugee camp. The camp's Apoist civilian militia armed with vintage rifles fought alongside a few PKK guerrillas staying in the camp. They temporarily prevented the jihadists from entering the camp, giving time for residents to flee down the highway toward the safety of Erbil. Under the protection of American airstrikes, a coalition of Peshmerga and PKK fighters advanced, and eventually pushed the jihadists out of the settlement to frontlines in the city. Ironically enough, the PKK is on the same terrorist list as ISIS according to the United States, but their secondary role in the offensive gave their presence a cover.

During my visit, the jihadists were approximately fifteen kilometers away from the refugee camp, and continued to launch assaults on Makhmur. Fear of infiltration was palpable among the fighters, especially considering the wide swaths of open desert. Regular patrols in the hills and mountains surrounding the refugee camp were a necessary precaution to ensure they stayed empty.

★

I was nervous to meet the group of PKK guerrillas I would spend time with in Makhmur. Questions danced around my head ranging from rational to hysterical: *Why should they even care about my photography project? I have no official publication behind me and yet I am asking personal details and taking photographs, will they think I am a spy? Wait, do I look like an ISIS member to them?*

Our car pulled up to the PKK base—a gray cinder-block building next to a firing position surrounded by dirt walls and sandbags. Outside the building, approximately twelve male and female guerrillas were huddled together around the warmth of a fire burning in a large metal can. The scene was painted with the desaturated blue of dawn's first light and the orange glow of the flames on the fighters' faces—I'll never forget the image. In another circumstance, perhaps I would have taken my camera out then and there and started snapping photos, but now was not the time; if I wanted to be accepted here, I would have to take, an ample amount of time to distinguish myself from a gawking foreign observer and gain their trust by first explaining my project.

One thing I was not quite prepared for was their hospitality. As I approached, the guerrillas stood up in a straight line, and each shook my hand as I walked down the row. Upon each handshake, eye contact was made with a warm grin. This formality would become a familiar practice at every new base I visited. They grabbed my bags out of the vehicle and stopped me from carrying them myself with the wag of a finger. I was led through a wooden door into the cinder-block base, and found myself sitting in a circle among the guerrillas.

Then began another formality: a round of tea for everyone before anything, ever, is done. In the typical regional fashion, the guest is always served first. I was given tea out of an old flame-blackened samovar, a double-stacking tea kettle with a small pot of thick, pure black tea brew on the top, and a larger pot for boiling water on the bottom. First, they poured the water into a glass cup, and then added the tea extract, based on how strong you wanted to have it. Copious amounts of sugar were then spooned into the mixture. However common the samovar was for the Kurds sitting around me, they became amused that it was my first time to drink from one.

The PKK's reputation as fearsome fighters against entire armies of jihadists seemed to vanish after spending just a few hours with them. The conversations were lighthearted yet inquisitive, flowing with an almost childlike curiosity. If I asked a question, they would inquire back with one of their own.

"This is your first time in Kurdistan? Where did you come from? Do you think Kurdistan is beautiful?" Tekoshin, a fighter with long dark hair tied loosely back in a ponytail, asked me through Jan's translation. She was no older than twenty and specialized in the sniper rifle.

The interior was simple and contained only the type of basic necessities you would expect to find in a monk's ashram, save for a makeshift wooden rack by the door filled with Kalashnikov rifles. In an adjacent room, a group of guerrillas sat together cleaning plastic crates of heavy machine gun cartridges. The ammunition had been successfully captured from ISIS, but was caked with the debris of an explosion set off during the operation. Now the dirt stuck in the crevices of the metal casings had to be individually scraped out with sandpaper and a knife blade in order for them to be used once again. "We stole this from ISIS but I promise we will send it back to them," laughed one of the men.

Most of the rooms were open to the elements, with bare, square windows with no glass, or had a plastic sheeting blocking the wind. All rooms had a dirt floor, yet the

living quarters were kept clean with a patchwork of freshly swept laminated vinyl flooring spread across the ground. The few sleeping mats and pillows were kept to one side piled on top of one another, with floral-patterned blankets neatly folded in a bundle. A sole bookshelf, rich in reading material, stood out from the other humble belongings. There was a book about the moral implications of using an atomic bomb, and another about the history of Mesopotamia's first inhabitants, and, of course, several writings from Abdullah Öcalan. The PKK do not consider their movement to be simply militaristic, but also one to develop intellectually. Education is part of their training.

I met PKK members from all backgrounds at the base—former university students, teachers, and farmers, as well as youth who didn't feel they belonged in mainstream society and sought an alternative clique. Some of the women were from small rural towns and had run away from arranged marriages. What they all had in common was a call to defend Kurdistan, and the PKK provided a very powerful structure to do so.

★

That sunset, Jan and I accompanied a group of eight guerrillas on an armed patrol of the hills around Makhmur. A nature walk, a training session, and an opportunity to begin taking photographs took place all in the same space of time.

The countryside of Makhmur doesn't strike you as the typical desolate battlefields so engraved into our psyche from television and film. As we traversed single-file up to a high outcrop, we could see endless stretches of rocky, rolling hills generously cloaked with violet flowers. I ran ahead, camera in hand, laid down on the rocky ground, and snapped a few shots of the guerrillas emerging over a purpled hill in the distance. The earthy tones of their traditional Kurdish outfits seemed to emerge from the landscape, while the women's braids swayed as they walked with rifles slung over their shoulders. Finally, I was taking pictures in Kurdistan.

After reaching the top of a hill, our group sat down for a rest. The waning moments before twilight over the valleys cast a rich golden hue over the landscape. Yet, due to the slopes of the surrounding mountains and pitted, rocky outcrops, a good portion of the terrain fell captive to night's shadows. As it grew darker, the small highlights of embers started to form in the distance, marking the presence of oil fields—a telltale sign that this area would be hard-fought over for other reasons as well. The tranquil setting seemed like a perfect time to create images. I asked Berivan, one of the group's photogenic commanders, if I could take her portrait. She nodded in approval and a grin spread across her face. "Of course you can, but first, you should get a shot of all of us together." Berivan and some of the guerrillas stood in front of my lens with their weapons, and I took a panoramic image with the setting sun across their faces.

Afterward, my focus shifted to individual portraits. Berivan could no longer keep a straight face in front of my camera and began to laugh, so I snapped a shot. Perhaps this was a more realistic depiction of the otherwise seemingly battle-hardened commander.

We made our way back to base camp, slowly wandering down the opposite side of the mountain, and seeing new sites before the darkness could engulf them entirely. Many of the PKK's more unconventional dwellings and military positions were hidden in the landscape, tucked into a mountain corridor or carved out of the land with uncanny precision. At first pass, you may not think that humans live there, but as I would soon find out, they are everywhere—in every crook and crevice. Traveling along a nearby road, I stared up at the tree canopies and noticed strange large "nests" hidden among the leaves. "What birds create those nests?" I asked Jan, motioning my head over to a row nearby. "Not for birds," he said, smiling, saying no more.

It was late in the evening when we reached another cinder-block building at the foot of a large hill. It could have been an exact replica of the base from the morning, but at nighttime it took on a different veneer. The interior was lit by a single fluorescent light in the center of the room. Electricity pulsed with an audible buzz from a small gas generator, a luxury running only a few hours a night. The only entertainment was a television set constantly updating us with news from the war's frontline. After the PKK's weapons were hung on the rack by the door, we sat together on the floor around some food.

"So does your country really think we are terrorists?" Berivan asked, half-jokingly, half-serious. She was vetting me.

I paused, and chose my words carefully. "For them, the PKK is not very well-known. It is common in North America to lump all Kurdish fighters into one category. But it's hard for them to imagine that any woman fighting ISIS is a terrorist."

Berivan leaned forward slowly—I had prompted a response. Via a very slow and careful translation from Jan, Berivan explained the role of female fighters: If feminism's goal is for women to take on an equal role to men in all aspects of society, then they must also be fighters. A woman holding a weapon is not a display of desperation, but rather a symbol of equality. Women in the PKK live and die on the same frontlines as men. Female fighters hold a place of power, and this influences all aspects of society, especially in wartime. Clearly influenced by Abdullah Öcalan's writings, Berivan explained that due to the history of patriarchy in both the region and worldwide, freedom will never be handed to women. It is the women's duty to fight and create it for themselves.

The chatter in the PKK camp came to an abrupt halt as the TV began to broadcast portraits of YPG and YPJ members who had died fighting ISIS in the outskirts of Kobanê, northern Syria. ISIS had recently lost the city, but had regrouped in the countryside and continued to launch assaults. An uncomfortable silence fell over the room.

Even though the PKK do not publicly disclose the numbers within their ranks, it was known that many of their commanders were fighting alongside the YPG/J in Syria. This relationship would become more clear to me on the next leg of my journey, but for now the tone in the room suggested the loss of close friends. All guerrillas consider themselves brothers and sisters, and know each other from sharing various bases, battles, or ideological summits. Although the fighters in Kobanê were still on the offensive—it had been a brutal day.

★

After a mutual trust had been established with the fighters in Makhmur, I felt it was time to try a more complex portrait setup. The next day, I attempted something different.

Behind another Makhmur PKK base overlooking a sandy desert plain, Jan and I slowly unpacked my cases of gear. I would be setting up a simple makeshift portrait studio in the outdoor cooking area. My goal was to make portraits that resembled the light and poses found in classic paintings, and that required a special control of the illumination. A gray burnt fire pit with a metal roof over it probably didn't seem like the best place to summon fighters to have their photo taken, but I explained to Jan how this area allowed me to control the daylight. The gray walls were the perfect tone to get shaped, contrasted light; there were wooden rafters to hang white sheets of diffusion material;

My backdrop setup while photographing Sarya

and there was a perfect space outside to put my flash through on a low power, and mix with the shaped ambient light. "But . . . it's in the fire pit," Jan murmured, pointing at the equipment getting sooty from the ashes. "It's OK, if you think it will work." Together, we slowly unrolled my hand-painted canvas backdrop—a smoky gray muslin with a faint forest green texture, which I had a friend make to be visually cohesive with the tone of the PKK uniform.

The goal for these portraits on the backdrop was to remove the sense of place, and allow the viewer to focus on details of the fighters themselves. I wanted the series to alternate between these contrived portraits and the more practical environmental shots like the ones on the hill that I took the day earlier. Although I photographed everyone present at the base that day one by one, a portrait of a young female fighter was one of the few that stuck out for me. She was quiet and didn't speak much of her life in Syrian Kurdistan before she left to join the Kurdish guerrillas in northern Iraq and before her nom de guerre "Sarya" was adopted. Her hands, grasping an RPG, were marked with the signs of a hard-fought war: burns and scars. She appeared in the frame as diminutive and formidable at the same time—her expression stern, yet effortless.

After all the fighters had their portrait taken, they lingered by my camera, curious as to what would happen next. Once again, I heard the same line from Sarya that Berivan had said the previous day: "You know, it would be better to photograph us all together. We don't want to have all separate pictures." I looked at my tiny fire pit studio, then at the group of sixteen people all watching. I hesitated and didn't know what to do—this particular setup wasn't going to work.

I thought to myself, although I am unprepared to do a technically savvy photograph of such a large group in the harsh broad daylight, it's probably better to keep these guerrilla fighters happy. Even if the photo ended up looking like a normal group snapshot, I could at least try. I motioned for the huge group to follow me to the desert plain just behind the base, and photographed them together on a mound of dirt beside a trench system dug into the ground. The fighters spread themselves out along the landscape, some standing higher on the mound of dirt, some sitting lower near the trench. The sun glared and I didn't have the flash required to overpower the midday sun lighting all their faces. The photo was going to be a technical disaster. I didn't lug around all these cases of gear to make snapshots, I told myself. I had sixteen PKK fighters waiting patiently in front of me and I couldn't make it work. A stupid dilemma only a photographer would have.

Suddenly, the sun dipped behind a cloud, and the group was thrown into shade for a few minutes. I took a few shots with my flash on full power, which spread a soft yet natural painterly quality across the image. I clicked just a few exposures, then the sun came back out as harsh as ever. I leapt over the trench like a giddy little child and shook their hands, thanking them for the suggestion of the group shot; thanks to them, we had made something I had not planned for.

WE CAME FROM FIRE

Faysh Khabur Crossing, Tigris River, March 7, 2015 If you want to enter Syrian Kurdistan by land from Iraqi Kurdistan, no visa issued by the Syrian government is required. Quite simply put: the area is no longer under the control of the state. The Syrian Arab Army fled the region years ago. Instead, the political and security forces linked to the decentralized system theorized by Abdullah Öcalan are now the ones who run the show. They are the men and women who fought together long before the world knew ISIS's name.

There are only a couple of possible ways for an independent photographer like me to enter this region of war-torn Syria. The dangerous way: go with a smuggler on a long, arduous trek through the mountains; there you would risk landmines, a no-man's-land on the edge of ISIS territory, and the watchful eye of Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga border guards. The less precarious way to cross the border: beg Iraqi Kurdish officials to put politics aside and let you use their informal crossing—a rickety wooden boat that traverses across the Tigris River, which is typically used to bring displaced peoples back and forth between the two regions.

Luckily for me, a few phone calls pleading our case and twenty-four hours later, Jan and I found ourselves gliding toward the western side of the Tigris. Our boat hit the muddy shore with a thud, and our feet sank into the river's edge. We were officially in disputed territory. Welcome to Rojava—the heart of the Kurdish revolution. Welcome to the de facto Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.

In the distance I was able to make out the silhouettes of three border guards. They wore dark green fatigues emblazoned with cerulean blue badges, which identified them as Asayish, or police. Jan and I trudged up the riverbank toward the guards, my cases of gear slung on our shoulders. The men seemed to dart toward us at first, but then they lent a hand with the cases, carrying them to a small metal inspection table, which overlooked the river. One of the Asayish—a friendly but serious-looking man—took out his pen and paper; he began to ask me questions in broken English.

"Gun?" he inquired, as he lowered his brow and lifted his chin to point at my cases.

"Gun?" I asked, a little confused. "Noooo."

"And, uhh . . . bomb?" he pressed.

I let out a nervous laugh. Then, a small mischievous grin began to spread across the policeman's face.

I called his bluff. "Are you kidding?"

The policeman couldn't keep a straight face, and finally released a full belly laugh, all while continuing his comedy routine. "And uh . . . RPG?"

I walked over to a long black tube-like case that held my painted backdrop and tapped my foot on it. "Did you inspect this case? This one looks very suspicious," I said.

"Oh shit!" he exclaimed.

We both laughed. The border guards back at JFK Airport didn't seem to have the same style of humor. This was a warm welcome, Rojava-style. Jan and I had made it.

Qamishlo to Tell Tamer, March 8, 2015 In Qamishlo, the self-declared capital of Rojava's Jazira Canton, Jan arranged us a pickup truck driven by a YPG volunteer—Delîl. Delîl was a chain-smoking gentleman in his late forties with salt-and-pepper, curly hair and a thick, black mustache. He had grown up in Hasakah, but left the city to help protect his cousin's farm after the Syrian Arab Army retreated and uncertainty swept the region in early 2013. Delîl's cousins, friends, and neighbors formed a small armed group and fought back attacks of Islamist rebels seeking to control his family's property. "We weren't fancy. No uniforms. Just farmers with guns. A Kurdish front," he explained to me between drags of his cigarette. Before his group could even give themselves a name, they were absorbed into the structure of the YPG, and continued on the fight.

Just before setting off on the road, Delîl pulled out a yellow triangular YPG flag from the truck's glove box and hung it on a pole on the back of the vehicle. We would be driving to the very edge of where Rojava's Jazira Canton ended, and where the Islamic State's borders began. As he drove, Delîl kept his weapon beside him, and two grenades were placed in the cupholders beside the gear shifter. Checkpoint after checkpoint of Kurdish fighters waved us through, as well as one guarded by tall men with dark bronze skin. "Arab *hevals*," Delîl explained, using the Kurdish word for both "comrade" and "friend."

As we made our way to Tell Tamer, about one hundred kilometers southwest from Qamishlo, I was overcome with an intense sense of paranoia. If you were to look on a color-coded map representing the various armed factions in the Syrian war, we were undoubtedly driving straight toward the big splotch of blank ink that typically represents ISIS territory. My mind played out numerous scenarios—most based on the ISIS propaganda videos I had seen online—and none of them were pretty. Kilometer after kilometer of bare countryside represents impressively large swaths of land for the YPG/J to claim control over, but in reality they are hard to defend. Empty plots of land can change hands over the course of a day. What mattered most was controlling key cities.

From the desolate countryside, we approached a small town. I still felt on edge, as I had no idea what would be around the next bend, and the uncertainty gnawed on me. I never thought the day would come when I would be so thankful to see an *NSYNC poster, but when I did, I let out an audible sigh of relief. There it was, faded but still visible in all its glory, hung in a makeshift CD shop. ISIS's fundamentalist laws would have banned such a poster, especially of an American pop group. The boy band's infidel smiles glistening in the sun and their frosted tips allayed any of my concerns that ISIS sympathizers may be lurking around the corner.

Just outside the small town, we reached the dusty outskirts of Tell Tamer. My original sense of danger proved to be true; Delîl tipped us off to a clash that had happened in the countryside between ISIS and the YPG just that morning. The sparse hamlets that dotted the landscape were still being defended to prevent a flank of the city. "Do you want to see some Daesh (ISIS) bodies?" he asked me, uncertain as to how I would respond. I said I would.

When we arrived to the site, it was early afternoon and the sun was high in the sky. We slowly walked to a farmhouse nearby; you didn't have to see the dead bodies to feel their presence. It was both a macabre and magnetic feeling that welled up in my gut, compelling me forward. Then I saw them out of the corner of my eye. A small unit of eight YPG/J fighters stood around the scene. Another group was on their way out in a beat-up armored vehicle. They waved to us through windows splintered by several bullet holes as they drove off.

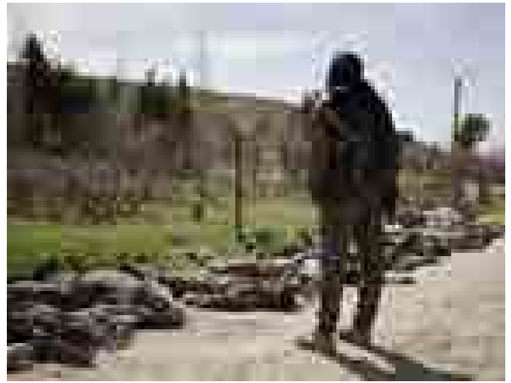
I shook the hands of the remaining YPG/J fighters, choosing not to look at the bodies nearby. It was a strangely fitting place to first meet a unit of these brave men and women I had read so much about. After an exchange of some words, I turned to examine the ISIS members. Fourteen men laid lifeless in a row, all of whom had been killed just four or five hours before. Their legs were strung together with rope. One side of the house was lined with dead men, the other with all their captured weapons, the latter neatly arranged in a composition. The YPG/J wanted to show both their own local media and the foreign photographer that they were only killing ISIS members and made it a point that they were not disrespecting the bodies or wreaking havoc upon local civilians.

The majority of the ISIS fighters were in their late twenties or early thirties, with well-fed bellies and grizzled beards. Each wore a hodgepodge of different military fatigues and civilian clothing; the camouflage patterns ranged from a light tan desert pattern to woodland greens. The clothes didn't seem to fit into any specific environment. All but one had their shirts pulled up to their chest, which was a way to inspect whether any of them had an undetonated suicide belt strapped on. The last corpse was of a much younger man who had ignited his explosive belt. The cadaver looked more like charcoal up to the mid-portion of his face. His rib cage was hollow—an empty shell from the bomb completely eviscerating his abdomen. One thing was certain: in order to detonate his vest rather than face capture, he must have had a genuine belief in paradise afterward, however skewed it might have been.

"Here the fighting took place between houses," one of the YPG soldiers explained, pointing around the scene for my video camera. "Here, there were civilians," he assured me. "They locked their doors. Daesh [ISIS] told them if they don't open the doors, they will kill them, but the civilians refused to help them because of their [ISIS's] inhumanity."

The soldier walked me through the phases of the battle and how they were able to surround the jihadists. Since I wasn't a witness to the battle itself, I could only take their word for it. The only proof I had were these bodies before me. I took a few pictures, focusing on close-ups of hands and faces of the dead ISIS fighters. As I stared through my viewfinder, I was actually very surprised to feel a bout of sympathy. I am not an apologist for ISIS. I believe that as soldiers, these men were accountable for their actions. With that said, I started asking myself who they were and what misguided passions may have led them here. Did they join ISIS as naive young men with intentions of overthrowing the dictator Bashar al-Assad, only to end up being used as pawns against the Kurds? Then, I remembered the ISIS propaganda videos, and thought about what these same men would have done to me had they realized I was camping not far away. I thought about the countless videos showing executions and massacres of civilians. Suddenly, my sympathies were cut short. Despite the self-released videos showing ISIS fighters as a prophesied, unstoppable conquering force, here they lay like anyone else, lifeless on the battlefields of Syria. "After a while, they all start looking the same," said Jan with a blank look on his face.

Delîl honked the truck's horn. I looked up from my camera's viewfinder. "We should go," uttered Jan. This was not a place to linger—adjacent farms within sight were still under the control of ISIS, and another attack could come at any moment. We continued onward



Bodies of ISIS members killed by the YPG and YPJ

to the city of Tell Tamer, which was just a twenty-minute drive away. The city, however, felt far more dangerous than the countryside.

In a newly liberated Assyrian Christian district of Tell Tamer, Delîl led Jan and I to the top of a muddy hill with a single concrete shed on top—a YPG commander's lookout. A circular trench had been dug in the dirt around the slope, and we tiptoed across some wooden planks onto the position. Several YPG and YPJ members stood with binoculars, watching and communicating to the several units spread across the neighborhoods stretching beyond us about a kilometer away.

From our view on the hilltop, rising plumes of dark smoke in the distance signaled the slow advance of ISIS soldiers into contested zones of the city. Below, the YPG/J were struggling to hold neighborhoods while under a barrage of mortar shelling. The feeling was tense for these experienced men and women, yet terrifying and confusing for an untrained observer like myself. The commanders on the hilltop asked to not appear on camera, so I was left without a device to distract my anxiety as Jan and I squatted down in our place behind the dirt walls next to the shed and slowly pieced together the unfolding situation. It was the first time I had observed an active battle and I needed Jan to fill in the gaps or maybe just tell me that everything was going to be all right. My blood pumped faster, my senses heightened, and my mouth went dry. This short span of time felt like eternity. Jan took the opportunity to educate me on the various, blood-curdling sounds of modern warfare.

One: a loud gunshot; this is good because it came from the side you're on. Two: the whizz of a bullet through the air above you; this is not good, as bullets are being hurled from afar in your general direction. Three: a sharp crack; this is really bad news; bullets are landing somewhere within hearing distance.

During this time I learned about the sounds of mortars, and the difference between a smaller factory-made artillery shell and the aptly named "Hell Cannon"—an improvised howitzer made of a large scrap metal tube that fires any homemade projectile packed into it—typically an oil barrel or propane tank filled with TNT and fragments of metal rebar and industrial ball bearings. These indiscriminate bombs seem to tear through the sky with a faint whistle and as they approach they sound more akin to a metallic saw waving . . . wobbb, wobbb, wobbb, wobbb, and then CRACK! Shrapnel and smoke simultaneously emerge from the wreckage. The reinforced structures of concrete buildings act as a shield in urban combat, but also present a paradox: The very cities one seeks to liberate can be reduced to rubble in the act of fighting for them.

With all this metal flying through the air, I asked myself where the fighters' helmets and bulletproof vests were. Surprisingly, most YPG/J fighters don't want to use them. They say their tactics rely specifically on speed and stealth, and moving fluidly on a constantly shifting battlefield. I came to understand it's a logic that must come from the bare-bones guerrilla-style techniques of the PKK commanders among the YPG/J; tactics which were not traditionally developed for a full-scale city battle. It's a daring style of fighting, but it is these same audacious methods that led to major successes against their better-equipped adversaries. Sure ISIS has tanks, missiles, and night vision technology, but even with these technological advantages, the jihadist group can still struggle against a force like the YPG/J.

With mortar strikes getting closer and closer and ISIS advancing, it felt too dangerous for us to linger around Tell Tamer. This first experience with shelling in the city got the better of me; I remembered the promises I had made to my friends back home to stay out of harm's way. To Jan, this was another day at the office, but as a portrait photographer with not much experience in war, I gladly observed my role, and for me it was time to go. On our way out of the city, Delîl turned to me and asked, "There is an American volunteer here; do you want to meet him?" We pulled off the main road up to a compound which was being used as a staging area for vehicles—brand new white Toyota pickup trucks that had been mud-smeared to conceal them from afar, and a barely running captured tank that coughed and spluttered exhaust as a Kurdish fighter with a red bandanna revved the engine.

A white man with a sunburned face, short mohawk, and overgrown beard stood out among a crowd of Kurds. He was a volunteer who had come all the way from San Antonio, Texas to fight alongside the YPG. "The name's Fat Jack, where you from?" he asked with a noticeable southern drawl. Fat Jack's profile could have been one for reality television—a redneck vigilante fighting ISIS in Syria, furnished with a long hunting knife in his ammo carrier. He was currently volunteering as an ambulance driver in one of the Toyota pickups—moving wounded fighters from the frontlines to makeshift military hospitals. It seemed he had a few moments to spare, so I took a quick portrait under the shade of an alleyway. As I photographed him, I realized a still frame could never quite capture his quirky character and Texan accent, so I decided to get some sound bytes of him on film. While framing him in the video camera, I inquired about what had brought him out to Rojava.

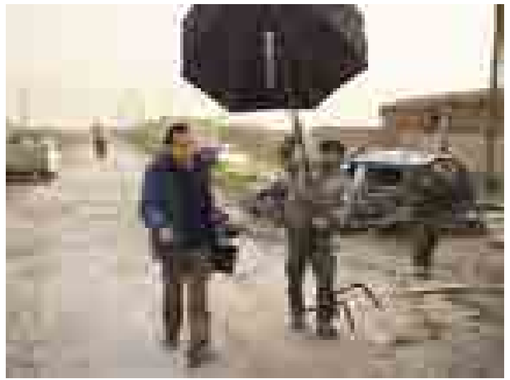
"The way Daesh is doing people, man. It just, uh. What they did to the Yazidi. Our governments won't step in, and you know . . . There's all these politics involved. They're providing airstrikes . . . but. Just—our governments weren't doing shit about it—by God we will. If Daesh can recruit people from 'round the world . . . if all these lunatics can come together to fight . . . How do normal people come over to fight?"

Suddenly, the interview was interrupted by Jan waving his hand off camera in the corner of my eye. "Somebody is injured." Another Kurd used his hands to make the shape of a steering wheel. It was time for Fat Jack to go. He sped off in his truck, back in the direction we had just come from, toward the sounds of the Hell Cannons. It was the last I saw of him on the trip.

★

We were moving east behind the frontline. Delîl suggested we go to Tell Hamis, a city slightly more secure, liberated no more than ten days before our arrival. The battleground was now pushed outside the walls of the city, connected to the farmland where we had seen the dead ISIS fighters that afternoon. The sun had just tucked below the horizon, and it was starting to get dark. As we drove, the headlights of our truck fell upon signs of recent clashes—destroyed buildings, exploded cars. There were no residents; the place was a ghost town. Tell Hamis had changed hands many times before YPG/J's victory against ISIS here. Previously, an alliance of local FSA factions, al-Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham, and ISIS had all fought for authority of the area against both the Syrian Arab Army and, later, the YPG/J. To the Kurdish fighters, the guys shooting at them were all the same jihadists, and any unit that absorbed itself into the ISIS structure was merely a subtle change of brand. This view challenged the Western media's presentation of Syrian rebels, who had used the buzzword "moderate" to differentiate FSA groups from the hard-line extremists. They were correct to ideologically distinguish between the groups, yet it seemed the reality on the ground was whoever's "moderate" finger pulled the trigger of a weapon was doomed to eventually surrender authority of conquered lands to the most dominant group. In Tell Hamis, that was ISIS.

Suddenly, from up ahead, my attention was drawn to the approaching silhouette of a motorcycle against the dark blue sky. Delîl pulled to the side of the road, and we all got out of the truck. Two YPG fighters, wearing bandannas and mismatched clothes, shared the bike on a night patrol. A red scarf was wrapped around the motorcycle's head lamp; I'm not sure if it was a safety precaution—blocking off the reflective surface—or if it was simply for decoration. A shiny metal lion ornament welded to the fender was left exposed.



Jan and the YPG/J with some photography equipment in Tell Hamis

Delîl and Jan spoke with the men, and they agreed to take us to a nearby camp, which acted as a forward operating base for all frontline positions in the area. Their commander would have to give us permission to stay there. Wait—first, a picture. I quickly snapped a shot of the two men sitting on the bike, using my iPhone flashlight as a light source in the already waning dusk.

Our truck followed the motorcycle down a dirt road toward a large compound, where we were to meet the commander. To the left of the road was a high concrete wall; multiple sledgehammer-sized holes were fashioned out of the concrete for shooting positions. To the right, a formidable concrete grain storage facility towered above us. The mammoth, cylindrical silos were approximately ten stories high, and their looming presence added to the Orwellian feeling of the place.

"Welcome, comrades." A YPJ commander in her mid-twenties named Didar approached and shook my hand. She was short in stature with dark hair loosely tied back and large round eyes. Jan spoke to her in Kurdish, and she began to laugh. I soon understood they were making fun of me for being terrified in Tell Tamer. Jan explained to Didar that I sought to stay in a more stable place.

"Don't worry about that; you are safe here with us," she consoled. "You have my permission to stay as long as you want."

"I have to apologize for the mess," she continued. "Daesh left this place filthy and we have only managed to clean half of the building."

"I think you've been a bit busy," I joked.

A smile spread across Didar's face. "Well, the room us women sleep in is very clean, but the area you'll sleep in with the guys is still very messy!"

We followed Didar into the compound that had been used as barracks for ISIS soldiers just days before. On the main staircase in the center of the building, every inch of the walls was marked with jihadist graffiti in both Arabic and Kurdish dialects. Jan tsked at the sight of his mother tongue, and described the Kurds that joined ISIS as traitors. "They forgot who they are," he scoffed. As we walked up the stairs, YPG and YPJ volunteers stopped what they were doing to shake hands and welcome us. There were about twenty male and female fighters in the building at any given time, all using the base as a central hub for rotating to different frontline positions and patrols in order to constantly remain on the lookout.

Jan and I sat with the fighters in a makeshift kitchen around an oil heater sharing tea and a meal of bread with apricot jam. In the beginning of the conversation, Jan translated everything that was being said, but eventually he struggled to keep up as they dove into a rapid and what appeared to be heated political discussion about the Kurdish ISIS fighters

Jan joins in singing around the campfire in Tell Hamis

who had been in Tell Hamis, some of whom could have been sitting around the same heater we were now.

It had been a long day, so eventually I bid everyone farewell and went to bed as the conversation continued. In the men's sleeping quarters, a few fighters were passed out, lightly snoring with their rifles next to them. The light in the room was kept on all night—patched by wire to a gas generator outside, serving the constant flow of fighters coming and going. An RPG sat on a heater beside an open window overlooking a vast field beyond the compound wall. I lay staring at the ceiling on a thin rollup mattress with a plush purple blanket, reflecting on what I had seen in Tell Tamer that day. I was overcome with gratitude for being allowed to enter these peoples' world. At this moment in the trip, I began to relax a little and trust the YPG/J. The paranoia I had felt earlier began to fade away. When Didar told me I'd be safe, it felt genuine. I could hear footsteps above me on the roof—young fighters were keeping watch in firing positions, and occasionally scanning the field with the beam of a flashlight. There was nothing out there—only darkness. Eventually, I managed to fall asleep to the sound of their footsteps.

Tell Hamis, March 9, 2015 I awoke at first light to the murmur of voices. I wiped my eyes, and walked to the makeshift kitchen area to find Jan still engaged in a heated discussion with the fighters. He was still drinking tea and smoking, but now the ashtray was overflowing with cigarette butts. It had been hours and they hadn't slept at all. "Good morning, Comrade Joe. Would you like some tea?"

Tell Hamis became our temporary home for the next couple days. An empty room with large windows became an ideal area to make the same makeshift portrait studio I had previously built in Makhmur. During my stay, I got to know several of the YPG/J fighters, especially Commander Didar. She would often disappear for hours—obviously doing important duties—but would then return to sit down and patiently attempt to teach me a few Kurdish words. Those who spent the most time with me also felt the most comfortable poking fun at my fear of being kidnapped by ISIS. Before Didar had thwarted his plan, one soldier told me he had considered busting into my room at night dressed in black and armed with a knife. For any group of soldiers, a good sense of humor is a necessary defense mechanism. Some had watched friends die in front of them, yet there was no shortage of mocking the jihadists. Having a sense of humor was something everyone could agree on.

One afternoon, I explored the giant grain storage facility beside the compound. Given the cavernous structure of the silos, every step produced an audible echo. It was dank and musty throughout. An occasional but perceptible chill swept through one of the many holes in the thick, concrete wall—created from the constant bombardment of artillery exchanged between militant squatters. I was warned by Didar not to disturb the ground or open anything with a door; ISIS is well-known for booby-trapping areas with explosives as they retreat. I used my flashlight to uncover an underworld of many peculiar curiosities and war paraphernalia: medical supplies for treating wounded soldiers, bullet holes from target practice, and what appeared to be the stolen ID cards of other soldiers. Scattered on the ground were scissors and the cutout portraits of Iraqi Security Forces, Peshmerga, and Syrian Arab Army soldiers. It seemed like they were forging documents, perhaps for slipping past checkpoints in disguise as another militia. In one of the rooms lay a black flag of Tawhid commonly used by jihadist groups. ISIS wanted to fly this flag as a symbolic proclamation of monotheism to Allah and his messenger, the Prophet Muhammad. Yet with the jihadists forced to retreat, here it was, dusty and disheveled among the ruins.

One evening, a number of the YPG/J fighters were sitting around the fire of a burning car tire at the foot of the grain silo complex, which cast a rich, orange glow across their faces. I sat beside Jan and Didar, staring into the flames.

"For Kurds, fire is extremely important. *We came from fire, and we will return to fire*—it's an ancient saying," Didar mused.

It was a fighter using romantic language, yet the origins of the phrase intrigued me. I listened intently through Jan's translation, but our conversation was interrupted by a sudden burst of singing around the burning tire. "This is a famous song," Jan explained, "they are singing about the Kurdish revolution." Didar nudged me in the ribs with her elbow to join in as she sang and clapped along, as if I knew the words. As the night went on, I forgot to inquire more about the ancient Kurdish proverb.

Oh mother, it's enough, it's enough
My comrades have come for me
I'm going to the place of revolution (mountain)
All my friends have gone but not me
I long for the mountain, I don't feel belonging here
Oh mother, don't cry, don't cry

Long afterward, back at home in New York, I was researching more into the proverb that I had first heard Didar share with me that night: "We came from fire, and we will return to fire." I couldn't find an exact match or locate its origin. Perhaps my memory had played tricks on me. I checked the notes in my phone and there it was written down in both English and Kurdish, just as I had remembered it. I turned to the guidance of Jan, Ipek, and my other Kurdish friends, but each gave their own explanation, rather than a definitive, agreed-upon version of the proverb.

Naila Bozo, a Kurdish doctor who had previously volunteered as a surgeon at a military hospital in Kobanê, explained it to me in her own way after a long discussion with her father. "The proverb comes from the ancestors of modern-day Kurds, in the pre-Islamic time of Zarathustra, the Prophet of Zoroastrianism. You can find similar things today in Êzidî creation stories, in the sense that God created the first angel Tawûsê Melek from his own Ronahi [illumination], or fire. There are many ancient cultures that worship fire because the sun is the source of all life, and fire is the earthly embodiment of the sun. Thus, Kurds believe they were born from fire. As for returning to fire—it is not about hellfire. It is regarding death—the dissolution of the material body itself and the soul going back to the source of creation, and thus continuing on the cyclical route of reincarnation. So, I think your friend Didar was describing being born from fire itself, and returning in death."

Another Kurdish friend, Berxwedan, wrote me his explanation: "In the Koran, men came from clay, Jinns [demons] came from fire. That, among other myths, is why the general Ummah [community of Muslims] don't see Kurds as Muslims, let alone humans."

Kovan Direj, a refugee from Rojava now living in Sweden who had taken up photography, described to me, "It is how the enemies of our ancestors accused us of being ghosts, and not humans. They looked upon those people in the Kurdish mountains celebrating the spring equinox with open flames and torches, worshipping fire as a religious custom. Kurdish nationalists have now adopted this phrase and use it generously. We now openly call ourselves sons and daughters of fire."

I looked over each explanation carefully. They all had heard it, but finding the exact roots of the phrase Didar uttered was an unsolvable mystery, as most Kurdish mythologies come from an oral tradition. Similar to the Kurdish language itself, oral mythologies had managed to survive without being recorded with pen and ink—spoken in the privacy of the family home away from the watchful eyes of rulers and regimes, or sung in the mountains by dissident poets and rebels.

Did finding the exact root really matter? Perhaps not. Oral traditions are passed down by generation, maintaining cultural motifs and surviving due to the familiar themes that are able to resonate in each era. Perhaps it was Didar herself who first birthed the phrase in this specific way, shaping and giving it a renewed meaning while sitting around a burning car tire in Tell Hamis, seeking to separate her cause from the jihadist graffiti on the walls of the compound.

"Kurds have lost most of their mythologies, but new mythologies will be based on these kids one thousand years into the future," reflected Berxwedan.

ARRIVING IN SHENGAL

Shengal Mountain, March 11, 2015 Descending the long and winding dirt road from Rojava into Shengal, we cut through the mountain range that had once provided sanctuary to thousands of the Êzidî religious minority escaping ISIS's merciless genocide on August 3, 2014. It was a clear day, and we could see miles into the distance and the city of Shengal below. As we disembarked down the mountain road, the sunny weather gave way to an otherworldly, dystopian wasteland that was once teeming with life. Our van passed abandoned vehicles every twenty yards; some were burnt to oblivion, others riddled with bullets, and yet the most disturbing signs of devastation were the clothes that littered the road before us. As we pulled to a stop, I noticed a small pair of children's shoes cast aside. The entire scene felt like something out of an ancient text—a level of brutality that we have tried to convince ourselves the human race has transcended.

In the passenger seat, Jan stared silently out the window, and I wondered what was going through his mind, though I could only assume. This particular genocide hit close to home for him. Although he does not identify as a deeply religious man, his family was of Êzidî background, and he considered the faith to be a vessel of distinct Kurdish identity, one which still held many indigenous, mystical, and pre-Islamic traditions. This was different than the attack on Mosul. ISIS never wanted to control Shengal; they wanted to burn it to the ground. The attack cut deep, because its purpose was to systematically cleanse the Êzidî from their endemic homeland. To ISIS, the devotees of Êzidism are considered worshippers of fire and the devil. An entire sect of innocent people, killed for their beliefs.

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Now seven months later, the Êzidî bodies had been removed for proper burial, yet the silence of the road was overwhelming. The intricate story that played out exactly where we

stood was palpable as we scanned the devastation left behind. The way it had been told to me, from many perspectives of survivors, was that the attack began in the dead of night.

Try to imagine.

While your family is asleep at home, ISIS fighters first creep into Êzidî villages and rural communities on the outskirts of Shengal city. Convoys of militarized vehicles come from the ISIS-occupied regions along main roads—from Tal Afar in the east, and Baa'j in the south. Across the valley, ISIS flags are swiftly hung from some windowsills and roofs of Muslim houses, revealing co-conspirators from bordering Arab, Turkmen, and Sunni Kurdish communities who would betray their fellow Êzidî neighbors and join in on the assault.

Without warning, a coordinated attack begins. You wake up in the middle of the night to screams echoing across the rural Êzidî villages, accompanied by the buzzing sound of bullets flying overhead. Your family is one of many who must hastily grab important belongings, while commanding younger and slower family members to pack their bags. You watch as some boldly stay behind to resist, giving their families an opportunity to escape the countryside and drive toward the larger, more secure city of Shengal, using nothing more than vintage bolt-action rifles owned by farmers in the village.

By sunrise, it is devastatingly clear that the city of Shengal is not as secure as hoped, nor is it protected. In a shocking turn of events, you discover that Peshmerga forces have withdrawn from all their checkpoints in the region, giving no warning to the Êzidî population—essentially deserting thousands of defenseless men, women, and children, now under siege by the jihadists.

At this point, the only option left is to escape the undefended city along the main road through the mountain. Thousands flood the streets, exacerbating the hysteria, creating traffic jams and mass confusion amid the chaos. You watch helplessly as ISIS sets up blockades and checkpoints on the main roads in every direction, trapping civilians and gathering them into groups. Here, the Êzidî men face a grim choice: convert to Islam, or be executed on the spot. Women are separated from their families to be sold off in slave markets, or to be raped by ISIS fighters. Any civilian that attempts to flee is hunted down and shot.

When it becomes clear what is unfolding, those still in their vehicles on the road are forced to make a life or death decision: Lead your family to be massacred, or run, by foot, into the hostile arid mountain terrain where an uncertain future awaits you. As your family leaves the car behind, abandoning any packed bags, you start running together into the mountains. As you flee you pass friends and neighbors lying dead in the landscape, but you cannot stop out of fear of the "usurping" extremists. As you race uphill, the most primal sense of survival takes over and you run harder than you've ever run in your life. When you reach the edge of the mountain, you turn one last time to look at what's left of your home. Blood is pouring in the streets, smoke billows above crumbling buildings. It is the most tragic thing you've ever seen, and yet the scale of the massacre echoes the generations of your ancestors who have experienced the same religious persecution.

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One might think the horror ended there for Kurdish civilians lucky enough to escape, but the struggle had only just begun. ISIS surrounded Shengal Mountain after the attack, closing off any route of escape for over a week. Many would die from dehydration, especially children, the disabled, and the elderly, who were lucky enough to have escaped in the first place.

After the fact, the international community would respond, sending helicopters with humanitarian airdrops and coordinating airstrikes on ISIS around the mountain, but it was too late. All was thought to be lost, as the starving, exhausted civilians saw an unknown militia approaching, covered in dirt and sweat. However, confusion and fear were broken when the deserted Êzidî saw female fighters among the ranks and bearing guns, realized this wasn't ISIS approaching, but the YPG, YPJ, and the PKK, who had been struggling for days to establish an escape route. The Kurdish groups had effectively opened a narrow corridor through the mountain and into Rojava, Syria, evacuating and saving thousands of Êzidî families who had been hiding for their lives in the hills. The Êzidî civilians would then begin an eighteen-hour walk, on foot, to safety. This was the defining moment when the PKK and YPG/J became heroes, eclipsing the Peshmerga.

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After paying our respects at the site of the mass murder, we made our way to a neighborhood on the outskirts of the city where we'd be staying. The chain of houses and compounds formerly belonging to Êzidî civilians were now considered the resistance line—a support network of barracks, makeshift clinics, and weapons storage to serve the fighters up at the frontline, which saw its most heated battles within Shengal's central bazaar. Jan explained to me that Peshmerga and guerrilla forces controlled 30 percent of the city, while 70 percent was under the control of ISIS. Things would simply have to take their course.

Our new home was a large multistory house with high compound walls that now hosted dozens of guerrilla fighters. Here we met one of the area's commanders, Çeko Agir, a charismatic PKK guerrilla with a thick beard, expressive eyebrows, and a larger than life sense of humor. He showed us around the house and we saw fighters preparing new rounds of ammunition for machine guns, while others organized stacks of cinder blocks and sand bags to be used for new sniper nests perched on rooftops. The cupboards in the kitchen had been converted into ammunition storage. I stepped toward a spiral staircase when Çeko gestured, saying, "Don't go up there, you'll become target practice."

After dark we used a generator for electricity and power. It was movie night in Shengal. The guerrillas pulled a pirated DVD from a collection of disks in a slipcase. We crowded together, watching a Turkish-dubbed version of *The Matrix* in front of the flickering television set. As the famous lobby shootout scene ended, we realized the gunshots we continued to hear weren't from the film, but were right outside our home base. The guerrillas told me I shouldn't worry, and it was only the Peshmerga shooting a DShK machine gun. The hills surrounding the city had an echoing effect that made the gunfire sound closer than it actually was. One of the fighters laughed as he explained that the Peshmerga shoot at nothing when they get bored because they have "endless supplies of ammunition from governments all around the world." While it was true that the Peshmerga had reentered the city to fight ISIS alongside the PKK, making them brothers in arms, deep political tension still ran deep between the two groups.

"They aren't doing anything useful, just wasting bullets . . . Maybe they want to kill ISIS from sleep-deprivation?" joked Çeko. After a beat, Çeko conceded that he had no problem with the individual Peshmerga fighters. He explained that, in fact, there were several Persmerga who volunteered to fight alongside the guerrillas when they first entered the city from the humanitarian corridor.

That night we slept together in rows on the ground. The men were squished together in a single room, while the female guerrillas slept down the road at a second location.

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The next morning, we left the house on the resistance line to follow Çeko and two of his fellow guerrillas on foot for a tour of the frontlines. Jan explained that there would be

Navigating through the frontline buildings near Shengal's bazaar

certain moments of our walk in which ISIS firing positions or contested zones would be mere meters away from us. I made a deal—agreeing to go anywhere the guerrillas deemed safe, but that they shouldn't tell me when ISIS was at its closest because truthfully, I didn't want fear to influence my photography. This, apparently, was pure comedy for the guerrillas, who happily agreed to play along with the game. Çeko gave me a wink and a mischievous smile.

As we walked, Çeko's body language vacillated between a relaxed stance with his rifle strapped across his back, and at other times, him unslinging his weapon and grasping it tightly in his hand, peering around corners and whistling to unseen guerrillas nestled in positions around street corners to inform them that friendlies were incoming. As someone who has had to move stealthily, anonymously, behind the disorder of many unstable cities, Çeko was at home with covert shortcuts. Some residential streets were entirely open for walking, while other paths relied on bypassing through smashed holes in building walls, winding through the labyrinth of the city. It was like an abandoned paintball course, but with dire consequences if you lost. Eerie stretches of silence were casually interrupted by random gunshots, seemingly with no strategic purpose other than to keep enemies on edge. We encountered some fighters sitting around: eating, watching, waiting. It seemed that the bulk of war required a zen-like patience while having an intuitive sense of urgency.

At one point, Çeko, who by now had become the comic relief of the group, grabbed my shoulder and changed his tone of voice: "Don't poke your head above this wall." He looked at Jan, and waited for him to translate. Çeko was not joking this time. I thanked him for the reminder.

Some of the best moments captured on camera weren't discovered until long after I'd left Shengal and was working with a translator. One of my favorite moments was from this particular afternoon.

During a break while having tea at one of the positions, Çeko turned directly into my camera, speaking in Kurdish so I couldn't understand. "Joseph, Daesh is near here. Right over there! Meters . . ." He held his hand out and began to count his fingers: "1, 2, 3 . . . We are in the fighting area and Daesh is twenty meters away. You are not aware of this but we are on the furthest frontline. Translator, translator. You translate to him later."

During all of this, he could not keep a straight face. The other guerrillas, and Jan, were roaring in laughter.

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We climbed a rocky hilltop to a position overlooking the city in which Çeko's comrades had a truck stationed with a mounted machine gun behind a wall of dirt. One of the fighters had a velcro badge depicting the Êzidî shrine of Lalish—the spiritual center of

the faith. I was told these fighters were the Shengal Resistance Units (YBŞ). They were a newly formed armed group largely populated with Êzidî refugees who had survived the ISIS massacre, and were rescued by the YPG/J and PKK through the humanitarian corridor. The dire plight of the Êzidîs made prime recruiting grounds for civilians who sought revenge.

YBŞ fighters were trained both militarily and ideologically by YPG, YPJ, and PKK commanders like Çeko. Öcalan's writings resonated with many Êzidîs because they instructed minority ethnic groups how to resist with force, but also described a path to self-determination and autonomy. With their trust of both the Peshmerga and Iraqi Army eroded, they believed the best way to prevent future genocides was to maintain their own local self-defense militias. YBŞ's management of key frontline positions combined with their fearless attitude on the battlefield won them admiration even among some non-political Êzidîs who don't agree with the PKK's agenda. Those who wanted to return home from refugee camps naturally admired the group fighting the hardest.

There was Warshin, a Êzidî girl who escaped her village of Sîba Shêx Xidir while it was under attack. She settled into a refugee camp with the help of the guerrillas. Warshin told of seeing her family members slaughtered, while others were still held captive. As she fled her village, she ran past the bodies of close friends. Warshin explained to me, "I feel like a different girl now, I am no longer the girl who ran away from her village." She went on to explain how she grew restless at the camp, wanting more out of life, and shortly after, joined the ranks of the female wing of the YBŞ. Her father would soon follow in her footsteps.

Çeko (right), Jan, and other PKK guerrillas take a break

Another YBŞ commander, Dijwar Feqir, had a unique story. As a former Iraqi Security Forces soldier, he described being in Mosul during ISIS's infamous siege on the city just before they turned their attention to Shengal. He remembered feeling panic, disorganization, and conspiracy in the air, claiming that several of his high-level commanders were suspected of coordinating with ISIS before the attacks. Other superiors would shed their uniforms and flee as the jihadists entered the city. As a Êzidî man, he watched on television as ISIS began their assault on his homeland. He left the outskirts of Mosul to volunteer in any local armed force that was helping his people, which led him to YBŞ. His former training from the American army quickly propelled him through the ranks of the grassroots YBŞ force, and he became a commander. We discussed the differences between his old and new army. Dijwar said, "In the Iraqi Security Forces, we had all the weapons, but no willpower. Now, here in the Shengal Resistance Units, we have barely any weapons and all the willpower in the world. The latter makes a better soldier. Now, there are eighteen-year-old girls in my group, but they are better than the soldiers in the Iraqi Army. A fighter is a fighter. They were born that way."

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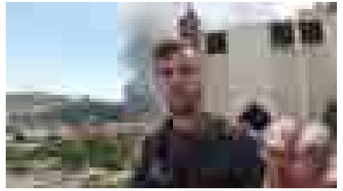
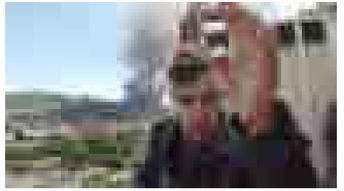
Back at home base on the resistance line, I showed the PKK guerrillas some of my photography projects from around the world on my iPad. The Kurds took a particular interest in a photo series of the warring tribes of Ethiopia's Omo Valley. Their ideological training encouraged them to ask me many questions, seeking to find parallels between themselves and this distant African culture. One guerrilla took pictures of my iPad screen with his point and shoot camera so he could study them later. I explained the scarification rituals used by some of these tribes, which act as visual manifestations of respect for the most accomplished warriors. This fascinated the guerrillas, largely because they made an effort to abolish visual displays of hierarchy, with even high commanders often doing chores and cleaning their own clothes. The idea that someone would go out of their way to broadcast that they'd killed someone seemed absurd to the fighters, whose eyes crinkled with laughter.

As we swiped through images from Varanasi, Siberut, and Brooklyn, two walkie-talkies sat on the table beside us. One was tuned to the radio channel ISIS currently used, which the guerrillas listened in on, while using the other walkie-talkie to communicate with their own comrades on the frontline. The dialects heard on the former varied from Arabic to Turkmen with a local Tal Afar accent, which served as a harsh reminder that many of the ISIS fighters in Shengal were those who had turned against their Êzidî neighbors.

Suddenly, one of the walkies crackled to life and we heard a voice cry out "*Allahu akbar!*" meaning "God is the greatest!" This is the calling card of ISIS that an attack has just begun.





An ISIS car bomb explodes behind me

The guerrilla fighters around me jumped to their feet, grabbed their Kalashnikov rifles, and headed outside the door; any trace of boyish curiosity had vanished. Once ISIS fighters launch an offensive, things happen fast. The resistance line must be prepared to support the frontline fighters in any way they can.

I followed the guerrillas outside, where we had a full panoramic view of the city from behind a compound wall. Shells had begun to fall near the frontline positions we had explored earlier, and machine gun fire was echoing across the city. A hill lined with the residential houses of a historic neighborhood separated us from the main action, but we were able to see large plumes of diffuse black smoke rising from the far side. It seemed ISIS was attempting to make an advance and take the high ground owned by the Kurdish forces. Some of the guerrillas that were, moments before, calmly sitting and looking at the iPad had already leapt into a truck and were driving toward the sound of the shelling, while others remained at the house on alert.

At this point, I was thinking, maybe I should be like Anderson Cooper and film myself with the battle in the background and speak loudly to the camera over the sounds of bullets. I passed my camera to Jan, and tried to help him align the shot as he peered at the screen. With my back turned to the city, I didn't notice that an enormous explosion of gray and black smoke and debris was billowing into the sky behind me. Out of nowhere, I felt the air shift around me, like a very subtle pulse of vibration through my body. I didn't even hear the sound of the explosion until a half second later. Instinctively, I ducked for cover exclaiming "Shit!" When I looked up, I saw Jan's calm gaze. "It's okay," he said soothingly as we were ushered around the compound wall by guerrillas for a safer viewpoint.

Jan is a man of few words but he always knows what to say at the right moment. "The explosion was over there, on the frontline. Suicide car, I think. It's so far away, don't worry, Joe. Film what you need but just prepare all your stuff in case we have to leave quickly. The safest thing is to stay here. Things are not always what they seem."

I watched another PKK commander who had stayed behind at the house to monitor the scene from our vantage point. He had put a wall between himself and the sound of bullets whizzing randomly over the house, fired upward by the jihadists seeking to make an advance uphill. The commander was fascinating to watch as he alternated between the two walkie-talkies from the kitchen table in his hands, seeking updates from his comrades with one, while listening intently to ISIS with the other for clues on their movements.

The back and forth on the ISIS channel sounded like this:

"Mr. Ali, ten of us are coming to you, God willing."
"Unbelievers will come from behind you, my brother."
"We prayed to Allah for this fight. I swear we will fight them fiercely."
"Wait for backup . . ."
"Waleed, where are you now?"
"Run, Ali!"
"The belt is empty now."
"Run in front of me!"

It wasn't until this point that I realized how tense my entire body had been since the suicide bomb went off. The commander monitoring the radio turned to me and cheekily explained that a few weeks before, the morale on the ISIS side fell so low that a voice on the radio lied to their fellow fighters and said, "Baghdad has fallen to the Islamic State."

The unification of military talent from former Ba'athist officers combined with the many "believers" who willingly kill themselves in the name of Islam makes ISIS an effective fighting force. After throwing the frontline into a state of chaos with a suicide bomb, jihadists can then rapidly advance on foot, flanking their enemies under the cover of smoke, shrapnel, and chaos.

That day, ISIS would not gain any ground, but word traveled fast that Manur, a YBŞ fighter, was killed. Later that night, the family of the fallen soldier arrived. They came to the guerrilla base and over dinner discussed funeral preparations with the commanders, which involved everything from retrieving the body to the proper washing for burial. I was hesitant, trying to respect the mourning family—however, they encouraged me and invited me to the funeral to document their traditions and to show the world what was happening in their homeland.

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The lawless atmosphere and airborne renegade spirit that was pulsating through the guerrillas yesterday was now gone. Today's mood was dark. The sun, in response, had disappeared, and a gray haze blurred the horizon. As the funeral procession began, the wind picked up, whipping sand particles against the exposed skin and faces of the mourners. The entire community of two hundred descended from all parts of the hills and mountains. Every single attendant was chanting, crying, or taking pictures on their cell phones. Suddenly, the crowd parted and the casket approached. The fallen soldier's comrades carried his body with his family leading the procession, wailing and chanting, "Martyrs never die!" Bullets were fired into the bleak heavens, though with the land stagnant under fog, it was impossible to tell where the earth started and the sky ended.

The martyr or *shahid* is one of the most respected titles throughout Kurdistan, though it carries a different connotation from how ISIS uses it, promising paradise in the afterlife to those who give their lives in jihad. Radical ISIS preachers promise things in the next life, while the guerrillas sacrifice their lives to protect their people in this world—our current world. In the martyr-culture of the guerrilla movement, never has someone simply "died." To become a martyr is to transcend a meaningless death and become a legend of Kurdish freedom. The way it was explained to me was more of a nonreligious context; when one dies protecting their people, his or her sacrifice lives on through those they have protected.

After the funeral, we began our long journey back to Sulaymaniyah as my time here was ending. We tracked back through Syria and down to the river crossing we originally came across. As we approached the crossing we saw soldiers gathering by the water, along with several members of the BBC and other Western press outlets. As we crept closer, we heard a familiar chant: "Martyrs never die." Their passionate cries came across to us, through a swarm of media trucks and cameras. Konstandinos Erik Scurfield, nom de guerre Kemal, had fallen. Kemal was the first British national to die fighting against ISIS with the YPG—which explained the media frenzy. Kosta was a former marine who felt his country wasn't doing enough in the fight against ISIS, and in September 2014, he decided to join the YPG. Within weeks of this decision he flew into Iraq, was smuggled into Syria, and joined the ranks of the Lions of Rojava brigade. After approximately six months of fighting, he was killed when ISIS hit his car with an RPG.

The local Kurdish women sobbed "Martyrs never die," grieving for the British fighter with the same exact intensity as they did for their own fallen Êzidî soldier. In the eyes of the Kurds, Kemal was one of them, and will be worshipped for his sacrifice. Images of Kemal were framed and carried by civilians throughout the funeral.

Enough good words cannot be spoken of Jan. He's one of those mystical, wise creatures who subconsciously gravitates toward those who need comforting or reassurance. During this funeral, he saw that I was fine on my own and planted himself next to Kemal's father, translating the entire funeral for him. It was clear that—although in mourning—the family was deeply moved by the Kurdish people's reverence for their son. After the funeral, Kemal's casket was loaded into the back of a vehicle which would be flown back to the United Kingdom. And with that, they swept away out of Syria, crossing the Tigris River, heading back to a land far less hostile.

Then, it was quiet by the river, with only the faint whisper of the Kurdish women and the soft gentle breathing of the wind and water. I didn't want to leave, but it was time.

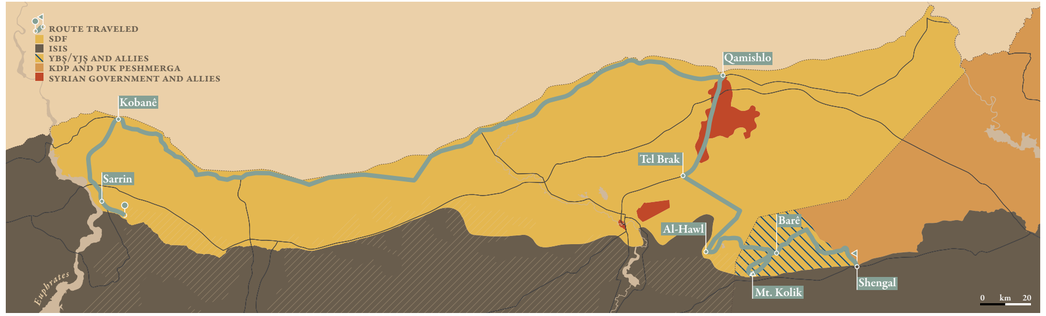
SAYING GOODBYE

Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan, March 16, 2015 Back at Jan and Ipek's home, this feels strange to say, but Jan and I were positively giddy. Jan is an accomplished fixer, but the things we'd witnessed over the last fifteen days were astounding. It felt dreamlike in the sense that so much can happen to these people on the same planet as the rest of us. There is something incredible, something so moving about this land. I knew I would be back. After decompressing by watching some slapstick Turkish comedy, Jan and I prepared to head for the airport, which felt far more comfortable than when I arrived. After our car was thoroughly inspected and all of my bags screened, we were given access to drive right up to the glass doors. After passing through the security checkpoint, I turned around to see that Jan was not allowed any further. He stared at me through the glass, a smile spread across his face. Goodbyes are not easy for me, but I hurried back to the glass doors to give him a final hug and farewell. I told him that I would see him again, and I meant it.

I gathered my equipment and bags, looking out past the glass doors we entered through. I stood there with my Canadian passport and American work visa, which would take me back home—to a world I know as "safe." But Jan, Ipek, and the fighters who I was so lucky to photograph would remain here in the midst of an unpredictable war. I sat on the plane, looking out over the vast land I was leaving behind—knowing that everyone back home would call me brave or courageous for making this trip. But in reality, I was just a temporary guest, a stooge with a camera, and certainly not that brave. It's the fighters who choose to stay in Iraq and Syria who are truly heroic. They've made the pledge not to retreat; they have visions of a free Kurdistan—and that does not come without a hard-fought war.

Alongside Commander Didar (second from left, seated) and her unit in Tell Hamis

JOURNEY TWO



FROM EAST TO WEST

My first trip had ended too soon. Back and safe at home, I would watch Twitter feeds sharing the social progress in Kurdistan, as well as updates from the battlefield. Unlike the unknowns that had circled around my mind as I processed this kind of data before my previous journey, this time all I saw were faces. I was fortunate to be back at work freelancing on commercial and creative assignments, but my mind would often drift. I knew deep down that I had to go back. I knew there was so much more to capture.

The photography and documentary video from my first trip were seen all around the world in various print publications and at film festivals, but the project took on a viral life of its own online thanks to the Kurdish community themselves and sympathizers of their struggle. The photographs and video were seen by hundreds of thousands, or even possibly millions, of eyeballs. Even Rêdûr Xelîl, the spokesman of the YPG, shared my project on his Facebook page. I received messages from families recognizing loved ones who had left home to support the Kurdish fighters, asking if they were in good health. I would receive phone calls at strange times from YPG and YPJ fighters saying good morning in Kurdish, laughing and fumbling with the phone until it was disconnected.

My work would also draw harsh condemnation from supporters of the Turkish government, especially ultra-nationalist groups like the Grey Wolves. I would be called an undercover PKK agent, a maker of propaganda, and a "terrorist-lover." I would receive an assortment of death threats and be sent photographs of dead Kurdish people. The hatred wasn't just directed at the PKK, but at Kurds in general. I experienced only a fraction of the inherent racism the Kurds in Turkey face in public with horrific comments like, "These Kurdish dogs should all be exterminated"; "the only good Kurd is a dead Kurd"; "we will rape the mothers of the so-called Kurdistan." Additionally, my photos shared on Facebook and Instagram were reported by the Turkish government's paid legion of online trolls, who collaborate to flag and report images from hundreds of individual accounts at the same time. Those images were swiftly removed "for breaching community guidelines." Silicon Valley claims to be an outlet of free speech, but as private companies they often cave to pressure by foreign governments like Turkey, who have successfully lobbied Facebook and Instagram to ban all PKK-related imagery, maps of Kurdistan, and images of Abdullah Öcalan.

In a great irony, the same portrait that was removed from Instagram hung on the walls of London's National Portrait Gallery as part of the Taylor Wessing exhibition. The gallery understood that this kind of photography should be a conversation starter of intense dialogue and debate, but never silenced. To ban a photograph of one's enemy is an attempt to dehumanize them, and to ignore the grievances such an armed movement represents.

A lot had changed on the ground in the very short time since my first trip, and when planning my next trip, it was imperative to understand the rapidly changing situation. In June 2015, the Peoples' Democracy Party, or HDP, a leftist political party in Turkey supported by the Kurdish movement, won enough votes to become an official opposition party in Parliament. This unprecedented victory derailed the parliamentary majority of the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, led by President Erdoğan. Shortly after, the Erdoğan government broke the ceasefire with the PKK and began a brutal campaign of repression against Turkey's Kurdish population. Entire Kurdish districts were annihilated by the Turkish military. Hostilities were rekindled with Kurdish youth so radical even the PKK leadership couldn't entirely control them from their headquarters in the Qandil Mountains. Turkey's heavy-handed, indiscriminate response to the uprisings in Kurdish cities in Turkey's southeast had begun to make the cities resemble Assad's Syria. Eerily, both human rights organizations and mainstream media were almost completely silent on these issues as they unfolded. The PKK responded with countless ambushes and bombings of Turkish military targets and police stations. What would follow in Turkey would take on even more serious consequences—the imprisonment of any academics or journalists approaching Kurdish issues, and eventually the push to strip the immunity of pro-Kurdish politicians. If the PKK gained momentum in the late 1970s due to no political process being available to the Kurdish minority, surely the dire option of further armed struggle would resonate even more. The more the Kurdish population was attacked, the more powerful the PKK became.

The events in Turkey's southeast caused a ripple effect of violence that didn't stop at the country's boundaries. The YPG/J stationed along the border had reported on several occasions being shelled by Turkey on one front, and ISIS on another. YPG/J remained unprovoked, seeking to draw a distinction between themselves and the PKK. A single shot back could have escalated into a full Turkish retaliation into Syrian Kurdistan.

After political pressure in the U.S.-led coalition's war on ISIS, Turkey eventually succumbed and granted the U.S. Air Force access to Incirlik Air Base to conduct targeted strikes against ISIS, mostly in support of the YPG/J's ground forces. However, within twenty-four hours of the deal of sharing the base being announced publicly, the Turkish military dispatched waves upon waves of fighter jets to attack the PKK in the Qandil Mountains, and launched just a single sortie against an ISIS target. It was clear which group the Turkish government was more serious in fighting.

Despite the odd shelling from Turkey, in Syria the YPG/J were swiftly becoming kingmakers. Their organizational capabilities led to battlefield victories, and thus a greater investment of American airpower. Most notably, the YPG/J had united their landlocked Jazira Canton to the isolated Kobanê Canton, resulting in a continuous stretch of territory along the Turkish border, much to Turkey's dismay. The Americans were growing weary of al-Qaeda's influence over the collapsing and fragmented Syrian rebel groups, and they seemed to find a trusted ground partner in the YPG/J. ISIS—seemingly the world's most terrifying boogeyman—was collapsing under every offensive. It was purely a military alliance, and the Americans rejected recognizing any political project of Kurdish autonomy in Syria. The U.S.-led coalition support was extremely limited to the occasional delivery of light weapons and airstrikes, which were called in covertly by a small number of special operations forces embedded among the fighters. The U.S. was wary to give the YPG/J heavy weapons such as the anti-tank TOW missile, perhaps fearing that one day they could fall into the hands of the PKK against their NATO partner, Turkey.

After the fall of Idlib Governorate and its provincial capital to a controversial coalition of al-Qaeda-affiliated armed groups and CIA-backed FSA rebels, the Syrian conflict took a dramatic turn. Russia entered the war in an attempt to stop the Syrian regime from falling, and tilt the chessboard back into the favor of Damascus, their longtime ally in the region. It seemed the strategy of the rebels joining forces with extremist factions was incredibly shortsighted—temporarily a huge victory, but it summoned the wrath of the Kremlin, a powerful influence that America sought to avoid confrontation with. If America wished to maintain its influence over Syria, it too would have to escalate. The indiscriminate aerial campaigns of Russian and Syrian jets made the refugee crisis grow to an unfathomable level and had finally caught the world's attention. Although the YPG/J had openly fought Assad's forces in the beginning of the war, the fragile neutrality that later formed was only seldom broken by odd skirmishes over checkpoints and access to roads. While they were opposed to everything the Assad regime represented, the YPG/J's reluctance to join the rebels in the beginning of the war had benefited them greatly. They were not yet targets of Russian airpower. After all, the Syrian Arab Army was severely lacking in manpower, and the YPG/J mostly had the same enemies. They say it's wise to fight your enemy's enemy last.

RETURN TO SHENGAL

Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan, November 13, 2015 Eight months later, I found myself back in Sulaymaniyah with Jan and Ipek where it all began. The same map of Iraq and Syria lay spread out across the floor as Jan pointed out the changing territories and areas of control. It felt good to return to familiar faces, who I had once been nervous and unsure of, but now considered friends. Perhaps the only difference was now a portrait of a YPG martyr hung in their living room—a close relative who had died fighting ISIS in the countryside of Kobanê.

In a timely turn of events, Shengal was liberated from ISIS the day of my arrival into the country. The Peshmerga and PKK/YBŞ would each claim credit for the victory. Jan and Ipek's television set buzzed with updates from different TV networks, all with a heavy bias

The destroyed bazaar of Shengal

toward their political party of choice. The president of Iraqi Kurdistan, Masoud Barzani, stood in front of the liberated city with microphones from a variety of local networks in front of him. He proclaimed that it was the Peshmerga and Peshmerga alone who had freed the city from ISIS—not once mentioning the presence of the PKK or YBŞ. "Is that really what you saw in Shengal, Joe?" Jan asked dryly.

With the new freedom of Shengal, we decided it was only natural that we begin our second journey there. Now that ISIS was pushed to the edges of the city, we were able to wander neighborhoods that I would never have dreamed of setting foot into when they were crawling with jihadists.

While the liberation from ISIS was unquestionably a good thing, it left new challenges for us to solve. Disputed zones between Kurdish forces became difficult to access directly. After some extremely creative and diplomatic problem solving, Jan and I entered Syria as we had in the past, transported under the protection of the YPG/J via their humanitarian corridor through Shengal Mountain, then descending back into Iraq. Then, we switched vehicles and were handed off to the local Êzidî affiliate—the YBŞ. (We had basically done a gigantic loop-de-loop around forces who would not grant us permission to enter.) On my last visit, YBŞ was a nascent force, starting with one or two bases with merely a couple hundred fighters. Now, just eight months later, the numbers of the YBŞ had increased dramatically.

In a way, it felt like my first trip was merely an introductory course to the crisis, and this second trip would allow me to explore the human side of the conflict much more deeply. At this point, both the Peshmerga and guerrillas of all factions were still on high alert due to a fear of the jihadists infiltrating the city's many vacant neighborhoods, and shells still regularly fell. However, this rare window of time was the perfect opportunity to find unique stories and take environmental portraits of those who were on duty, but no longer distracted by the daily violent clashes that had plagued the city. Wandering the empty streets looking through a camera lens was like gazing into a diorama frozen in time.

★

Cudi Serhed, the commander of Shengal's entire frontline operations, led us through the smoldering ruins of the newly freed neighborhoods. I snapped a few shots as he stood defiantly over the city, planted firmly on a sniper's nest built of plastic crates and sandbags filled with rocks. In the distance, streams of black smoke rose from the wreckage. The moment was bittersweet; the enemy had been defeated but at a great cost, with hundreds of fighters' lives lost during the battle for Shengal. For now, there was silence on the walkie-talkie that hung out of his vest's breast pocket, connected by wire to a cluster of batteries taped together in another pocket. Beneath the vest, grenades were strapped to his traditional sash tied around his waist. As we continued onward and waded through the brickwork that once made up the city's historic center, Cudi pointed out every nook to hide in, every balcony to shoot from, and every dirt tunnel that dove underground and popped up suddenly in an unanticipated location.

We entered what was once Shengal's main bazaar, but this time from the side ISIS had been shooting at us from: a wide main road with shops on both sides and smaller side streets off the main strip. The thoroughfare was eviscerated. Former clothing stores, cell phone kiosks, and bakeries were utterly unrecognizable. We continued down the straight path and passed several guerrilla camps established to hold the city against infiltration. Resilient members from the PKK's women's army, the Free Women's Units (YJA-STAR), were sitting around a fire. They gave a friendly smile and waved as we walked by.

Streets became more difficult to walk on the deeper into the bazaar we traveled. The roads gave way to piles of rubble, often surrounding buildings and filling the entire walkway. A smell that I now recognized as rotting corpses slapped me in the face out of nowhere. Farther down the road we found the shell of what was once a truck. As we got closer, we approached a relic I had only seen before in propaganda videos—it was one of ISIS's infamous suicide bombing vehicles. This one had been stripped of its most valuable materials, probably re-engineered into mines for the guerrillas' ongoing campaign.

Originally packed with explosives, the vehicle was deployed against the guerrillas' frontline position. Its goal: turn a stalemate into an advantage for the jihadists with unwavering conviction and brutality. I first noticed its wheels, which had been reinforced with circular cut sheets of steel to prevent bullets from puncturing its Achilles' heel: rubber tires that, if ruptured, could slow the vehicle's advance. The rest of the vehicle was buttressed by sheets of metal, protecting it against bullets or grenades launched from its targeted destination. It is uncommon to see such a relic still intact; this one was stopped in its tracks by a sniper before it could reach its target and explode. The jihadist's body was still in there, his hair fried, skin burnt black and melted into the driver's seat. A few days later, the guerrillas would burn the truck in order to get rid of the smell of the rotting corpse trapped inside.

My experience of first seeing dead ISIS militants in Tell Tamer had left me feeling introspective. Not in an empathetic way, but I had felt a sense of compassion for the waste of human potential. Now, I was surprised to feel nothing. In Shengal, where mass graves and beds showing evidence of the rape and torture of kidnapped women were uncovered, it was impossible to find sympathy within me, even though I wanted to pretend. I took a moment and struggled to search my feelings. Still nothing.

Then, Jan pointed out something profound. "Mister, you remember when we were over . . . there," Jan nodded his head toward the former resistance line, "watching the clashes? And there was a huge explosion? It was a suicide car . . . You remember?"

"Yes, how could I forget?" I replied.

"This is the same place, I think." Jan motioned to a massive crater in the ground. Any remnants of a car were unrecognizable. The empty hole in the ground did appear to be roughly the place where we had witnessed the blast on our first trip.

The next day, we headed back to the bazaar, and found the YJA-STAR female guerrillas again. I snapped a few portraits and a large group shot of the women at their post. One of the more outspoken of them, Shevjîn, declared, "We destroyed Daesh here. We defeated their legend and their ego."

YJA-STAR guerrillas cook us kebabs

As Jan and I prepared to leave, the women insisted that we stay to eat with them, so they could cook for us. I discovered this charismatic Kurdish hospitality time and time again. The women were excited to share their culture, so while building an impromptu grill they explained, "We cook for our friends. The guerrillas make every way possible . . . For example, if we have a special guest we cook differently. In Kurdish culture, we want to offer the best food when we have guests over. The guerrilla is always creative. We cook whatever we have at our disposal."

In the dark city empty of civilian life, we sat together in a circle eating delicious chicken kebabs, cooked on skewers over a fire in a rusty metal bin.

★

I wanted to capture aerial imagery of Shengal's destruction with my small quadcopter camera drone. Before the flight, we needed to go through several levels of communications to inform the various armed factions holding neighborhoods in the city. We would accomplish this through Egid Civiyan, the highest-ranked PKK commander inside Shengal. Egid had the same thick brows that many of his brothers in arms share, thoughtful but fixed eyes, and a statuesque forehead, giving him a somewhat regal air. He was cool, calm, and collected yet still had a friendly, warm demeanor. Egid informed the Peshmerga in nearby neighborhoods that we would be flying a drone at sunset. Drones can be viewed with suspicion, as ISIS often uses them to scout enemy territory, or even to drop small explosives to disrupt gatherings of fighters. Cheap consumer electronics had been repurposed for war.

Egid semi-joked, "If the Peshmerga shoot it down, we view it as an attack on guerrillas, because you're with us."

I had expected that ISIS would be shooting, but the Peshmerga? In this tense climate, I didn't want to be responsible for a turf war. Regardless, Egid sat with us and some other guerrillas on the top of a schoolhouse roof, the highest point in the neighborhood under their control. I launched the drone and was met with shouts of glee from the guerrillas. Simple sweeps of neighborhoods slowly became long flights around the city, and admittedly, I pushed the limits of where I should have been flying.

Without warning, my controller abruptly went blank and a warning message began to flash across my viewfinder:

"Warning: Electromagnetic waves higher than normal."

Seconds later, shots rang out in the distance. I had no idea where my drone was since I lost navigation and could feel myself on the verge of a panic attack. The shots were coming from far away—a Peshmerga-controlled zone.

Jan had become a nervous wreck, saying, "Mister, fly it back now!"

I still didn't know where my drone was. I was so embarrassed and apologizing while explaining through Jan's translation. The guerrillas and Egid were laughing so hard, they couldn't stand up.

One exclaimed, "Don't worry, it's fine. Peshmerga won't be able to shoot anything out of the sky anyways."

I pushed the "return to home" button on my controller again and again; after what felt like eternity (it was more like two minutes), we were relieved to hear the faint hum of propellers directly above us. The drone slowly descended back to the schoolhouse roof to thunderous applause from the guerrillas. We had a decent laugh and a sigh of relief. It was impossible to tell what had happened, but Egid's suspicion was that either a coalition control center or the Peshmerga had used technology to jam electronics in the perimeter of their airstrikes, which included my video signal. If true, luckily they weren't able to fully disrupt my control signal, and the quadcopter had stayed fixed hovering in the air, which was how I was able to summon the drone back to the spot it had taken off from using the safety button designed for newbie fliers.

We received permission to fly the drone, yet something was lost in communication among the many factions inside the city. Egid saw this as a mere thorn in his side, but I felt like a total amateur in that I could have aggravated the growing tensions between parallel forces.

★

A following day, Jan and I explored an abandoned airfield at the outskirts of the city, with the help of the female wing of YBŞ, the Êzîdxan Women's Units (YJÊ). As was now becoming a pattern, these women were all from the Shengal Mountain area—displaced by genocide—and had taken up arms to protect themselves. Berivan, a nineteen-year-old recruit with gleaming emerald eyes, would show us around the airfield. At the time of photographing, Berivan's village, Sîba Shêx Xidir, was still under the control of ISIS militants.

She told me she hoped to fight them there. "Throughout our history, Êzidî people have been the victims of seventy-three massacres in Shengal. Before, we didn't have our own forces to organize us. We were always under our enemies' control. Now, we have established our own force to stop future genocides and protect our people."

As we explored the hangars together, which were empty save for the heaps of ashes covering the floors, we found canvas road signs with Islamic State flags printed on them. I took a portrait of Berivan lifting one of the signs and looking directly into the camera lens. The result became one of my favorite photographs of the entire trip. The simplicity of the charcoal-colored ground, the disheveled tears in the canvas, and the piercing gaze of the brave young woman in uniform who had assisted in taking back her kin's city was captivating.

On another occasion, I took another photograph of Berivan with one of her fellow female fighters, Silava. While the pair looked stoically into my camera as I took shots, they suddenly broke out laughing together. They then insisted that if I was going to publish one of the images, then I should use the laughing one, as it is "more realistic, because we always laugh when we fight on the frontlines." I can say this is very true, and a strong sense of camaraderie is one of many things that makes these fighters so effective. After a while I noticed the name "Yilmaz" stitched into Silava's ammo carrier, which she explained was the name of her brother. After I assumed his death was at the hands of ISIS, Silava corrected me, stating her brother was killed as a PKK guerrilla in a battle against Turkish forces. It was yet another reminder that in the eyes of these fighters, the same decades-long war has been waged on countless fronts, and has only recently manifested in the form of ISIS.

Later in the day, Berivan would share her devastating recollections of Êzidî men being left to defend themselves with useless, old rifles during the genocide as she escaped. The memories were painful, but she felt that the role of women's forces was changing. In a strange twist of fate, the prevalence of female fighters in this conflict has sparked a change in the views of the elder Êzidî men, whose ideas were once quite conservative.

Photographing Silava and Berivan

On our last night in Shengal, Jan and I were driven to a base at the top of the mountain to await our next ride. I would photograph some of these elderly Êzidî men that Berivan had spoken of. They had established a local police force to protect their refugee camp on the outskirts of the city, nestled among the boulders of Shengal Mountain. If I were to describe just one of the old men, the same words would be true for all: their faces hardened but handsome, large bushy mustaches, all wearing traditional Êzidî clothing complete with red and white scarves tied around their heads. The old men still carried the same vintage, wooden bolt-action rifles that Berivan had described to me, making even the old Soviet-era Kalashnikovs of their younger counterparts look high tech. When I asked them about what Berivan had said about the new role of women, they all nodded in agreement: "We are proud of our girls."

After the portraits, we escaped from the bitter chill of the night air and joined some other Êzidî elders inside a metal shed warmed by an oil heater placed in the center. All the men smoked cigarettes, creating a gray layer of fog that slightly obscured the television set just across the room. They switched back and forth between a local Kurdish station and RT, the pro-Kremlin channel. As the only one not smoking in the room, in typical Kurdish hospitality, I was offered a cigarette, but I politely declined.

"Mister, I really think you should take one," cautioned Jan. "Everyone smokes around here except the jihadists. If you don't, maybe they will think you are an ISIS member." Jan mused this sarcastically. Without missing a beat, I lit up a cigarette.

Suddenly, a news flash poured across the screen with fresh details from an incident earlier. Turkey had shot down a Russian jet, claiming it had violated its airspace. Now, there was new footage emerging of soldiers from the FSA-aligned Syrian Turkmen Brigades firing at an ejected pilot as he parachuted toward the ground.

"Oh God, Putin is going to burn Ankara over this!" bellowed one man.

"Turkey is a friend of ISIS, the entire world knows this time!" cried another.

While the rest of the world watched uneasily thousands of miles away, this was a particularly nerve-racking moment for everyone on the ground in Iraq and Syria. The alliances of warring regimes could have sparked World War III. Luckily, at least this time, the matter was resolved between the superpowers, and the war continued on, waged by proxies.

Later that night, Jan and I sat together outside on top of a massive boulder, talking about various conspiracy theories and staring out into the horizon. We had a full 360° view of the villages across the land; to the north sat the freed areas, yet in almost all other directions, places were occupied by ISIS. All was pitch black below except for a sprinkling of lights from the various frontlines of armed factions, accompanied by the hum of generators. In the morning, we'd be traveling west.

FEMALE LIONS DO ALL THE HUNTING

Kolik Mountain, Iraq, November 25, 2015 The peaks of Shengal Mountain ripple westward toward the border of Syria. After a horseshoe-shaped corridor of sunken land, a second, smaller range rises and takes on an identity of its own: Kolik Mountain. The region is too desolate to be largely populated, save for small Êzidî villages and farmhouses made from the mountain's rock that seem to camouflage themselves into the vista.

There are a few ancient sites, too—the stone patchwork of frames of lost villages, and the dusty remnants of ascetics' chambers built into the caves. The archaeologist's trowel seldom digs here, however, and any whisper of Kurdish history that may lurk beneath the soil still waits to be discovered.

Although Kolik is just inside the border of Iraq, from its flat plateaus one can see the same war in Syrian Kurdistan being hard-fought over by the YPG and the YPJ. The expanses of pale yellow grassy plains are alive—small streams of black smoke climb in the distance, and the constant drone of coalition airplanes in the sky can be heard, with the occasional thunderous roar of an airstrike. In a paradox of U.S. foreign policy, the jets strike freely over Syria, yet the U.S. can't publicly support the same connected guerrilla frontline in Iraq due to its relationship with the PKK. What happens privately is a different matter.

After losing the city of Shengal, many of the ISIS militants retreated to various outposts in the countryside of Kolik, digging into the landscape, and forcing their pursuers into treacherous uphill battles with little cover. Their positions were sparse. Man-made bunkers had been built into natural caves, and rocks had been pushed into rings to form circular shooting positions.

On one side was Syria's YPG/J. On the other, PKK and YBŞ, working together to squeeze the jihadists in a pincer-like shape. A frontline around a mountain is crooked and overstretched, with the enemy having the higher ground. When straightened, the line becomes shorter, and forces can be concentrated on offensives instead of taking bullets and mortars from above.

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Our vehicle pulled up to a compound at the foot of Kolik Mountain's plateaus, outside the small village of Barê. The building would seem ordinary if it weren't for the steady flow of supplies and fighters in and out of its doors. The base was shared by both YBŞ and PKK fighters, and served as a crossroads for all units involved in the various military activities happening in Kolik. We'd spend the next week or so here . . . Maybe longer. We weren't sure. Since we had a lot of time, Jan and I decided to stay until it felt right to leave.

At first light, dozens of soldiers coming back from the frontlines would appear covered in Kolik's dirt, utterly exhausted. They would enter the building, remain

cordial, then go directly to sleep. On one occasion, I went to shake hands with a fighter, but he motioned toward his opposite hand—his prominent arm was disabled. The freshly bathed and fed fighters from the night before would swap places with the fatigued—replicating their patrols, maintaining their positions along the mountain, and continuing the fight.

During the day, just a handful of people, cooking and cleaning weapons, remained in the compound. A thick-framed, hearty man named Rudy, one of the few formally trained PKK doctors, would tend to the latest wounded in a back room. He explained to me it was probably not a good idea to photograph his patients—if the wounds were too severe, he would have to send them for smuggling across the border for more advanced medical treatment. Rudy carried a small Turkish-to-English dictionary in his left breast pocket and took advantage of practicing with Jan and I. After being served a sweet yogurt with savory green onion for lunch one day, he looked at his uncomplimentary food in horror, flipped through his dictionary, and exclaimed "It is something . . . controversial!" but then a toothy smile stretched across his face when he learned his misfortune had taught him a new English word.

At night, commanders from all corners of the mountain range would have meetings and politely usher us toward the kitchen to eat dinner with the rest of the soldiers while they spoke in secret. After meetings, we would rejoin them to discuss unclassified versions of the latest happenings. It wasn't all serious; the commanders loved to make prank phone calls late at night. They would call other commanders far away, pretending to be Iraqi journalists, and ask controversial questions, each question getting more and more uncomfortable:

"We saw a picture of you on Facebook with a mysterious Western woman. Who is this woman?"

They held their hand to the phone's microphone and forced in their laughter. One commander had to leave the room before he spoiled the joke.

"We heard that you have good relations with the Peshmerga and they gave you many mobile card credits and goats, is it true?"

"We have information that the coalition accidentally supported you with airstrikes, can you comment on that?"

The voice on the other line paused awkwardly. "How did you get this number?"

Their scarves couldn't contain their chuckles, and they burst out laughing before hanging up and rolling on the floor into their friends' arms, wagging their feet uncontrollably in hysterics.

Jan and Nûjiyan share a laugh

They also loved nature documentaries, and would exclaim loudly at the generator-powered television as a team of lionesses took down their prey, "Look! The female lions do all the hunting."

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Although I was trying to keep myself busy, getting to know the fighters, exploring, and photographing the areas closer to the Kolik compound, the main operation had commenced days ago. Egid, the same lead commander we had flown the drone with in the city of Shengal, had emerged in Kolik to assist in guiding the operation. He determined the situation was still too dangerous to allow a photographer to join the fighters clashing within Kolik.

"War is boring most of the time," Jan murmured dryly, staring at his feet.

"Be patient, and I promise we will take you." Egid added.

I had too much time alone, asking myself what the war photographers I admired would have done in this situation. At night, every once in a while you could hear the thunder of explosions echoing across the mountain. Although I had a sinking feeling that I was missing out on capturing historic moments of the Êzidîs' revenge, I decided to listen carefully to my experienced hosts.

It was around this time that I started what would be a short-lived yet deep bond with Nûjiyan Erhan. She was a trained guerrilla fighter, but one who had grown into the role of an on-screen activist and journalist on a pro-PKK television channel, as well as

other non-political Kurdish outlets focused on the role of women. As someone trained in both the weapon and the camera, you could count on Nûjiyan to be right up at the frontline with the fighters, risking her life to report back to the Kurdish community tuned in from around the world.

Nûjiyan sat on the porch of the compound, cross-legged in khaki pants and the big steel-toe boots of a construction worker while surrounded by camera lenses and batteries. A blue headband held back the wild curls of her thick brown hair as she looked down, focused on cleaning sand from the buttons of her DSLR camera. Then, she noticed I was there.

"*Hevalli* Joe." She motioned for me to sit down.

Jan wasn't around to translate, but we communicated using hand gestures, broken Kurdish and English, and universal technical camera terms, which share common words across all languages. Not knowing what to say next, I went inside and returned to Nûjiyan with my own camera.

"Ooohooo," she exclaimed as she picked it up, dialed around the settings, and pressed her eye to the viewfinder. "*Nice one*," she said in nearly perfect English. Then she handed my camera back to me, and held up her own next to her cheek. "We *Hêzen Dîmena*, we Photo Army." She then tapped her index finger on the shutter button as if it were the trigger of a gun. "Pew pew pew!" An infectious smile spread across her face. This was Nûjiyan.

After many days of lingering and photographing portraits around the safety of the compound, the wait was finally over.

"Tomorrow, we take you. We leave first thing tomorrow morning," Egid said after a group meeting of commanders.

The rumor was they had broken through ISIS defenses, and had made significant progress, though the operation was not over. As promised, Egid pulled up to the compound in a truck at first light the next morning.

"We hear there's a wedding party somewhere around here, would you like to join us?" he asked, grinning, as his truck idled, speaking in code language to describe a battle. Ironically, this is the same phrase used by jihadists to describe a martyrdom operation—in which they will go to paradise and be united with seventy-two virgins.

Our destination wasn't far from the compound. As we weaved down a dirt road, Egid radioed to a position ahead to inform them the vehicle approaching them was friendly. We continued forward and reached a sandy dugout looking upon two higher mountains.

It didn't take long for me to realize that Egid had begun to feel sorry for us waiting around at the compound, and they had brought us somewhere safe enough to see guns shooting, but far away from the heat of the frontline fighting. As Jan and I hopped out of the truck, I turned to see Nûjiyan remaining inside. She smirked at me from the back of the truck. "You'll be safe here. See you later tonight back at the base." The two sped off away from the dugout, down the dirt road into the distance, and then hooked a left, traveling deeper into the far side of the mountain range.

I spent the day at this forward position facing the ISIS-occupied plateaus of Kolik. Two young fighters ran between an ammunition resupply vehicle and the line of fighters that kept a steady stream of bullets in the air. Suddenly, the group would stop, wait, the commander's radio would crackle, and then they'd fire another volley of bullets into the air. After the pure adrenaline of being right next to firing weapons wore off, my lack of exercise began to show. The two runners were kindly trying not to laugh at me, but giggled endlessly as I gasped for air, out of breath, struggling to keep up with them through the mountainous landscape.

The guerrillas were using cover fire to route the jihadists in the adjacent mountains exactly where they wanted them. With all those bullets in the air, it was difficult for the enemy to take their positions. Other, more experienced guerrilla units worked on the other side, in a much more dangerous position. To avoid shooting someone on his or her own side, the key was a constant, open line of communication. It seemed Nûjiyan and Egid had joined the fighters working on the other side.

A PKK guerrilla and a YB$ fighter transport ammunition to a frontline position

I began to understand this was also a way of training and familiarizing the newer recruits with weapons, although it was connected to a real military operation. With bullets such a precious commodity, training while in the field becomes necessary for quick growth as frontlines expand.

That was it for the day. Time to return to base camp, and hope Egid would come again to give us permission to see more. Later that night, the elder guerrillas watched my videos of the resistance line and constructively critiqued the young fighters' arm positions while holding their rifles. "Keep your head down when you're reloading. It doesn't matter how far away they are." I didn't need to speak Kurdish to understand the tone was critical, yet somehow reassuring.

A day later, the news came—apparently ISIS had lost the high ground, and as far as anyone could tell, the only remaining jihadists in Kolik were likely dead. The rest had retreated to villages beyond the mountain. It was now declared safe for me to survey the scene. We would drive as close as we could to the mountain the new recruits had previously been shooting into, and climb up the rest.

The guerrillas' convoy of trucks wove freely around the mountain, no longer in fear of coming under fire. When the dirt roads ended, fighters leapt out of the trucks, and began guiding the vehicles through the rocky landscape. We were now traveling through an active minefield, and the fighters walked slowly in front of the trucks to scan the ground for mines. I realized the situation the frontline fighters had been going through and exactly why it was unsafe to join them.

Once the landscape became too cumbersome for the vehicles, everyone continued on foot. "Do you know how to spot mines?" Nûjiyan urged Jan to translate for me. "If there is a nylon bag . . . If there is a cable, be careful with that."

Our group halted for a break and we all sat down, red-faced, catching our breath. "If ISIS doesn't kill us, these cigarettes surely will," one fighter murmured under her breath. From the distance, a single-file line of fighters descended a plateau in front of us. These were the fighters who had fought in the last hours of the operation. Exhausted, they would swap places with the group I was with, who would continue to hold the territory. Wide eyes and large grins spread across the faces of both groups as each formed into a straight line, shaking hands with each and every fighter that passed. The next day, the second guerrilla I shook hands with would die in a car accident. Even though he was not technically killed in battle, the guerrillas would still refer to him as a shahid—a martyr for the cause.

As we reached the top of the mountain, I was surprised to find its surface relatively flat—as if some giant in ancient times had sliced the head of the mountain with one clean swipe of a machete. After knowing what had happened in these Êzidî areas, there was a feeling of retribution in the air. On top of the hill were the mangled remains of many ISIS fighters—fifteen, twenty, it was difficult to count. Some appeared to have died from clean shots to the chest, while others passed more brutally—their heads half imploded, or their faces melting away, blood still oozing out of the hole that once was their mouth. I came across a foot all by itself, a shinbone sticking out of it, torn off a man's leg.

We stumbled upon the body of what was described to me as an Eastern European jihadist. I wondered how they could tell the difference—to me, most of their bearded faces were indistinguishable from one another. Then, Nûjiyan produced the materials she had found in his pocket. The ID card of a man who had lived in Belarus, the business card of a dentist he used before leaving home, and a hotel Wi-Fi key from his stop in Turkey before crossing the border into ISIS territory. This was the route most of the foreign recruits took.

In times like these, it was not hard to see how the guerrillas' conspiracy theories of Turkey trying to wipe Kurdish culture off the face of the earth began to resonate. Turkey infamously turned a blind eye to its porous border with Syria, and allowed the free flow of foreign jihadists, boosting the ranks of extremist groups by the tens of thousands.

What happened next in Kolik can only be described as a propaganda party. Captured weapons were taken in wheelbarrows down from the mountain and back to the compound in Barê, and then painstakingly arranged to spell the letters HPG, YBŞ, and YJA-STAR. (The curves of long clips of bullets made for a great letter S.) A captured hair-straightener lay beside rows of mortar rounds. Selfies with peace signs thrown up were taken in front of the artwork. Nûjiyan interviewed female fighters, commenting on the long list of strange weapons from faraway lands, some of which they had never seen before.

Even though the U.S. won't supply the PKK directly with weapons, they did supply them to the Iraqi Army, who lost them to ISIS, making them now re-gifted to the guerrillas. It's perhaps the most imperative guerrilla tactic of all—arm yourself with your enemy's supplies.

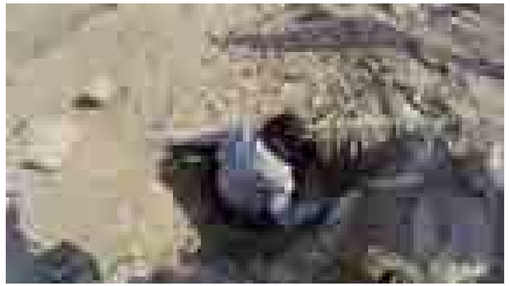
★

Following ISIS's retreat from Kolik Mountain, many of their fighters' positions were uncovered, giving us a rare window into the military lives of the jihadists. We discovered that they too were using guerrilla techniques to embed themselves within the landscape. It turned out that there was an underworld of secrets right below our feet.

One night after dinner at the compound, Nûjiyan summoned Jan and I excitedly. She began describing something a unit she was with had found on a walk in the mountain while clearing and surveying the newly claimed area. Her dark eyes widened as she retold her discovery. "It's big . . . huge . . . You've never seen anything like this before. We can go! I will drive you."

Dusk stretched over the Kolik Mountain range as we pulled up to an impromptu YBŞ checkpoint on a dirt road. Leaving our vehicle behind, Nûjiyan and three other fighters led us off the main path through a jagged rocky landscape, instructing me not to use my flashlight, as there still could be a stray ISIS fighter left in these hills. As promised, fifteen minutes later we did come across a stray fighter, but he was lifeless. Barely visible in the dimming twilight, he lay motionless on his back, his windswept face looking blankly up at us. Bullet holes had pierced through his chest, and his legs seemed to be torn apart by heavy rounds. The white shirt and pants under his military jacket were stained with large pools of blood, still freshly bright red and unoxidized. He couldn't have been dead for more than forty-eight hours. "*Heval* Joe, *taswir taswir*," Nûjiyan motioned, telling me to take a photo, clicking her finger in the air.

Fumbling further through the darkening terrain, Nûjiyan led us to a hole in the ground, the entrance to a tunnel. The entrance was small enough to evade the watchful eyes of coalition jets in the sky eager to strike, but large enough for a person to move in and out. As we ducked our heads below the surface, we followed the snakelike curve of a narrow rock crevice several meters deeper into the cave. Now concealed from the hills, we turned on flashlights and cautiously made our way to a sharp edge—the tunnel suddenly ending in a giant deep pit. As I panned my flashlight down into the dark void, the beam revealed an enormous natural cavern below us. I peered down into the giant space, squinting my eyes in an effort to make sense of what was in front of me. The constant drone of wind sweeping through the cavern's hidden lungs filled the empty auditory spaces between our gasps of awe.



The hidden entrance to the giant cave base

A single metal staircase led down to what looked to be a large white metal shed constructed inside the cavern itself. It looked like an out of place shipping container, with cut-out square windows looking out into the cavern. It was likely built to keep the residents of the cave base dry and warm: a man-made eyesore among the natural beauty of the cavern.

As I began to slowly embark down the staircase toward the structure, Nûjiyan stopped me. She explained it would be better to come back tomorrow in the daylight; there were natural holes in the cave's roof that could light the way, and better reveal any booby-traps or mines left behind.

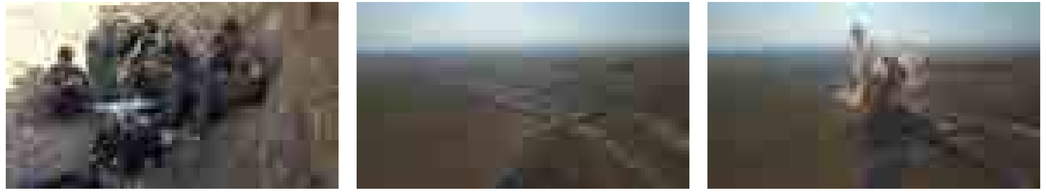
The next morning, we returned. I gripped the handrail of the metal staircase and slowly made my way down, following Nûjiyan and some fighters from the checkpoint. The cavern was now visible in the daylight. It was roughly the size of a basketball court, and condensation sparkled on the giant slabs of gray stone that formed the cavern's natural walls.

The Western media often lazily portray ISIS as some kind of James Bond–style villain—succumbing to the group's own propaganda. I must admit that when exploring the cave base, it was impossible for this simplistic narrative not to temporarily take over and engulf the senses. Upon further inspection, the eeriness subsided, and the image evoked was now the cartoonish henchmen of Dr. Evil's underground cave lair from Austin Powers. ("Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to my underground lair. I have gathered here before me the world's deadliest assassins," Dr. Evil proclaimed in the 1997 film *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*.)

We entered the metal shed and found peculiar things: vitamins, sleeping bags, hand mirrors, a beard comb, a branded pamphlet on the ways of jihadism issued by "The Islamic State Committee of Research and Fatwa," and another beard comb. Inside another room in the shed, a meal of eggs and spam was set up on an eating mat, likely hastily abandoned as the militants ran out the back door of the cave upon being ambushed by the Kurdish forces. A YBŞ fighter explained to Jan and I his theory as to why the cave had two entrances: "The truth is that this is a natural cave, and the entrance is there. And they camouflaged another door, so that whenever there is an airstrike . . . They would die because of the pressure of the explosion. They opened another door, two doors. So that when the jet hits, the pressure would escape from both doors. Nothing happened to them whenever they were hit. They built it that way."

★

Nûjiyan, Jan, and I drove along a road leading south through a narrow corridor between Kolik and Shengal, with each mountain range towering beside us. At the end of the road is the southernmost YBŞ outpost—a crude wall built from large slabs of concrete. If one were to travel past the checkpoint a few kilometers down the road, they would find themself in Êzidî villages under the control of ISIS. But before the campaign could continue, the Êzidî fighters had to take care of a hidden threat.



My camera drone captures the explosion of a mine

When scouting the area, a spotter had noticed strange patterns in the dirt road, the trigger for a mine. Buried in the ground, there was a water tank with three tons of explosives inside of it. If the trap hadn't been found, and the weight of a vehicle had passed over the trigger, the result would have been devastating. Before the guerrillas could advance further, they sent one of their own mine experts to deactivate the bomb. But, it's not like in the movies—it basically meant he was going to place a smaller bomb on top of the bigger bomb, duck inside the safety of a trench, and blow them both up. Nûjiyan and Jan convinced the fighters to let me film the explosion from the air using my drone. This time, there were no Peshmerga around to fire a shot, as the entire area was under the control of YBŞ, and they had given orders to their comrades not to shoot at it. Word had spread that my drone had been targeted earlier inside the city of Shengal, and it became an inside joke all over the radio.

"Okay, tell our comrade over the hill to be careful because we are going to fly something."

Without a pause, the other end of the radio responded sarcastically, "I will target it."

On our end the commander couldn't help but smile. "No, no. It's our friend's drone. Don't shoot it."

Jan and I took cover in a trench keeping a safe distance, while Nûjiyan, of course, was much closer with her video camera on a hill overlooking the road in which the mine would explode. As my drone took off, a commander asked himself out loud, "I wonder how much explosives this thing can hold?"

The drone rose out of our trench, above the mountains, and now a sweeping expanse of green blended against a blue-gray horizon was visible on the controller viewing screen nestled in my hands. A fighter helped me line up the shot, pointing out exactly where in the road they suspected the bomb to be. Then, knowing I had about twenty minutes of battery life, I began doing slow sweeps back and forth with the drone, unable to anticipate exactly when the mine expert would be able to safely set his charge off and explode the trap. After fifteen minutes passed, my palms started to get sweaty, and I was going to have to fly it back any minute for a battery swap. Then, just in time, a few last words quickly uttered over the walkie-talkies, then BOOSH! Muddy white smoke and shrapnel filled the air, billowing upward, outward, in every direction, and could be seen for miles around. I watched the explosion live on my screen, but from our safe distance, the sound took an entire second to reach us.

After the bomb was detonated, the soldiers celebrated with contagious laughter. "You are my soul!" one exclaimed, a Kurdish expression to imply wonderment that doesn't translate perfectly into English. The journey ahead would be slow, dangerous, and littered with hidden mines, but for now, the guerrillas would celebrate another small victory.

It was time to move westward once again. The frontlines of the YPG/J in Syria and the YBŞ in Iraq were now connected, and a new corridor into Rojava was unlocked. It was here that Nûjiyan and I would say goodbye for now. We'd stay in touch through private messages on Twitter, as well as during my future third trip to the region. I would watch her video reports in a language I could not understand, but could easily recognize the boldness of her work. When the circumstances surrounding my own projects became intimidating, I began a mantra of sorts, always challenging my limits by thinking of Nûjiyan's bravery in every single situation she encountered. I had no idea this would be the last time I would see her in person.

On March 3, 2017, Nûjiyan was filming a Êzidî demonstration against the Peshmerga over a controversial embargo. The demonstration escalated into an armed clash between the YBŞ and Peshmerga, and Nûjiyan was shot in the head by a Peshmerga bullet while filming the standoff. As was her very essence, she fought for her life in the hospital for weeks after, succumbing to death on March 22, 2017. I can say with full confidence that Nûjiyan was more courageous than I will ever be.

THE MYSTERY OF THE ORANGE AND BROWN SHOES

Al-Hawl, Syria, December 1, 2015 While the PKK and YPG/J are separate entities, they not only share a common ideology but have also historically moved cadres from one organization to the other. This means that knowledge gained from decades of warfare is passed down from PKK commanders to fledgling forces under their wing: how to keep fighters fed on the frontline, how to organize ammunition supply-lines, and of course, what clothing is best for no-frills combat.

The Mekap sneaker is one such staple among guerrillas of the PKK. The orange and brown leather running shoe may look strange mixed with traditional Kurdish clothing upon first glance, but it has been selected as official military garb for its utility. The sneaker's water-resistant shell makes it effective in snow, and for moving quickly in the rocky terrain found in the mountains between the Turkish and Iraqi border. A pair goes for $5-10 in local markets—expensive for many in the region, but cheap in comparison to a military-grade boot. A most perfect purchase for an outlawed group on a tight budget.

The sneakers are purchased in bulk in all parts of Kurdistan, and smuggled wherever they need to go, alongside other guerrilla basics such as the cheap Casio calculator watch, often worn with its face turned below the wrist. One could say that where these shoes travel, so does the philosophy of Abdullah Öcalan.

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After saying goodbye to the fighters at the Barê compound, Jan and I were taken on a long drive across the empty desert plain that makes up the border of Iraq and Syria.

Well-worn Mekap shoes

Our next destination was the Syrian city of al-Hawl, which now ran along the same frontline as the newly liberated Kolik Mountain. In al-Hawl, we were to seek out a YPG commander named Kemal Hewraman, with whom, thanks to Ipek's coordination, we were welcome to stay and continue the photography project. Ipek explained to us that Kemal was an esteemed commander, and one of the first to enter the city of al-Hawl in the clashes against ISIS. Upon reaching the vicinity of the city, my phone connected with a local cell phone tower and I received an automated text message left over from a friendlier time: "Ministry of Tourism welcomes you to Syria. Please call 137 for tourism information or complaints."

ISIS had managed to occupy al-Hawl as part of their self-styled Caliphate project for over a year, and the predominantly Arab residents had suffered under their harsh rule. Now the jihadists were thrown out of the perimeter of the city, and the locals were living temporarily in refugee camps until the YPG/J could push the frontline farther away.

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Arriving at a base inside the city, I spotted a familiar sight. Several pairs of Mekap sneakers were neatly aligned outside the door. The owners of the shoes sat inside in a circle around an oil furnace. Once they spotted us, they stood to shake our hands and welcome us inside. We would wait here for our contact to arrive, the high commander Kemal.

After greetings were exchanged, I began to be grilled with questions by a short, chubby YPG fighter. He had a sly glow to his eyes, a prominent brow, and a strong nose with a set of flared nostrils. He asked open-ended questions like, "So, what does freedom mean to you?" Half exhausted from the long trip across the border, and suffering brain fog due to hunger, my answers were lackluster. I could tell Jan was also getting tired of translating the long-winded conversation.

Suddenly, the portly fighter started chuckling. "You failed the quiz, but you can still stay with us. I am Kemal and I tell these other lazy bums around here what to do."

It was hard to imagine Kemal being the one to match Ipek's description, but over the course of our long stay in al-Hawl, my own judgment would prove to be wrong, and Kemal would begin to fit the description.

I told Kemal that I was interested in photographing the union of Kurds and local Arabs from the region who had joined the YPG/J. Kemal was thrilled and explained that I could find Arabic fighters everywhere, as the units were not grouped together based on ethnicity, but by common tongue. "All Syrian Kurds speak Arabic, but not all Arabs can speak Kurdish. Well, actually, many Kurds can't even speak Kurdish!"

Kemal was born in Halabja, the site of Saddam Hussein's 1988 chemical attack that purposely targeted thousands of Kurdish civilians in an act of genocide. "So, you may ask

Kemal driving "the Frog" and Nejhîr, a YPJ fighter

yourself, what is an Iraqi Kurd doing in Rojava? Well, you could say that there is only one Kurdistan," Kemal said with a twinkle in his eye.

It just so happened that Kemal also had a great interest in photography. "My uncle was a photographer," Kemal proudly explained, even going so far as to talk about composition and the tonality of black-and-white film stocks. Kemal also understood the social impact of images, and purposely went out of his way to make sure we had access to photograph anything we needed while in al-Hawl.

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One morning, a ride Kemal had arranged for Jan and I to the frontline was over an hour late. Kemal took to his radio. "Rubar? Rubar? Where the hell are you, man? This photographer is missing the morning light," Kemal blurted over the radio. A faint voice answered back, "The tire is being repaired. We are with the mechanic now. Sorry, comrade."

Kemal offered to drive us himself. "I would like you to meet *the Frog*," he said, proudly gesturing toward a small green relic of a truck that was falling apart at the seams. "It is so beat-up that no YPG members on the frontline trust it. Nobody wants to drive it except me. So it's mine! Only mine! Aha!" Kemal ranted as he started the engine and it coughed to life.

While driving in the Frog out of the abandoned city, Kemal continued to taunt the other marooned driver over his radio, "Rubar? Rubar? What's the matter, oh Rubar? Are you stuck in traffic?"

The Frog took us all the way outside the city, off a main road and through some winding dirt paths to the desert. Dotting the barren landscape were military positions every kilometer or so, forming a loosely connected frontline. Each position was almost an identical replica of the other: they were circular walled fortresses of bulldozed dirt with metal sheds inside. Every position had a large YPG or YPJ flag and a couple fighters stood guard at the top of each dirt mound, keeping watch on the horizon with binoculars in hand. Two to three kilometers away were ISIS positions laid out in a similar way, controlling smaller rural villages and a network of trenches.

Kemal slowed the Frog to a stop, and we walked toward a position. Outside the circle of dirt walls was a trench dug about 1.5 meters deep, which was built to prevent ISIS fighters and their exploding vehicles from easily accessing the center. The only way in toward the metal shed was a very narrow metal beam, which acted as a bridge across the dry moat. Kemal and Jan effortlessly strutted across it, but I was left tiptoeing, trying not to fall into the deep pit. The ground down below was littered with crushed energy drink cans and cigarette boxes.

I walked behind Kemal as he was welcomed with cheers and hugs by the mixed Arab and Kurdish YPG unit. He stayed for tea, explained my photography project to them for us, but had to go. "I have just one rule. Be back to my base in the city by night, because that's when ISIS is usually attacking the frontlines. Sunset is okay, but it's not safe to sleep over." Kemal appointed us a new driver to take us around, then the Frog disappeared off into the distance in a plume of dust and exhaust smoke.

Inside the giant sand castle, the fighters acknowledged the historical grievances between Kurds and Arabs, but explained that within the ranks of their military structure, there was no difference, and that together they sought to influence the society in a similar way after the war.

"The most fierce war is ideas. It's not about fighting with weapons. As our leader Apo said, the most powerful war is ideological war," a fighter explained to me, while pronouncing "Apo" as "Abo," as there is no hard "p" sound used in the Arabic language. It seemed the ideology of the Qandil Mountains had somehow made its way all the way here.

Our new driver entrusted by Kemal took us hopping from base to base, position to position, photographing a mosaic of the diverse cultures and communities that make up this part of Syria, all finding common cause against the extremists. There was Xebat, a very dark-skinned fighter of the Amesayel tribe, likely of mixed African descent from slave-trading times among the Bedouins of the North Arabian and Syrian deserts. Xebat identified as an Arab, but had now taken on a Kurdish nom de guerre.

Among other positions were the fighters of al-Sanadid Forces, an Arab tribal militia, which traditionally had good relations with Kurds of the region, but grew even closer during the war against ISIS. Many fighters couldn't be photographed, as they still had family members trapped in areas under the control of ISIS, and didn't want to risk them being punished.

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After several hours and many portraits later, we are now much farther into the desert, deep into the sand where the Frog dares not travel. Although the driver says he is taking a shortcut back toward the city of al-Hawl, it appears to me that we are lost. We've taken so many turns that I am disoriented and unsure which direction we are traveling. The afternoon sun high above us also provides no clues. We are driving through desert plains where vast swaths of no-man's-land are unprotected, and the opposing frontlines between YPG/J and ISIS are virtually indistinguishable from one another. There is no road, only dust, and a barely visible set of car tracks we are trying to follow. We haven't seen any YPG or YPJ flags for quite some time, and have passed random farmhouses in the desert with no flag at all, which is not a good feeling. At one point we see a shepherd grazing his sheep, which is a bit odd because the camps where the displaced civilians are sleeping are supposed to be far away.

It seems I've now spread my paranoia to Jan. He is speaking nervously with the driver in Arabic, pointing out landmarks. I hear the Arabic word for "frontline" and also "Daesh." Fuck. I am scared.

From the desert, we slow to a stop at what appears to be another base, but this is a huge compound surrounded by high fences. My eyes dart around but I can't spot a flag. Out of the compound emerge twelve men walking toward our vehicle, some with thick beards, some wearing black berets, and each carrying a weapon. Then I notice a younger soldier among the group of men and my heart stops. The young man is wearing a long Pakistani-style shirt made up of a digital desert camouflage pattern. It's most certainly an ISIS uniform, and I immediately recognize it from their propaganda videos. In the past I had envisioned myself in this kind of scenario and figured I'd just spring to action and make a Chuck Norris–style escape. Instead, I am literally frozen in place in fear as the armed men walk toward our vehicle. The little voice inside my head says, "Wow. You just drove straight into an ISIS checkpoint. Congratulations. I guess this is how it all ends."

Our driver rolls down his window. "*Dembaş*," one of the men outside croaks in a thick Arabic accent, Kurdish for "Good day."

At this point, I've regained a little control over my body and I peer outside our vehicle's window down toward the feet of the men. Half of the "ISIS" fighters are wearing orange and brown sneakers. They are Mekaps. Before I can even ask for an explanation for this bizarre situation, our driver jumps out of the front seat and scolds the young fighter.

"Why are you wearing ISIS clothing?!"

I learn that this group of new recruits had raided an ISIS position in the desert the day before, and had taken the spoils of war: weapons, ammunition, an entire case of black berets, and of course: the long camouflage shirts. The young fighter had just joined the YPG and had not yet been issued a uniform. He had assumed that any military clothing would do.

I admit I thought they were ISIS, but no one takes offense. Instead, they just howl with laughter, and then agree to show me around the compound, which ISIS had formerly converted into both a weapons factory and a jail.

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At dusk, we arrived back to Kemal's base just in time for our curfew. Inside, Kemal sat on the floor beside the oil heater with stacks of paperwork, organizing all of the YPG's affairs in al-Hawl. From one pile, he pulled out a checklist scribbled in Kurdish and pressed Jan to read it to me.

"Rubar to fuel supply"
"Serhad to water supply"
"Photographer to Arabic fighters"

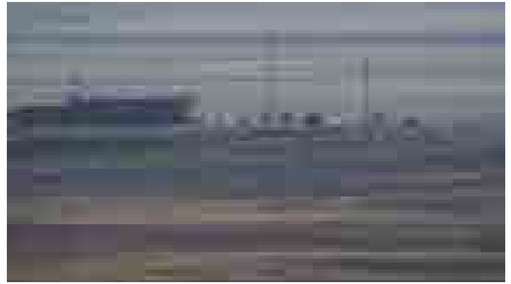
There was a checkmark beside each line item.

THE SUICIDE BOMBER

Al-Hawl, Syria, December 7, 2015 Kemal has sent us out on another day trip, but this one is very different from the others. The fighters who once sat around fires, watching and waiting, are now gathering weapons and pallets of water bottles, and revving the engines of homemade armored vehicles. An operation is under way to reclaim a cluster of five rural villages on the other side of the trench walls we have been visiting and photographing in every day. The YPG and YPJ fighters are in good spirits. Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, and Turkmen have all gathered together in unity for the operation. As I photograph the fighters getting ready, they make peace signs to my camera.

Operations in the sparse desert are much different than within urban environments, and it is a mass coordination of many moving parts that can force ISIS into a defensive posture. First and foremost, coalition airstrikes knock out key ISIS targets, such as staging areas for heavy weapons spotted during reconnaissance. We can hear the roar of the jets doing sorties above us, but where they are striking is far away from our viewpoint. Just a few narrow streams of smoke can be spotted in the distance. Secondly, bulldozers roll into no-man's-land and erect several walls of sand closer to the ISIS villages. The bulldozer

A YPG fighter monitors the frontline with binoculars



ISIS fighters visible in the village ahead

drivers are brave souls—truly on the first frontline, and their slow crawl is an easy target for incoming missiles. Then, trucks mounted with heavy machine guns get into place behind the dirt walls, establishing new temporary positions from where the main attack will be staged. From our viewpoint, the YPG and YPJ walk on foot in small groups of six to eight fighters toward the temporary positions closer to the ISIS-held villages. It is about 2:00 p.m., and in the short days of the Syrian winter, their figures are already casting long shadows as they strut across the flat desert toward uncertainty.

A group of us squat together on top of one of the dirt walls. We are gazing out through binoculars toward the direction of the ISIS-controlled villages, watching the operation unfold step by step from a safe distance. About two to three kilometers away, we can see the shapes of people in the village, but it's impossible to make out who is a civilian, and who is an ISIS member.

I put down my binoculars and look over at Jan. He has his Nikon Coolpix P600 camera resting on a rock, and he is lying down in the dirt peering into the LCD screen. At first, I want to make fun of his point and shoot camera, but then he calls me over to have a look. With his 60x optical zoom, Jan's view is much better than my binoculars, and he has found an incredible, yet painful, sight to watch. Within the village ahead of us, we can now make out that some of the silhouettes are clearly ISIS fighters corralling civilians outside the houses and forcing them to stand together in groups. The zoom can't take us close enough to see facial features, but we can see rifles held in their hands, and we can distinguish the authority they have over the civilians as they wave them place to place. I feel calm and secure with the YPG/J, and it's as if I'm watching some kind of sick movie unfold in front of me.

As the minutes pass, it seems the first stages of the YPG/J operation have disoriented the ISIS members. Jan translates some ISIS radio chatter a YPJ fighter is dialed in to beside us, and it seems individual jihadists in the village are confused about which areas to hold, and which areas to fall back to. Across the desert, the sounds of small arms fire can be heard from within villages, but it is sporadic and rare. It doesn't appear ISIS is putting up much resistance.

Vehicles from within the villages are scattering this way and that. Some leave quickly, tearing across the sand deeper into ISIS territory, while others remain behind. Suddenly, a convoy of five vehicles and several motorcycles leaves the village, and starts to weave its way through no-man's-land toward us. White flags are being waved from civilians sitting on the roofs of trucks, and others are attached to sticks extended out of car windows. Sensing an opportunity, I grab my camera, and foolishly try to leave the walls of our position to get closer and film the civilians escaping. Jan stops me, warning that sometimes suicide bombers hide among the civilians and explode themselves. "I think it's not worth the risk, Mister Joe."

Jan and I compromise, and together we head down off the dirt wall. Placing some distance between ourselves and the convoy, we film it passing by us. The Syrians hold up victory signs with their fingers, whistle and cheer in delight. It seems sincere. The convoy then slows to a stop, seemingly unsure what to do. A YPG fighter then runs to the driver in the very front of the row of vehicles and directs him to drive toward a receiving area, away from our position. They will be checked for weapons and suicide vests, and sent into camps to be vetted and screened.

Jan and I climb back onto the top of the dirt wall, and the rest of the operation seems to be going according to plan . . . Until, abruptly, the mood completely changes. An erratic vehicle is spotted moving quickly toward one of the small groups of fighters stationed at the edge of the village. The group had entered a farmhouse to hold a position, but were awaiting orders. Just a moment passes, and it becomes clear to the fighters around me that this is not a civilian vehicle trying to flee—it is an ISIS suicide car, and it's headed straight toward their comrades.

Beside us, a frantic voice yells into his radio, "Yes, God! It's a suicide car. There is a suicide car coming! All comrades take cover!"

A YPG commander yells the order for a truck mounted with a machine gun beside our position to begin firing across the open plain at the car. The time to be conservative with the limited supplies of bullets was not now—carefully placed shots ring out in succession as the fighters around me whistle and chant the name of the fighter, "Agid!"

It's a dangerous situation, as the shooter has no choice but to fire directly toward the YPG/J members as the vehicle makes its way toward them. "Agid, aim higher! There are comrades there!" fighters scream out.

And then, we hear an explosion. There is a quiet lull . . . as if everyone is acknowledging that an unknown amount of souls may have crossed the threshold between life and death.

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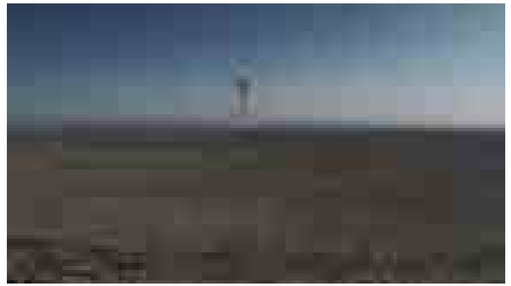
To fully comprehend the events of the attack, one must insert oneself within the mind of the suicide bomber. It's not hard to do, because ISIS glorifies these attacks with videos they release themselves.

We must imagine . . . He is probably a young man, recruited specifically for this mission. The recruiters know that young minds are among the easiest to exploit. This particular volunteer probably doesn't have the same experience as the older, hardened foot soldiers, and can be best utilized in other ways. The young suicide bomber is eager, for he has been indoctrinated to interpret the material world as just a temporary state of being, and nothing in comparison to the eternal paradise that awaits him in the afterlife as a reward for his deed, or so he believes. Perhaps his previous experience driving a vehicle is lacking. He has been trained to accelerate quickly toward a target, shift gears, but most important, to overcome any last-minute doubts lingering in the mind.

The vehicle is filled with explosives, encased by defunct fragments of metal that will become thousands of pieces of deadly shrapnel upon ignition. It is reinforced by sheets of metal, so that the nonbelievers it is sent toward cannot pierce it with bullets or rocket-propelled grenades, igniting it before it reaches its target. Although the vehicle has been sitting dormant for weeks in a civilian garage out of the sight of coalition jets in the skies above, its deployment is sudden. The young jihadist's commander quickly summons him—it is time. The bomber climbs rapidly into the vehicle. No need to buckle the seatbelt. The heavy reinforced door is closed behind him with a thud.

Through a tiny thirty-centimeter porthole in the sheet of thick metal covering what was once a windshield, his brothers in jihad wish him a hastily uttered farewell and remind him of the pleasures of paradise, and what awaits him there. The suicide bomber is unaware that just an hour after his sacrifice, those very same brothers will retreat, and reorganize themselves in the next position on the edge of an ever-shrinking pseudo-Caliphate. The engine turns, the young driver backs out of the garage carefully, and he speeds toward his target. The vehicle lags and feels strange due to the heavy load it carries. In front of him, through the tiny porthole, he can't see much, but the course is straight and the ground is flat.

Suddenly, a melody of bullets rings against the metal enclosing the driver—the infidels must be shooting light arms against the vehicle, but that fails to stop its momentum. The cadence sounds more like heavy rain on a tin roof than the larger rounds that have the ability to pierce through the metal. Finally, the vehicle reaches its destination. The suicide bomber is so close to his victims, he can hear shouting from outside. While still in motion and accelerating quickly forward toward the target, he presses down on the toggle switch. Fuses are connected, and a weak battery-



Moments after the suicide car bomb detonated

powered electronic pulse ignites the first spark in a lake of hellfire. Before the sound of the explosion even becomes perceptible, it is all over.

★

In the panic and confusion, Jan and I were unsure if the suicide car was stopped, or if it reached its target—the group of YPG/J fighters stationed at the entrance of the village. After a few moments of uneasy silence, I heard the first YPG fighter speak: "God damn, he was hiding in the school." We'd learn later that the car did reach its target, severely injuring two YPG fighters, but, incredibly, no one was killed.

As the day's light sank low in the sky, more vehicles continued to trickle out of the cluster of villages the operation sought to liberate. These were different to the last, moving slowly and displaying white flags. As they approached, the YPG/J cautiously waved them to travel beyond their frontline positions.

By sunset, it was believed that the villages in front of us were completely emptied, and despite the injured fighters, the YPG and YPJ returned to their good spirits. Walking around the position, I spotted an elderly man wandering around in a long white keffiyeh—it was a civilian who had escaped the village. I walked over to him with my video camera, curious as to how he was feeling. The man greeted us as he sat down in a circle with YPG fighters, smoking cigarettes and drinking tea. They were discussing the suicide car, and how a group of civilians managed to escape. Upon learning I was a foreigner, the elderly man suddenly grew suspicious about being on camera. "What is it? Who is this?" he asked.

YPG fighters celebrate a successful operation

A YPG fighter calmed him down. "They are journalists," he explained. "They are inquiring about villagers and whether they have been ill-treated. Then they show it to other countries so they know these people have been ill-treated. They want to show the world the story and bring [coalition] airplanes to help the villagers and kill all ISIS."

After a moment, while the elder seemed to be waffling between suspicion and trust, the soldier added, "You don't have to mind the camera."

The elder then agreed to talk more. "They really oppressed people. These two villages were not with them [ISIS]. The people hate them."

THE VERY END OF THE LINE

Al-Hawl, Syria, December 8, 2015 Jan and I sat with Kemal along with a few other fighters while waiting for our ride: an ambulance that would be making a trip from al-Hawl to the large city of Qamishlo. From there, Jan and I could organize the next leg of our journey. It was just another sunny, normal day in the totally abandoned city of al-Hawl. Jan and I stood out like sore thumbs as the only non-combatants, with the exception of one mentally unstable woman, a civilian left behind after ISIS retreated, likely abandoned by her family.

We saw her from far away, slowly walking down the street toward us. "She's either a mad woman, or a very convincing spy. Whichever it is, we still give her some food and water sometimes," Kemal joked. She eventually made it to us, and began uttering things in Arabic under her breath. You wouldn't have to speak the language to know she was mentally ill. I watched as she spoke and ate what was given to her, and wondered what was going on in her mind. Was she prescient enough to realize the city had switched hands? She didn't seem to care.

Eventually, the ambulance arrived. We said our goodbyes, took various mobile phone pictures together, and went on our way. I told Kemal that once the war was over, perhaps he'd make a good photoshoot producer. The driver, Jan, and I squeezed into the large front seat together. *"Rojbaş,"* I greeted the driver, saying good morning in my terrible attempt at speaking Kurdish.

My mind was so absorbed in writing journal notes into my phone that I forgot to ask the driver the route we'd take to Qamishlo. I was obliviously staring down like a zombie when the ambulance began to slow as we approached a military checkpoint. I peeked up from my phone through the windshield and noticed that the checkpoint did not fly the yellow triangle of the YPG flag, or the familiar mustachioed face of Abdullah Öcalan. Instead, it was a flag of red, white, and black bands with two green stars in the middle: the flag of the Syrian State, the flag of the Syrian Arab Army. "Fuck," I said out loud.

When we had driven through a government-controlled roundabout in Qamishlo on my first trip to Syria, it wasn't so bad because the city is mostly controlled by police loyal to the Rojava project. Here, in the middle of the countryside, there were no comrades to come to the rescue if something happened. I had entered Rojava with the blessing of a de-facto entity. To the forces still loyal to the Syrian government, I was a trespasser in the country without a passport stamp. Of course the outcome would be much better than when I imagined us pulling into an ISIS checkpoint a few days prior, but at a minimum, Jan and I would most certainly be thrown into a jail cell.

Jan's eyes widened. "Don't worry, don't worry. Everything is okay." It clearly wasn't.

"Map me. Map me on your phone. Put open the map," Jan said hurriedly, as the ambulance edged forward toward the checkpoint. My iPhone's GSM put us on the road to Qamishlo via Tell Brak—a large Syrian regime–controlled area south of Qamishlo. As we pulled up to the checkpoint, Jan looked me in the eye and said, "Don't say any word."

The driver pulled up slowly to the checkpoint. The regime soldier motioned for him to unroll his window. He had a cigarette in his mouth. This was starting to feel like the opening scene of a *Locked Up Abroad* episode. My heart was racing like wild. The soldier asked one question to the driver, smiled, and waved him on through, motioning that it was okay to continue on forward. The tense air in the vehicle lifted, but not one of us said a word until we were out of sight of the checkpoint, much further down the road. Then, Jan began speaking firmly to the driver, his hands gesturing wildly. The driver pulled the vehicle to the side of the road.

"Mister, everything is okay. But we can't turn back. Because the checkpoint we just went through will be suspicious and it will be even worse for us," Jan explained. Oh boy.

I asked our driver how many more checkpoints there were. "Eight, I think. Honestly though, it's no problem," he said less than enthusiastically. Ohhh boy.

What else were we to do? We had made one small mistake and it felt now our fate was not in our control. This has got to be my least favorite feeling in the entire world. Jan apologized, but ensured me it was best to keep moving on. I hopped in the back of the ambulance where patients go on stretchers, put on my green hat because for some reason it helped me feel more hidden, and sank into the ambulance's bench chair.

Jan turned around in his seat and spoke to me through the glass window separating the back of the ambulance and the front cab. "Don't worry, you look like a Kurd . . . I think. That's why the driver took this way, he thought you were Kurdish," he said as he nodded along reassuringly, but not quite convinced himself. The best advice I could come up with for myself was, "Think Kurdish thoughts, in case they can read minds." One question from someone at the checkpoint would have blown my cover.

The checkpoints came and went—all eight of them. Some didn't stop us, waving as we drove by. Others slowed us down and spoke with the driver. Some were in the uniform of the Syrian Arab Army, while some were National Defense Forces, localized militias sponsored by the regime.

The moment we drove past the eighth checkpoint, I let out a huge sigh of relief. Of course, a kilometer down the road, there was yet another. Yep, turns out there were actually nine, but I don't think the driver realized I was nervously counting them one by one. These checkpoints can spring up randomly overnight. Eventually, though, we reached the safety of an Asayish-controlled neighborhood of Qamishlo.

It turns out my fear wasn't totally unwarranted. Just a couple weeks later, during a stop on our way back through the city, Jan and I would stare out from a restaurant window in Qamishlo and watch a small riot form around an Asayish policeman as he punched and spit on a soldier's face. Tensions had sparked in the city after regime soldiers had arrested a group of students at a checkpoint and attempted to conscript them to fight on behalf of the government. The YPG/J intervened, entered the city, encircled the checkpoint, fired shots, and eventually freed the group of students from being drafted into the ranks of the desperately faltering Syrian Arab Army.

★

The Euphrates River, Sarrin, Syria, December 9, 2015 After a little time organizing the next part of our trip from the relative safety of Qamishlo, Jan and I would find ourselves heading west once again, but this time we drove as far as we could go. Our armed YPG convoy took us past the cities and farmland that made up the frontline of my first trip; past Kobanê, the now famous city where ISIS had its ego destroyed as the world watched; further and further west, finally to the outskirts of Sarrin and to the edge of the Euphrates river. For now, this was the very end of the line.

Here by the river, positions are shared with the newest alliance led by the YPG/J. If you thought this war didn't have enough acronyms, here is another: Syrian Democratic Forces, SDF. It's a pretty-sounding, coalition-friendly name that includes the Kurdish and Arab fighters we've already met of the YPG and YPJ, but also includes various factions of Free Syrian Army (FSA) rebel groups who have aligned themselves with the Kurds to fight ISIS.

After spending so much time with established forces like the YPG/J and PKK, staying at a rebel base gave me a very different feeling. Whereas both the YPG and YPJ were byzantine in their need for order, the FSA bases within the SDF coalition appeared to be disorganized and messy.

The ever-turning tide of the war can be summed up in the story of Mohammad Abo Adel, a general commander of the rebel group Jaysh al-Thuwar, or "Army of Revolutionaries," which is now part of the SDF coalition that fights alongside the YPG/J. As I photographed him by a position on the Euphrates River near Sarrin, he wore the uniform of a Syrian regime soldier, but the old badges had been torn off. Early in the Syrian revolution, Mohammad had joined the protest movement, taken up arms with friends from his hometown of Manbij, and revolted against the forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad.

Following Mohammad's path through years of war reveals a long list of battles and defunct rebel factions: the Victory Battalion, the Kurdish Front, the Free Syria Brigade, Northern Sun Battalion, and finally, the Army of Revolutionaries. But the various ragtag brigades that made up the FSA were not immune to corruption, nor were they exempt from infighting.

Using binoculars, one can see the black flag of ISIS blowing in the breeze on the opposite shore of the Euphrates River. At night, Mohammad's soldiers regularly shoot at boats coming from across the river attempting to infiltrate their territory. The ironic thing is that Mohammad, among other rebel fighters, wasn't always on the opposite side of ISIS and fellow travelers. In the beginning, their factions had shared trenches in battles against the Syrian government.

As the war evolved and grew in complexity, the Islamist factions monopolized their power over other FSA groups. The rebels found themselves fighting against each other instead of finding common cause against the Syrian regime. Mohammad was among the few who eventually rose up against the extremists, but he found himself within splintered ranks. The surviving members would eventually flee to the protection of YPG/J-controlled enclaves of Syria. Now, various individual fighters and factions like Mohammad's have reorganized themselves to fight the extremists that hijacked their revolution, defeating ISIS being the main objective.

As we sat overlooking the river, Mohammad told me, "We strongly condemn those foreign extremists who aren't Syrian. They came to infiltrate the minds of the revolutionaries in Syria. They made the country fight their own sons."

The newly established SDF alliance is as promising as it is fragile. At least for the time being, they're stuck together by unity against a common enemy. During a video interview with Mohammad, fighters would leap behind him with weapons. It was hard to tell whether they wanted to depict themselves as strong and ready to fight, or in desperate need of weapons and training and wanting to reach out to the international world. It seemed to be a bit of both.

These rebel fighters were denied support from Turkey due to their collaboration with the YPG/J, yet they had also initially refused the Americans' "Train and Equip" program, as they had been asked to only fight ISIS and not the Syrian regime. I asked Mohammad about Russian airstrikes, which were now targeting groups across the country he used to fight alongside. "You can ask me anything, but it's probably better I don't talk about that."

Next I photographed Badawi, who was only twenty-one, but had been fighting the regime for five years. His emerald green eyes stood out from a black leather jacket and matching headscarf. Badawi was one of the rebel fighters whose faction once collaborated with the al-Nusra Front against the Syrian Arab Army, unaware of their long-term goals of religious oppression.

I asked Badawi, "Why fight the regime?"

He responded, "There are one hundred reasons."

When pressed further he said, "One of the main reasons was when people went out to protest the regime, they answered with heavy weapons and airstrikes."

After a moment of reflection, Badawi started speaking again. "The jihadists tried to Islamize the revolution. They tried to tell the others we weren't real revolutionaries. But, we are the true revolution because we want to protect the identity of Syrian people, and will fight anyone who goes against that."

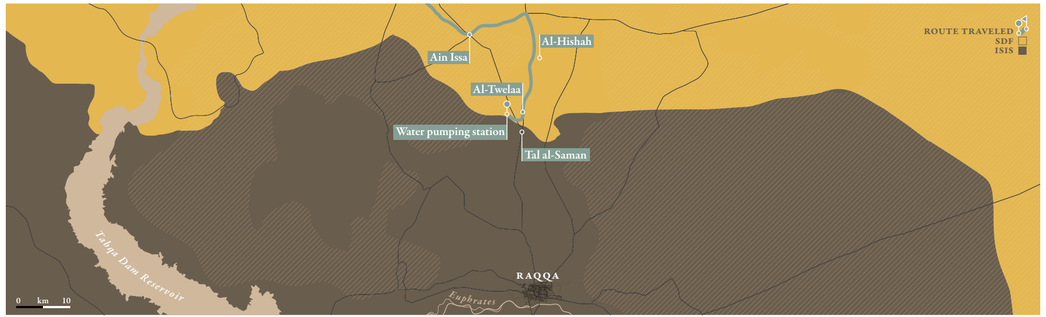
Badawi paused, and pointed out wounds on his body that he received from the regime, and others from fighting ISIS. Then he continued, "Of course, before we joined the SDF, many of us had fought against Kurds in other regions. We made many mistakes. But now, we are one force. We are brothers. We said the door is open for any of the brigades all over Syria to join us, except the jihadists. We are not against Islam. We are against extremism."

Whatever these new rebel forces were lacking in organization, they made up for with passion. Yet between the strong words, sometimes I had the gut feeling that they just wanted it all to end, and for them to be able to go home.

After a long second journey, I left Iraq and Syria once again with even more questions than I had entered with.

Jan and I with rebel fighters from the newly established SDF alliance beside the Euphrates River

JOURNEY THREE



THE ISIS WINTER

Qayyarah, Iraq, October 23, 2016 Almost a year had passed after my second trip to Kurdistan before I found myself back in Iraq once again. This time the focus was different—I was working with the British NGO Oxfam on a photography project to support a humanitarian campaign.

An enormous operation led by the Iraqi Army and the Peshmerga had been launched to remove ISIS from the city of Mosul and the surrounding region. Oxfam was ready to assist in the rebuilding of vital local infrastructure that was sure to be damaged in the fighting, as well as to serve civilians needing medical assistance.

ISIS's defensive lines collapsed around Qayyarah, an Iraqi city to the south of Mosul, and the jihadists were forced to retreat. But before they left, in an act of revenge, the jihadists placed explosives on top of local oil pumps and shot them with a sniper rifle as villagers watched helplessly. Eighteen oil wells and a fifty-thousand-tonne stockpile of pure sulfur were set ablaze, summoning an environmental disaster in the region, and sabotaging the local economy. The thick layer of black clouds spread across tens of kilometers, blotting out the sun for months, in what the residents of Qayyarah would name "the ISIS winter." The smoke obstructed the view of coalition jets in the sky, making it easier for the militants to avoid airstrikes, and to vacate their military convoys and heavy weapons. Despite the health risks and danger of living next to the toxic fumes, many families in Qayyarah refused to be resettled into refugee camps, as the uncertainty of not being able to return home seemed to be an even greater risk.

Staring into the flames, it seemed unreal, like a horrible nightmare. In this apocalyptic light, perhaps the jihadists wanted to convince themselves that the end of the world had come. Or, maybe they were just spread thin fighting on multiple fronts, and desperate to gain any advantage. I watched a wall of flames three stories high slowly creep toward homes of the al-Shuhada neighborhood. Civilians watched from their rooftops as firefighters battled the inferno, poorly equipped and failing due to a lack of water pressure. The middle of the afternoon was as dark as night and we needed flashlights to work. As I flew my drone to take aerial photographs, it would get totally lost in black smoke, and I had to rely on the guiding system to direct its path, shoot, and then return to clean the oil that had muddied the lens in just minutes. I could only imagine what the locals were breathing in every moment of the day and night.

Although this was still a visual project connected to the war against ISIS, it felt strange to be photographing in the region without Jan by my side. I missed his wit. This had all begun with us, and although the Oxfam team was incredible to collaborate with, nothing can quite compare to the camaraderie of the Kurdish and Arabic fighters in the SDF coalition. I craved to be photographing them once more.

Although it was primarily Iraqi forces leading the massive assault beyond the flames in Qayyarah, I thought about the other axis of ISIS being pummeled by the SDF in Syria. A highly acclaimed YPJ commander named Rojda Felat was leading the "Wrath of the Euphrates" operation, a campaign seeking to isolate and surround the city of Raqqa, capital of ISIS's self-proclaimed Caliphate in Syria. I desperately wanted to embed with Rojda, and see how the SDF forces had evolved since my last trip. There was just one problem: a new strict embargo enacted by the Iraqi Kurds was suffocating Rojava. This embargo also banned most journalists and photographers seeking to use the Faysh Khabur crossing under the control of the Peshmerga. The embargo had already lasted for over eight months, and when I submitted formal applications to officials, called, and nagged, all was denied. Rojava felt so close, yet so far away.

The words that Commander Kemal told me in al-Hawl echoed in my head. "You could say that there is only one Kurdistan." There was no way I would be here in Iraq and not make an effort to enter Rojava once more. Jan and I hatched a scheme together that unfortunately I am unable to describe in this book, but I'm sure you can use your imagination. By this point, Jan and I were friends, and it felt like we had a mission to achieve. In short, what we did was long, risky, and partly crazy, but it worked, and eventually . . . we found ourselves back in Rojava for the third time.

WELCOME TO RAQQA

Kobanê, Syria, November 13, 2016 Kobanê—a city of anomalies. Walking through its streets with a camera in hand uncovers a city back to life and thriving under the experimental self-administration system, but also a level of destruction that will take years, if not decades, to repair. Peering into holes in the sides of eviscerated buildings reveals what used to be Kurdish homes: plastic ceiling fans are melted from the heat and fires of airstrikes or rocket-propelled grenades. A water truck roams the corridors of abandoned neighborhoods, wetting main roads to keep the concrete dust from spreading through the air. By nightfall, the roads are dry again, and the dust creates a low-lying layer of fog.

The same tanks the world saw ISIS make their advances in are now derelict monuments in a public roundabout. Kids on their way home from school play and dangle upside down from the tanks' guns. With the Syrian regime's Ba'athist education programs expelled by the new administration, they are learning their once outlawed Kurdish language in school for the first time.

Since the victory at Kobanê, the battle-hardened fighters haven't stopped moving. They have continued onward, growing in both size and sophistication. As of late 2016, the SDF was one of the most diverse and successful coalitions in Syria, not to mention America's most trusted friend in the country. Convoys of both Kurdish and Arab fighters were advancing in Raqqa's expansive countryside, with other brigades snaking along the winding path of the Euphrates River, using the water as a natural barrier, all the way to the gates of the city.

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Our pickup truck moved alongside a YPG/J convoy heading to Ain Issa, a large city north of Raqqa. From there, we navigated south to al-Hishah—a village from which ISIS was ousted just days before our arrival.

We drove through many of the dusty, small hamlets and villages that make up the frontline, which is constantly shifting and expanding rapidly due to the desolate nature of the landscape. After areas are taken from ISIS, bulldozers move in quickly, making temporary berm walls to consolidate minor defenses, then continue pushing onward. I knew the campaign might be moving fast now, but would likely see its bloodiest days if the SDF managed to reach the city of Raqqa itself.

We approached a building just outside al-Hishah, and I was instructed that Commander Rojda Felat was on the roof. Jan and I slowly walked up an outdoor concrete staircase, and first saw Rojda standing with her back to us—a stout figure looking out over the horizon with a tactical radio in hand. Her short stature was exaggerated by a long, thick braid of dark hair, which fell past her lower back. Her voice was strict and authoritative, and several female fighters beside her scribbled notes as she dictated. Suddenly, Rojda noticed us, smiled and waved, but then returned to her radio. It was buzzing with reports from the commanders of the various groups in the coalition. As she dialed through each radio channel, her eyes were fixed in the distance, as if visualizing the movements being described to her in the open plains ahead.

Twenty minutes later, there was a pause in the radio chatter, and things seemed to calm. Rojda walked over to me, and through Jan's translation, she apologized for making me wait. I explained that, of course, no apology was necessary.

As I explained that I wished to embed with her and take photographs, Rojda's large, round eyes studied me closely, as if trying to read my intentions. The authoritative tone heard over the radio was gone, and she was warm and friendly, often revealing a big toothy smile. When speaking, she barely broke eye contact, and used a calming, hypnotic voice I have found to be common among former guerrillas who spent time training in the Qandil Mountains. It was uncertain if she had, but her new role was clear—she was a linchpin in the SDF.

Rojda agreed to let me tag along and photograph her, but explained that she was very busy then, and would pick me up the following morning. Together, we would travel to each new position, and observe the ongoing battle. It was getting late, so she suggested my driver take me to a YPG position so I could bunk with a nearby male unit.

As we drove back through the empty streets of al-Hishah, we suddenly met its missing population. A long line of motorcycles and cars waited on the main road heading into town. It was the local Arab villagers, and they seemed eager to return to their homes. Personal belongings were piled high on top of their vehicles, as if they had been unsure how long they were going to be displaced by the fighting. They had needed to wait several days for the battle to end, and the SDF troops to allow the civilians to reenter.

With their engines idling, I approached a group of men on motorcycles to photograph and ask some questions. I mentioned that the spokesperson and main commander for the offensive were both female. Knowing how male-dominated and traditional the society is in this region of Syria, especially after having been so recently under the control of ISIS, I was curious about how they felt about the prominent role played by the women. "We don't care if it's a man or woman who is liberating us, we just want to go home," exclaimed the man, wagging his finger in the air as he spoke.

Murat and his fellow YPG fighters in the Raqqa countryside.

It was an easy answer when their fate of returning home depended on an armed group. There was a lot more to ask but our conversation was interrupted suddenly by a huge explosion coming from the direction of the village. People waiting in the queue climbed a wall of dirt beside the road to get a better look. A huge pillar of smoke rose in the air above the village.

We would learn later that it was a last unused ISIS suicide car equipped with explosives, sitting booby-trapped inside a civilian garage. The SDF team had de-mined it, blowing it up in place to render it harmless. Suddenly, the road was opened and the civilians were allowed to move. They honked their horns, waved to my camera, and smiled broadly as they returned to their homes.

It seemed so perfect that it could almost be a planned propaganda exercise—"Look, the predominantly Kurdish force is helping the Arabs! Send us more weapons, America!" Except, there were no foreign journalists expected to be there, and an orchestration of that size seems nearly impossible.

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Just a short drive away from the newly liberated village, we reached the YPG base Rojda had given us permission to sleep at. About twenty fighters in mismatched camouflage fatigues shared an abandoned farm equipment storage facility made out of gray cinder block. A vast, empty horizon loomed in the distance—there were no main roads, just sand, but counter attacks could come from anywhere.

Upon climbing out of our truck, we were greeted by a wave of handshakes from charismatic young men led by Murat Amed, the commander of the camp. They were surprised to see me, but happy to let me stay and photograph anything now that I had Rojda's blessing.

As dusk descended, our driver decided to return to Kobanê, admitting that he didn't trust the nearby Arab population who had just been under the authority of ISIS, fearing sleeper cells. "I've got kids," he murmured dryly, staring at the ground, and eventually he drove off.

Jan and I sat with the SDF fighters on plastic chairs surrounding a small campfire. Murat was now cooking hamburgers in an iron griddle. After tea was poured, we dove into talks about politics. I asked them what they thought of Donald Trump's recent win as president of the United States.

"The American people can decide for their own country, it's not for us to say," carefully explained the first fighter to answer.

"Come on, be honest," I said. "That's the same excuse politicians use to dodge the question."

Another chimed in, "It would have been nice for a woman to win, but Clinton is the one who let all the jihadists in here. She is a puppet of Erdoğan and the Gulf."

Another disagreed, "It doesn't really matter. The outcome will always be the same no matter who is president. It is a *system*."

As self-trained and independent as these fighters had been over the years, they knew the next American president's decisions would ultimately be a powerful voice in the international proxy war the Syrian conflict had evolved into. With hostile actors as neighbors, leading the operation for Raqqa itself would be a future political bargaining chip for the SDF.

"Like all politicians, we will judge by their actions," Murat explained, taking on a serious tone. The rest nodded in agreement, suddenly careful with their words.

There were sleeping mats set up on the roof of the building where a group of fighters was rotating every few hours keeping watch, but they insisted I sleep inside where it was warmer. In a room filled with weapons and ammunition, Murat arranged some blankets for me while holding his flashlight in his mouth, and politely refused to let me help. He might have been the commander, but these kinds of duties were shared by all.

Before falling asleep, I showed Murat some of the photos I took of them on the screen of my camera. "You send my sister," he said in broken English. Murat pulled out a number scribbled in his journal and repeated "WhatsApp, WhatsApp, WhatsApp." No translation needed.

★

I was awoken by Murat tapping on my shoulder at 5:00 a.m. The fighters were still gathered around the fire, as if the scene from the previous night had never ended. While I slept, they had been taking turns watching the camp. An hour later, a pickup truck pulled up. It was Rojda and two of her rooftop partners from yesterday. She joined us and we all had breakfast together as the sun rose. The YPG seemed happy to see the general commander make an appearance at their base, and their morale appeared to be immediately uplifted.

Jan and I piled into Rojda's pickup truck with the two other YPJ fighters, and together we took off down a dirt road toward the town of al-Twelaa. But first, the pickup truck made a quick pit stop at a lonely building on the town's outskirts.

"There are American Special Forces here," Rojda explained. "It's okay for you to see each other, but we please ask that you don't take any photos of them."

On the building's rooftop was what could only be described as the classic Hollywood stereotype of Special Forces: six men with grizzly beards, sunglasses, muscular tattooed arms bulging out of tan T-shirts, and bags full of military equipment.

Commander Rojda Felat inspects the frontline with binoculars

For a moment, I felt confused at the protocol and didn't want to ruin the trust Rojda had put in me, so I decided to hang back and not interrupt their work. However, by nature I am a nosy person, and this idea quickly dissolved. It was fascinating to watch them engage with Rojda via their interpreter. Despite how sophisticated or trained the Americans were, they seemed to rely on Rojda's forces to coordinate their entry to the frontline, where they planned to contribute to the next phase of the offensive. This small group of Special Forces had something in common with the SDF units: all were decentralized by doctrine, and were able to make swift decisions in combat. The United States Special Operations Forces or SOF primarily aided the SDF by calling in airstrikes and using heavy weapons, such as the Javelin—an advanced rocket system useful for taking out approaching suicide cars. The short-term goal was to take Tal al-Saman, a nearby city surrounded by more expansive countryside, and the last obstacle to connect the frontline to the other separate groups working their way down the Euphrates River.

The Americans headed off the rooftop toward their vehicle, nodded at me with a simple "Hey dude," and said no more, driving off on their separate way. I supposed that we were both not supposed to see each other. We followed Rojda into al-Twelaa alongside some other SDF fighters from the base.

As we traveled through the newly captured village, walking single-file to avoid buried mines, curiosities of the war begin to reveal themselves. Hidden inside a barn, there was a

one-meter-by-one-meter dirt tunnel ISIS used to pop up from a neighboring village. Outside the barn, there were the remains of a large piece of artillery destroyed by a coalition airstrike.

Rojda led us along a path to a position where an SDF unit was monitoring the flanks on the sidelines of Tal al-Saman while the main operation went on. A small group of fifteen fighters was gathered, gazing through binoculars and sniper rifle scopes. Their role was to report and strike any enemy movement or suicide cars that ISIS might send from this side against the larger operation currently unfolding. The small village in front of us was quiet, but the thuds of mortars, machine guns, and the occasional coalition airstrike could be heard booming in the distance.

"Nothing is happening here, sorry it's a bit boring," laughed Rojda.

Before calling it a day, I photographed Rojda inside a half-destroyed shed. The walls were ash-gray from a fire, and rubble was spread across the ground. It was unclear if the room was booby-trapped, but the light was perfect for a portrait. Jan turned to me. "I hope we all don't get blown up over a photo."

★

The next day, we would go to the heart of the fighting, in Tal al-Saman. Rojda admitted she had other duties to attend to, but instead sent me with the SDF's upstart media department. They happened to be a team of four fighters no different from the others, except for holding a camera in the hand their rifle was not in. They had handy-cams and a GoPro with no extra battery.

"If we manage to enter today, if we are lucky, we can see them pull the big ISIS flag down in the city center," a member of the media team explained. "Maybe that would be a good shot?"

Together, we traveled to a large power station on the outskirts of Tal al-Saman. A small dam contained an artificial reservoir of water, and a network of smaller concrete water channels nearby provided a safe staging area. From here, only about one kilometer of open land separated us from the nearest ISIS firing position, and a little farther onward lay the city of Tal al-Saman itself. We were told a small group of SDF fighters were at the edge of the city, and currently under fierce resistance from ISIS.

We crossed the dam's bridge on foot, toward three fighters manning a heavy machine gun mounted in the back of a pickup truck, nestled in between a wall of dirt and a concrete reservoir. Suddenly, their radio called from the fighters up at the frontline and they fired several large rounds in succession at the ISIS position described over the airwaves.

One of the men standing beside the truck, watching through binoculars, turned to me and to my surprise, asked in perfect English, "Do you want some earmuffs? It's kind of loud."

YPG machine gun–mounted truck positioned outside Tal al-Saman

It turned out he wasn't an American SOF member, but a Danish guy named Tommy—an adventurous foreign volunteer in the YPG.

Just minutes after shooting, a blood-curdling whistle from above was heard, and a split second later, the loud boom of a mortar striking no more than twenty meters away from us. Jan and I dove on the ground, anticipating shrapnel, and my camera got full of sand. We crawled underneath the concrete barrier beside the truck.

"Shit me, that was a close one!" exclaimed Tommy, still standing stoically in place. He raised his binoculars to scan the city ahead.

Suddenly, another ISIS mortar landed fifty meters behind us, closer to the power plant. A minute later, another struck the road we used to reach the power plant.

An instinct of fear compelled me to want to get up and run away, but I was assured by Jan's calm and experienced voice: "It's better to stay here for now."

The afternoon light was terrible for photos. I was lying down in the dirt like a dunce, wondering if I would be able to summon more courage if it were sunrise or sunset. I doubted it.

Eventually, we gained the nerve to peek up from the concrete barrier and check what was going on. The Kurdish man firing the weapon on the top of the truck yelled to Jan in Kurdish, "Comrade! If you hear another go *chuuuuuu*, lie down. Okay?"

A new mortar landed near their truck. "I think they are aiming for the truck," I said.

"No. They are aiming for . . . all of us," Jan said with a smile—a sick sense of humor I have grown to appreciate.

Jan continued, "Mister, you said you wanted to see action! So, I brought you to the action. This is the reeeeeeaal action! What's wrong with you?" We laughed together nervously. I could tell he was trying to make me feel better. It worked.

The mortar strikes eventually slowed to a stop and we decided to make an exit, running back closer to the relative cover of the nearby water plant. There was a group of Arab men calmly sitting in a circle in the open, totally unbothered by the shelling, and discussing their next steps. One man introduced himself as Abu Sayaf, a commander of FSA rebel group the Raqqa Martyrs Brigade. His fighters were about to enter the city in a small group carrying AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenades, running across the open field and entering the few cleared buildings at the city's edge.

Like many Arabs in the SDF coalition, Sayaf's fighters were all locals from Raqqa. During a pause in the operation, he shared a few stories about the early days of the war, before ISIS took over. It was not the simple tale presented in Western media of revolutionaries fighting to kick out a brutal regime as a unified force, but rather one of various armed groups with sometimes radically different visions for Syria.

"Those groups all gave *bay'ah* [pledged allegiance] to Daesh [ISIS]," Sayaf told me, explaining that once the regime was removed, factions from both FSA and al-Nusra joined ISIS in Raqqa city, provoking confusion and infighting.

Sayaf's rebel group eventually rejected the extremists, and found themselves forced out and thrown into a loose alliance with the Kurds of the YPG and YPJ—much like their brothers-in-arms along the Euphrates River. The coalition hadn't always been smooth sailing, as political views differed. For now, they shared a common desire to rid the area of the extremists. If the battle were to eventually move into Raqqa city, Sayaf explained to me, he expected to find some of the former FSA members who had fought the Syrian regime alongside him in the early days of the war now opposing him on the side of ISIS.

As our shadows grew longer, it became apparent the SDF were not able to push further into the city center that day.

Days after leaving the region, I stumbled upon a video of an ISIS flag coming down on Twitter, shared by the SDF's official handle. Shouts in both Kurdish and Arabic rang out as the flag was thrown to the ground. It seemed the media team had gotten the shot after all; it had just taken a little more time than anticipated.

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Back at Murat's camp on my last night in Raqqa, we sat once again around the fire, talking about the latest developments in the region. This time, the feeling was much different. News had come that Turkish planes had begun an unprecedented phase of airstrikes directly targeting SDF positions outside Manbij, a large city the SDF had cleared of ISIS previously with coalition air support. Turkey's military and allied Islamist rebel groups occupied the countryside to the west of the city, and minor hostilities had previously broken out. Now a new level of escalation was under way.

The SDF fighters felt betrayed. From their perspective, America was allowing their forces to be attacked by Turkey while the Raqqa offensive was under way. The radio crackled late into the night with updates, as commanders were unsure of the extent of the bombing, and uncertain how far the Turkish-backed forces would try to press into Manbij itself.

"They want to slow down the Raqqa operation," one theorized.

An SDF fighter takes cover with us underneath a concrete barrier

Just a week later, an American SDF volunteer—Michael Israel—would die alongside eleven others in another round of Turkish airstrikes on a base in Arima, outside Manbij.

A strike on a passionate foreign volunteer among locals is one thing, but targeting the American SOF is an escalation Turkey will likely never attempt. Other than a shared objective of getting rid of ISIS, it's easy to imagine that the SDF also kept the American SOF members with them in Raqqa as their own shield against Turkish airstrikes.

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Undisclosed Location, Jazira Canton, Rojava, Syria, November 20, 2016 "Joe, I think . . . this is a very bad idea," moaned Jan. "What if people think I am one of the ISIS members?"

I put my camera down and looked at Jan, sitting by himself on a stool with a brown linen curtain behind him. I was using Jan as a test subject because at any moment, ISIS members would be sitting where he was. "I'm almost ready, I'll delete these after," I replied.

After many requests, and thanks to Jan and Ipek's connections, I had finally been granted permission to photograph portraits of ISIS prisoners held by Rojava's Anti-Terror Units (YAT). The YAT is a mysterious specialized branch of the most skilled fighters of the SDF, acting as a kind of special forces for advanced missions—infiltrating behind enemy lines, leading operations to capture key targets, and, of course, interrogating ISIS prisoners.

The hands of ISIS prisoner Muhammad Mubarak al-Helli

Rather than being allowed to see the prison itself, Jan and I were only allowed to photograph three of the ISIS prisoners in an office adjacent to the cells. Inside the office, there was a cheap-looking goldfish aquarium, a massive painting of Abdullah Öcalan, and a ceramic bust of a wolf on the desk.

Jan got up to check out the test images on the back of my camera. "Looks great, Joe, but please delete these after, okay?"

A few minutes later, the door opened. Two YAT prison guards entered the room to greet us and check if we were ready for the ISIS prisoners. The YAT guards were dressed in head-to-ankle black fatigues with ski masks covering all but their eyes. On their feet they wore tan-colored boots that matched ammo carriers worn over their shoulders and across their chests. Each guard carried a Kalashnikov. You'd expect them to be intimidating, but when they started to speak, they had the same warm manner as any YPG/J fighter. I supposed I wouldn't want to be on their bad side.

Dicovering that we were ready, one YAT guard left the room to get the first prisoner, and the other remained with us. After about three minutes, the other guard reentered the room, but this time was firmly escorting a man in his mid-twenties in handcuffs wearing loose sandals and a blindfold over his eyes. There was no wild long hair or jihadi beard—he looked vulnerable and frail.

I suddenly realized that I didn't know how to say hello to this person. Not because we didn't speak the same language, but because—how are you supposed to greet an ISIS member? I acquiesced and mustered up the standard Arabic greeting, "*As-salāmu 'alaykum*" ("Peace be upon you"), which was the only thing I could think of. From his stool, he quietly answered back, "*Wa'alaykumu as-salām*" ("And upon you, peace").

The man was Muhammad Mubarak al-Helli, a foreign fighter from al-Bahah, Saudi Arabia. We learned he joined ISIS only a short while before his capture, meaning he was well aware of the widely reported atrocities the group had committed, including the genocide against the Êzidî. Muhammad's story may be one of the best examples of irony in history: A man travels to join a suicidal gang of sex slave owners and is captured alive and locked up by the fighters of a feminist revolution.

The YAT guard began untying his blindfold, but I waved my hand to him and asked Jan to interpret that I wanted to leave the mask on. The guard looked quizzical, but then stepped back. I replied through Jan without going into too much detail to the guard, out of respect and fear for seeming ungrateful, that I did not want to give this man's identity out to the world. Not because he deserved my compassion but because there is a tacit agreement when working as a photographer or journalist: do not reveal someone's identity when that could in turn endanger his family—even though they are likely not complicit with his actions. "We have already released his identity, but photograph him as you like, comrade," the guard replied.

The second prisoner led into the room was Savaş Yıldız, a Kurdish ISIS member from Turkey, born in Adana, in 1983. Savaş was captured injured during the YPG/J's March 2015 offensive toward the city of Tal Abyad. Jan and I learned that in a YAT interrogation, Savaş confessed to being a member of the Dokumacılar, a Turkish cell within ISIS with links to bombings of Kurdish political rallies on Turkish soil in Adana and Mersin. If the allegations were true, and not the theatrical handiwork of the Kurdish prison guards, Savaş's testimony revealed a direct link between the Turkish government and ISIS—an opportunistic relationship of mutual interests.

Savaş claimed to be radicalized by a Salafist preacher in Turkey who was recruiting his followers for jihad in Syria alongside ISIS. According to the testimony, fundamentalist preachers and mosques maintain connections to Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MİT), and willing suicide bombers of ISIS can be traded as strategic assets for the Turkish government to exploit on their own soil. In Savaş's cell's case, this could be disrupting the political rallies of rival parties, or using the carnage of suicide bombers to enact martial law and extend authoritarian powers over the society.

It seemed like propaganda too large to believe, this carefully curated prisoner. However, the most striking aspect of Savaş's story was not what the YAT interrogators had released, but what a pro-government newspaper in Turkey had published themselves. After a suicide bomber killed himself and four tourists visiting Istanbul's district of Taksim in May 2016, Turkish authorities were quick to publicly blame the PKK for the attack. After being pressed for an investigation, the Turkish authorities changed their minds and said ISIS was to blame, releasing the identification of Savaş Yıldız as the bomber, and claimed they had DNA evidence to prove it. The problem was, Savaş was alive, and had been secretly held as a prisoner of the YAT for almost a year. The YAT chose this moment to publicly release a video interview with Savaş on YouTube, in which he sat in handcuffs verifying the events. The Turkish authorities quickly changed the story, confirmed a different perpetrator, and ever since, the details behind the mixup have remained foggy.

★

My journey ended with the proverbial mask being pulled off of a formidable villain. In Iraq and Syria, the Kurdish people have risen up against a genocidal enemy, and have broken the great myth that ISIS had carefully crafted around themselves. Thanks to the Kurds, ISIS's black flags have become shadows of themselves. As a photographer, I feel honored to have spent time among the free people of Kurdistan. Through their sacrifices, their struggle is being recognized around the globe.

Some people might think it's strange to find a beacon of secular reformation in the heart of such a brutal and sectarian conflict. They might say this is the last place in the world they'd expect to see a revolution led by women, or a creative and radical new form of self-governance. But this is exactly how new ideas are crafted—they are born from urgency.

As I write this last journal in October 2017, the SDF forces have managed to encircle ISIS into the last few neighborhoods of Raqqa, and victory over the city is likely to be declared any day. I am sending WhatsApp messages back and forth with Jan, who is keeping me up to date on the latest news, as well as conspiracies. After the battle for Raqqa is over, the self-administration will inherit the reins of power of a destroyed city and be tasked with rebuilding the crippled society. It is likely that ISIS, with its territory gone, will seek to return as an insurgency, and its poisonous ideology will fester most within communities with unanswered grievances. This will be Rojava's next war to win or lose.

In a final operation to expel the extremists from their last enclave, the SDF may choose to increase the tempo of its campaign in the oil-rich province of Deir Ezzor. Not only will this bring about the end of ISIS in Syria, but also capturing the resources will increase the chance of self-rule away from the Syrian regime post–jihadi conflict, or provide room to bargain a negotiated peace settlement for a future unified country. At the same time, all of Rojava's neighbors are hostile, and the Turkish government seeks to destroy the project by any means necessary. As the myriad examples in history highlight, there are many nations ready and willing to betray the Kurds. SDF's main ally, the United States, has grown weary of getting involved in more conflicts in the Middle East, and could pull their support at any time. This will leave the SDF to defend large swaths of land against much better-equipped militaries with air forces.

By the time this book is published, many new events undoubtedly will have unfolded. Time has shown that it is unwise to predict which turn this erratic war will take next. When ISIS is gone, the real fight may have just begun. But at least for the time being, the destroyers of history have yet to silence the world's newest authors.

JOEY LAWRENCE, Canadian-born photographer and director based in Brooklyn, New York, is internationally celebrated for both his humanitarian projects and high-profile commissions.

As a self-taught professional photographer, he has built his style by dedicating a vast amount of time and resources to passion projects designed to help emphasize the humanity in underserved communities and circumstances. His photography has greatly benefited organizations such as Oxfam, the ACLU, FEED, charity:water, and WaterAid.

Joey wrote and directed his first scripted film, entitled *People of the Delta*, entirely in Southern Ethiopia. Not only did the film star the local population as actors and invaluable creative collaborators, but all of the film's dialogue was spoken in the endangered languages of Dassanach and Hamar.

Joey has traveled four times to Iraq and Syria to document the ongoing crisis. He has embedded with multiple sides of the war, from the government-held areas in Damascus, to the Free Syrian Army opposition rebels, and Kurdish fighters of the YPG and YPJ. What began as a personal project has been published in *Sunday Times Magazine*, *Vanity Fair Italia*, the *Independent*, *Rolling Stone*, and many others. *Portrait of Sarya with RPG*, portraying a Kurdish guerrilla fighter, was featured in London's National Portrait Gallery as part of the Taylor Wessing prize exhibition.

Joey's work has been consistently sought out by advertising clients and top publications, including notable work for the National Geographic Channel, the U.S. Army, Canada Goose, Lavazza's 2016 calendar, Summit Entertainment, and *Vanity Fair*.

Dedicated to the free people of Kurdistan.

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We Came from Fire:
Photographs of Kurdistan's Armed Struggle Against ISIS
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Page 261: The hair of mourning women hung as a decoration at a Êzidî grave.
Xanikê, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq, November 8, 2016

Maps by Eduardo Artika with research and assistance from Dani Martínez, Wladimir van Wilgenburg, Emmanuel Pène, Alan Siverek, and Aryan Nawzad.

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