The Women's War

Robert Evans

2020

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These are... not optimistic times for most Americans. Across the world, the dangers of climate change and the terror of creeping authoritarianism present an increasing danger to all of us. After covering this degeneration for four years, Robert Evans went looking for hope. He found it in the unlikeliest of places: Northeast Syria, in a region known as Rojava that's become host to a feminist, anti-authoritarian revolution. When you've heard about these folks in the mainstream media, they're usually just described as the "Syrian Kurds", and credited with beating ISIS. They did, in fact, beat ISIS. But their military successes were just part of the story. In The Women's War, Robert will introduce listeners to dozens of men and women fighting a war for the future of the human soul.

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The Women's War Trailer

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March 17, 2020 • 1 min

These are... not optimistic times for most Americans. Across the world, the dangers of climate change and the terror of creeping authoritarianism present an increasing danger to all of us. After covering this degeneration for four years, Robert Evans went looking for hope. He found it in the unlikeliest of places: Northeast Syria, in a region known as Rojava that's become host to a feminist, anti-authoritarian revolution.

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Hey, you know, the world's kind of in a real scary place right now, with a creeping authoritarianism and liked HEAs and all of the horrible stories we hear about every week. I'm Robert Evans. I'm a journalist and I cover the international fascist movement, And in two thousand, nineteen July of that year, I decided to do something a little bit different. Instead of covering horror, I wanted to go look for hope, and I found it in a place you might find kind of unlikely, North-Eastern Syria.

The region I visited is known as Rojava, and when the Western media covers it, they mostly just refer to these people as the Kurds. Since two thousand and thirteen, a loose alliance of revolutionaries over there have been fighting to not just drive back Isis, but to establish something of a utopia, an egalitarian, feminist, eco conscious community in a place that previously had known mostly war and terror. In the Women's War, I'll take you to this place, and I'll introduce you to the revolutionaries fighting to build it, brave women who battle for equality with an AK47, with a spade and with a pen. Follow me as I travel to a land of war and hope, a place trapped on the edge of utopia and oblivion.

I'm Robert Evans. Listen to the Women's War on the I Heart Radio app, Apple Podcasts, or wherever you get your podcasts.

1. The Women's War: A Utopia in Syria?

Listen here.

March 25, 2020 • 39 mins

What would you do if the government collapsed? Over the last eight years, the men and women of North-East Syria have had a chance to answer that question for themselves. Using the political theories of an American anarchist and a Kurdish terrorist, they've built a feminist oasis in the middle of the world's most brutal war.

Music: "Bella Ciao" by Astronautalis (feat. Subp Yao & Rickolus)

Footnotes:

1. **Bella Ciao: A "Kurdish Anthem" Made in Italy, Has Become a Global Sensation**
2. **The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountains (Rebels)**
3. **Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan**

Welcome to the Women's War, a production of I Heart Radio. What would you do if the government was just gone one day? A couple of months ago, that question might have seemed more like a fantasy than it does Right now. As I type this, huge parts of the United States are in lockdown from the coronavirus. Millions of Americans are out of work.

Guns stores across the nation have sold out of ammunition. Grocery stores are out of toilet paper. Collapse right now seems more plausible than it ever has before, perhaps even imminent, And depending on what movies and TV you watch, you might expect the retreat of your government to bring chaos and violence in its wake, But that is far from a foregone conclusion.

In two thousand twelve, as the Syrian Civil War heated up, the soldiers and secret police of the dictatorial Assad regime pulled out of northeastern Syria. The men and women who lived there took this opportunity to build something new over the ashes of the old. As the world order we've all grown up with phrase and crumbles, their story holds lessons for us all.

[01:06]

The woman you're about to hear from is a Syrian militia woman named a Freen Masseo. I met her in July two thousand nineteen at a training camp in the Syrian desert. If you ask the Turkish government, a Freen and her comrades are all terrorists. If you ask many of the people in northeast Syria, they are saviors. And if you listen to the mainstream media over in the United States, they're just the Koords. As I write this, a friend and her comrades are fighting and perhaps dying for their revolution, a women's revolution.

Throughout history, the first city states were built on the basis of exploiting the woman. If we go back to history, we see that it was the women who created everything. In natural societies. Before the rise of city states, women were leaders.

But after the system of city states was built up by men, they began impressing women for the first time in history. Throughout the last four thousand years, a system has been built up over the woman. It doesn't allow her to work, to go outside, to take up the gun, even in her own home. She is not allowed to express her opinion.

[02:13]

Even when you get married and should live a shared life, you cannot express your own opinion. You aren't free to say what you want. Our goal is to bring an end to this mentality. We don't say that women should take a higher position than men. Our goal is a quality between women and men, to make it possible that our society can live with a free mentality. Neither women nor men should be the oppressor.

There should be equality. The land in which a fren and her comrades live and struggle is called Rojava. The word means west in Kurmaji Kurdish, the language of most of its inhabitants. But a Frien's comrades are not all Kurds. They are Arabs and Armenians and Yazidis, as well as Brits, Americans, Spaniards and Germans.

The Syrian Democratic Forces or SDF are the umbrella organization they fight under, but a freen is a member of the Women's Protection Units or y p J and all female militia. You've probably seen videos and pictures of their fighters, beautiful young women bedecked in colorful kefia's riting into battle against the Islamic state.

Such images made for easy, feel good coverage in a region where those stories are hard to come by. But then the Caliphate lost its last territorial holdings, and over the months, the news spent less and less time talking about the Koords and Rojava until in winter two thousand nineteen this happened.

[03:42]

Now about breaking news in the fight against Isis the White House withdrawing troops from a key part of Syria as Turkey plans an attack on US backed forces there. Turkish forces have begun a major offensive in northeastern Syria with air strikes this evening. The streaks of artillery lit the sky of this border town, the Turkish army hitting Kurdish targets just inside Syria. What we're seeing here, sir is arguably one of the greatest betrayals um in the history of of military In military history, the Turkish invasion of Rojava, ironically named Operation peace Spring, immediately displaced two hundred thousand people.

Hundreds of thousands more would be made refugees by the end of two thousand nineteen, as majority Kurdish towns on the Turkish border were cleared out by military force.

The government of Turkey bust in Syrian Arab refugees in a bid determanently changed the demographics of the region. Western media coverage touched on some of this, but nothing piqued as much fear in American and European viewers as the threat that the chaos and Rojava might allow for a resurgence of ISIS. A senior US defense official just told CNN, Turkey's attacks are already heard in the U S counter ISIS operations, effectively bringing it to a halt.

Nick, what are you hearing there on the ground about what the attacks mean for the resurgence of ISIS. A Turkish shell slams into an ISIS prison compound. Moments later, IIS prisoners are seen making a break for it. Kurdish forces, already stretched too thin, warned US they'd struggle to contain ISIS detainees if Turkey attacked, and that's more or less the story.

Everybody knows. Kurds fighting ISIS than Turkey, than Turkey and ISIS. There was a lot of talk about Trump betraying the Kurds, but very little talk about what those Kurds were really fighting for. If you listen to the mainstream media IS telling of events, you might think their ambitions extended no further than beating ISIS.

But the Kurds of Northeast Syria and their allies weren't just fighting Isis. In fact, many of them considered the battle against the Islamic state to be just a side effect of the real fight, a war against the authoritarian virus at the heart of both ISIS and the dictatorial regime of Turkish President Erdwin. The people I met in Rajava believe the path to victory in this war the only way to achieve true peace is to strike at the heart of authoritari arianism, the domination of women by men.

The next woman you're about to hear from is Horium Chamid. She's a feminist, anti capitalist community organizer in Rojava. She lost a son in the fight against ISIS, but she does not consider Islamic militants to be her number one enemy.

[06:20]

Women have been suffocated in society by the politics of the Syrian state. Their rights have been limited, and this mentality has suffocated them. So they are scared to resist, to resist against the oppression around them, to rise up and say this is my right. I exist. We have difficulties with this. Isis were well known throughout the world. They were a barbarous enemy, not just for women, but for all people.

But women also have hidden enemies around them. Oppressive men, customs, practices, economic repression, hidden things, women struggle in secret. What I found in Rojava in the summer of two thousand nineteen was so much stranger and so much more revolutionary than the battle against ISIS or the insurgent campaign against Turkey.

This is the story of the war in Syria you have not seen on the news, the story of an idealistic dream that had the unlikely chance to flower in the dry, flame racked planes of northeast Syria. I'm Robert Evans, and this is the women's war.

[07:27]

I first heard about Rojava in two thousand fourteen through a series of half credible far left blog posts and social media posts. The picture they painted was of an anarchist, feminist, utopian project in Syria, fundamentally reforming society at the same time as it led the fight against ISIS. It all sounded way too good to be true, and I was instantly suspicious.

What I was reading about Rojava was so lacking in actual detail that it felt more like fan fiction than real reportage, and so I dipped in and out of the story. It became gradually clear something significant was happening in Rajava, but it was hard to tell what, and I didn't think about it too much until March of two thousand sixteen, when I traveled to Iraq for the very first time.

I was there to report on the ongoing battle against ISIS and the siege of Mosul, which was then in its early days. I spent several days near the city of Sulimania in Iraqi, Kurdistan, visiting camps filled with Yazidi refugees. These men and women were members of a religious minority, neither Christian nor Islamic, that was targeted by ISIS for annihilation and enslavement. During the Caliphates days of expansion, its soldiers poured into the towns and villages around Mount Sinjar, the holy mountain of the Azides.

Isis massacred men and boys, they enslaved women and girls. The Azidis have been targeted for genocide many many times over the past few centuries. ISIS targeted them in part because their women were considered famously beautiful, and since they were neither Muslims nor people of the Book, Chris-

tians or Jewish folks, they could be taken as sex slaves under the sick interpretation of Islam practiced by the Caliphate.

The story I had heard on the news was that President Obama in the United States Air Force intervened to stop this genocide. Isis's advance was halted by air strikes, allowing the Azidies to flee up Mount Sinjar. Food had been dropped to sustain them.

It was a good story, that rare tale of a timely U S intervention to halt a genocide. But once I started talking to survivors of the massacre, dozens and dozens of them, a different story emerged. The US air strikes had helped, and so had the food drops, but everyone I spoke to was emphatic that what had really saved them was not the U.

S. Air Force. It was the men and women of the YPG, the y p J, and the p k K. The story of Rojava is unfortunately a story with very many acronyms, and I will do my best to stop them from getting confusing. The y PG is a Kurdish acronym that translates to People's Protection Units.

It is a mixed male female force, although the vast majority of its fighters are men. Most Kurds called the WIPEG, the YEPIGA the wy PJ are the women's protection units. These two malicious together composed the bulk of the Syrian Democratic forces. They are the core of the Rojavan military.

In two thousand fourteen, the Iraqi Kurdish military, the pesh Murga, abandoned the Azides and fled from the Islamic state. As one survivor told me, nobody helped the Azides but the Yepiga, and while they were still fighting a desperate battle against ISIS and Syria, the people of Rojava diverted troops to invade Iraq, punch a hole in Isis's lines, and rescue roughly thirty five thousand Zidis from near certain annihilation.

Hearing all this got me really interested. I started reading more. I learned that the Wipeg, the wy PJ, and the whole Rojavan experiment had only gotten started thanks to the help of a terrorist group called the p k K or the Kurdistan Workers Party.

See what I mean about acronyms, the stories filthy with them. We'll talk about the p KK a little more later, but in short, the U. S Government and the Turkish government consider them to be a terrorist group. Other nations around the world disagreed and consider them to be more of an insurgent army fighting for Kurdish independence from the Turkish government. Depending on where you stand, both descriptors are actually pretty fair.

I wound up covering Iraq two more times over the next year in order to cover the fighting against ISIS and Mosel. With every trip I made, I had heard more and more about the strange things happening in Rojava. The story percolated out, drip by drip. Most of the detailed coverage of the Rojavan political system was still confined to left wing sources, but the details had solidified a bit, and I started to run into scholarly publications too.

In two thousand sixteen, I came across the book Revolution in Rojava, a very dense analysis of what was happening in the area. Now, finally I had a hard data to go with the lurid, praiseful stories i'd come across on the internet. What I read only made what was happening in Rojava sound more incredible and enticing.

I learned about the women's houses buildings established by the new government, and towns and villages they controlled. These were places where women could go for help, escaping from abusive relationships, accessing education, or getting job training. In some communities, the divorce rate leapt to more than fifty percent. Almost overnight. I grew more and more convinced that something very interesting was happening in northeast Syria, and over the next two years I committed myself to visiting.

Getting to Rojava was easier said than done. Though there are no commercially available airports in that part of Syria. The people of the region were still considered rebels by the Assad regime, so I couldn't just fly into Damascus either. The only safe way into Rojava was across the Tigris through the Iraqi border.

It was not an easy or an inexpensive journey to take. It took time to get my career and find anansws into a position where visiting was even a possibility. And while I waited and watched from a distance, the situation on the ground in Rojava continued to evolve. In October of two thousand seventeen, Rocca

was liberated by the Syrian Democratic Forces. Rocket is a large city in Syria that became the capital of the Islamic State for several years.

The YPG and YPJ did the bulk of the fighting to retake it from ISIS, supported by U S artillery and air power, but once the Caliphate's territorial holdings collapsed, the United States reduced its support of the SDF, the majority Kurdish militias it had previously backed. The Turkish government considered the YPG and the YPG, which made up the bulk of the Syrian Democratic Forces, to be nothing more than Kurdish terrorist groups, and they wanted to wipe them out.

In January of two thousand eighteen, the Turkish government launched Operation Olive Branch, and their soldiers invaded the Kurdish majority city of Afrin in Rojava. At this point, the United States still provided air cover and military aid to the sd F, but they withdrew their protection from the area around Afron.

The Turkish government began an ethnic cleansing campaign against the Kurds there, bulldozing cemeteries, confiscating homes and businesses, and moving in Arabs to change the demographics. Many saw the invasion of Afron as a grim prelude to what would happen to all of Rojava when the Trump administration finally withdrew its support and American soldiers.

I began to feel that perhaps there was a ticking clock on my chances to see this thing with my own eyes. By that point, the cause of the Rojavan Revolution had been taken up by left wing movements around the world. When I visited Athens in early two thousand eighteen, I saw protect Afron stickers up on light poles throughout the city.

[14:43]

One of my friends in Dallas held fundraisers for the Kurdish Red Crescent of Humanitarian Aid organization in the region. On left wing media, the story of Rojava attained mythic proportions. One representative example is this episode of the now defunct podcast The Guillotine, at the time, a popular far left news and politics show. I don't know you keep waiting around for a revolution.

These motherfucker's are walking around with anarchists, symbols painted on walls, hammers and sickers, sickles painted walls, a K forty seven. They're literally fighting against states, trying to destroy them. They're trying to create gender equality, They're putting property in common. They've eliminated fucking prisons and cops.

[15:23]

I mean, what what more? What what if this movement is too complicated for you and and not pure enough for you? To get involved in. You're gonna be waiting all goddamn day. Now, I knew a lot of that had to be wrong. For one thing, Roshava definitely had prisons, and there were numerous stories about the ones where they kept captured ISIS fighters. But at least some of the idealistic, anarchist wet dream stuff was in fact written into the Rojavan Constitution.

Here's how it starts. In pursuit of freedom, justice, dignity and democracy, and led by principles of equality and environmental sustainability, the charter proclaims a new social contract based upon mutual and peaceful coexistence and understanding between all strands of society.

It protects fundamental human rights and liberties, and reaffirms the people's right to self determination. This constitution declared all cantons, which are essentially states, and the autonomous regions to be founded upon the principle of local self government. Article twenty three of the constitution is particularly compelling to me.

[16:26]

It declares everyone has the right to express their ethnic, cultural, linguistic and gender rights, and everyone has the right to live in a healthy environment based on ecology balance. Under Article twenty six, all residents of the autonomous regions have the inherent right to life. Execution is banned in Rojava.

[16:46]

Article twenty seven guarantees women the inviolable right to participate in political, economic, and social life. Some parts of the constitution do run counter to the far left fantasies about Rojava. The Charter Esta wishes a police force the sayish and explicitly guarantees the right to private property, but it also guarantees the rights of children, prohibits monopolies in shrines labor rights, and guarantees a minimum representation of for either sex in the judiciary.

In short, the Rojavan Constitution represents what would be a shockingly progressive platform in the United States, let alone a chunk of rural northeast Syria. And this constitution was not just a pie in the sky dream cooked up by some left wing radical smoking weed in a basement.

[17:30]

At its height, three to four million people lived under this system, and more than two million people still do today. And right now you're probably wondering, how in the hell did any of this happen in the first place. That, my friends, is a weird and winding story, Like everything in the Middle East.

The origins of what's happening in Rojava stretch back many centuries, but for the sake of brevity, we will start with the tale of a Felon named Abdullah a Jelan now Aujelon is one of those folks who gets labeled as both a terrorist and a freedom fighter depending on who you ask, and to make matters more confusing, both of those terms are pretty accurate descriptions of the guy. He was born in nineteen forty eight.

[18:13]

Probably that's essentially a guest because Aujelon was born in a tiny village in eastern Turkey Oor merely and it was no one's priority to keep track of birth certificates back then. He was born part Turkish and part Kurdish in the eyes of the Turkish government, though that Kurdish part of him didn't exist from its beginning. The government of Turkey has had a weird obsession with denying the existence of non Turkish people's native to Anatolia.

When Aujolan was born, it was a crime to even speak the Kurdish language. He got a job working in civil service and eventually started teaching political science at the University of Ankara. As the years went by, Aujolon found himself more and more frustrated by the outright denial of Kurdish identity in Turkey.

[18:56]

To give you an idea of exactly how bad it is, in nineteen ninety one, Layla Zanna became the first Kurdish woman to win a seat in the Turkish Parliament. After she took her oath, she spoke this single sentence in Kurdish, I take this oath for the brotherhood between the Turkish people and the Kurdish people. Now, at that point nineteen nine one, Kurdish was still illegal to speak in public.

[19:18]

It had only been legalized to speak in private earlier that year. In videos of her speech, you can hear the immediate, almost violent response to her words. Layla was not jailed immediately for her actions because she had parliamentary immunity, but her brief Kurdish speech set at emotion a sequence of events that in nineteen ninety four led to her arrest and imprisonment for ten years.

This all happened in the nineties, when Turkey was working towards EU membership. In the nineteen sixties and seventies, when a Jolan was a young man, even speaking Kurdish and private was illegal, and as he grew more politically aware, Abdullah began nursing a deep rage over how his people were being treated.

In nineteen seventy four, he met up with between seven and eleven other young men who were furious at the status quo. They put together plans to build a Kurdish leftist organization, one unlike any political party that existed in Turkey. Augelan was elected the leader of this political youth group, which was initially just called the Epocular or the Followers of Appo.

Appo is Aujolan's nickname. It means uncle, and it's a word I was to hear hundreds of times throughout my days in Rajava. Over the next several years, the Apocular evolved into the p k K, which was officially established in nineteen seventy eight. It was initially a Marxist Leninist movement whose aim was the overthrow of the Turkish government.

In its early days, the p KK feuded with other left wing political parties, at times fighting their members in the streets and carrying out assassinations. Gradually, the movement morphed into a ragged guerrilla army, executing acts of sabotage and inciting riots against the Turkish state. In the early nineteen eighties, the p k K launched a mass of violence campaign aimed at destabilizing the government.

By nineteen eighty four, this had erupted into a full fledged insurgency, and the p k K were as vicious and brutal as any other insurgent movement in history. They frequently killed civilians who did not support them. The vast majority of their targets were Turkish soldiers or police, but they did not hesitate to murder innocent people who stood even non violently against them.

Throughout this period, Abdulla Agellon and his fellow leaders fled to the safety of Syria and dug in There. The Assad regime was hostile to Turkey and more than happy to sponsor rebels on their soil. For nearly twenty years, Augellan and his comrades ran one of the most brutal insurgent campaigns in history. Well relatively safe themselves under Hafez al Assad's protection.

Tens of thousands of people were killed, mostly by the Turkish government, but Apple was not squeamish about sending huge numbers of people to their deaths, and as in nearly all wars, most of the dead were civilians, normal people caught in the crossfire. Up to this point, the story of the pe KK and of dela Agelon sounds like the story of many other insurgent groups and their leaders.

But there was something that separated of de la Agelan from his blood soaked peers. He was capable of admitting his failures. In the early nineteen nineties, the b KK realized that their campaigns of indiscriminate violence had cost them the support of many civilians in the rural Turkish villages where they operated.

Aujelon ordered an end to the targeting of civilians. Abdullah's ideas about women were also evolving in this period. The first p KK women's organization had been formed in nineteen eighty six. Seven years later, in nineteen ninety four, Augelon created the first all female military unit. Now this was not entirely a new idea.

[22:57]

Iranian Kurdish rebel groups had experimented with female ele military units back in the early nineteen eighties. But Aujelan did more than just crib ideas from his fellow revolutionaries. He committed himself to fighting for improvements in women's rights. Along with his bloody guerrilla struggle.

Aujelon, the unquestioned leader of a violent authoritarian insurgent army, started asking his men to cook for their wives.

He wanted women's time freed up for armed training and ideological study. Aujelon's political view shifted considerably throughout the nineteen eighties and nineteen nineties. While once to committed Marxist Leninist dedicated to the global struggle of the proletariat, Augelon softened into more of a moderate socialist. In nineteen ninety six, he named Germany as an example of a socialist state he supported.

In nineteen ninety nine, Abdulla Agelan was captured on the Lamb in Kenya thanks to a multinational intelligence operation. He was jailed on an island prison named Mrali and the Sea of Marmara, and he remains there to this day, alone in his small cell, guarded by a thousand men. He began to delve in a Sumerian mythology and history textbooks focused on Neolithic humanity.

He grew convinced that the root of all authoritarianism the essential moment in which human civilization had gone wrong? Was the domination of women by men. Prisons seemed to have wrought a permanent change over Augelon. Whether this was a coldly calculated plea for mercy from a brutal terrorist warlord or the very real evolution of a man reconsidering his past.

Abdullah's new ideas had a profound impact on the p k K, for he was still their leader. Augelon wrote book after book about his new theories. He smuggled them out of prison by hiding them as legal briefs sent to the lawyers who were permanently appealing his court case.

[24:44]

As the years went by, Augalon's politics evolved further. He came across the work of Moray Bokchin, a Jewish American writer and anarchist philosopher who, like Augelon, had once been a Marxist Bookshin had been one of the very first people, back in nineteen sixty five to be warning humanity about climate change. He believed this looming crisis required a fundamental shift in reordering of society away from capitalism and towards a less destructive, more egalitarian society.

Libertarian municipalism is the system he eventually proposed for this reordering. In brief, libertarian municipalism calls for a radical participatory democracy, with every person having an equal say over the matters that affect them directly.

[25:29]

Local communities in this system should govern themselves directly through citizens assemblies and elect recallable representatives who coordinate and communicate with other communities. The goal is to prevent situations like we have in the modern United States, where voters in a city make laws to govern the lives of people in vastly different rural communities, and vice versa. Book Chain believe this system would also make it easier to form an ecologically responsible society.

No community would vote to have, say, an incredibly toxic oil refinery in their own backyard. Book Chin wrote in nineteen ninety one that libertarian municipalism is not merely a political strategy. It is an effort to work from latent or incipient democratic possibilities towards a radically new configuration of society itself, a communitarian society oriented towards meeting basic human needs, responding to ecological imperatives, and developing a new ethics based on sharing and cooperation.

That it involves a consistently independent form of politics is a truism. More important, it involves a redefinition of politics, a return to the words original Greek meaning as the management of the community or police by reasons of direct, face to face assemblies of the people in the formulation of public policy, and based on an ethics of complimentarily and solidarity locked up in m orally, book Chin's ideas merged with Aujolon's own theories about history and feminism.

He named his ideal system democrat at a Confederalism and published an essay laying out how it should work in two thousand eleven.

This became one of the foundational documents of the political system in Rojava, and so through this very unlikely chain of custody, the ideas of a fringe American anarchist thinker became the foundation of a system that more than three million people live in today over in Syria.

It is easily one of the unlikeliest things that's ever happened. From my perspective as a journalist, judging how real everything in Rojava was was complicated by the impressive level of pr savvy that can be found among the Kurds in Iraq and Syria. It started back in nineteen eighty eight when Saddam Hussein began gassing Iraqi Kurds and world attention was drawn to their plight by Iranian and British journalists who filled the massacres from the air.

Ever since, Kurdish movements have had an intense appreciation and a deep gut understanding of how the power of the global press can be harnessed to help their movements for liberation, and so as the SDF advanced against ISIS, they did so with the aid of a BRU and social media campaign which spread footage of the beautiful young women of the YPG squaring off against fundamentalist militias.

Regular Twitter videos of liberated towns showed women discarding their veils in Ni Cobbs. This sort of content was true, these things were actually happening, but it was also a targeted propaganda campaign aimed at warming the hearts of liberals and conservatives alike back in the West. The Good Wild campaign succeeded in drumming up support for Rojava around the planet.

It also drew in hundreds of international volunteers, mostly young men and women from around Europe and North America, who traveled to Rojava to fight and to help build a new egalitarian society. The stories of these international volunteers created something of a sensation, particularly within the global left wing media ecosystem.

The revolutionaries of Rojava position themselves as the tip of the spear in the global battle against creeping fascism. In late two thousand seventeen, after the deadly Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Anarchist International SDF volunteers posted pictures of them selves with an anti fascist action flag the Antipha flag you might have seen it rallies, and the words from Mojava to Charlottesville, Solidarity with all anti fascists Avenge heather Higher.

Some of this messaging was carefully coordinated by different organizations in Rojava, like the Syrian Democratic Forces, but a lot of it, including the Avenge Heather Higher photo, was ad hoc and grassroots, a product of the fact that this revolution genuinely drew in large numbers of committed leftists from around the world.

These people saw themselves as inheritors of a great anti fascist tradition, the spiritual successors of the leftist partisans who first fought fascism during the Spanish Civil War and the members of the French, German and Italian resistance movements. During World War Two, Kurdish fighters in Syria began to adopt foreign anti fascist anthems as the soundtrack to their revolution.

This ranged from revamped versions of old Irish militant folk music to covers of rage against the Machine songs to the old Italian anti fascist anthem, the Chow Chow. Bela Chow means goodbye beautiful, and in its original incarnation, it was a protest song by female laborers and the patty fields of northern Italy.

After Mussolini came to power, a new version of the song was adopted by anti fascist freedom fighters, and Bela Chow grew into an international anthem of freedom and resistance in Kurdish culture. The adoption of Bela Chow goes back to at least two thousand and nine, when Iranian Kurdish filmmaker as San Fatahian made a YouTube video which he dedicated to the Kurdish people and all people struggling for freedom.

Fatahan felt a powerful emotional connection to the anti fascist version of the song, which centers on a partisan waking up in the morning to find a fascist soldier at his door. The partisan and the song accepts his duty, which is to die a beautiful death struggling for freedom, and he expresses his hope that he will be buried in the mountains and a flower will bloom over his grave.

Fatajan's own death came later in two thousand nine, when the Iranian government executed him for being a member of a Kurdish militant group. In two fourteen, the Kurdish singer Chia Madani

released the cover of Bella Chow that you just heard, set over video of the men and women of the YPG and J marching into battle against Isis.

[31:21]

The positioning of Rojava as part of this global struggle against fascism was simultaneously canny, an intelligent way to get international support, and also a large risk to their political support from some of the governments of the world. Anti fascism is, shall we say, a touchy political stance in this part of the twenty first century. In two thousand nineteen, the histories of Italian and Kurdish anti fascism and the history of the song Belli Chow merged rather tragically in the death of Lorenzo Orsetti.

Lorenzo was an Italian citizen, a cook, waiter and somalier from Florence who grew inspired by the Rojavan Revolution and joined the STF as a foreign volunteer. He died fighting Isis in March of two thousand and nineteen, and during his funeral service, men and women sang Beli chow in both Italian and Kurdish Lacha lachachachacha Roa.

In the spring of two thousand nineteen, the stars finally aligned to allow me to visit. My podcast Behind the Bastards took off that year.

Right around the same time, I wrote several articles in the wake of the christ Church massacre that went very viral. I launched a fundraiser and asked my fans to support my desire to do more conflict journalism. To my utter shock, they raised more than forty thou dollars. I now had the opportunity in the funding. All I needed was a way to get into Rojava and get the access I needed to learn the truth about its system.

I reached out to a colleague of mine, Jake Hanrahan. Jake is a four A reporter from Vice and currently an independent journalist. He has a podcast called Popular front that focuses on the gigy details of modern conflict. Back in two thousand fifteen, Jacob found himself as the only Western journalist in southern Turkey during an uprising by a Kurdish youth militia, the y d g H or yet aga Hash.

It started when he received a message from a Turkish contact of his telling him that the y d g H had taken over a small city in southern Turkey named Jizra. Well, I was there in January when that happened. By the summer all it was total. So like they you know, all the different towns basically set up why d H franchises.

And it went from being like the youth going like yeah, we've got some rifles, which you know everybody does down there, so the p k K coming the adults coming down from the mountains where they're kind of hide out and training them up and being like this is how you build a bomb, this is how you do this, this is how you do this. So I was like fuck, it went there straight there, and you know, with two of my colleagues and yeah, man, it was crazy.

We just saw like PKK gerrillas in like civilian clothes being like we're the hy dg H. And it was like, what you're thirty five, Like you know what I mean, Like you're not the White d H. But then we were seeing like, you know, eighteen year olds becoming like pure militants, you know. So yeah, that's kind of my history with a film of them.

As you know, that went bad, we got arrested and sent to jail for a little bit. Jake and his crew spent several harrowing days in a Turkish prison, incarcerated with a mix of refugees and ISIS fighters. He was obviously freed and returned to England. The whole experience sparked in him a fascination with Rojava. He started studying the movement and making connections to the people in the area. Since he'd been arrested covering a Kurdish uprising, he had sort of an in that most Western journalists lacked.

It was a little like having done time for the mob. Even though as a journalist covering the White d g H, Jake had not been entirely sympathetic to the movement. In fact, we were actually questioning him. I was like, why are you shooting like police officers, like they're not, you know, they're just policing the air that used their job, you know, So to be honest, like some of it was quite critical.

Between Jake's connections in Syria and my friends in Iraq, we were able to put together a rough plan for getting into Rojava. It was sort of unclear up until the last moment whether we'd be able to

cross the border legally with the permission of the Iraqi government, or if we'd have to pay a smuggler to sneak us in. Either way, both Jake and I were committed to trying, so in July I plopped down three thousand dollars on airfare.

I had to be careful to make sure I didn't accidentally book Jacob leover and is Standbul. He is quite literally a wanted man in Turkey. Jake's main job was to find us a fixer, and fixers are a mix between a journalist and interpreter, a tour guide and a security adviser, or at least the good ones are. They helped foreign journalists find stories, gain access, and conduct interviews in war zones.

The quality of your fixer largely determines the quality of your story. When I was working in Mosle, I'd had the extreme fortune of working with two of the very best fixers in Iraq, Sangar Eel and I are was Sul. Most of the journalists working in Syria, we're all going after the same stories, interviews with captured ISIS fighters and ISIS brides.

World media only really wanted stories from Syria that involved ISIS. I wanted to capture something different, an exploration of the Rojavan revolution, of this women's war and how it had transformed society. To get that story, we were going to need the very best fixer we could find.

A couple of weeks before our flight, Jake reached out to me with the name Kabat a Bass. His sources said she was good, very good, but neither of us had met her. Picking Kabat was a roll of the dice, as these things always are. Thankfully, it would turn out to be one of the luckiest rolls of my life. For the trip from Iraq to Rojava, we leaned on my old friends Sangar.

I had spent days watching him smooth talk Iraqi generals into letting us in bed with troops at the bleeding edge of the fighting, and Mosle Jake, and I figured he could probably talk his way through any issues we had at the border. With all that settled, the only thing left to do was to actually fly to the Middle East. I'm on my way first to Dubai, where I have a fifteen hour layover, so about fifteen hours in the air and about a fifteen hour layover.

The nice thing about that is that the hotels in Dubai are really luxurious and very cheap. The journey to Iraq from the West coast of the United States is not a simple one. It started with a four hour flight from my home to Los Angeles, and then a one hour layover, and then a thirteen hour flight to Dubai, and then a fifteen hour layover and then a short hop to Suleimania. I had a lot of time for reading during all that, and during the final flight of my journey I finished reading George Orwell's Homage to Catalonia.

It's a book about that famous author's time as a volunteer soldier fighting against fascists in the Spanish Civil War. George Orwell had rather complex political views. Most people would probably sum them up as broadly socialist, but more than anything, he was anti authoritarian, so in the late nineteen thirties he traveled to Spain to fight alongside anarchists and communists, battling desperately to stim the onslaught of the deadliest ideology mankind has ever produced.

In the book, he described his attitude in going over this way, I had promised myself to kill one fascist.

[38:14]

After all, if each of us killed one, they would soon be extinct. Sadly, for Orwell and the world, the struggle of the Spanish anti fascists ended in defeat, and it was a defeat that began within their own ranks. The anarchists who had started the struggle against Francisco Franco were outmaneuvered by social democrats and communists. Many of them were purged violently by the people who should have been their comrades or well.

Watched in horror as his friends and battle buddies were arrested and executed. He barely escaped Spain with his own life intact. Musing over the tragedy. Months later, he wrote, the fact is that every war suffers a kind of progressive degradation with every month that it continues, because things such as individual liberty and a truthful press are simply not compatible with military efficiency. The situation Rojava has more than a few parallels with the Spanish Civil War, and as my plane descended into

Sulimania Airport in Iraqi, Kurdistan, I couldn't help but wonder if I too was stumbling into the last days of an equally beautiful, doomed effort.

Jan game Moy The Women's War is a production of I Heart Radio.

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2. Sneaking Into Utopia

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All Episodes

Welcome to the Women's War, a production of I Heart Radio. Americans learned about the world through the lens of war. Before Isis emerged, most Americans probably wouldn't have been able to tell you what occurred was in any detail. Today, if asked, those same Americans would probably say, they're the folks who helped us fight ISIS, or maybe they're the people Trump just betrayed because modern media cannot abide nuance.

The Kurds in Iraq and the Kurds in Syria tend to get lumped into the same bucket, but Iraki Curtis stand and Syrian Rojava are two very different places. The Kurdish Autonomous Region in Northern Iraq has its origins in ninete one, when the United States and her allies established a no fly zone in order to stop Saddam Hussein from murdering more Kurdish people.

This was maintained in one form or another up until the two thousand two invasion. As a result, Northern Iraq was spared the worst excesses of Saddam's regime. After that point, the Iraqi Kurds were given space to build their chunk of country into something very much resembling an independent state as a result. While most of the country fell into violent chaos after the U S invasion, Northern Iraq blossomed.

Its local militious collectively referred to as the Peshmerga, succeeded in providing an exceptional degree of security, and with security came economic investment. Over the course of a decade, Iraqi Kurdistan built rapidly and capitalized on their substantial oil reserves. Skyscrapers went up all around the capital their bill and for a time, pundits claimed the city would soon be the Middle East's next Tobai.

That dream came crashing to the ground in two thousand fourteen when Isis invaded. Investment money dried up, construction halted abruptly. The city has recovered somewhat today, but its skyline is still dotted with dozens of skeletal skyscrapers forever abandoned. The fault for this is not purely with Isis.

Outrageous corruption within the Kurdish Regional Government or k r G also played a role. The Kurdish Regional Government is, on its face, a democratic system, one where women are guaranteed thirty of the seats in the one and eleven seat regional parliament. Now, the the KRG Kurdish Regional Government is separate but technically subordinate to the government in Baghdad.

The closest parallel in American politics would probably be to compare the Kara Ge to something like a Native American reservation. Although it's it's still a lot different than that um Iraqi. Kurdistan is independent, though in in a lot of the ways that matter, but not all of them. It's still rely on funding from Baghdad and the like, but they have their own military force, the Peschi Marka, who are made up from the militias of the two largest political parties in the region.

It's a little bit like if the Republican and Democratic parties each controlled half the military, and it works about as well as you'd expect that to work. Now, everyone who spends any amount of time in Iraq will agree that the kaya Ge is much better at running things than the government in Baghdad. But considering the Baghdad government spent the winter of two thousand nineteen machine gunning protesters, this is a pretty low bar.

No bis, this gets done in Kurdistan without a lot of bribe, money, greasing a lot of palms. The KRG is a hell of a lot more functional than the government in Baghdad, but it basically exists to siphon off cash to a handful of wealthy families. At the top of the heap are there Barzanis and the Talibanis, whose many scions are basically Kurdish nobility.

Or Bill is a city where you can see penniless refugees and millionaires driving escalates on the very same street. In other words, it's a lot like Los Angeles. Jake and I landed in Sulimania in the early afternoon July eighteenth, two thousand nineteen. We were met by a driver, a friend of a friend, who would take us on the five hour drive to her Bill. Now the drive shouldn't really be five hours long, but the roads in between Sulimania and her Bill are filled with potholes in random debris.

We have to slow to a near stop every few minutes in order to navigate them. Some of my local friends say the poor state of Kurdistan's roads is an understandable lapse given the giant war the government just fought. Others say there'd be plenty of money for road work if it weren't all going to the barsanis the patron of the family, Massoud Barzani is worth an estimated forty eight billion dollars.

The state of California, with roughly eight times the population of Iraqi. Kurdistan spent one point six billion dollars maintaining its state highways in two thousand and nineteen. You do the math. Graft is not the Kyrg's only problem. Rank nepotism is another major issue.

[04:25]

Massoud Barzani was the president of the Kyrgi until June two thousand nineteen, when he was succeeded by his nephew, Natschervin. Prior to being elected president, Natschervin was the Prime Minister of the KRG. He was succeeded in office there by mass Rua Barzani, Masud's son. There's a lot to love about this part of the world, but the sheer scale of the corruption and the unbelievable bullshit regular people here have to put up with as a result of it, it's it's just infuriating.

We have to wait a day and a half in our bill for our fixer. My old friends sang Are to square things away with the border crossing into Rojava, so Jake and I see the sites and swing by the mall to pick up a couple of last minute bits of equipment. I spend most of my time working my way through Iraqi. Kurdis stands shockingly good selection of international beers. I settle on Moosehead, an odd brew from New Brunswick, Canada.

I developed an appreciation for it during my days in Halifax. I had my first Moosehead on a nude beach in Nova Scotia. It feels strange, to say the least, to drink one in the blistering heat of an Iraqi summer. On our last night in her Bill, twelve hours before we're set to drive to Rojava, Jake and I are in a cab on our way to dinner. The driver has the radio turned to a local pop station, and the music is a ragged selection of hits from the last couple of years.

There's a lot of talk of champagne, bottles and clubs and brand new cars and all that sort of stuff. At one point, the host, who speaks in flawless English, tells her listeners a story she's heard about Charlemagne the God. Apparently when he goes on tour. He flies four of his very good friends around with him everywhere he goes so that they can hang out and stuff, and she absolutely cannot get over how cool this sounds.

The host of voice takes on a mournful tone when she says, I just want that life so bad. The pain in her voice is palpable. As I listen to this, I think about Murray book Chin here and her bill. The primary influences from the United States are pretty obvious celebrity obsession, displays of conspicuous wealth, marvel t shirt, star wars, posters, all of the cultural gifts that Hollywood has distributed to the world.

But just a few hours away in Northeast Syria, the United States's main contribution to the culture there was the work of an obscure anarchist philosopher. Globalism is a fucking Roulette wheel. We eat and head back to the hotel.

[06:38]

I go to bed thinking about Murray book Chin and Charlemagne the God. Jake and I wake up at seven am on July excited that today is finally the day we will both see Rojava. All right, Jake, it's Saturday morning. A feeling man, You're fiting good minute fresh. Yeah. Yeah, what about what two and a half hours three hours from the border from when? Yeah, and we like three hours there? What he messed around for like a couple of hours waiting from stumps and then go across and then do another couple I was waiting for stumps on the OtherSide.

Yeah, it will be a long day of waiting for stamps. Yep. Sangar picks us up in his brand new Toyota four by four. I first met him in two thousand and seventeen during the Siege of Mosle.

[07:28]

Sangar probably has the highest tolerance for danger of anyone I've ever met, and that's saying something. Some of my fondest memories at the times we drove away from the death defying trips to the front line, he'd always stopped at a little shack on the road back to her Bill and buy us all knockoff Heineken's hen Kins. Those lukewarm beers in his car tasted better than any alcohol I've had before or since. As we drive to the border, Sangar tells us about his previous trips to Rojava.

He goes there to work, obviously, but also for fun. When Ramadan comes around during the daytime, most of a rack shuts down and alcohol sales are officially forbidden. On those days, Rojaba becomes a Kurdish drinkers oasis. So you don't feel there's ramana in here. I know. It's like um that the restaurants they have to have like what you call the big rocks, you know, like they cover, they cover the restaurant.

They're no fun, no, I know, like the tea shops, restaurants are opening like it's normal. There's no religion in Rojavva. No, there's no just upper religion, just up religion. Yeah, you know, like you don't feel it's romana here. You're feeling you know, yeah if you you cannot smoke everywhere here, you know, like you cannot smoking public, you cannot smoking with But like there it is so rare to find someone who's fasting with Ramanani.

No one ramana. So that's even like for drinks beer, and you're like, I don't find them easily. That's great. The radio continues to play as we drive along, mostly hip hop ballads of Hollywood wealth at ex Us.

They make for a strange contrast with the yellow Sun racked countryside of northern Iraq. Much of Kurdistan is gorgeous, but not this area. We roll past dismal, gray villages and over broken roads to the tune of bubbly pop music. We noticed an unusual amount of Iraqi military traffic on the road to the Syrian border.

No one knows why precisely, but we assume it's due to something that happened on July sevente the day before we landed in Iraq. While I was still in the sky, two unidentified gunmen had walked into an Herbille restaurant and opened fire on a group of Turkish diplomats. One of those diplomats was killed, along with a civilian. Now, nothing more than that was known at the time we landed, but I will say that one of the people we talked to you just assumed this had been an attack carried out by the p k K.

If you'll think back to the last episode, the p KK is that left wing militant group founded by a Dola Agolan that the the U S and Turkey both considered to be terrorists. As Kurdish Turkish militants, they have a fraud relationship with the cur Dish regional government in Iraq. Now their FELLO occurred.

[10:02]

So a lot of the actual people who live in northern Iraq under the ki rgs you know, domain or at least broadly sympathetic to the p kk's goals. But the kara Ji's government, dominated by the Barzani family, has been making increasing diplomatic overtures and having more and more conversations and making more deals with the Turkish regime for years now. They want better relations with Turkey for variety of political and practical reasons, but this has been regularly stymied by the fact that the PEKK has a bunch of bases in northern Iraq and regularly attacks Turkish soldiers.

Meanwhile, Turkey regularly bombs northern Iraq, which the KYRG is not super happy with either. It's a messy and it's a fraud situation, and it complicates relations between Rojava and the Kurdish regional government in Iraq.

Iraqi. Kurdistan is also one of the most capitalist places on the planet and Rojava system is very much founded by far left radicals uh and particular among these radicals are members of the p y D or the Democratic Union Party of Syria. I really apologized for all the acronyms. There's just no other way to tell the story. The p y D is the largest political party in Rojava, and most of the early organization in the region after the Assad regime pulled out was done by the p y D and its members.

Now, the Turkish government considers the p y D to be terrorists as well, and says they're basically just a wing of the p k K. And to make matters more complicated, there's a lot of p KK involvement in the p y D, So it's a mess. The whole situation is almost unbearably complex and and and messy and complicated.

But um, the most important thing to know at this point is that it wasn't exactly strange for us to see the Kurdish regional government sending more soldiers to the border with Rojava in response to a p KK assassination in their capital. Stuff like that has happened before. And I spent a lot of the ride talking the situation over with Jake and sang Are and trying to make sense of it all in my own head.

I know it's confusing. As we talk all this over, we wind up hitting the first border checkpoint at around noon, a place called pesh Kebar, a small crowd of perhaps two people are already waiting to cross.

These are Syrian civilians. Many of them fled the civil war years ago. They recently decided the situation was safe enough to return, and they're headed back for a long awaited reunion with their families. A few months from now, after the Turkish invasion, many of these same people will become refugees yet again. We leave the air conditioned comfort of Sangar's car and head to the office where our fate, or at least our ability to cross legally into Rojaba, will be decided.

She's going to okay, come and then we go to the music. All right. Quadrett is the gatekeeper of the border control station. She's one of the few women I've met in Kurdistan who holds a significant role in the government.

She is essentially the intermediary for the people who decide which journalists are journalists enough to get to go to Northeast Syria. Of course, Jake and I worked with Sangar to set things up ahead of time, but having things set up ahead of time means almost nothing in a place like Iraq. We are led into a small room with surprisingly good a c where another Western journalist waits for his credentials. Quadrat looks our paperwork over and deliver some bad news.

We've been denied. Permission to cross the y is not immediately clear. We appear to have run a foul of Iraqi bureaucracy, so we continue to sit and wait. Time sledges by minutes than an hour than two. We wait with a motley, quiet assortment of other reporters from around the world. They filter in and out, and all of their approval processes seem to go much better than our own.

From over in Rojava, Kabbat are soon to be. Fixer texts us that we have a three pm appointment with the sash Kurdish military police to get our approval pass to work in Rojava, as it's already well passed. One Jake begins to suspect we will not make it in time for this meeting. He winds up being right. Only after interminable weight do we find out what the problem was that when you sent an email come on go was they filled to the online media right radio.

It turns out that some of the papers I submitted to the Iraqi government listed my employer as I Heart Media rather than I Heart Radio.

This would not be an issue anywhere else in the world, but to the iraqis the word media made us sound like a PR firm and the only one journalists to crossover. Quadrette understands the mistake here, but both of her hands are tied up in the red tape that makes up roughly three fourths of the mass of the Iraqi government. The only man who can turn our no into a yes as a fellow named Dr Hamide.

He's in charge of approving reporters. Unfortunately, Dr Hamid lives in Sweden, where it is currently night time. We call him repeatedly for more than an hour, texting and dialing on multiple phones. Hello, Dr Hamide, this is Robert Evans with I Heart Radio. UM. I'm calling because we're here at the border crossing station and we're trying to get across and we've already got, you know, an emailed approval, but they're saying that we need your approval to get across, and there was some sort of confusion about us being a media company or a radio company.

At two thirty six pm, still waiting in the press office with quadrat I wright encircle the phrase fuck borders in my notebook.

It is a sentiment I felt often throughout my adult life, but rarely so acutely. Rojava, this place I've been reading about for years is right over there. I could literally swim across the Tigris and be there in thirty minutes, but because of a line on paper drawn by dead French and British assholes, I cannot. It's frustrating, to say the least.

But at the end of it all, Dr Hamid's approval finally comes through a little after three PMLA. Before we can go, there's still a little more bureaucracy for us to weather though. First we're questioned by the Iraqi Ritish Asaish in the mildest way possible. They ask us basic questions about our plans and then stamp our documents.

[16:06]

The whole process takes around thirty minutes, and it mostly consists of us handing our passports to numerous cops, who passed them around to other cops, who passed them around to more cops before handing them back to us. It's a perfect illustration of bureaucracy in a nutshell. We bid goodbye to Sangar and we take our place in line for the bus into Rojava. Everyone else on the rickety steel contraption is either a refugee or Assyrian with business interests over in Iraq.

Many of them are young children, excited to be back home. We cross the bus rumbling over a massive pontoon bridge. Crossing the Tigris is always a strange sensation for me. The river has an almost mythic presence in my mind. Growing up. It felt like the kind of location Indiana Jones would stumble onto during an adventure.

It feels sacred and heavy, with the strange kind of gravity that only the deepest history imparts to a place. But it is in the end to another river, and our crossing is uneventful. We are officially driving across Rojava for the first time. On the other side of the Tigris, it's a quick, dusty jaunt to the border crossing station.

The contrast is immediate and obvious. On the Iraqi side of the border, everything was clearly temporary, prefabricated office buildings, trailers and tarps, things that can quickly be torn down once the political situation changes. The Rujavan border control station however, is a massive stone edifice with a large duty free building still under construction and a suite of permanent offices.

In front of the station is a billboard covered in the brightly colored faces of young men and women soldiers in the WHITEPG and J who died fighting isis The meaning of all of this is quite clear. Rejava

paid for its sovereignty and blood and it's here to stay. Something in the air seems to change the moment we cross the border, and it's more than just the quality of the buildings.

We see women in uniforms, suddenly sizable numbers of them clearly doing important work. Even the women out of uniforms seemed to carry themselves differently. And the first of these women that we meet is our fixer, Kabat. She's in her mid twenties, about five ft six and thin, with a warm smile, piercing eyes, and an immediate get the funk to business attitude.

She rushes us through the bureaucratic necessities, hurrying the border officials along when they go too slowly for her, liking the people who run things in Rojava, the p y D and the SDF from the Sundry, other acronym organizations and ministering this place. They're all recognized as terrorist groups by the Turkish government. If any of these organizations were to, say, stamp a journalist passport, it might cause that person a lot of unpleasantness when they had a layover and is stand bull on the way back home.

So instead of stamping our passports, the Rajavan authorities give us a thin strip of paper with our personal information and several stamps on it. This is our internal passport. The whole process of getting it takes about a half hour, and then we're in the van. Alan Kabat's chain smoking driver takes off down the highway, giving us our first good look at the land itself.

Wow, it's beautiful. As soon as we get past the hill and it's just like mountains and valleys and hills and green, more grain than you see in Iraq. This would not remain true for our whole trip through Rojava, but it was definitely true of the first couple of miles of terrain we saw. After crossing the border.

We get to talking with Kabat and I try to sound out some of her opinions. I mentioned that when we were in our bill Jake and I had driven past the Barzani family palace, a massive compound significantly larger than a city block. Yeah. Yeah. Kabat immediately defined capitalism as something we don't want in ro Java, which was interesting to me, but she also acknowledged that the system in place was a very weird hybrid of capitalism that was kind of duct taped to leftist political theory.

Java has taken a lot of criticism for this from Western leftists and even from some foreign volunteers. Kabat, for her opinion, expresses that this kind of hybrid system is really the only option right now given the realities of war.

We are that we're protected to that level. They are still yeah, because it's too confused to build a new system, which she is not. And it's interfare and everything. So now it's unshapped, you know, it's like just completely our system. It's not to it's half capitalists have communists have nothing.

[20:27]

I don't know. It's like a cultural best all the are the culture. It's just not clear state, you know, shaped, it haven't been shaped it. So we are struggling to always be aware, like, look, we don't capitalist system. We don't want to the communist completely system. We donna something which is stud with our touchant or you know, history and everything.

But for sure not as a couch. This is everywhere now, she said, but for sure not as the KRG there. And she's stating her opinion that in her eyes, most of the believers in the Rojava project are looking for something new, something that hasn't been done before, that will work better than the stuff that has been tried there in other places in the world. And there's not really widespread agreement on how that new thing will work in every instance, or exactly what it will be.

But they have looked at the border, at the thing going on right next to them, and they have decided that that's something they don't want to have. As we roll into Derek, the first city we see in Rojava, it's obvious that this region does not have the same rampant wealth disparity we saw across the border. No one is rich in Rojava, or at least they don't appear that way on the surface.

But no one seems crippling lee poor either. We don't see any fancy New German cars or glittering malls. We do, however, see miles and miles of tunnels being constructed by the SDF defensive prepa-

rations for the imminent Turkish invasion. I mean, is it kind of like kind of just accepted that that's going to happen.

[21:58]

It's always all the about said, like we haven't seen the arient. Yeah, you know, always that The funny thing that how we prepared after all these sizes if it's everyone attack us? But now when were they are preparing? That's mean there is something very big, you know. So we are a friend? Why you are prepared? We use it to not prepare.

It's an awkward subject, namely due to the fact that the invasion of Rojaba can only happen if the United States pulls its troops out and abandons the region to Turkey's dictator. Are I take it people don't have a lot of faith in the United States is going to continue? Yeah, exactly, we don't. Never never, We're not great friends.

The Turkish border is so close. We can see the massive wall constructed by Edwin's government, a towering concrete edifice topped with wire and backed by guard towers. It's the kind of wall Donald Trump dreams about at night. The knowledge that NATO's second largest army sat looming behind.

It was deeply unsettling to all of us, but Hubbat seemed to take the looming specter of doom in stride. It's infuriating. Yeah, I don't know. Maybe the election will make a difference. Which election the in the United States? Day by day? That makes sense. Yeah, we're gonna struggle for sure, we are not.

It's good if not. We're started. Isn't there saying around here that's like struggle is life? For resistance is like something like that. Even but Gianna, how much you resistance? How much you are alone? Yeah.

[24:13]

During our drive into Derek, we noticed that dozens of metal storefronts have been painted with three leaf clovers. On a deep laugh under background, Kabat informs us that those metal grades used to be covered in Syrian regime flags. Once the regime was gone, she says, people in town decided to paint them over with something more feminine. As we head to our hotel for night, Kabat explains that tomorrow we will visit the city of Kamishlo.

Kamischlow's very name is a matter of political significance. Like the Turkish government, the Syrian government for years suppressed Kurdish identity. This meant suppressing the Kurdish name of the city Kamischlow, in favor of something more Arabic. And we see not the people.

[24:59]

How I've been fire than tortune because of this all during the regime time. I remember one of the doctor because he just tried his name and they said they to place that clinic is okay, and he have been arrested, that tortured because of the Remember, it's like identity, you know, think, I'm just I'm sure it's the same thing in Turkey, right, Kurd's being murdered because they use their language.

You're like, yeah, but it's funny how many years I change in the name of the places to Arabic names and never starve in population is still using the naches, you know. The conversation comes to a close as we roll up to the Inn Deir Hotel, which I will come to learn it's probably the nicest hotel in all of Rojaba.

It's so new that the interior walls shine largely because some of them are still wrapped in glossy protective plastic. The air conditioning works as long as there's power, which is mercive about eight of the time. There's a large TV in one corner of the lounge, and when we enter, it's showing the Kevin Hart Ice Cube movie right along.

The subtitles are all in Arabic. This will prove to be the single most baffling thing I see during my journey through Java. The hotel is occupied primarily by foreign reporters.

[26:25]

Habat checks us in and negotiates on the price while Jake and I sit down and have our first good coffee of the day. For a while, we just sit there, taking in the fact that we've made it. We're here. Journalists from the BBC and Vice filter in and out, and we meet a photographer from Greece along with a female Welsh journalist, who sit and have coffee with us. A few minutes later, Jake's friend Shea enters. Now, Shia is a mountain curd.

He lives somewhere on the edge of Iraq and Iran. He's a tall, lanky young man with a quick wit and a general air that reminds me of my comedian friends back in Los Angeles. Jake and Sheia had pre obviously worked together, and now Shia was leading another team of reporters through Rojava. It's late in the afternoon by the time we check into our rooms. Kabat bids us farewell for the night. It's an hour or so for her to drive up to Komischla, where she lives.

She and a lawn will return in the morning to start our first full day in Rojava. The sun is beginning to set, and then wasn't the Islamic call to Prayer begins to play. I head up to the roof of the hotel with my new colleagues to watch my first sunset in Rojava. This is the nicest part of Java.

Yeah, I'm glad. We are glad we came here. Derek is a lovely town with some elevation to help you take it in. My first impression is that it's green and clean, although you know, rather run down. It is full of people bustling, but not crowded. The other journalists tell me that Kamischelo is a very different place.

[28:13]

It's doubled in size from four thousand to nearly a million people since the start of the revolution, and they describe it as dirty, dangerous, and strained, a symbol of the precarious nature of Rojava itself. After a while, I ask my new friends what they think about this place. How real is this Rojavan revolution really in their eyes? Everyone agrees that what's been achieved here is significant. The difference in women's rights alone is staggering.

The serried militias of the STF are obviously good fighters, but in terms of the fantastic promises of the Rojavan constitution and the transformative theories of Abdula Jelan and Moray book Chin, well, they have doubts about these. In particular, my colleagues wonder how deep the changes of this revolution will really prove.

[28:56]

When push comes to shove with the Turkish government. We get together. Jake and I are new friends in Shia, and we head to a local restaurant for food and numerous tall bottles of FS, a Turkish beer. While we eat, Siah tells us about one of the Arab tribes in the area, the Akashant, near a town called Hassekah. They're a tribe who has been integrated effectively into the SDF, despite the fact that they're very traditional beliefs clash with the leftist ideals that have made Rojava an international Darling some people will point to this compromises evidence that the Rojavan project is a farce.

These local tribes hold distinctly regressive attitudes towards the role of women and religion in society, but Sia says the sdf's acceptance of them as a wise and pragmatic acknowledgement of on their ground reality. He tells us, if you want to make an impact and keep things settled, you have to go through the tribes.

In general, Sia is fatalistic about the future of Rojava. He mean says no words in stating his belief that the whole project is likely doomed since there's almost no chance the Americans will continue to keep troops in the region. That said, I also detect a certain tinge of pride in his voice when he talks about what's been accomplished here.

[30:03]

When I show him the internal passport I received at the border station, he tells me take good care of that it was bought in blood. He explains that the current situation, the stability Rojava enjoys, and the fact that a formal border crossing even exists, these are all direct products of the sacrifice of thousands of lives. I tell him, I've been reading over the Rojavan Constitution, and I ask how much of it he thinks is real.

He tells me, when it comes to the constitution, most of it's happening, but when it comes to the communalism, most of it's not happening. Syrians are used to a hundred years of entrenched bureaucracy. Now she speaks almost as many languages as I have fingers, and he rattles through them over the course of the night. As he communicates with driver's white staff and orders the last round of take home beers from the manager of the restaurant, he seems to be as fluent and Kormage, Kurdish and Arabic as he is in English.

Someone asks him what language he dreams in, and he responds dreaming has no language. Align my drunken brains finds significant enough to take down in my notebook. We returned to the hotel and stagger up to the rooftop for our nightcap. One of my new friends tells us about his first days in Syria at the beginning of the civil War, when the YPG and J, the two militias that make up most of the SDF, were two relatively insignificant groups in a nation that had rapidly filled with militants.

He credits their success with their great fighting ability, but also expresses doubts that the most revolutionary promises of Rojava will ever be achieved. Journalists and fixers tend to be cynical people, and I am not surprised that our new friends have little faith in the Rojava revolution.

What I find most interesting is the one thing they all seem to agree on. The gains for the women of Northeast Syria have been staggering the greatest success of this revolution so far. One by one we finish our beers. There's a general agreement that we should all get to bed. It's late and we've each got to be up early.

[31:50]

But for a few more minutes we find our eyes drawn to the lights of Rojava spread out before us. I look down at my phone catch the time, an express shock that Jake and I have only been in country for a few hours. It already feels like so much longer. There's something about this place that seems to suck you in and dilate the passage of hours until they feel like days. I mentioned this, and Shia nods in agreement.

He tells me that time here is elastic. I had to bed thinking about that at the end of my first night in Rojava. My expectations of this place feel elastic. Two. They swelled during my first few minutes across the border, which is a pretty natural reaction for me, at least to the giddiness of seeing a new part of the world, and of course meeting Cabat and observing the differences between Rojava and Iraqi.

Curtis Stan swelled my expectations even further, But then a long talk with my colleagues contracted me. I drift off to sleep, wondering just how I'll feel about all this in another twenty four hours. The Moldy the Women's War is a production of I Heart Radio.

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3. Law and Order Among The Anarchists

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April 8, 2020 • 41 mins

How does law and order work in a system based on anarchist political theory? In this episode, Robert visits a court for ISIS prisoners and talks to one of the top Judges in Rojava.

Music: "Bella Ciao" by Astronautalis (feat. Subp Yao & Rickolus)

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All Episodes

Welcome to the Women's War, a production of I Heart Radio. It's the dawn of our second morning in Rojaba, well, my first boarding in Rojaba, our first full day, our second day here. Anarchy gets a bad rap, mainly because the word sounds cool, and so it gets used as a synonym for chaos, disorder, and violence and awful lot of the time, many people will laugh when you bring up the idea of anarchist leadership or anarchist organizations, and if you happen to introduce yourself as an anarchist, you often wind up needing to cover a fair amount of rhetorical ground just to convince people that you're not either a violent maniac or an adult with the brain of a teenage skateboard punk from a Disney Channel original movie.

There are a number of different ways to do anarchy, but the general goal is usually the same, the dismantling of unjust hierarchies. Murray book Chin was an American and ideas that wound up shaping the system in ra Java were originally conceived because they were the system he thought might best take hold of.

The United States. Book Chain saw massive dense urban areas making laws for rural mountain dwellers hundreds of miles away, and he saw small town voters forcing their beliefs on cosmopolitan city dwellers. He thought both of these things were wrong, and the goal of libertarian municipalism was to break down these unjust hierarchies. Almost anywhere you live, if your goal is dismantling unfair hierarchy, you're going to eventually find yourself looking at your justice system.

And prior to their revolution, Northeast Syria had a famously bad one. Every town was riddled with massive complexes for the mukabrat, or secret police. The Assad regime maintained compliance through an infamous system of torture designed by a former Nazi s S officer.

It was a pretty easy system to justify tearing down, but it's not always enough to just remove an injustice. No nation needs mukah barat, but you do need people to investigate and adjudicate murders, domestic violence, and other sorts of crimes that we can all agree are in fact crimes. How does the society based in Moray book Chain's quasi anarchist principles handle this? On Sunday, July twenty one, two thousand nineteen, Jake Hanrahan and I set out with our friend Kabat to learn.

We were both still a little bit hungover from the night before when a law on our driver picked us up from the hotel He lived nearby, and he was going to drive us into Comischelow to pick up Robat to start our day. Alan is a thin, wiry man in his early forties.

He has an impassive, semi permanent poker face, and he expresses the vast majority of his emotions through cigarettes. As a rule, only the very worst cigarettes on earth wind up in Syria. If it can't pass inspection in the EU, it winds up in a Lan's pocket. His very favorite brand, argolis Is. He offers Jake

and I each one and we enjoy a cigarette breakfast. As a lawn gets onto the highway, Jake and Alan take turns plugging in their phones and playing different Kurdish militant anthems, including the song of the y d g H the Kurdish Youth Movement.

Jake was arrested for reporting on for the anthem of a children's militia. It kind of slaps pocket pocket bogget.

You can tell a lot about this place. By looking at the window on a morning drive, we are passed by an ambulance, lights flashing. We see construction teams working on the roads, which are very notably and better shaped. In the roads in Iraqi, Kurdistan, we see oil fields in operation, men and women with a K forty seven's manning checkpoints and waiting for the bus alongside one another.

And to my right, as we rolled north to Comischelo, we see mighty trenches being dug to build more and more tunnels. Archways and billboards covered with the faces and names of Shahids, the martyrs and the war against Isis line the highway to every town we enter.

[04:00]

They are always vividly colored, set on a background of bright green and revolutionary read. Many women on the street wear head scarfs and somewhere the full nikop which covers them from head to toe. But I also see a great number of women with their heads uncovered, girls walking to school with back straight and stacks of books held in the crook of their arms. Freedom of religion and freedom from it are both visible here.

Food is in clear and ample supply. The markets we pass are bustling at least as much as those we see in the k r G there are numerous military checkpoints which do slow the speed of travel, but they're necessary to protect people from the ongoing threat of is As sleeper cells. These checkpoints are all manned by women and men of the SASH, the military police. Several of the Asaish we pass have patches on their shoulders that say salak jin Mabe, which means no life without our leader.

The patches feature a silhouetted portrait of Abdula agolan Apo, the ideological founder of Rojava. I find this somewhat unset. The veneration of strong and singular leaders is always, you know, at best, a risky proposition. But I also can't help but notice that the Syrian regime and the ISIS flags that had once been painted over the walls and shutters of buildings in the towns we passed through.

They haven't simply been replaced by YPG flags. Instead, they've been covered up by art paintings of flowers and clovers. The only political symbols that are on display everywhere are pictures of the men and women who died to build this place. We pick up Kabat from outside her home and she takes us to a nearby food stand for breakfast.

We eat something that looks very much like a burrito, but with garlic, sauce and falafel inside. It is delicious. While we eat, we go over our schedule for the day. Before heading over here. Jacob sent me an NPR article about a judge named Amina who was working to build the legal code of this new autonomous region. The article was titled Revenge Is for the Weak Kurdish Courts in Northeastern Syria, A take on ISIS cases Now.

The first part of that title is a quote from a Kurdish lawyer explaining why their system explicitly bans things like torture, the death penalty, and even life imprisonment. Amina is sited in it claiming that even Abu Baker al bug Dhatti, if tried and convicted, would only have been eligible for a twenty years sentence.

[06:18]

Her hope is that he could be rehabilitated. This seems kind of crazy to me, and it seemed kind of crazy to Jake, but it was also really interesting. So we told about that we were interested in talking to Judge Amina, and she set up everything. We arrive at the courthouse around midday it's actually

more of a combination courthouse jail, although it looks from the outside mostly just like a house with a large garden. When we enter the court, the first thing we see is a young man sitting in a chair.

His eyes are covered by a black blindfold and his hands are bound in front of him. He sits facing the wall. It's later explained to me that the blindfolds are so many released prisoners will not be able to tell where they've been. Judge Amina and her colleagues are at constant risk of being murdered just for doing their jobs. Not only are they targets for ISIS sleeper cells, but as the architect of Roshava's new justice system, Judge Amina is a wanted criminal by regime controlled Syria.

But char Alasad doesn't look super kindly on revolutionaries building their own law codes in his country. She chose to help make a new court system in her like country as sort of the the old regime was was pulling back. And I'm curious as to like as because she practiced law before the Civil war, what was it she wanted to see changed? Like when she thought about how she was going to like build a new system what were the changes she wanted to see instituted in the new system.

Hobbat was the interpreter for all of our interviews, and we've brought in voice actors to represent some of our sources. But for now, I'm gonna let Kabat summarize Judge Amina's answers. And fair warning, she's a fast talker.

If you do have trouble understanding anything. On our website, the Women's War dot Com, we're going to have a PDF of the episode script and eventually all the episode scripts up for you to to access. So that's the Women's War dot Com. Um, here's Judge Amina talking through Kabad but wanted to She just said it's a pyramid.

She means that the Syrian justice system is a top down sort of thing. All power flows from Assad to the population to be im people. She's saying that the Rojavan justice system takes place primarily between the people and each other, rather than having everyone follow laws dictated from someone or someone's up at the top.

So a we are building from From talking through Kobad, Judge Amina explained to us that she and her colleagues were working to replace the old authoritarian vertical power structure they'd grown up under with a horizontal one. I don't think Judge Amina is an anarchist, but I suspect the justice system she helped to build would have met with Murray book Chain's approval.

He believed that society needed to be altered in fundamental ways, but that taking power was not the way to do it. Power is the fundamental problem. Boction wrote this in his book Post Scarcity Anarchism. Quote. Power to the people can only be put into practice when the power exercised by social elites is dissolved into the people.

Each individual can then take control of his daily life. If power to the people means nothing more than power to the leaders of the people, then the people remain an undifferentiated, manipulatable mass, as powerless after the revolution as they were before. So any way, for properties fighting.

[09:51]

You'll notice she's using the word problems instead of the word crimes. I thought this was just sort of a translation issue at first, but over time it became clear that it wasn't. In her view, there are crimes and there are problems. A crime like an is as sleeper cell planning to murder a bunch of people that needs to be addressed by a bunch of folks with guns. But problems should not be solved by a bunch of folks with guns.

They should be solved by communities at the neighborhood level. Society in Rojava is divided up into local communes representing a few dozen to a few hundred households each. These communes have a number of committees dedicated to solving different problems. A lot of issues that we tend to send and police to deal with, like domestic disturbances and the like, are instead handled by social committees.

[10:36]

Only the most complex and ugly problems get escalated out of the committees and into the courts. The local communes are democratic structures and they include every member of the neighborhood committee. Members are elected by their neighbors and selected for their perceived level of wisdom and trustworthiness.

A lot of older men and women, grandmothers and grandfathers, wind up in these positions. Now, law and order in Rojava is complicated by the unavoidable reality of tribalism. This part of Syria is filled with a number of very powerful tribes, and there are often blood debts going back decades between one tribe or another. The complicated nature of tribal politics means that any murder could potentially spawn a brutal series of reprisal killings that leave numerous people dead.

When a murder like this occurs in Rojava, the police do the job you'd expect and arrest the killer, at least ideally, but the social committee also springs into action, and their job is to stop the violence from spreading. So we were starting to communicate with this.

What happens next is a series of negotiations between the family of the victim and the family of the killer. The committee members act as mediators, gradually working out a way for both families to remain in the area without gunning each other down.

[12:07]

Judge Amina tells us about one particular set of negotiations that took six months. At the end of the process, the arrangement was sealed with a feast, having a big public party where the family of a murderer and the family of his victim all hang out. That sounds weird, and it is weird, but it serves a purpose of making sure there is a large public show of both sides squashing the beef.

That way, if either family attacks the other later, the whole community will know who broke the peace and broke their word are In the Rojavan system, violence is seen as a community problem as well as an individual problem.

Judge Amina didn't consider justice to be achieved when a criminal was behind bars. She and the other architects of the system here thought it was equally important to try heal communities racked by violent crime who wanted to forgiveness existence. Rujava still has many of the same mechanisms of justice were familiar with in the United States.

They have criminal courts in prisons, but the maximum sentence is twenty years, and the goal of incarceration is rehabilitation, not punishments. It's not about education. Our prisoners in every different communities in different ways, so they are prepared different they are educating.

Judge Amina explained that the goal of her Java's prisons was too prepare to integrate the prisoner back into society without a murderous mind. I had troubled disagreeing with this on a moral level, but all the prisoners I had seen so far in the jail were suspected Isis fighters. The vast majority of her Java's prisons were occupied by captured isisman I lived through portions of the battle from Mosel, I talked to hundreds of people Syrians and Iraqis who suffered under Isis, the idea that these people could somehow be fixed with job training seminars ward with my desire to see them quickly and violently punished, I had trouble believing that people in Rajava, who had suffered much more from ISIS than I could ever imagine, would support de radicalization over punishment.

And I told this to Judge Aminaret More. I want to want to do people. I asked Judge Amina about the prisoners we've seen on our way and the ones handcuffed to chairs and blindfolded.

She assured me that the blindfolds and handcuffs would be removed once the prisoners were processed. It was just a matter of necessary safety. For the moment, it all sounded good enough, but of course, you know all I had to go on with me sitting in a room talking to a woman verifying how this entire justice system actually fun and is beyond my ability. It's larger work than one reporter can carry out.

And I asked Judge Amina how she'd feel about international observers from the UN or Amnesty International coming into report on the justice system in Rojava. She said that she and her colleagues very much wanted the international community to come. This is consistent with other reporting I've seen on the courts in Rojava, and as with most things in this place, there's a really pragmatic explanation that goes along with the idealistic one.

See, Rojava is quite literally under a gun right now. International recognition and the protection that legitimacy provides, that's a matter of life and death for these people. If the u N came in to observe their justice system, it also means the UN is here and they're not going to get bombed by the Turkish Air Force. Um So, yeah, there's a couple of reasons they do that.

To emphasize the openness of the court system. Judge Amina offered to take us on a tour of their facilities, and it was absolutely not a polished affair. We hopped downstairs and she threw open the door to an interrogation that was in process, and then beckoned for me to walk in. The first thing I saw in the room was a young man handcuffed to a chair sitting in front of a table with four people behind it and even mix of women and women.

Three of the people are judges and one is an observer from the village the arrested man came from. This is the way terrorism charges are handled in Rojava. The judges were clearly in the middle of questioning the man when I barged in. We shared a long, awkward glance, and then they greeted me. The prisoner said nothing. On my way out of the room, my backpack flipped off the light switch and plunged the entire room into darkness.

Everyone was very cool about it, but I felt like an idiot. I didn't, however, feel that what I was seeing was stage managed or set up in any way to impress me. Amina shows us everything we asked to see, including sales where prisoners weight. And I will not say these facilities are plush and luxurious. They look like a jail there, they're they're not a place you'd want to be, but they aren't, you know, filthy, dank or tortuous seeming either.

I would say things are about as comfortable as you could expect them to be given the resources available. The willing us to be observed is so consistent and so pervasive that it's hard not to be convinced by it. We leave the court pretty impressed with what we've seen.

[17:14]

We start to drive back into Kamichelo. As we drink lukewarm instant coffee and watch the road go by, three of us start to chat. Kabat tells us about one of Rojaba's less reported problems, people firing guns into the air and celebration. It's a major issue in Syria and across the Middle East. Since it's also an issue in Texas, where I hail from, Kabat and I bond over this, Yeah, shooting into the air as I can't, I can't.

I mean, speaking as a man, I get what you want to It does sound fun. I know I want I love, but I know it would be fun. It's like says I was a kid jake, and I admit that as men were fundamentally driven to break things, sometimes mostly to see what it looks like men, we have like a destructive stream, like all men have a bit of like you want to grab the smash somethings.

When we here from the Red we saw a couple of guys on a fifty cow shooting into a quarry. Yeah, it's like, yeah, it's fun. It's fun. Can guys, I'm not saying it's healthy.

[18:22]

I'm just say something. It's something we do because we're dumb. Okay, I understand. It's not just the culture. Culture problems problem, a problem everywhere. There are men. God, when I was a kid, we used to take stones and we have like we have like glass phone boxes and we just smashed them, like no idea, why like ten years old? Like yeah, where the kids also they have this trend of destroying.

Yeah, men, some of us we can't grow out joined this joint smashing things instead of building. Right, Yeah, you really have because of that now destroyed because it's a oh yes, absolutely, we are absolutely like the kids are.

Throughout the Syrian Civil War, the fighters of the YPG have been praised is probably the most ethical, least war crime armed force in the country. Kabbat credited some of this on the fact that both genders were present on the battlefield, the existence of the woman with next to them in religion.

Yeah, this is the thing that's always prevented to act like that sometimes, like you know, when you are just around otherwise, as we re enter commischela, I take notes on the things. I see a smiling boy in a hoodie kneeling, a young woman in military garb grinning and looking at a colleague nearby in mid conversation, brightly colored pictures of Shahid's hanging over a traffic circle, a wall painted with the international symbol for recycling.

Jake and I wanted to spend a day in Rocca, the former capital of the Islamic State, and go out on troll with an st F unit. Before we could do that, though, we'd have to collect the proper permissions, Alan drives us to an Assais base on the outskirts of Comischelow. We park outside of failings of nondescript one story white office buildings surrounded by a low wall dotted with guard posts.

The inside of the facility reminds me more of my old high school in Plano, Texas than of anything. This feeling is reinforced after we're ushered into a waiting room that is filled with kids. Okay, not literally kids, but eighteen and nineteen year olds. They're all off duty, a sash taking a tea break before picking up their guns to go back on duty. Two of them are women.

[20:34]

One wears a veil, the other does not. The remaining five or men, three of them have visible tattoos, including one of the women. Before heading here, I've been told it was unusual to see tattoos on people in this part of Syria, but this is apparently much less true for young folks here. The officer in charge is slightly older than the rest, perhaps in his mid twenties. He is also the most heavily tattooed of the bunch. I can see a hawk on his arm and words written across both of his forearms.

He wears a T shirt that says black is the New Black. If he'd had boots instead of sneakers, he wouldn't have looked out of place at a punk show. I asked him if he knows any local tattoo artists. The line work on his inc is pretty good, and I decide then and there that while I'm in country, I want to get a tattoo. He gives Cobat the phone number of his guy, and I wonder fleetingly if this same hookup can maybe find us weed.

But then I remember I'm technically talking to a cop. Instead, I use the opportunity to ask this young gender mixed group about genealogy and gender integration. I want to know how they feel about the changes that have recently been made. They are instantly awkward, giggling, and blushing. It was as if I had asked a group of American men and women at work, why do you all treat each other like people? Shortly after that, we're called in to talk with the SASH press officer and to square away the details of our trip to Rocca.

When that's done, we pile back in the van and head home to Derek. Cobat asks me if I'm really serious about wanting to get a tattoo. I assure her I am, and that the only question is what it will be of.

[21:58]

On our way back, Jake and I talk with Cobat about our thoughts on the interview with Judge Amina. One thing I was struck by is how many of the new structures in the Rojava legal system boiled down to groups of people sitting around and talking to one another. Cobat explains that this is a central facet of the revolution. From the beginning of this project, military units in the YPG and YPG engaged in

what they called tech mill sessions, where squads would gather together after actions and discuss what had gone well and what haddn't.

The word tech mill just means report, and tech mil sessions can be called by anyone in the military or civilian structures of Rojava. Most often tech mill is done at the end of a project. I found a write up by a foreign volunteer in Rojava, Philippe O'Keeffe. He explains that the ideological justification for this system is rooted in a critique of capitalism.

Quote. Capitalist modernity does not foster equality nor mutual trust. It divides us and forces upon us as hyper competitive culture built upon internal and external deception and facades. In this system, criticism is not seen as a means by which we can improve our helps and each other, but rather as a means by which we can attack and destroy our competition.

Our enemies are fellow humans. O'Keefe connects the tech milk system to one of the foundations of the Rojavan revolution. Have all. The word hall literally means friend and so havalti just means friendship. Essentially, quote, it is the idea that we work together, we help each other, we share everything from the tangible to the intangible.

Not because we expect something in return, but simply because we are comrades, that we are humans living, struggling and experiencing life together, that we are sharing the same purpose of trying to advance the collective well being. It is the idea that we can trust and believe in each other and that we need not fear ulterior intention. By establishing the culture of Havalti as the basis of revolutionary life, we create the alternative environment and society conducive to constructive criticism and the means by which together we improve ourselves and the collective.

This is critical to tech mil because it allows us to respectfully give criticisms and more importantly, except absorb and address the criticisms in an efficient manner, free of ego, fear, mistrust, or conflict.

The technical system was initially just a thing for the military and civil administration, but over the years it started to spread into the home lives for a number of the families who are most devoted to the revolution. So they have this system of the community in the home. They have, you know, the same in differnce lines. You have it with the military, or they have it with each other.

So each one of them have a rotation, to cook, to clean the house, to do, you know, shopping. They criticize each other at the same level, the children with the father with the mom. Now, this is all part of a broader trend and one of the things that interests me so much about Rojava. The fact that this place exists at all is due to the tenacity and the skill of the militias that defended it from isis.

[24:47]

The people of Rojava have responded to this reality, not by seeding control of their lives to the militias, but by adopting what Kabbat calls a culture of self defense. We have this community is publicly at but self defense culture we haven't here. This is the way that we're going to protect ourselves for any stress. Whatever Americans wanted to be thrown all of the stuff. We start by ourself, We're gonna end up by ourself because we have this catch off self defense.

So what they are doing, they are organized. You can't see all these different military inside the cities, plus the front lines and the army, plus that there is a society militaristic. You know, somehow there is the mamas and that's like you know, the the elderly men and women fifties up fifty sometimes like Grandma's you know, you can't see them.

They get the training and they have their clashes during their during this critical situation. Always they are starting because I know everyone in the neighborhood say, we're they we're gonna start to make these checkpoints. Now. When she says clash, she means a collashf an a K forty seven? What about is talking about? Here are local networks of men and women, most of whom are elderly, who have taken responsibility for armed self defense of their communities onto themselves.

You cannot believe it. It's not clash, No, no, no, no, it's super real. Believe me. Look, I mean, and you haven't been in the like when the time, it's like any celebration, any thinks.

So they have everyone just organized, starting from the neighborhoods whenever we passed there. And they are more strict than the normal size, to be honest. They are taken over responsibility under our fifties. So they are like doing those of the jet generations of the eighties, you know. So they are over me always just my eyes up and I just saw them with this elderly you know and have this clash, and they are super nice.

It's true. Do you think for some of them that's probably like the first time in their lives as women have been allowed to have some kind of exactly and they are accepting, integrating, adapting. Now this all brings up the natural question how much honesty can we trust her about to express about this place, which is after all her home.

When you're working as a journalist in a place like Iraq or Syria, your experience of the country is deeply colored by your fixer, their opinions and their relationships, their biases and their beliefs. Jake and I needed someone whose relationships with the SDF were good enough to get us access, but we were also worried about working with someone who was literally aligned with the powers that be in the region. As a journalist, you never want to work with a man, even if he happens to be a woman.

Between their obsession with a delage alon and strident left wing political views, the military forces of Rojava have been accused of brainwashing their members.

Patches saying no life without our leader did not exactly squash that worry from my mind, and we were certainly concerned with the possibility that habbat herself might wind up somewhere on that spectrum. What do you think about people that you know? Some people say, oh, they're just brainwashing everybody. What do you think about it? No, I mean you're gonna suggest something, you're gonna implement it, and if it doesn't work, if it's out of your nature, it will be clear the outcomes.

It's it's proof it that it's everyone more happier, more feel value as a human beings. So which kind of brainwashing if it's not relevant to your you know, mind and and and even your feelings, it's deeper than just you know, brainwashing. Yeah, let's say people say there's a lot of criticism.

Yeah, it's it's the no one oblished anyone. I mean brainwashing in a way like if it's on behalf of the community and they sit by their own eyes, you know, you feel it, you see it, you live it. Like my family they don't know. I go into the front side, but I go I'm going nuts because of anything.

[28:47]

I like that. I can't find myself, part of me it's there. It's something you cannot even express it. You know, it's no wants it with me in full independence. I'm not a part of an institution. I'm doing this because I found myself there. The more we talked about this, the more Kabat began to share about herself and her own motivations for doing this work. There was an element of patriotism to it. The Rojavan revolution had made life better for people here in her eyes, and she supported that.

But Kabat was also not anyone's zealot. You lived the commission on your whole life. No, my father, he is working in the oil fields, so he moved from different citiesen and so we are seven siblings, each one of us. But my other siblings, each one of them in a different city, some of them in the village and spropol commishially, some in hask in uh where else.

Young village has four cities, which eangered her out seven houses, and now my parents are which is the city of the oil. And again the fact that Kabat lives alone is hugely significant.

[29:51]

This is simply not done. Even given the revolutionary spirit that has overtaken Rojava. Young women tend to live with their families or communally in cooperative farms or military units like the White p J not alone. To just break this rules also of the community. That's for the woman to have a house, she had to get married and it will be the house of the man.

For me. It's again we are struggling on the civil side as well, not just you, not to break all this outdates customs and traditions. So I said, okay, I'm gonna live by myself. I can't have a house without get married. And my mother she was like, no, it's shame, and how people are going to speak about us and this. Hey, I said, I'm fully independence woman.

I don't need a man to have a house. I have a house and I have it. And then I can't see the reaction of the famous and I think, wow, like you want to we wish we can do the same. And I'm sure it's just you open you pad the way for the next generation next year after that. It's a bit super normal for the woman in framption to live by theirselves. Whether or not you trust about it is up to you and aimed to be a perfect judge of character or motivations.

All I can say is that by the end of our first full day in Rojava, Jake and I were at least completely convinced of her sincerity. That doesn't mean we agreed or understood everything she believed. For one thing, Jake and I had both spent large chunks of our careers face to face with the bloody consequences of ices IS ideology, the idea that the Rojava and legal system supported some kind of forgiveness for these people.

It seemed almost obscene to us. Well in my head, you know, as a Western, I even having like that, I've deserved that and don't deserved the period educating or whatever. Look at the Western it's completely different. The ISIS with the Western wants specifically that I, I, meand them. They are not, like the city, completely ideological. She's talking about the difference between foreign ISIS fighters and local ones, and this is a meaningful distinction.

In Syria and in Iraq, a number of local supported ices for a period of time because quite frankly, they didn't have many other options. The night before, when we've been drinking with our friends, one of them had told us about arian rebel commander he embedded with a few times at the start of the civil war.

[32:04]

That guy eventually wound up joining ISIS, not because he was ideologically drawn to Isis, but because all of his sons had died fighting the Syrian regime, and Isis was the only group who would give him more bullets and more guns to keep fighting the regime. Foreign fighters, the people who leave places like England or the United States to go fight for Isis, well, those are very different sorts of people, and Hubbat had no time for them.

[32:26]

The lying that are like it's very clear like oh poor me, I didn't do anything else, just a cooking there, la la la. But it's very obvious like no, for those, I'm sure this program is still not gonna work. But for the Syrian because you are have this social approach, cultural approach, you know, and you check them as a human beings, and all of them, and even I met to Isis, they were in the jail Syrian from They said, like, when we have been in the front lines with the ISAAC, they lose part of you know, handicaps, they are losing their legs.

But for the normal Syrians of Leans who got caught up in something bigger than themselves, I believe those men and women deserved another chance at life. This is a powerfully different attitude than the one I encountered most often when I visited the refugee camps around Mosel.

I mean I remember when near the end of the fight again Mosel, I talked to a lot of people who like had been run out of like they've been tortured by us IS or something, and like we were talking about a refugee camp and they'd say something along the lines of and when I get back home, I know who I'm going to turn in to the to the Iraqi police, and like then they're going to get there's and then it'll be on the other foot.

And it's like like you could you already see the cycle of violence starting up again, and it has with the Shia militias who have just been very brutal um and it's just gonna there's gonna be another Sunni uprising. There's going to be And like everything everyone in Mosel was like in another ten years, there will be more fighting on the sitting.

Yeah, it's just gonna take a little bit of time. This is what we do on at this example, because as as that on islence attract more violence, we don't want this revenge, it's revenge, it's we don't want that. So when you you forgive them, you give them a chance. Let's see. Kabat spoke with deep passion about the importance of forgiveness and her fervent belief that radicalization and terrorism must be treated as social problems, as the result of flaws and the culture, rather than as individual problems a result of the terrorist in question just being a bad person.

I'm sure to do a lot of Americans. This may sound like naive, hippy dippy nonsense, but Hobart is anything but naive to the consequences of terror. Now, my brother had been murdered by eyes Is like my brother, So I went to I'm always making the eyes Is never have a hit against them, and I don't feel that, you know, sometimes I feel pitiful for them.

Really, I feel like, oh my god, no, never even hey, do you know what, I don't even when I go to the Rose camp, so usually I know all the girls there.

So I got to the action and I was like, I wanted to make a coffee. So I asked the eyes Is why she was. Canadia said how's your coffee? And she was like, what do you wanted to make coffee for me? And said yeah, And she was like, oh my god. Since the years, no one you know, have they asked me this question and not for sure.

[35:17]

We were going to have a coffee old woman together, you know, and then I said, and she was like, oh you're so sweet. You can't touch people where you humanity? I cannot say, like you devil lords of what the point? I don't have any And even I cried too much with her story. Well I cannot stop crying, like you know, we have to help you, like you know, I help many of them with the lawyers.

There is international lawyers and always, like I started, sometimes they give me numbers or names. So I passed to the lawyers like help them because if we want to because if we wanted to stop this, do not repeat it again. If we wanted to repeat it again. The Sweden case, I remember, there is this very fair was switten isis uh you know, very famous on the Twitter and and they always make it calls for Islam things like that, and he have been kids and his wife also you have five or funds.

So for me, I play a basic role in order to push the media this within India where highlighted that case, to push the politicians to kim and take those our fun Why because for me, all of them have been malnutrition.

[36:27]

They were in the suffering, already have this. So if we didn't help them after a few years, we were going to have five jihadis instead of on. Syria has been at war now for almost a decade. Everyone is tired of bloodshed and killing. This exhaustion has driven Rojava's humanitarian policy towards ISIS prisoners at least as much as ideology has naivety is believing that more executions and more incarceration and more torture can possibly solve a problem like isis.

How about Feelings on this were fully crystallized into has An eighteen when she watched the very last stronghold the Caliphate, a place called the Goose Fall. I went there to just because I had loose many friends, my brother, like I wanted to fil something victoria or whatever. No, there is no victory, all of us losing all of us.

There is no victorian this just because it happened. We lost, Yeah, all of us. Look to this mal nutrition babies of eyes, what they are just victims, you know, you know, yeah, there are mal nutrition thousands of Look so why if some insane people wanted to destroy this world? We're not gonna for sure to all of us being said, no, we have to repair it.

It's again someone destroying. You have to be, you have to bid. We have this ideology. Okay, I saw everything, all of there is something new, just no way. Near the end of the day, we crossed back into the rik home for one more night.

On our way in we see some graffiti written on a wall, the Kurdish phrase that translates to we shall take revenge for the martyrs of the homeland. It's a sign that despite what Kabbat and Judge of Mina told us, not everyone here considers revenge to be for the week. This is not a place of unanimous voices, and in truth, I Rajava is truly democratic. That's what you'd expect, disagreement, pain and confusion over the issue of whether or not to forgive the people who fought to dominate them, just as there's deep confusion over the thorny question of gender equality.

[38:42]

Our evening ended with a dinner at a prominent local restaurant and all women's cooperative that had been organized with help from the Women's Economic Development Committee. Projects like this are increasingly common in Rojava. A compromise between the realities of capitalism and leftist political theory. The food was incredible, and I'm not generally a fan of eggplant, Syrians do something with it that makes it taste almost meeting. It's just it's amazing.

It was also incredible to see a large and prosperous business, and the chunk of the Middle East that we were in owned and operated and entirely managed by a collective of nine women who all share work and share profits. After dinner, Cabot and I sit down with one of the co owners and I asked just how this place got started? One on my name, She said, Municipal Council.

There. It's one of the bottom up governing organizations that manages most daily life in Rojava. It took a lot of convincing to get some of the older men in the group on board with the idea that a woman run business would work, but eventually the municipal council decided to back the project and helped provide funding for it to get off the ground. After a few months, the co op was successful enough to stand on its own. Just kind of project and cooperative blankets run Bible and it's all run.

Possible to her ten years ago before the road. You know, I didn't need a translator for that answer. We bid goodbye to about for the night, and Jake and I set out on a vain quest to buy beers.

The bustling market streets of the recold many treasures, particularly cigarettes. But in the end we have to rely on a boy in our local motel to bias a case of beer. It's kind of the opposite of the way things work in the United States. Two adults asking a child to buy them alcohol. I pay about fifteen dollars for a dozen tall boys, and Jake and I go up on the roof to drink him in moderation, and me too mild excess.

[40:39]

As I stumble, rather piste down the stairs towards our room, the hotel manager stops me. There's been a mistake, he explains, I've been overcharged for the beers. He gives me back like four or five dollars worth of Syrian money. Since I didn't really know the price of the beers to begin with, I never would have noticed the fact that I'd been overcharged. His honesty here is a small thing, but it surprises me. I'm used to a rack where hotels and bars understandably try to get every possible diame out of Western clients.

Rujava so far has been filled with little moments like this, moments of shocking, honesty and compassion from a place that's been racked by war for a full third of my lifetime. There's this odd sort

of assumption we have in the West, spread on by Hollywood, that war and violence must by necessity make people harder, colder, more ruthless, And I think the truth is more nuanced.

War can harden the hearts of a culture and its people and turn them away from compassion, but it can also be the catalyst for something very different, a verdant bloom of compassion growing out from a field of blood. The Moory The Women's War is a production of I Heart Radio.

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4. A Town For Women

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April 15, 2020 • 36 mins

In Rojava, the desire to build a society free of misogyny has led to the creation of an entire village just for women. From this place, Jinwar, they seek to heal themselves and then their society.

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All Episodes

Welcome to the Women's War, a production of I Heart Radio. Rojava might be the friendliest place on earth. And I mean that in a purely literal sense of the word friend. See in Kurdish the word have all means friend. I'm not a linguist, and I can't explain to you exactly how it happened, But over the decades of fighting in Turkey and Syria, the word have all came to take on a deeper meaning.

Today it's used in a manner similar to the way the Soviets used comrade. And so when people in Rojava are trying to refer to the revolutionaries in their land, the people in this region who truly believe in the ideology of Abdulla Alan, they often call them the have alls.

Now, if we were in the United States, a heavily armed group of true believers calling themselves the friends would absolutely be a terrifying death cult of some sort. But for whatever reason, the word have all has a friendly quality to it that somehow stops it from being on settling. Well, there's a certain militant formality to the word comrade. Have all just feels warm.

[01:05]

You cross a checkpoint and the assay you say hello, friend, a soldier offers you a cigarette and you say thanks friend. There's something addictive about the term, and Jake and I fall easily into using it on a regular basis. The morning of July two thousand nineteen starts with us both packing up our crap, paying for our time at the hotel, and meeting a lawn outside. He picks us and our gear up.

At around eight am, Alan offers us cigarettes. Were both hungover thanks to the terrible case of Turkish beer I bought last night, and neither of us particularly wants to smoke, but we take the cigarettes and say spats of all anyway that means thanks friend. After our first puffs, we rather performatively smile at Alan, look up to him and say bush that means good. A Laan responds with a ray, a grin and the words sus bush, which just means thanks.

Good for the rest of our time together. Whenever a lawan offers us a cigarette, he'll wiggle his bushy eyebrows and grunt spas bash at us. It's a light, friendly jab at the fact that, like most foreigners, Jake and I have only learned the words thanks and good in Kurdish We get on the road and we roll through a checkpoint just outside of Drek.

Alan slows to a stop to hand over his papers. I look out the window with the men and women manning the checkpoint, and I'm struck by how good looking they all are. Jake seems to notice the same thing, and he leans over to me to say, everyone here is gorgeous. My eyes are particularly drawn to the man in command of the checkpoint, a grizzled male. A saysh.

[02:31]

I find myself staring at him for a while he converses with his colleagues. He has a broad, sculpted chin with a perfect John McClain level three days stubble. His hair is a dusky brownish blonde. He looks like a militant Kurdish George Clooney. There's a cigarette in his left hand, while his right stays behind his back, gripping the magazine of his rifle. As we pass by, he catches me staring at him and he smiles.

Slah have all, he says to me. It means hello, friend. Calling the folks in rojav a good look or attractive doesn't quite get at what Jake and I kept noticing. It's not that everyone here looks like a runway model. It's more that they all look like the exact kind of people you'd cast if you were making a movie. The folks here are all striking, and Jake and I are not the first Westerners to come to Rojava and notice this.

In the nineteen thirties, Agatha Christie, author of Murder on the Orient Express and about a billion other books, traveled to Kurdistan with her husband. He was an archaeologist. Christie herself was quite an adventurer, and she traveled widely through much of the region that's now Rojava. She wrote this about the appearance of the people here. Kurdish women are gay and handsome.

They wear bright colors. These women have turbans of bright orange round their heads. Their clothes are green and purple and yellow. Their heads are carried erect on their shoulders. They are tall, with a backwards stands so that they always look proud. They have bronze faces with regular features, red cheeks, and unusually blue eyes. The Kurdish men nearly all bear a marked resemblance to a colored picture of Lord Kitchener that used to hang in my nursery as a child.

The red brick fete, big brown mustache, the blue eyes, the fierce and martial appearance. We're waved on through the chat point and a line continues down the highway. As I stare out the window, slightly hungover, drinking coffee and smoking horrible cigarettes, I think about something Cabat mentioned yesterday. She told us that a decent amount of the men that she worked with in Rojava weren't really committed to the gender equality aspect of the revolution.

She thought they were mostly kept in line by the fact that at the moment, the weight of societal inertia was behind equality. In her opinion, a number of Rojava's men were just too afraid of being publicly shamed to rock the boat. No one wants to be Like, as soon as you feel astra size from your friend, you do anything to get back.

You know, that really works naturally. So it's like they see everyone like, oh women now eventually exactly even it's those men. I'm sure deeply they are not conversed, some of them, or like they are not really but what they were gonna say, but just that that's it and do it.

Then it became a habit. Hollis is a bit of Arabic slang that kabat uses a lot. It means finished or done. She's saying that in another generation, the bigotry hidden under the surface of some of Rojava's men will disappear, because those men will die and they'll be replaced by young men who have only ever known women as their equals. This is a heartening fact, but it's also a scary one.

While the change is still skin deep, it's easy to revert. I pondered this as we drove on, and it led me back to thinking about my own country. In November two nineteen, the FBI reported that hate crimes in the United States had hit a sixteen year high as the coronavirus descended upon American society. Hate crimes against Asian Americans searched for the first time since World War Two.

I think many people were shocked to see so much racist of violence and bigotry bubble up into the mainstream. Up until two sixteen, they felt like the fight against this stuff had been one for the last few years. We've all had to confront the reality that this was not the case. Some of the explosion in bigotry is new racism. People converted in dark corners of the Internet. But much of it, and probably most of it, is a result of people who were quiet bigots for years until they decided it was finally safe enough to be loud.

As a lawn's van trundled into the outskirts of Comichelo, my eyes were caught by a trio of young girls on their way to school. They walked together, heads bare, laughing and giggling, and weighed

down with probably twenty books between them. Not too long ago, these girls had stared into a horizon dominated by the black flags of Isis.

I wondered what their future would bring. My mind was drawn back to something I had seen the night before in the bustling streets of Darek. Jake and I had been poorly navigating the crowded market looking for beer. As we'd stumbled about, my eyes had been caught by a young soldier on his drive home atop a scooter. His wife in full MiCab sat on the back, her face towards the traffic at their rear.

It felt like a clear illustration of the fact that many of the people here could still go either way Rojava's revolutionary sentiments, its radical equality. That stuff did enjoy a lot of popularity, and still does. But the continued progress of those ideals relies on the mass of folks in the middle acquiescing to progress because that's where they feel the weight happens to be.

The most important question I had to ask about Rojava was this, will any of it really last? And I knew that my only chance at getting an answer lay in the hearts of the people here. As we pass along, it became obvious that tensions in the area had ratcheted up overnight. The guards at checkpoints all checked our papers thoroughly, and there seemed to be more of them than the day before.

A quick search through Google revealed that Turkey's president Radone had recently made more threats against the Syrian Democratic Forces or SDF. The military of Rojava. U SMS series were said to be in route to the region. As we waited in traffic, I couldn't help but stare up at the Turkish border wall up in the not too distance. I couldn't see them, but I out the weight and guns of NATO's second largest army just beyond the horizon.

We pick up Kabat outside of her apartment in Comichelo, She greets us with a thernis of instant coffee and we go again to her favorite food stand for more falafel burritos. For months afterwards, I found myself periodically craving them the closest US equivalent. I found the garlic sauces, probably the sauce at Zankow Chicken and Los Angeles, but it's not nearly as good as we eat kabat walks us through our schedule, she set up a meeting with the head of the women's Economic Development Council for the city of Kamischlow.

The building is located in a residential neighborhood, one floor in a tall, dusty brown apartment block. We park outside and Jake and I grabbed the minimal necessary equipment to bring inside. We've been warned that this location is a particular target for ISIS sleeper cell attacks.

Security is high. I leave my backpack behind and I just bring my recorder, but I forget to remove my pocket knife. As a little bit of context, I always have a good solid knife on me, particularly when I travel. I've used it to pry open bathroom doors into crepit public facilities in Serbia's grape Off Nazi graffiti on abandoned buildings in Los Angeles, and to open more beers than I care to mention in more places than I can remember.

Bringing a knife is so second nature to me that I often forget that I haven't. And that's what happened as I stepped up to the middle aged Assayish guard running the security checkpoint. His partners, I notice, are two women in their mid twenties. All three of them have a K forty seven's and they all seem to be on high alert.

But the old man is by far the most thorough and the rest. He catches my pocket knife tucked into the waistband of my pants, and he is profoundly frustrated to find it. He laboriously explains to Chabat that I will have to pick up my blade on the way out. I say that's fine, but I can tell Hoobat's face that she is somewhat amusedly frustrated with me too knifeless. We are allowed to enter the building.

[09:45]

The Women's Economic Development Headquarters is the cleanest building we've been to in Rojava. It smells sweet, a little like flowers and a little like fresh laundry. Pictures of female martyrs are during the walls, and my eyes are immediately drawn to a colorful portrait of a Rin mir Khan, one of the most review eared Shahids or martyrs in all of Rojava. Arin was one of the y PGS female fighters.

In two thousand fourteen, during the desperate battle for Kobani, she stymied an ICE's advance by throwing multiple grenades into squads of fighters and then, in a last desperate act of defiance, charging into their ranks and blowing herself up. She is reported to have killed dozens of them. I will come to know her face well, her straight black hair, her wide honest smile, white teeth and flush round cheeks.

Arin Merkhan hangs in thousands of homes and public buildings all around Rojava. In the Kamischlo Women's Economic Development Council meeting room, it hangs on the wall opposite from a gigantic woodcut portrait of Abdulla Ajalon Apo, the founder of the p k K. One end of the room holds a heavy bookcase filled with Appo's books. There are two long couches on either wall. Jake Cabat and I take our seats and Horium Chamid, head of the Woman's Economic Development Council, walks in and greets us.

She takes a seat underneath the enormous apo wood cut and we begin to talk. My first question is one I've been pondering for a while. What does she see as a bigger struggle, the battle against Isis or the battle of the women in this region against entrenched male supremacy.

[11:12]

We see the women's struggle as much more difficult than the struggle against Isis. Of course, Isis are barberous enemy. You come to fight them and either you eradicate them or they eradicate you. But the struggle against customs and practices, against religion which limits the rights of women, the struggle to change the mentality of women, this is much harder. In Horim's view, the victory against Isis was just one battle in a long struggle.

Women have been suffocated in society by the politics of the Syrian state. Their rights have been limited, and this mentality has suffocated them. So they are scared to resist, to resist against the oppression around them, to rise up and say this is my right. I exist. We have difficulties with this. Isis were well known throughout the world.

There were a barbarous enemy, not just for women but for all people. But women also have hidden enemies around them, oppressive men, customs, practices, economic repression, hidden things women struggle in secret. Much of Horium's work centers around helping the women of Rojava and their struggles against misogyny and bigotry.

Rujava's war with Isis captured the imagination of world media, but this quieter war is the one that will bring actual, lasting victory to the women here. There was a woman whose husband was martyred in the war against Ices. His family wanted to take her children back because she had no money and they felt she had no opportunities.

She was basically given the choice to either find a new man or give up her children to their dead father's family. Our job was to provide her with a belief in herself the economic opportunity to struggle against her family anxiety. Before the war, educational opportunities for women in Syria varied widely depending on their family background and location, and after eight years of fighting and years of ISIS occupation, many women in Northeast Syria haven't benefited from the kind of basic education that gives them a chance to survive as a single mother.

This particular woman's situation was all the more challenging because she was deaf, but Horium Senter helped her find adult education classes that taught her how to sew, which gave her a marketable skill.

[13:22]

She works in Taylor's shop now, and her economic situation has improved. Her children are with her, and her late husband's family now has no excuse to take them. Years ago, when I worked for a website called Cracked, I spent four long days reading nearly a thousand pages of ices propaganda. It was filled

with pictures of young men posing with enormous rifles, wielding swords, and galloping on horseback, firing rocket launchers and on rushing tanks, in between articles about the proper care and raping of sex slaves.

It was a veritable cornucopia of toxic masculinity. And I thought about that as I sat in the air conditioned meeting room and looked at the portraits of Shahid's on the walls. These women had been martyred in a struggle against the human distillation of misogyny. Horium clearly venerated them, but during our conversation she labored repeatedly to make the point that these martyrs were but the tip of an iceberg.

Even more women are being martyred by the male mentality and by the capitalist mindset. In these times, our economy is based on money and earning money. Women who get caught up in this can lose themselves in it, and they too become martyrs. In two thousand and thirteen, American billionaire and Facebook chief operating officer Cheryl Sandberg published the book lean In.

It advised women that they could move forward, fight against entrenched sexism in their industries, and succeed under capitalism if they did stuff like refused to take off work just because they were pregnant. Lean In was a guide for women to excel under capitalism by pushing through the unfair, unreasonable demands and biases they faced until they reached success.

[14:51]

Cheryl herself realized that her advice was not quite as good as it seemed when her husband died and she found herself trying to lean in as a single mother. The rest of the world realized that Cheryl Sandberg might not be the best source of advice on anything. When the Cambridge analytic as scandal broke. This was followed by an ocean of bad pr for Facebook, the worst example being an ethnic cleansing in Myanmar fueled by viral Facebook posts.

[15:14]

It was soon clear to everyone that Sandberg, the adult in the room at Facebook, had really just used her credibility to help gloss over the social networks reckless culture. I am certain that Horium never read lean In, but Cheryl Sandberg's mentality, the idea that women can force capitalism to treat them equally, well, that is very much what Horium was arguing against. Equality, in her eyes, was not about enabling women to exploit people from money just as well as men.

It was about providing women with tools to take care of themselves. Western women they work, but received less. They work in mentality of the men. If I am free here, I can only be as free as the other women here.

What we talk. One of Horium's assistants brings in tea. Kurdish tea is normally served with lots of sugar. Often half the glass or more will be sugar, But today the tea arrives unsweetened. Horium tells us about her son who fell Shahed, fighting against Isis. She believes he died to make this woman's revolution possible, but that's only a part of her motivation. Horium is a fierce looking woman, tall with a pointed jaw and large eyes that burrow into me.

She answers our questions politely, but she radiates a strange coolness the whole time. It's not unfriendliness or anger exactly. I described the sensation of sitting in the room with her as a little like talking to a coiled spring. Later, over the course of days, I'll come to recognize this particular type of energy. Horium is from the mountains.

That's the term people in Rojava use for the old fighters, the members of the p k K who started off as Marxist guerrillas in the mountains before coming down to help build this place. The people from the mountains have a definite hardness to them, an edge that sets them apart from everyone else we meet. It helps explain a little bit of where Horium is coming from.

At the end of the interview, we bid Horium goodbye, gather our gear and make to leave the Woman's Economic Development Center. On our way out, Habbat points to a brightly colored mural on the wall. It says jin Jian Azadi. This Habbat informs me is one of Rojava's most popular slogans. It means women, life and freedom.

[17:38]

On our way back to the van, we wave hello to the two young female soldiers at the guard post outside the center. They smile back and wave excitedly, so we asked them if we can come take some pictures. The older male, Asaish, the gruff man who'd taken my knife earlier, comes up to hand it back. He trundles away afterwards, rifle in hand, scanning the alleyways around us. I find myself wondering how he feels about working with two women who are young enough to be his granddaughters.

I wonder how committed he actually is to this revolution for gender equality. Cabat looks over to me. She's anticipated my question. Should we talk to him? She asks, Her question is rhetorical. We walk over to him, and he stiffened slightly in surprise. Before stopping to talk, he steps away and puts his back to the wall, standing in the place that gives him the most secure view of his surroundings.

Kobat asks him first what he thinks of the Women's Economic Development Center and the work that hori Um and her colleagues do there. His answer is simple. In my view, it's a very good organization. We have many women who haven't had a chance to be educated.

[18:42]

This helps that. Next, I have Hubbat asked him how he felt as a soldier the first time he saw women in his community picking up guns to fight for their liberty. I was very happy. It's nice to have women in the military, and I support them. Finally, I have Cabat ask him point blank, does he consider himself a feminist.

I wonder if perhaps Kabbat will have to explain the term to him, but he doesn't ask for clarification. Instead, he scrunches up his eyebrows a bit, considers the question, and then answers, no revolution can succeed without the women. We thank the old soldier for his time and get back in the van just in time for a lan to hand Jake and I two more of his precious terrible cigarettes.

Spas, We say, spas, bash Alan replies with an eyebrow wiggle. Our next destination is a place I've been excited to see for months, since long before I started planning this trip. In earnest jin War easily one of Rojava's most ambitious projects. Genoir is a village for only women and their children. Most of the inhabitants here are survivors of abuse, women who have had to leave violent spouses or oppressive traditionalist families.

Genoir is a place where these people can remake themselves by building a new town from the ground up. The word jin means women in Kurdish and jin War is a living expression of one of the concepts of Rojava's founder of the law Augelon. Along with the democratic confederalist system that runs this place, Aujelon is the creator an advocate of something called genealogy or the science of women, or very literally women's studies.

It's sometimes referred to as Kurdish feminism, but that definition doesn't really convey what's going on here. At its core, all of Aujelon's modern beliefs are rooted in the idea that women must be liberated in order to liberate the world. The oppression of the patriarchal system extends past just legal codes and religious rules and into the realms of what we'd call the social sciences.

Genealogy, then, is the process by which women reevaluate history, economics, art, education, health, and many other things. In an attempt to cast off male centered biases on a societal level. Advocates of genealogy hope that this will lead to a more equitable civilization and a more accurate understanding of the world. On an individual level.

[20:53]

Genealogy is a big part of the justification for women's only spaces like jennar As. A line written on the walls of gen War states, until women educate and empower themselves, no one is free. My first glance of gin Wir is of a lightly fortified desert compound, a dozen or so spacious uniform homes with lavender painted walls and a tall iron gate manned by a young woman with an a K forty seven.

Atop the gate is the word gin War, which literally means women's land. We've arrived in gin War around nine. It's hot, dry, and sunny. Today. The ground below us is baked rock hard, and it appears to be that way everywhere but the rows of crops in the middle of gin War. Outside the walls, there's more farmland and rising pillars of black smoke.

There are constant brush fires in northeast Syria during the summer. Some are natural, some are caused by isis sleepers, and some surely are the result of careless cigarette smokers. We're greeted by two women. One is in her mid twenties and Kurdish, and the other is a tall German woman in her thirties.

She's the first foreign volunteer that I've met in Rojava. She's heavily tattooed and initially suspicious of Jake and I. She questions us politely about our intentions here and what she's satisfied with our answers. She agrees to an interview. What is your family think you're being here? M yeah, I mean, it's of course, um, let's say it's also process.

Yeah, I think it's generally like affected by the of course, like the mass madea and in general dessituation when you when you say that you live in northern Syria and if you sounded like this, it's of course like the things which comes to the mind of many people's war and war and war.

So it's hard kind of to convince them to understand what is it and actually me, I'm like in the process of like them understanding better or not, like they wouldn't probably you know what, Oh, no, good, thanks, you know water, just coffee, thank you. Yeah, it's uh. When I told my family I was coming here, I think their vision was that I'd be dodging sniper fire the whole time.

And yeah, yeah, I spilled coffee there, says it's fine though. Spilling coffee is good luck if you don't do it on purpose. We sit and talk for a bit, feeling each other out. Our Kurdish host asks me how aware most Americans are about what's happening in Syria right now. She makes a point to ask me if they think that our country's effort here in supporting Rojava is seen as being a lot like the Vietnam War.

I have to cringe and explain that most Americans know very little about Syria. They know there's a civil war, they know Isis was here, but that's most of it. They've probably never heard of the term Rojava. She is not overjoyed by this answer. In the UK, like most people, they don't really know about it, but they'll just be like the curtains Syrias.

Oh yeah, they're the good guys, right, that's you know, that's about it. Yeah, a lot of Americans were here, Yeah, like we like the like my friends at home, probably have no idea what's going on, but they just think they seem cool, like they seem okay, you know, like that's about it. Yeah. Yeah, they recognize that they seem you know, and they would probably say the Curds in Syria the pesh Murga because you're asking a lot for an American.

There was a lot of laughter at the idea that Americans would confuse Iraqi Kurds with Syrian Kurds, and tension broken. I pivot to another question, based on something she'd said a few minutes earlier before I started recording. I was interested, she mentioned earlier, seeing growing up seeing that like it seems like all the people writing books whom and all the philosophers are men um And you know, there's a picture of a male philosopher, two of them on the walls of this room.

Would she like to see a picture of a woman philosopher adorn it or adjoin it? At some point? The male philosopher, I mentioned, there is a delage on gin Warri's town hall hosts the obligatory very large framed picture of Apo.

[24:57]

He looks a bit like Bill Cosby in this one, crossing his hands on or his chin and grinning impishly out at the world. I'm still concerned about the new life without our leader. Patches I've seen on some soldiers uniforms. The fact that Oppo's portrait hangs in the center of almost every meeting room doesn't diminish my worries. Her response is thankfully not the response of a zealot. She explains to me that students of genealogy, the women's science that they study in Rajava, have spent years combing through history books to find examples of female scientists, philosophers, inventors, and thinkers whose stories were buried by the traditional education systems of the area.

So this section of the geneology of researching, they found out that they are still on the process.

[25:38]

They came out with the many philosopher romans, and they really going to take the picture of all of them, that maybe there will be no place for the picture. The women of gen war haven't separated themselves from men because they hate them, or because they advocate for a permanent segregation of gender. The why of this place is complex, but a large part of it is rooted in history, not just Kurdish history or Arab history, but human His story over coffee, we talk about the oppression of midwives and wise women for witchcraft in European and American history.

After coffee, they take me on a tour of the largest building in gen War, the school they've built for their children. It's clean, orderly, and decidedly low tech. In one corner of the room is a bookshelf covered in pictures and recreations of ancient artifacts. The one that catches my eye is a large, colorful picture of the Venus of Willendorff.

You've seen this, even if the name isn't instantly familiar. It's that small prehistoric statue of a rotund, large breasted woman. So it's the symbol of of the woman. It's like the woman body, the like the fert symbol like it's like the woman goddess who was representing the society, and it's it's clear message. The venus dates back more than twenty five thousand years.

It's the oldest known depiction of the naked female form, and starting in nineteen o eight, the universal archaeological consensus was it's porn. The name is even a form of mockery. European archaeologists thought this statuette was erotic art from a primitive civilization. This remained the scientific consensus until nineteen ninety six, when professor's Leroy McDermott and Kathleen mc coyd carried out some novel research to suggest an alternative theory.

They took photographs of heavily pregnant, naked women possessitioning the camera and the rough location of the subject's eyes. Then then compared those photographs to similar shots of the venus and found that they were nearly identical. The venus of Willendorf, long assumed to have been sculpted by a man, looked precisely like the kind of sculpture a pregnant woman might make if she was attempting to create a clay representation of her own body.

This analysis, when you look to the body of the of the of the venus, it's like the women body looking them from top. Back in two thousand sixteen, I actually published a book, A Brief History of Vice, and it discussed the venus of Willendorff and the theories around it. I interviewed Professor McDermott and he explained to me that the venus was likely the very first medical device in recorded history, an obstetric aid made by women for women.

He explained, quote women alone un face the inevitable, life threatening and painful event of giving birth, and it is very likely that the thought of preparing for it had crossed the mind of a woman before the process became of intellectual interest to men.

It's always been fascinating to me that everyone just agreed for nearly a century that the venus must be pornography, rather than even considering another possibility. And seven thousand miles away from my door, the women of gin War had been struck by that same reality. And it's but it's crazy, you know,

I feel for example, if you go to different places and then there's an archeological research and there's like figures appeared many times.

Of course the interpretation, oh, it was the goddess, it was the representation of the of the society, it was the symbol of the clan. If those whatever, and when it's like a statue with women body found, then like the interpretation that is pornographic or that it's you know, it's you can already see like the mentality in it. How like the historical moment in the historical like a foundation so in the gin War exists for the same reason that the White PJ exists, and the same reason that towns and Rojava have women's councils as well as town councils.

There's an understanding here that the sheer depth of oppression women face means that they need dedicated spaces to build and to rediscover their history.

And in keeping with the bottom up nature of governance here, gen War's creation wasn't ordered by some central figure or agency. The initial idea came from the collaboration of a number of different local women's organizations, including Congrega Star and the Free Women's Foundation of Rojava. These local groups and international NGOs provided some of the funding, but many of the raw materials that built this place were donated by the villages and towns around it.

The villages around they from from one region. That because the houses, the foundation of the houses the stone's foundation, so like it's a really big amount of stone which needs to be tought. So for example, that was the one donation. Other donations which is usually for example really expensive sync is the vote because there's not so much wood. So from the different region, like people from different places, they donate.

This gin War is one of the most peaceful places i've ever been. The color lavender is everywhere. The buildings are short, squat and handsome, resembling the architecture one finds in New Mexico. It's very quiet, but outside its walls, wildfires race across the land, burning through dried brush in the brutal Syrian summer. I watch as a small fire tornado. Hall's asked just a football field or two away.

Our guide admits that fire is a constant threat. Fortunately like nothing bigger happened, No like nothing like, no cables, no uh, people was heard. The children two times were equated, and we together with neighbors are so with like help of the surrounding people, we very fighting with the fire. With the woman here, it's almost kind of like it's an immediate danger, but there's also like it's kind of symbolic.

As we were driving up here, we saw that big wall Turkey built sort of that that threat looming. I don't know, it seems like it's like an expression of it. Not I was also thinking about it. Not, it's like the direct threat here also to the attack and for the like the political situation of the like of the Turk troops and of the occupation of the Turks. It's still it's really it's really present, so it's kind of fair you could see that.

It's three months after I visit, the Turkish military surged forth from behind its walls. Artillery fire and missiles rained down on the land around gin Wir, and the town was temporarily abandoned by its residents. I was surprised by how hard the news hit me. Seeing the fires from miles away doesn't make it hurt any less when they reach you.

After our tour, we head back into the town hall. A few more of gen War's women have assembled and agreed to talk to us, so we have another cup of coffee and sit down for an interview with a young Arab woman.

She's a large flower tattoo on her left forearm and a T shirt that says every day is a second chance. I'll play a little bit of the audio from this, but I have to tell my recorders started having issues at just this point in the day. If you didn't understand that, I'll repeat This young woman was explaining to me that this month she was the village representative that made her the point woman for talking to journalists, and it also meant that she was expected to represent gen War to the other towns in the area.

All the women here take turns doing this job, which is scary for some of them, but our host points out it also forces them to grow as people. She and most of the women we talked to prefer not to use their names, but she explains to us how she came to gen War.

Her husband, she says, was a tattoo artist, but over time he developed a problem with alcohol and then he became violent. At first, she thought that maybe having a child would fix their issues these problems. So she gets first child and it was like not that bad, but it was like still on the problems there.

So then she get another child. She thought that it would be fixed there, have more children and their relationship would be more tight. But doesn't but last of her life with him because it's too bad and she couldn't manage to to offer that anymore, so she started. When she decided she'd had enough, she went to the women's house in her town and reported him these places.

The women's houses were formed by an organization called Congreya Star, a confederation of different women's groups across Rojava. Their core belief is that no society can be truly free unless it's women are liberated. It's basically the same sentiment that old fighter had expressed a Hoobatani, there is no revolution without the women.

[33:31]

The people at the women's house helped her divorce from her husband separate her life from his. They told her about gen War and suggested it might be a good place for her to go make a new start, So she took her children and moved there. In the months since, she has learned to farm, how to help manage a store, and how to administer a small village. I asked if she would ever have been able to consider leaving her husband before the revolution. Her answer is simple, law is the Arabic word for no.

We next talked to a woman who introduces herself as the wife of a she Heed. She is also Arab, and she wears more conservative clothing and a fuller head scarf. One of the criticisms you'll hear sometimes is that Rojava is really a Kurdish supremacist movement and that Arabs are oppressed in the area. It's an idea that the Turkish government has a vested interest in pushing.

Several months after I conduct these interviews, in the wake of their invasion, the Turkish government will force hundreds of thousands of Kurtish civilians out of their homes and move in Arab refugees from elsewhere in Syria to take their place. It's a deliberate act of ethnic cleansing. We see no evidence of racial animosity here in genoir, though our next INTERVIEWE expresses that her kids are happy here, learning with the Kurdish children and studying both Kurdish and Arabic languages.

She and a number of the women we talk to engen War don't express a great depth of knowledge about Abdula Jolan's ideas or about any of the radical politics that have made this place such a cause celeb among the global left. And I suppose some people might find that disappointing to me. It's a pretty clear statement about the relative lack of brainwashing that occurs here.

The ideological underpinnings of this place are important to many of its residents, but no woman is denied a place to live here because they haven't read enough political theory. Gin War is not large, just a bit over a dozen families, but it's also very young. Our hosts explained that the goal is to build more places like it, and not just women's villages, but other villages made using the eco friendly construction methods used in the creation of these homes.

The buildings in gin War all have high ceilings and carefully positioned ceiling fans in order to stay comfortable during the blazing Syrian summer without using air conditioning, and it is in fact very comfortable inside. One day. They tell me villages like this will help to reduce the influence, size and ecological toll of overcrowded cities like Kamischlow sentiments like this are common in Rojava.

The goals of the true believers here are always spectacular and ambitious, and it would be easy to see them as a lot of hot air if it weren't for the huge amount of work that's evident all around me. It is far too early to say if the things they're aiming for will ever actually happen. Of course, everyone I speak to is conscious of the fact that this could all be swept away in the space of an evening, with the speed of a wildfire tearing across a wind swept plane.

But in spite of that, they struggle on putting one foot forward in front of the next doing the work and hoping they'll get the chance to keep doing it tomorrow. We say our goodbyes, pile into Alan's van,

and drive away. I look back as we roll off, and I noticed that the word jin war atop the gate has been split in half by its opening.

Now I see the two halves of the word as separate terms. Gin Women's War game in the moy The Women's War is a production of I Heart Radio.

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5. Grandma Law And Revolutionary Sacrifice

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April 22, 2020 • 46 mins

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All Episodes

Welcome to the Women's War, a production of I Heart Radio. Jake and I are pretty experienced travelers. We're both well used to dangerous places. But something about Kamischlow, the city where we spend the night of July, sets us on edge.

The city itself is, if not exactly clean, not particularly dirty either. It is overcrowded, badly so, but orderly enough. Given all that, the graffiti on the walls is generally friendly and pro social. There are the names of various Shihid's martyrs who died fighting for Rojava, brightly colored recycling symbols, and cozy cartoon illustrations of women with a K forty seven's but alone among the ruins of Rojava.

Kamish Loo is not entirely under the control of the SDF. The Syrian regime and its blood soaked dictator Bashar al Assad still run a few square blocks of the city, along with its military airport. The result of this is that every so often you turn a corner in Komischlow and run face to face into a gigantic portrait of Bashar.

The regime. Bits of town are walled off, protected by razor wire and surly looking young male soldiers with kalashnikovs. A few days before our arrival, an American tourist was kidnapped by regime soldiers. Here. The full story of this that comes out later is profoundly dumb.

Sam Goodwin, aged thirty, was trying to visit every country in the world. The Syrian regime, of course, would not approve his visa, so he hired our friend Sangar to get him approval to cross the Iraqi border into Rojava. Once in Rojava, Sam planned to head to Kamichlo so he could step briefly into the regime controlled side of town. Sangar told him that this was a terrible idea, and also told him that if he was going to safely visit Kamischlow, he really needed a local Kurdish fixer to show him around there too.

It was easy to accidentally why end up in the wrong part of town and thus get arrested by the regime. But Sam decided he knew best. He didn't have much money, so he decided he wouldn't have a fixer once he reached Rojava. This was safe enough until he got to Kamischlow, and he decided to execute his cunning plan he checked into the Aja Hotel two A's, which is where most foreigners stay, and then he hit the ground and scoped out a regime checkpoint.

Sam's plan, it seems, was to hop across into regime territory and then run back over into Rojava very quickly. Only he wasn't quite as fast as he needed to be, and so when Jake and I checked into the Aja Hotel on the night of July, Sam sat in a prison cell somewhere nearby in regime controlled Syria.

His fate at that moment was uncertain, although he's since been freed, and it lingered in our minds. Our nerves were not helped by the ten minute speech Kobat and our hotel's manager gave us on which parts of town were actually safe to visit and which parts of town get us arrested like Sam.

The key, they explained, was just to avoid wandering too close to the regime parts of town. Large chunks of the city, they assured us, were totally safe. It was just that foreigners had a nasty tendency to funk up in the unfamiliar environs. Now, neither Jake nor I wanted to spend a lot of time out on the street.

Given all the reasons, I just laid out. But we were hungry, and so we ventured out for schwarma and for some beer from me. We were about ten feet from the door of our hotel when a technical a flatbed truck with a giant gun melted in the bed, farted into view. When a cloud of exhausted wheels to stop just a few feet ahead of us, smack in the middle of an intersection, two WYPG men hopped out from the bed of the truck, a K forty seven's in hand.

They took up positions on either side of the street and began searching vehicles and questioning people. They did not seem overly aggressive or frightened, but they did seem very serious, and the mood on the street turned icy and weird in a way that's hard to describe to people who haven't watched roving pat rolls of armed men search for suicide bombers.

That is what the hPG we're looking for. That afternoon, Kamischla was large, and it's chaotic enough. That isis sleeper cells have had an easier time operating there than in most parts of Rajava. There had been suicide bombings earlier in the year. Jake and I gave the whole scene a wide berth as we walked past and on to our destination, a little hole in the wall Shwarma Joint.

We ate, and then we set out to find a beer store. We were maybe half a block into that mission when a young man on a motorcycle burned right past the air SATs checkpoint and up to Jake and I. We both tensed up. I wouldn't say I've been close to a suicide bomb detonating, but I have been closer than I wanted to be.

[04:41]

Jake and I never talked about this, but I kind of gathered from his reaction that he'd had a similar experience, and so we were both rather jumpy at this. But the kid just topped off his bike and breeze passed us into a shop. We relaxed, but we also decided it was probably a good idea at a high tail it back to our hotel rooms. We did not go back out into Kamichelo alone again. We made it through the night, though, and we awoke the next morning to an even tenser mood.

The commander of Sincom United States Central Command had just flown into Rojava's capital, Kobani to meet with the leadership of the SDF. Rojava's military security was correspondingly tightened. Kabat and Alan picked Jake and I up that morning, and as soon as we got out on the road the additional a Sayish patrols were very obvious.

[05:26]

That's not the only reason things felt tense, though. The reason that the head of Sentcom had flown to Rojava was to discuss the so called Turkish buffer Zone. President Erdowin wanted the United States to force the SDF to withdraw from all of the areas immediately around a Turkey's border, but a lot of northeast Syria is bordered by Turkey, including most of the defensive fortifications and tunnels that would give Rojava a hope of defending itself against NATO's second largest military.

As we ate breakfast, the news dropped that an individual in Rojava had fired a small rocket into Turkey. No one was hurt and the STF arrest at the culprit, but it did not seem to bode well for future peace. Moments later, scanning my phone, I came across another piece of breaking news. Iran had just announced its arrest of seventeen people it called CIA Operatives.

I began to feel as if Jake and I might be standing on the edge of some yawning, terrible chasm, and so I elected to set down my phone. This proved to be a wise decision. My mood improved immensely as we got out of Commissil and on the road to our next destination. Today we were headed to a woman's cooperative farm out in the countryside near a town called Trebespie.

The farmer is one of several co ops training up a new generation of female farmers. As a law tour across the landscape, he began to play as one of his favorite songs, Destane Kobani that means long Live Rojava, We are ready to die for you.

The attacks of the enemy are in vain. Revolutionary men and women are defending the homeland without fear of barbaric dogs. You get the idea. It's pretty standard militant stuff, but there's a pretty sweet breakdown at the halfway point.

Jake and I like it, and it gets us to thinking about our favorite Irish rebel songs. A lot of Jake's family came from Ireland, so he grew up listening to the stuff. I don't have any Irish blood at all, but for whatever reason, I fell in love with old ira A anthems when I was in high school.

We decided to play one of them for Kabbat, and there's no question among us as to which song it should be. Come out and fight me like a major, like Calabey from The Green Lovely Day, This is come out Ye Black and Tans, a classic tune about a drunk Irish partisan taunting members of a British military unit.

The notoriously violent Black and Hands. The defiance of the song appears to Kabbat. She asks us if we've heard Sia Madonni's cover of Bella Chow Jake has, but I haven't, and she plays it fish Son the Stars Chocho.

In response, Jake and I put on another one of our favorite i RA songs, Home Soldiers, go on home, have you done looking homes? Or rad under jeers and will fight you for ray. Kabat likes that one a lot.

She spent most of her life with foreign soldiers occupying her homeland or threatening to occupy it Syrians from regime controlled territory Russians, Americans, Turks. Kabat identifies deeply with the sentimentic spressed in this song, and she laughs a lot during it. We have to stop by the nearby Asaish or Military police office to get more paper stamped and inspected.

We drive into a walled complex of buildings with a large friendly poster of Apo up de Lagelon, the founder of Rojaba, wearing his Cosby sweater and smiling. It's displayed prominently out front. The process takes a little while, and while we wait, how About starts a conversation with one of the cops in the office with us.

She asks him a variant of the same question I've had her asking a number of the men. The gist of the question is do you find working with women to be weird? Did you used to feel differently about their place in society? Is this strange at all for you? And this guy insists that it's never been an issue for him. Then he shoots back a question to Jake. Are women allowed to serve in frontline combat units in the British military? Jake tells him yes, but only recently, because for a long time people thought women could not do those jobs.

I tell him the things are more or less the same over in the United States. The asaish man regards this as ridiculous. He tells us our daughters they defeated isis So there is the proof. We get our permission to move on, and before long we're rolling up the dirt road leading to the women's cooperative Farming Commune.

It's a sizeable endeavor, more than two dozen acres under cultivation and a complex of a dozen greenhouses, each the size of two eighteen wheelers park next to each other. Alan stops the van and we get out and meet a middle aged man outside a pair of trailers that seemed to function as an office space. He introduces himself as haveal ken War and explains that he's an agricultural engineer and that he acts as an adviser to the young women who live in work here.

He takes us into the trailers and he leads us to a small classroom with YPG and J flags in one corner and a desk with a computer and an a K forty seven lint against it. Two young women sit in a low slung couch at the other end of the room. They could have walked out of downtown Los Angeles. Both war jenes, sneakers and colorful t shirts.

Ahim has dark glasses, a head scarf, and presents with an overwhelming air of shyness. Her partner, Salam is her polar opposite, with a penetrating gaze and a wide, toothy and thoroughly winsome smile.

Both young women are the elected representatives of the commune, chosen by their fellows to represent the group at local council meetings and in the instances when foreign journalists rolled through town. They both looked very young to be taking on leadership roles and an endeavor as large as this farm. When we arrived, there were enough crops on the ground to fill a couple of large trucks.

My first question for a human Salam as if before the revolution they had ever thought they might end up leading a project like this. Kabbat asks them for me that tutting noise was Salam saying no in a way that translated very clearly to everyone in the room, even if it didn't quite translate over my recording. No, we never thought the world could be like this, I asked her when she first realized that the world had changed, and that women in her society suddenly had more options.

The memory was clear to her. She was sitting with a group of friends shortly after the start of the revolution, and as they began to talk about the changes happening to their society, an avalanche of buried desires began to bubble up from within them. We were young, and we wanted to study.

One of us said I want to be a doctor, and I said, I want to study economics. Salam and her friends went to the women's house that had been newly established in their town. When this place was set up, our neighbors and other people in the community talked about it. Salam came from a fairly traditional Arab village, and it was not the norm for women and her family to have careers or to even really live independently before marriage.

I asked her if her family made things more difficult for her when she announced that she wanted to do this work. The sound she made wasn't picked up perfectly by my little handheld audio recorder. I will try to recreate it as best as I can on my own.

The sound only conveys half of her message. The other half was on her wide open eyes and cheerfully traumatized grin. It's the kind of look you see on your friend's faces when they were called the times their parents caught them out drinking underage, or sneaking out to visit a boyfriend or a girlfriend, or doing something else that caused their parents to blow up in a huge way. Announcing that she planned to leave home was clearly not a pleasant memory, but her family weren't able to make her stop either.

Perhaps it's true that our work was men's work before, but now it is women's work. We said, yes, we will work like the men, and we put in long hours here to do so. After a period of study, Salama sided that her interest in economics would be best served by helping to start and operate a business.

Her training for this involved classroom lessons and practical training and agriculture, but it also included the same month of ideological and armed training required of new recruits who joined the militias of the SDF. We had classes about ancient history starting with the Big Bang, classes on Abdullah Alan, on ethics, on how we should relate to others in our community.

We had many classes, including education on economics. They also learned how to use a gun. Basic arm training is considered a critical skill for just about everybody who takes any sort of real role in Rojava. Did remember what she thought the first time that she had the first time that she fired a weather it was scary up until the first bullet I fired.

My hand was shaking and the comrade had to help me. But the second time I fired it. I also asked what was probably a more important question, how had it felt the first time she was able to eat crops that she'd helped grow herself. It was hard work, but we enjoyed it when the crops were finally ready. The cucumbers finished first, We liked them a lot.

[15:08]

The harvest was difficult, but after we had everything gathered, we were so happy. Now you can see our fields here. They're so big, and it took a lot of effort to make them this way. Days spent under the sun, irritated by the heat, but once we had that food in our hands, we forgot our discomfort. After we conclude our interview, Salamin Aheim take us on a tour of their farm.

We pass a man cutting up metal segments of fencing while a female apprentice observes. We pass a fertile field filled with row after row of cucumbers, cantaloupes, and zucchini. I'm not an expert on agriculture, but I've spent a decent chunk of my life on small farms in Texas, Oklahoma, California, and Oregon. It is clear to me that this is not a tiny token endeavor.

There is an enormous amount of food on the ground, a lot of thick, flavorful cucumbers with an almost media richness to them that's entirely absent from the ones I've back in the United States. We eat them while we walk. The pastoral charm of the field is broken by the enormous oil refinery that dominates the horizon in the distance.

[16:09]

Rojava holds a number of very rich oil fields which provide a significant amount of serious total oil output. The refinery ahead of US doubles as a base for US troops in the region. Oil production definitely does not jell well with the ecology balance bits of the Rojavan constitution, but selling it represents a pragmatic necessity. There are taxes in Rojava, but this is not a wealthy region of the world.

War is expensive without oil sales the STFs position would be even less secure. A great deal has been written about the oil refineries of northeast Syria. A few months before my own arrival in Rojava, a reporter with Mother Jones named Shane Bauer published a massive long form article about his own experiences in the region. Rujava's oil refineries and the role of US played in securing them were a major focus of his story.

Bauer was critical of the Rojavan Project, and he spends relatively little time discussing economic cooperatives like the farm Moron. He writes of them, quote, These profit sharing ventures are subsidized with interest free loans, but their role in the economy is relatively marginal. There are just a hundred and twenty nine cooperatives in Jazeera, which is one of the cantons in Rojava.

Their goods are bought and sold on the free market. The question of whether or not these cooperatives really matter in the big picture is a debatable point, to be sure, but it's worth noting that none of those one d and twenty nine cooperatives existed prior to the revolution, and there are more cooperatives in the other cantons of Rojava.

[17:32]

Fifty five of these co ops are all women endeavors. Like the restaurant we ate at in Darek and Salam and Ahms Farm, these employ more than seven thousand women. It feels significant to me that something of this scale has been accomplished while the people of Rojava have also fought an expensive, grinding war with ISIS. And it feels significant to me when we step into the large complex of greenhouses on Salam and Ahims Farm.

Yeah. Here we see on one end of the very large greenhouse space. There's no internal walls between them group six women, all masks, cutting down plants. Watching these young women chopped down old vines, remnants of the last harvest to clear up space free planting pulls my mind back to California and the medical marijuana farms that I spent a sizeable chunk of the late Oughts living in and around.

Perhaps Shane is right, and everything happening here is an insignificant side show, but it doesn't feel that way standing in the middle of it. We eat a cantaloupe before we leave. Like most right thinking people, I've spent most of my life considering cantaloupe to be among the very worst fruits.

I find it dull and flavorless, and I've always sort of assumed that its main purpose was to be an inexpensive way to fill out the weight of cafeteria fruit salad. I don't know if it's something in the soil or just the fact that I've never had a farm fresh cantaloup before, but it tastes incredible here, so much sweeter than i'd expected.

[18:57]

Bellies full, We bet our hosts farewell and drive to Turbespi, a large town of about sixteen thousand. I want to get a sense of how men on the street feel about the changes to women's rights here since the revolution. We haven't heard from many men who are just normal civilians, not involved in any of the militias or political parties that make up Rojava. One allegation you'll hear from people who are critical of Rojava is the idea that the main political party in the region, the p y D, has basically dressed up their authoritarian rule as a democratic revolution.

The p y D or Democratic Union Party, was founded in two thousand three. Shane Bauer of Mother Jones brings up the case of Burzan Leani, a Kurdish journalist who was imprisoned for six months in two thousand seventeen under charges of being part of an unapproved media organization.

Forty five days of a sentence were held in solitary confinement. Leoni is affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria or k DPS, a political party that many Syrian Curds say is just a wing of the Barzani family's empire of influence. Since the KDPS is a party for herds and for Kords alone, it is legal in Rojava.

Under the constitution, political parties may not be found out on ethnic or religious lines. The Self Administration basically accuses Leani of being a spy in Rojava there to drum up unrest and resistance. Leoni denies this, and neither I nor Shane Bauer have any way of knowing what the truth here is.

The best I can do with the resources available to me now is to try and gain an understanding of how free people in Rojava feel to express their feelings towards the p y D and the Self Administration. We park on a random street and Kabat approaches the first passer by. We meet a short, middle aged Arab man on his way to the market.

We say our greetings, and then I start in questions, what do you think about the changes that have been made since the revolution? His answer to the second question is a bit more winding, but it's also broadly positive. Day said was just a woman who are educated, our functioning in the jobs as as well the women the men that they were like, I just have education for people like me alerted they didn't work, they were just always farmers.

That might have been a little hard to follow. This guy was saying that back when ASSAD was in charge, only wealthy, educated women were able to hold any kind of job. They have always been liberated working women in Syria, but until the revolution they were primarily wealthy, generally from coastal cities, and generally benefiting from some sort of direct connection to the ASSAD regime.

This guy expressed his opinion that now working class women had opportunities, and he felt this was a good thing. We approach another passer by a reedy young man who expresses a more critical opinion of the self administration. He praises the security, but he complains that some of the dishonest, corrupt officials who ran things under ASSAD were still around, and we're still dishonest, but the people who are already before the revolution have a problems with their like attitude or corruption.

Kabat asks him next how he feels about, you know, the fact that women can do stuff here now, none of us. We'll hear variations of this joke several times today, and many times throughout our time in Rojava, as you can hear.

Jake and I both laughed when we heard it the first time, but it grew a little bit less funny every time someone repeated it. I couldn't help but think that some of the men back at home in my own country who complain about the feminist movement oppressing American men. This feels much less aggressive than the men's rights movement, for instance.

[22:42]

But it's certainly not all lighthearted jokes either. Many men in Rojava feel that what you and I would call legal equality is in reality women being placed over men. It's not exactly a new story in the history of civil rights movements. After a handful of interviews, we find ourselves talking to a tall, heavy

set man in a thobe, the traditional Arab dressing gown. Kbat asks him how he feels about the changes to women's rights after the revolution.

There have been great successes. Next, she asks him, before a woman could not pick up a gun or go to work, how do you feel about the fact that this has changed. I think it's very good that now women can take up the gun. Before women lived under violence. Now after the revolution, they have had chances. They have had their freedom.

Before they weren't free, they couldn't speak. Now they can work, they can speak. There is an improvement. Next, she asks him if he feels the self administration government has treated his people Arabs any differently than Kurds. No, there's no difference. We are all one. It doesn't matter here if you're Arab, Kurdish Christian. We are all brothers from this revolution who rose up together as one.

We continue down the street, talking to Arab and Kurdish men of all ages about their feelings towards the new system. Most people are broadly positive, particularly about the security situation, but also generally out the new opportunities for women. After an hour or so, we find ourselves in a vegetable market talking to the owner of a small shop. He's the first man, we think who is emphatically against the changes made by the Rojavan Revolution.

Okay, so he is not with this system of the woman. He feels like it's too much or it's over Why because he already have one wife and he wanted to get a second wife. But he's a friend. Do you not saying now a lot that it's not allowed to get a second wife.

[24:28]

I'm not particularly sympathetic to this fellow's complaints, but I am happy that he felt perfectly comfortable voicing them at length to foreign journalists because he don't have a children from the first one, so you have a reason for the second. But even that, I certainly can't say that the members of the p whitey Rojava's largest political party, or any other officials involved in its governance, have never targeted or oppressed individuals with political differences.

That statement would not even be true of my own country. But I can't say that this man on the street, talking to a foreigner with a clear and visible record device, felt fine voicing his criticisms of the system, and that same thing would not have happened and Bashar al Assad, Syria. At the very least, we finished our time on the street, and after a couple of terrible, terrible cigarettes with a lawn which we enjoyed very much.

Thank you. Alan. We hop in the van and roll off back to Kamisch. Lookbat and I start talking about her feelings towards the interview, Um, how did you feel about the running joke about the women being in charge of everything? Now? Yeah, I accepted.

[25:43]

I even sometimes expect like a more harsh comments. You know, I know deeply they are many of them don't like it at all. They don't believe it at all. They and even sometimes I feel like if it came again their control, if this system has been done, the woman will be like the U is losing this because maybe they were going to take revenge again. Yeah, which of those guys, like some of them were clearly she's like a gay in the vegetable card seemed to be having a laugh about it.

Do you feel some of them were or maybe he was. I think, yeah, this division because the other one and he said, like it's strong system and like I want to because he wanted to just get another wife because of the kid. He have a reason why he's criticizing this system. But the other one he's clear like don't like it at all, and he's like even make fun on it, Like yeah, they were going to take us to a whole somehow.

Our whole is the open air prison slash refugee camp or isis prisoners are help interesting, yeah, because that's the first time in their life, like never they imagine they have been right up. Like the

woman, she's basically an Arab culture that they want. She cannot do anything, She's just a housewife, maximum for home at fellows.

So now it's another thing. It's so difficult for them to accept it. Even they said by their eyes they feel like it s will be changed. She means they all hope will go back to the way it was before, and perhaps it will. As we drive past yet another towering stretch of the Turkish border fence, I can't help but think about how suddenly this could all end. Our last stop for the day is a residential neighborhood and Kabbat's hometown, kamisch Loo.

We're going there to meet the members of one of the local women's councils. This council represented the women in the neighborhood and met regularly with them to vote on how to handle specific hyperlocal problems. Since all of the women in it were older and grandmother's Hobbat referred to them collectively as the Mamas, and introducing us to them was clearly the most excited she'd been in the three or four days since I had known her.

So, what they are doing, they are like organizing. They cannot read all right, it's one of them. They have a smartphone. What they are doing They just sent the or share voice messages together in order to organize for our meeting, gore or gathering. Go. You know, they are discussing the cases or issues together.

So you see it's one of them. She's hundling and get cooking in one this thing. Just run, She's just show me. So it's so funny. Alon glided his van to a stop in front of a nondescript tan colored building at the end of a working class neighborhood and commischelow.

We headed in through the open gate of a courtyard, and inside we met the mamas. There are six of them, and the youngest looks to be in her late forties or early fifties. They all wear head scarfs and dressed traditionally no exposed tattoos. Here a gaggle of young kids scamper around doing kid things. There are no opo pictures on the walls, nor any hanging pictures of martyrs.

A circle of plastic chairs sits out in the courtyard and we all take a seat, with a bot in between Jake and I to facilitate the interviews. She introduces the co presidents of the Women's Council, one of whom is also the co president of the larger local commune. And it's here that I should probably give you another brief overview of how Rojava's democratic confederalist system works.

[28:55]

On the ground level, every neighborhood, which is in this case about a hundred and eighty house, has a local commune made up of all the adult members of that neighborhood. They elect co presidents which represent that commune and the People's Council for their district, and the People's Council elects co presidents to represent that district at the city council. And you know, so on. Co presidents are elected by simple democratic vote, and they are recallable through the same mechanism.

The higher level councils are responsible for the kind of coordination necessary for handling life in large urban areas, but the root of all governance in Rojava are the local communes. They're responsible for hyper local maintenance tasks, basic security, and the distribution of many social welfare programs. They also act a little bit like a d MV, supplying people with stamps and papers they need to do official stuff.

The women's councils run as auxiliaries to the local communes as well as to the larger people's councils. They have veto power over every women's issue decided in the area and can thus stop the mixed gender local communes from ruling on issues of domestic violence or women's healthcare should they disagree with the ruling.

All these different communes and councils are further broken down into committees which handles specific issues for their community. The mamas were meeting with today are the Social Committee for the Women's Council of one local commune in Commissilow, and as they explained to me, their job is to act as a sort of emotional police force. The SA the military police don't show up to deal with domestic violence or a fist fight between neighbors.

The belief is that getting the police involved is bringing outsiders and to solve which should be a community issue, so instead When problems like that crop up, the first responders are often the mama's. As we sit and talk, the mom must tell us the story of a recent domestic dispute they had to handle. He went to fix that problem between a couple the way she is in her parts in home since the month, because they like the has was getting here.

So they went there and they wanted to solve this problem. And then they listened to the why then she had too, and she said, it's maybe she is not saying the genuine plan. Let's listen to the other side as because she said like a now. Also sometimes the woman they out of pressing. In short, what they initially thought was a simple case of domestic violence turned out to be a more complicated dispute between a married couple.

The mamas grew concerned that the woman in this case may have been distorting or fabricating some of the claim she was making against her husband. Unfortunately, like have been oppressed, and there is sometimes the at a tap of revenge, so let's not you know, we get powers or try because I do want also alerted than they have.

They don't know how to handle all this to whatever. So sometimes the woman also they are not always right. The conclusion the mamas came to was that both parties had valid reasons to be angry. They talked things out with both and they helped them reach a place where they could apologize to each other and move back in together. This would be an example of a fairly light case for the social counsel, but they also dealt with more severe issues than quarreling spouses, issues like the fallout after a murder ten days ago.

There there is a case like a murder case since sport is, it's there, but no one can sol But you know, now I can hear the true crime. Fans in the audience getting excited, but interestingly enough. When Hubbart said the murder was unsolved, she didn't mean that the killer was unknown.

[32:08]

In fact, the murder had been caught very quickly, tried, convicted, and imprisoned shortly after the crime itself. What hadn't been solved was how to reintegrate the families of the victim and the murderer back into civil society. It's so his wife have been the mother of this son and his sister.

[32:30]

They are not accepting to solve this problem. She said that the immediate family of the dead boy refused to accept peace. When are we're going to kill that joke? Okay? Anyhow, they keep the children and then you kicked this and so his wife out and whenever the woman or anyone wanted to try to fix this problem, they said, no, I'm gonna kill blood. Revenge killing is an extremely common problem in many parts of the Middle East.

The specifics differ from region to region, but the basic idea is that it's still pretty normal for members of families and try as to revenge murder in response to the death of a loved one. I found an interview with a young Egyptian man, Joseph Nazir, on a website called Connect the Cultures dot Com. He described her revenge killings can often turn into all out war between families. Quote. When I was a child, five or six years old, there was a war like this between two families in our street.

My little sister and I were inside our home with our mom when it started. My dad wasn't there, he was working. There was a fight going on outside our door. Families were shooting at each other. I was sitting with my mom inside the house, scared. There were a lot of guns. The shooting went on for about an hour or two. One person died in this gunfight, and per local custom, his family were unable to hold a proper funeral until one of them had killed a member of the other family, and that family would be unable to do their funeral until they committed another murder, and so on and so forth.

You get the idea, and as Joseph explained in his article, there's only one way to end. As such, a cycle of violence quote revenge killings can go on for a long long time, decades and decades.

[33:56]

It doesn't stop until someone in one of the families wants to stop and agrees to go through a ceremony to officially halt the killings. This is the only thing that can stop it. Other than that it will never stop at all. Now. The ceremony, Joseph refers, who involves one man from one of the families marching over to the home of the enemy family, lying down in front of the man of the house, and saying some variant of I'm dead, I'm yours.

You can do whatever you want with me. Now. The man who does this is generally never killed, but it is considered deeply shameful for him to take this action, and so, in other words, the cycle of violence can't end traditionally unless a young man is willing to sacrifice his pride and honor to stop the blood letting. They've taken the responsibility out of the hands of individual family members and put it into the hands of other members of the community.

In this particular case, it took weeks of work by members of the social Committee and members of several other communes in the city. Eventually they got both families to agree to the terms by which they would make a peace. The next step was to host a gigantic feast attended by members of the community and by both families. There they would publicly make peace that way of one side or the other.

The truth, all of the neighbors would know which family was going back on their word of honor. Now, convincing both sides to reach a place of agreement was not easy. The mam has told us of another story about a murder committed by several members of the whitepg against one of their comrades. It looked like so it's like one of them having in the other. Okay, brother was the pin because he's in love with his sister so what he done, he proped he and another three of his friends.

They told now, I feel like I should also jett in here to say that if the self administration were secretly authoritarian, they probably wouldn't let foreign journalists here about murders within their own military units. What happened the families of those for four youngs likely because of the family to get so the white PG caught and prosecuted the murderers.

But the families of those murderers had to their homes because they were terrified they'd be murdered in retaliation. This is the point at which the mama stepped in. So this solution, it was that the guy, he's already the killers and in this jail and the present and they get you dissolution that the families for families, they were going to turn back to their to their houses.

But three of them they already announced that they don't consider that this sons. They are sons. Eyning Kabat is explaining that the social counsels were able to convince the families of the killers to disown their sons. This placated the family of the victim and allowed everyone to return to their homes without further bloodshed.

The mamas were pretty emphatic that they could not solve every problem that came their way. For one thing, none of them could read, and they freely admitted that some issues exceeded their depth. These problems could be escalated up to the educated ladies at the women's house, or up to the professional courts in the very most extreme cases. People in Rojava still have the option of dealing with certain problems and what ME America would call the normal way with cops and judges and lawyers, but they prefer not to start there with any of these groups or steps.

One of the foundational ideas of democratic and federalism is that the folks who live in an area are generally better at managing their lives than the people outside it. Bringing a bunch of cops from fifteen miles away into a domestic dispute is often a lot less effective than having a group of older women everyone knows in respects rolling to investigate and talk things out like just about everyone else we speak with.

The mom as have also trained in using their a K forty sevens during times of heightened tension. They take direct responsibility for the security of their neighborhoods, and they take this work seriously. It's not hard to see why. The co president of the commune tells me about her son, who died in an ambush conducted by ISIS during the darkest days of the war, when the SDF was losing forty fighters every day.

Am Chad, you could have it, she plays as a music video made a tribute to her martyred boy. The pride is obvious in her eyes.

She explains to us that her work on the Social Council and in her local commune is part of how she honors her child sacrifice. The more we talk, it becomes clear that all these women have lost children and other family members battling against ISIS, and rather than yielding to their rage and pain, they decided to throw their lives into building something. At one point, I ask if she can imagine things going back to the way they were before the revolution.

She immediately tells me that such a thing is unimaginable. System because youth, because of imaginal names. For example, of minding it's a Cristan.

[38:55]

But on the idea they they were just a Cristan, you know. Just to to change it, Tom for the Kurdish name, so we couldn't even speak it away. It was optional, I guess us. We couldn't excution, we couldn't do anything, so we cannot even imagine. Then, as we leave, the co president hands me a little plastic token with the face of her martyred boy on it.

For the first time in my life, I'm glad I can't speak fluent Kurdish. It's much easier to just thank her, take her hand, and meet her gaze without another word. As we pile into the van, Kobat points out the little plastic memorial in my hand. She tells me, you can see where they get the morale to keep going. If they stop, then they're just grieving. We drive off, and Jake and I burned down another god awful cigarette with the lawn, but we mull over the day's findings.

It's late and the sun is beginning to set, but we're not quite done yet. Kabat has one last stop for us to make. Our prior stops on this trip had all been places in groups. Jake and I told Kobat we wanted to visit. We'd read about women's cooperatives and local councils and Judgemina and genoir. Before we ever arrived, we informed Kabat where we wanted to go and we wanted to meet, and she worked out the logistics and got the permissions.

But this last stop of the day was the first destination that Harbat had picked herself for us. The Cemetery of the Martyrs in Kamischlo is one of the places where Rojava buries its war dead, the Shahids. From the outside, it's a large stone facility with a gathering field to one side and long rows of orderly graves on the other.

As we stepped through the gates following Kabat, I turned on my recorder to capture the moment. We're walking into a cemetery. It's around sunset. The muzzen's playing. This is where the graves of the Shahids are held.

[40:43]

M m M. I see marker after marker. They're colorful with the kind of traditional gravestones on the top written in both in kind of Arabic characters. On the bottom, there are pictures yellow backgrounds, faces and color of different Shahids.

[41:09]

Most of them are very young in their twenties, some of their teens, some older people, men and women, young women who look like they should be in high school, and middle aged women mothers. Probably. They're brightly colored pictures surrounding it.

Essentially looks like like a gravestone on top of a like marble box, and the sides of the box are covered in sort of colored picture inserts of the person. There's a picture I'm looking at right now of a martyr named barn There's three pictures of him on the front, one of him holding a puppy dog, one of him gesturing with an ak by his side, and other of him smiling.

He was born in nine and died in two thousand fourteen. I'm looking at Shahid Zana next. Oh, that's how About's brother, Zanna Abbas, was born in nine.

He died in two thousand and fourteen fighting isis. Colbat puts a hand on the picture of his face frozen forever as a teenager. She kneels down and kisses her brother's grave. We walk in silence for a while, given Colbat space for her grief and doing our best to take in the feel of this place for ourselves. We reconvene as the sun falls down past the horizon line.

I don't know how you can understand it unless you how you can start to understand it without saying it's who they have to come to the first to understand what.

Hoobat tells us that it's not uncommon for the parents of martyrs to spend hours at a time here reading or speaking to their deceased loved ones. I don't know, you cannot express this. You know, there is a man I showed, like elderly man, how he's ready for unto his son. Some mammas they just say, like you know, speaking to them as you know, for hours.

Sometimes you can and you say randomly mamas speaking for a little while. We just walked through the rows of graves together and mostly silent. Yet as we walk I noticed something written on one of the walls of the cemetery in Kurdish.

I asked Hobart what it means? What is said? So are our symbolic leaders, and that's She explains that the Shahids hold a particularly sacred place in people's hearts here. They are the only people in rojapan society who are considered to be beyond criticism.

They sacrifice their own futures to provide one for their neighbors. In this way, they are seen as leaders, opening the door to a new world that the people they've left behind now find themselves challenged to step through. Thank you for taking us, for me to be honest, team, even if they don't ask me, because for me, the story it's will not be completed without this book.

Yeah dat chow chow chow chow chow a dinner at Radoslajano, or me via bell A Chow chow chow chow chow Dejano or me via Jimmy said.

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6. On Patrol In ISIS's Old Capital

Listen here.

April 29, 2020 • 28 mins

In this episode, we travel to the city of Raqqa to meet the male and female co-presidents in charge of its defense and embed with a mixed-gender military unit in the streets of the Islamic State's former world headquarters.

Episode Transcript: **https://www.thewomenswar.com/**

Music: "Bella Ciao" by Astronautalis (feat. Subp Yao & Rickolus)

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All Episodes

Welcome to the Women's War, a production of I Heart Radiom. The weird thing about war is how damned normal most of it feels.

One of my strongest memories of the battle from Mosel isn't the time an Isis snipering early put around through my head, or the time that an Isis mortar team dropped a pair of a hundred and twenty millimeter shells on the other side of a wall from me. It's a night I spent with my photographer, my fixers, and an old bombed out mosque with a bunch of a racky civil defense guys. While I sat and drank tea. They ripped out the wiring from an old refrigerator and used it to connect an old CRT television to a generator.

They succeeded, and we spent the night drowning out the sounds of gunfire and death with a blurry subtitled transmission of the film Clear and Present Danger. Today, we are driving to Rocca, the former capital of the Islamic State, to embed with one of Rojava's military units.

[01:02]

This will not be an exciting war story, full of blood and guts and daring dew, but it is still a war story, because every story that comes out of Syria today is in some way a war story. Let's talk some more about Rocca. More than three quarters of the city was leveled during the battle to liberate it, and as is usually the case with violent liberations, very little was left behind aside from shattered buildings and shattered lives.

The stf have been criticized for the level of destruction they wrought upon the city, but the bulk of the actual damage was done by air and artillery strikes conducted by American guns and American planes. It was an ugly fight, as sieges of cities always are. In the modern era, military planners have developed a new term, feral cities, for what happens when an urban area within a state passes out of the control of that state.

The United States military has spent years developing special small unit tactics for fighting these sorts of wars, but when it came to Moslin Rocca, they let local forces do most of the dying and supported them instead by blowing up whole city blocks.

[02:05]

I caught several chunks of the battle from Mosele myself, and I have failed ever since to adequately describe the brutality I witnessed, and from everything I've read and heard, Rocca was just as bad. There are very valid arguments that more of the city was destroyed and more of its people killed than was necessary. Some of the blame for this surely falls upon the SDF, who, after losing more than eleven thousand of their comrades in battle, took every opportunity they could to avoid fighting door to door.

A good deal of the blame, though, must also fall upon the Trump administration. The man who campaigned on bombing the ship out of ICE's delivered on that promise. At least civilian casualties as a result of US air strikes increased massively after Donald Trump took office. By two thousand nineteen, annual civilian deaths caused by American action in Afghanistan alone had tripled.

Rocca's destruction also amped up significantly under Trump, just as his administration laxed reporting requirements for the Department of Defense and effectively made it much easier for them to avoid telling anyone about deadly air strikes. In April two thousand nineteen, Amnesty International released a report titled Rhetoric Versus Reality, How the most precise air campaign and history left Rocca the most destroyed city in modern times.

By some counts, up to eighty percent of Rocca was leveled. As Jake and I shower and dress and pound Mahmud instant coffee, the worst instant coffee on God's green earth. I think about what it means to be the most destroyed city in modern times.

When I visited Mosel, there were places where buildings and the people in them had been pounded into a substance finer than sand. I literally cannot picture a more destroyed city. I will admit to feeling some nerves ahead of this trip too. Our goals that day were twofold to interview the co presidents in charge of defending Rocca and to go on patrol with a squadron of SDF fighters in search of ISIS sleeper cells.

The former capital of the Islamic State is still filled with its soldiers dashies as some call them. They'd carried out several attacks in the days before our arrival, and it was made very clear to us that Rocca is one of those places in the world where just about anything could happen. During our visit, we meet Kabat a bit after dawn, and after pounding down another terrible coffee and smoking a cigarette that actually tastes good by comparison, we pile into the van and roll off down the road.

On the way, we see a line of gas trucks, dozens long, waiting for their chance to cross into the regime controlled chunks of Syria. These trucks are part of the devil's bargain that Rojaba has struck to ensure its survival.

[04:35]

The fuel gives them critical leverage against the Assad regime. If the government gets pushy, they can throttle the flow of oil and stop serious tanks in their tracks. We stopped for breakfasts and tell Tamar, a small mixed Assyrian, Kurdish and Arab village. Kabbat takes us to a little roadside stand and orders eight or nine oblong flatbread pizza styled dishes. They're delicious. All of the food here is delicious.

[05:02]

This is what is this uh ratter mind. We get to talking a bit of shop about our experiences with war zone journalism, and we soon move on to the subject of cigarettes, which are almost an item of religious significance to soldiers at the front. If you embed in an Iraqi military unit. You will be offered many, many cigarettes, and you'd be kind of a dick if you turned one down.

It's just the way Howbat informs us that in this regard, things in Rojava are not wildly different from things in Iraq. One thing this place never run short of is cigarettes. No. I'm I stand all the front lines, and everyone's smoking, everyone never sometimes not smoking.

[05:45]

But I remember one journalist he quit smoking for a few years, and he came to here and he wanted to interview one of these Swedish eyes. Did they he arrived band they stopped at all the interviews at camping. In the evening, I found him on the stairs. The conversation moves on and Jake talks about a friend of his who was stabbed to death during a robbery gone bad back in his hometown.

There's a lot of talk about what leads to such utterly pointless crimes and how they can be more unsettling than the targeted violence from groups like ISIS. Kabat tells us that she's glad her brother died fighting for something at least as opposed to falling in some random cruel tragedy. She tells us she thinks stuff like that is less common here, perhaps because death from other things is so much more common.

It's a sort of conversation I've had before. I was in Dublin, Ireland, at a hostel on the day after the two thousand twelve Sandy Hook shooting. I went up drinking and talking about the massacre with a Venezuelan friend. Now he'd actually seen people murdered for their property with his own eyes, shot to death by masked men on motorcycles in the streets of Caracas.

Even so, he was horrified by the idea of a school shooting like Sandy Hook. People kill each other here, he told me. But no one does that. No one does that. After a couple hours on the road, we arrive at the STF Media office. It's a dusty, gray white compound of several buildings that looks like it used to be a private business. Today it's where the sundry militias of Rojava interface with journalists.

We will come to know this place very well. There's a gate to the compound and a WYPG man guards it. I notice his A K forty seven as we pass by. He's customized it beautifully with a colorful rap for the magazine that turns it into a copy of the WIPG. Patch. On his shoulder there is a single bullet mounted to the top of the barrel, stored on a little pop out container.

Hobat explains that this setup is common among the soldiers of the WYPG. The last bullet is to use on themselves rather than be captured by Isis. We enter the office and sit down for the requisite Kurdish ta with a man who very much wants to be our new friend. Mr. English. That's not his real name, but it is what he seriously called himself and what everyone else in the office sort of I rollingly called um.

Mr English is an SDF Media liaison and an English literature major. He has powerful dad joke energy, and he is supremely excited for a chance to put his English speaking skills to use. Are you go? Yeah, you are, Yeah, you are here, you are American? Here you go? And Americans say, um, So, if if a brick goes into the shop, I say, yeah, please, can I have that? Americans say can I get that? We sit and sip coffee and answer just a whole bunch of questions about our language from our very excited new friend.

While we do that, Kabat talks to sdf officers and works out the final arrangements for a trip to Rocca.

She works, and Jake and I listened to Mr English talk about his daughter. He shows us many pictures and Bragg's that she just graduated college in Aleppo with an engineering degree. Like many in Rojaba, she found herself in the awkward position of living in the Autonomous Region of Syria, which rejects government contr role, but going to school in regime territory.

[09:03]

The whole conversation occurs in what is essentially a waiting room with walls bedecked in pictures of the SDFS martyrs. Directly above my chair is a plastic box with a camera in it. Underneath the martyr's photo. Mr English explains to me that this is the camera that man was carrying when he was shot dead. Working for the SDFS Media division at the front lines, it's a fun thing to see right before you go to inim bed as a member of the media with a military unit looking for isis guys.

We receive approval to drive into Rocca, all right, so it's uh am Wednesday, j and we're on our way into Rocca.

Rocca looks a lot like Moslded when last I visited. The destruction is extensive, but it is markedly less scary than we had been led to exp act, at least so far. A decent amount of repair work is clearly underway. Already we passed lively streets filled with people in shop stalls, and then a block or two later we'll hit streets that have been absolutely leveled by high explosives.

They're like islands of life in a sea of death, or like anti tumors of some sort of weird reverse cancer, slowly taking back the ruins. As Alan's van whirls over cracked and broken streets, we in the van share a lively conversation about suicide. I noticed when we uh the guy guy who was on guard duty had the bullet mounted on the top of his a K forty seven.

This reminds Jacob, a Kurdish fighter he used to know have All kim All who found himself cut off after a firefight surrounded by isis lovely guard. You won't look down in a house grenade. Yeah, oh my god, Yeah, it's great.

I'm one of the other send me the picture. I was like, why, why do you do this? I don't want to see this. We stopped by the side of the street and Kabat's friend, Ahmed, jumps into the car with us. He's a lifelong Rocca resident who now works for the SDF. Ahmed lived here back when Isis was in charge, and interestingly enough, he found them okay.

At first, crime went down at least, he tells us with a shrug, but over time things grew markedly more brutal. In the years since Rocca fell Or was liberated, Ahmed started working with the SDF. He tells us he's happier with them and that he likes seeing Arabs and curds eating together. I asked him if it took him getting used to going from dash control to working with a woman like Kabat.

In response, he swings his arm around Kabat's shoulder and fixes me with an easy grin. He says, Kabbat is my best friend. Of course, Kabat brings on that a lot of work and he makes a nice side business helping to set up and arrange inbeds and interviews with the SDF. I don't know the man but he strikes me as the sort of very friendly, very charming fellow who will find a way to make a decent life for himself under any system.

We stop outside a large complex of buildings based around what looks like it used to be a very large office park, has been appropriated by the Syrian Democratic Forces as part of the Nerve Center for their soldiers defending Roca. Armed men and women of the YPG and J form a buzzing hive of activity outside a regular procession of technicals.

Toyota trucks with machine guns mounted in the beds passed through on their way to conduct patrols. Jakobot and I will be heading out with one of those patrols soon, but before that can happen, we've got to have a meeting with the two code presidents of the Rocket says. I've had a lot of meetings like this when I was in Iraq. We'd be trying to secure an embed up at the front, and first we'd have to hang out with a room full of Iraqi generals and colonels to put in some FaceTime and get their permission to go forward.

This generally meant an hour or two of watching Ammirati television and drinking Shi coffee. We'd have long winding conversations that would end with one of the generals telling us we could go up to the front. Now my experience with the rocket Defense Counsel would prove very different. We are led into see the co presidents of Racca Za sayish of all Czechick and have al Kabat.

I realized that's confusing. Unlike our Kabat, this one is a man in his miss fifties. Of all Cechick is a woman of about the same age. This is my first time seeing a woman in one of these general level

sit downs before embedding with a unit. At first, she pays us little attention while her male colleague answers questions.

Of all, Cichick is busy juggling multiple cell phones and a regular stream of subordinates, starting in and out with questions and answers. She wears urban pattern camo fatigue pants, sneakers, and a dark gray Safari shirt. She has a square, serious face and hard eyes. Jake and I exchange some polite q and a's with their colleague, but Cichick is the person we really want to talk with, and after twenty minutes or so we succeed in getting her attention enough for a serious interview.

I start by asking her how Rocca, the city that spent years under the thumb of hardline and seriously misogynistic Islamic militants, adapted to having hundreds of armed women patrolling its streets. Of course, as hard, things were difficult until the people here started to believe in us. There were many times when people refused to recognize our authority.

They would say, these are women. How can they pretend to administer our city? How can these women be in charge of us? Some people would even lecture us and say it is morally wrong for women to wear that sort of clothing. Women should not be in the security forces at all, have all. Chichik explains that her process of building personal trust in the community has been slow and mainly focused around repeated, firm but polite conversations with leaders in the community.

We made them understand after so many conversations, they accepted that I was determined and there was a place for me in this community. It's not as difficult now. I'm sure determination was a factor, but I'm equally sure that the sheer number of guns have all Chicheck and her comrades could bring to bear had an impact on them being taken seriously.

[14:49]

She more or less confirmed this when I asked her for her take on how this new system had come together. We seized it. I asked what she saw as the importance of having both men and women out on the street protecting their community. Women have an important role in this. Why because if you don't have any women in the security forces, then the women in that society will not be able to communicate with the men on an equal level.

[15:10]

We got to talking a little more about her background and what her life had been like before the revolution. She told us that as a young woman living under a SODS dictatorship, she'd thought about doing this kind of work for years before she ever got the opportunity. Whenever I would pass through a regime checkpoint, I would daydream about what it would be like to take over from them. I thought, after all the violence we've experienced at their hands, we would have to be more democratic if we were in their position.

And so Once Isis was defeated, the SDFS goal was not just to occupy the city, but to actually give the young women here who'd spent years living under isis a chance to take control of their own lives after the beginning. After we secured the city, we immediately started recruiting women for the SASH. Seventy women joined.

[15:53]

The women took their place everywhere, the checkpoints office, media office, commissary in the bureau, the administration, the patrols, and communications in every place. Jake and I brought up that in our own countries women had only very recently been allowed to apply for frontline combat roles. I

told her that this was controversial among many men in my country who thought women weren't as capable of doing these kinds of jobs.

[16:14]

That is the system preventing women from empowering themselves. When women are empowered, man's power deserts him. At this point in the conversation, have all Habbat spoke up as a man, if there's a woman on your side, your work becomes easier. He brought up American style democracy and questioned whether or not men and women are really equal in my country.

[16:35]

In the United States, how many women do you have in government and so they don't get to make decisions? Trump says, I withdraw, and he withdraws. There's a woman next to him, but she is just for decoration. In the American Congress, likewise, there are women, but they cannot take any decision. It's men who are in charge. He points out that gender balance is one of the key advantages of the co presidency system, which he says frustrates the u US forces that they work with on a regular basis.

The Americans ask us what is this code chair system? They didn't like it because having two points of contact made things more complex than our military prefers. But as have all, Kabat pointed out, if the chair were alone, it would probably be only one man, and that's not right.

You suppress half of society. A young soldier comes to the door and signals that our ride is just about ready. I have time for one more question, and so I asked haval Cichek, how many people in Rocket today she thinks, really support the new system and the gains for women's rights, and how many wish things would go back to the way they were under Isis or the Assad regime. The men in public, they say they want women to be empowered, but inside, in terms of the essence the mentality, they don't change.

The masculine mentality cannot be changed. She fixes her partner with a strange look that I can't quite read. I don't know either of them well enough to tell if this is a joke between the two of them, or if she's suddenly signaling something about hal Kabat. I thank them both for their time, and then we head now the stairs to meet them.

Men and women that will be going on patrol with we're getting on the truck. Oh no, I can we meet them down at the base vehicle pool. It's a happening location filled with a couple of dozen very busy men and women. The unit will be going on patrol with is twelve strong, ten men and two women. They're busy loading their two RpK medium machine guns into the beds of the two Toyota Highluxes that will be writing into hopefully not battle.

I should stop here to say a little something about the high Lux. We don't have them in the United States. Our equivalent would be the Tacoma. And on the surface, that's all. The high Lux is yet another regional Toyota pick up. But if you travel the sundry war zones of planet Earth, the single most common vehicle you see won't be a Humby or some other military jeep. It won't be a tank or an armored personnel carrier.

It'll be the noble high Lux bearing men and women on their way to war, or acting as a mobile gun platform for some armed force on a budget. Over the years, I've seen high lux is mounted with anti vehicular cannons, grenade launchers, heavy machine guns, and one time a recoilist rifle the size of a motorcycle the SDF high Lux as we hop onto our humble By comparison, the machine guns in the back don't even have a permanent mount.

They rest on the top of the cabin, perched on a stack of rugs. The largest man in each vehicle holds the gun in place on our drive into downtown. I don't speak Arabic, the language used by all the soldiers

in this unit, so I couldn't really judge what they were saying, but it was easy to pick up on the general vibe of the unit.

Most of them were from seventeen to nineteen years old, with the two women in the unit being seventeen and eighteen. The oldest person was a man in his early twenties with very cool sunglasses. Before we loaded up. Both the young women seemed to mostly stick with each other, but when the go time hit, they both hopped into separate vehicles. The less populated districts we drive through on our way to downtown Rocca have been just utterly leveled piles of rubble that are themselves the size of large buildings loom over us.

It reminds me a lot of mosle. A man with a rifle could lurk behind any of the broken windows or bombed outdoor frames we pass, but none do today, as our drivers do the vehicle equivalent of elbow their way through traffic. Jake and I talk with the soldiers about what it's like to patrol through the streets of your own shattered home.

It's so grateful for us because it's apart from our body can. For example, he's saying that seeing his hometown like this hurts him as much as it would hurt him if he'd lost his arm. Seeing the ruined skyline of Rocca is like looking at his own severed limb in the dirt.

As we near our destination, Jake turns to the young woman in the truck with us. She's just seventeen, and she looks like she should still be in high school. I know I had friends back in the US who joined the Marine Corps at age seventeen, but it's still strange to see someone so young in a uniform holding a gun. Jake asks her a question.

[20:48]

So we're in a city right now where women were enslaved and they were killed. They had no rights, so they couldn't even whoop the streets, you know, without covering the whole faces. Now you're here and you'll keep in the city's safe as a female with the we was like completely banded to be out of the home round cover. But low I am participating more effectively. It slight a free She's saying that under ice is she was banned from even going outside if she was unescorted by a man.

Now she's free to participate in society, and she's decided to do that by picking up a gun and protecting her community. We had a traffic circle in the middle of town, and both trucks pulled sideways, blocking off sections of traffic and bringing the stop and go action of midday rocket to a stop. The young soldiers were with pile out of their trucks quickly and set up a pair of air SAT's checkpoints, drivers are briefly questioned and forced to show documents.

In a few instances, cars are searched inside and out for contraband weaponry. I spent a lot of time looking at the faces of the people in the traffic and the people being searched. Rocket is not a normal part of Rojava, and the streets feel profoundly different. For one thing, there are an awful lot of angry people here.

Equal numbers of men and women on the streets seemed to both fall into this group, but they express it differently. The angry women tend to wear full nikabs with only their eyes visible, and they turn away from us as soon as we see them. The angry men are different. They tend to be much older. Most are in their late forties or fifties. They have hard faces, very long beards, and you can see in their eyes that they were much happier back when the previous folks were in charge.

I particularly enjoy seeing the young women in our unit take licenses and give orders to these men as they go about their business. I can see little girls on the street watching curiously, taking all this in. Whatever else is going on here, however, permanent the other achievements of the revolution proved to be.

[22:40]

This is undeniably real. The memories in these young girls heads may prove to be the most radical accomplishment of the Rojhavin project. The patrol passes without violence, and after a couple hours, we returned to the base. When we get back there, we see several smaller groups of soldiers preparing to head out. Our truck stops and we all get off and say oh goodbyes. As Kobat thanks our hosts, I find my attention drawn a few feet to the right, where the driver of another high lucks chats with one of his comrades, a short woman wearing a headscarf.

She's pointing to different locations on the map, and he's nodding in agreement with her. It's a small moment that's noteworthy for how normal it is here now, just two years after the Islamic State was kicked out. We say our goodbyes, pile into a lawns fan, and then we're off to the city of Kobani for the night.

As we barrel down the highway, Jake Kobat and I talked about our interview with the two Asaish leaders. We met this morning.

[23:44]

When we'd asked the woman of Alchichek about her early life, she'd given very few details, just saying that she lived at home with her family before the revolution. That may have been true, but Jake suspected she was from the mountains. This is common local slang for she was in the p k K. A number of influential figures in Rajavan politics and in the military got their start in the p KK or Curdistan Workers Party. The p k K is the originally Marxist guerrilla group that helped to found this place.

Membership in the p k K is the kind of thing people talk about furtively, and there are a lot of false rumors as a result of this. The old fighters from the p KK tend to be quiet, stone faced, and hard. Kabat tells us that people used to spread rumors that she was from the mountains because she never wears any makeup. We enter Kobani in the late afternoon, just a little before sunset.

Kabat takes us to see the city's enormous cemetery, which is several times the size of the one in Komischlow. Kobani was the site of some of the bloodiest fighting against Isis, and the scale of death that occurred here is obvious in the rows and rows of colorful graves. We watched the sunset there. The orange light of the fading sun mixes well with the reds, greens, and yellows of these revolutionary graves.

As I walked through the rows of dead, I find myself drawn to the dates of their birth and of their death. I do the math in my head with every shahida pass. A terrible number sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen years old, a few or even younger. In the dark days when Isis laid siege to this town, an awful lot of kids were forced to take up arms to defend their homeland.

Thinking back to the seventeen year old fighter we met in Rocca, I realized that many still are. Kobani is a city permanently shaped by the battle that ran through its streets from September of two thousand fourteen to January of two thousand fifteen. It's been called the Kurdish Stalingrad. By the end of the fighting, more than seventy percent of the city lay in ruins.

Almost all of it has been rebuilt in the half decades since, but a single destroyed neighborhood remains. The local communes in the city decided to leave it as a memorial and an open air museum. Kabat takes us there next, just as darkness hits. You can see everything just as it was rebel piled up into fighting positions, cars blown into the sides of buildings, ruined tanks, pulverized masonry.

It's not lost on me that from several of the old fighting positions you can see across the border into Turkey. Kobani has been called the city that stopped Isis, and the town's spirit of resistance is more than a little infectious. Kabat takes us next to the very center of town to show us the victory monument the people of Rajava chose to make to celebrate their struggle.

It sits at a roundabout in the center of town. In the middle is a tall white statue of a winged woman raising her arm in defiance as she beckons an unseen enemy forward in the universal gesture of come at

me, motherfucker. At the winged woman's feet are two very Realisis tanks, both blown apart in heavy combat. It's she's saying that it's not like the other statue she's seen in her country, most of which celebrate a single powerful man, generally Bashar al Assad or his father.

It's also not like any of the bright posters of Ajalon that we've seen in most of the government buildings, and rose Java wasn't the flipping. At the time all this happened late July two, nineteen, the long term survival lords for a Java were pretty low, and they haven't exactly gotten higher in the months since.

There's only so much that revolutionary pluck and a defiant spirit can do against hell fire missiles, F twenty two bombers and all the heavy artillery that a major nation state like Turkey can bring to bear. Even so, as the months have passed and brought more stories of violence, disease, and the inexorable march of authoritarian governments worldwide, I still find myself inspired when I think back to that statue of a winged woman beckoning death forward and promising to at least give it the fight.

Oh billet chaw bill schau chau chau chau partijan game, don't be mory. The Women's War is a production of I heart Radio.

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7. The Women Warriors

Listen here.

May 6, 2020 • 47 mins

In this episode, we visit a training base for Rojava's all-female militia, and talk to young soldiers about their transition from life as slaves of ISIS, to armed revolutionaries fighting for their freedom.

Episode Transcript: **https://www.thewomenswar.com/**

Music: "Bella Ciao" by Astronautalis (feat. Subp Yao & Rickolus)

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All Episodes

Welcome to the Women's War, a production of I Heart Radio. It's weird to wake up in the morning and read about a dictatorial warlord's promise to murder all the people you're planning to hang out with that day. I can safely call it a unique experience.

We'd ended our night in Kobani with a huge dinner at a local restaurant located right next to a soccer field. Young men and women had played while we all enjoyed cold beer and hot food. Kabat even had a drink. I had several. I'd digg in a couple home to have before bed, and while I walked around the hotel grounds, I got a feel for Cabani at night. It was a pleasant evening, and a need to pee woke me up unusually early the next morning.

Once I got back from the restroom, I made the profound error of unlocking my phone and checking the news. Sweet Lady Internet informed me that Turkish President Edwin had made a whole new spade of threats against Java in the Syrian Democratic four Is. The United States was still ostensibly trying to mediate in the dispute between their largely Kurdish allies and the Turkish government, but everyone in the region knew the United States planned to leave, which made their actual negotiating position with Turkey practically nil.

The cities we've been traveling through bright, defiant, Kovanni, peaceful, Derik, chaotic, kamishlo. Ridawin called them all a terror corridor. In meetings with his own party, he promised to shatter this corridor no matter how the negotiations with the US to establish a safe zone along the Syrian borders concludes.

His reasons for this go back decades, and they're tied up heavily in the deeply complicated history of Turkish domination over the Anatolian Peninsula. But the most recent justification for violence was, in fairness, pretty straightforward. P KK militants in Iraq had absolutely assassinated a Turkish diplomat just the day before Jake and I had landed in her bill erda Win's contention was that all of Rojava was nothing but one big, giant safe space for a terrorist group to operate.

In the debate over the peakk's role in Rojava is yet another super fucking complicated issue. The people who actually live here talk readily about who is from the mountains in the p k K and who is not.

We'd actually talked about this a bit the day before with Kobad. She'd acknowledged that these old fighters were often more experienced organizers than local Syrian Kurds, more professional or more experience the local or sometimes you find this mamas there are also super professional.

[02:29]

So one of then demandin she organized all that moment, that mama that you met, and now she moved, and now that our organizatives them. So it's good that beginning. It would be rank idiocy to deny the influence the PEKK wields in Rojava, but it would be just as foolish to act as if everything that happens here is part of some gigantic terrorist conspiracy to destroy Turkish sovereignty.

The mamas are not militants, have all Salaman Ahim, who we met at the farm, did not have secret designs to assault Turkish military basis. Jin War was not a cover for any sort of militant action. There are very few simple truths in this place, but as best as I can ascertain, two things are true.

Number One, the Kurdistan Workers Party or p KK has been responsible for horrificed acts of violence in the past and is still responsible for violence in the present day. And Number two, the p KK also saved tens of thousands of Yazdi lives during the early days of the war against ISIS. The early YEPG was heavily dominated by p KK fighters, and the men and women who invaded Iraq to stop ISIS from massacring the z Ds were basically all p KK.

If you don't know this history, it's easy to look at the p kk's assassination of a Turkish diplomat and write them off is just another extremist group, But you really can't. Averting a genocide may not wipe the slate clean, but it damn share earns something in my book. And it's also worth noting that outraged as Turkey was over the attack her bill, the Turkish government gives zero fox about violating another nation's sovereignty to murder a political enemy.

Sacchina Johnsys was one of the founding members of the p k K, right alongside Abdulaglon. She wasn't faster lucky enough to escape to Syria when the government cracked down on them, and in September of nineteen eighties, she wound up imprisoned in the Arbuqure.

Some thirty four of her fellow inmates were tortured to death during the years she was locked up. Seeing her friends get tortured to death was a profoundly radicalizing experience for Sechina and for many of her comrades. This helped push the PKK to acts of more extreme violence in the nineteen eighties. While she was locked up, Johnson's led a series of inmate protests inside the prison.

Her composure and toughness made her a natural rallying point for the imprisoned insurgents, and by the time she was released, Sechina Johnson's was seen as a legend within the p KK. She escaped to Syria after being freed, received armed training, and became one of the movement's first female fighters. So Quena's first combat experience was against Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Army, who were then in the process of committing genocide via chemical weapons.

She was good at fighting, and she pushed hard for more women to join the p KK as fighters. Since Johnson's was close to Abdulagelon, she was able to play a major role in getting the guerilla leader to embrace the concept of armed all women units. By nineteen nine three, one third of the p KKs fighters were female.

It's probably fair to say that Secchina Johnsons was as much a founder of the Rojavan Revolution as Abdulla Ajolan. Her decades of advocacy and personal lobbying certainly had a profound impact on APO and his eventual conversion into an obsessive advocate for gender equality. In nineteen under interrogation after his arrest, Apo said this, I started the women's movement to free women from the feudalism of men and to create a strong type of women.

I wanted lively discussions in relation to that. I do remember the name of Sacchina john Says. For her part, Secchina wound up dispatched to Europe to work on the political side of the p k k's operations, lobbying the European Union for Curtish sovereignty. She spent nearly twenty years in France and was a prominent face for the movement until January ninth, two thousand thirteen, when she and two other Kurdish activists were gunned down by a Turkish maintenance worker with strong ties to Turkey's equivalent of the c i A.

All of this was on my mind in the morning of July twenty five, as I tore myself away from my smartphone, showered, and stumbled out into the breaking dawn with a goal of finding a cup of coffee.

Instead, I found Kabat sitting out in front of the hotel and smoking a cigarette with an old man who identified himself as Papa Curdie. He invited me to sit, smoke and talk, and so we did. We talked

a bit about the fighting against ISIS and the coming war against Turkey until Jake and Alan got up to join us. Then we all piled into the car and headed off. We rolled through downtown Kobani in our way out of town, and it gave me my first real look at the center of the city.

Everything is very clean, very new. We approach a traffic circle in the exact middle of the city and my eyes are drawn to what is easily the largeest television screen I saw in Rojava. It's mounted to a monument in the circle, and it displays a twenty four seven feet of drone footage of the city right after the Battle of Kobani ended. The footage shows us the same traffic circle as it was just a few years earlier, lasted and ruined.

Our first stop today is a press office for the SDF located just outside of Kobani. We need to secure permission to visit a nearby base for the YEPJ Rojava is all female militia. This particular base as the first all Arab training center for the wye PJ, which up until the last year or so had been overwhelmingly Kurdish dominated. No journalists had ever been allowed inside this training center before.

As a lawn barrels down the highway this morning, We've already been turned down more than once, but Kabat is absolutely committed to turning this no into a yes. So we park outside, walk in, and start what became a three hour back and forth between Kabat and a rotating series of SDF officials people on the academy.

[07:59]

So we're going to discussed with them or we're gonna see how if they said no media have been in the academy never, So this is the new we're at So well, Jake and I sipped coffee and smoked a lawns hard cigarettes about worked. It was a long, grinding and interminable process, but these kind of days are also an unavoidable reality of conflict journalism.

As with soldiers, much of a journalist time in these places has spent hurrying up for the opportunity to wait. By the third hour, Jake and I start to suspect that this whole thing might not actually work out.

Kobat received no afterno from different officials the whole morning. She darted from person to person, one hand always on her phone as she gently applied each of her contacts within the SDF. It was a painfully slow process, but she did eventually get our yes. We piled immediately into a LANs van, terrified that someone might change their mind if we were to linger too long.

[09:01]

Once we actually got on the road, we shared a moment of gleeful celebration, made all the sweeter by the agony of the weight. Alon produced a pair of cigarettes for Jake and I spas bash. He grunted at us with a wiggly smile. Then he turned his eyes back to the road and put pedal to the metal. We'd already burned through a lot of the day getting the yes. Now it was time to make it count. The White p J Bass is a massive compound in the desert, surrounded by low, cream colored walls and the yellow rolling plains of northeast Syria.

There is fire in the air and dust all around us as we drive up to the entrance, which is lined with dozens of flags and icons from all the different units in the SDF. Behind these flags are rows of baby trees, saplings clearly planted recently when the space was constructed. It's anyone's guess where Rojava will be by the time they grow to adulthood.

We passed through a gatehouse, and then a lawn grumbles his van to a slow stop in the middle of a complex of large, low buildings that looked like the scilities for a rather humble state university. We see a few young women sitting out around the steps of a nearby building, huddled around a couple of books and studying. If they weren't all wearing military fatigues, this might look like some progressive women's college in the desert.

That impression fades when we meet our host, Neuras Rocca, the commander of this training facility. Like most of the women will meet today, she has adopted a nom de geer. The standard is to take the name of the city of your birth. In her case, Rocca. She looks to be in her mid twenties, although her face seems much older. She keeps her jaw clinched tight, and my lasting impression of her face is all stern lines and sharp angles have all.

Rocca presents a powerful air of severity to the world. This is reinforced by the patch on her shoulder, which bears a picture of Abdula Agelan in the words no life without our leader. For all that though, she is quiet and polite as she welcomes us into this training facility, which is also her home. We carry our gear into a large meeting room in the compound's main building.

The meeting room is rectangular, about the size of a large trailer. The walls are all lined with ground level couches, essentially just a network of thick cushions that provide comfy, low slung seating around the walls of the facility. There is no APO picture on the wall, but there is a flat screen TV which is playing coverage from one of Rojava's local TV news networks. The day's big stories about the peace talks between Turkey, the US and Rojava's self administration.

We settle in, exchange some pleasantries, and then Hubat and I slipped rather casually into an interview with haval Roca. She refers to this training facility as an academy, and through Hubbat tells us why it was opened in the first place.

While they opened this academy because there was a necessity for the Arab sect in order don't understand the corn land which they opened it. This academy in Arabic. The whole training courses two months and a full month of it is ideological training, starting with a class in the history of Syria and then an introduction to the accuracy with women's rights as the core of that philosophy.

Core education, which is the feminist movements and specifically the characters who are filmous like and the other women who are the statute they make a stand in the revolution history struggling women. This education into the history of feminist movements eventually dovetails into a history of the YPJ. The goal is for women here to feel as if they are part of a struggle that's bigger than Syria and older than just the ideals of Rojava.

So they are giving share, including this whole movement in around the world globally. What who are those women, why they are fighting, who they were fighting, why this revolution take a place? So all this they are explaining during this feminist movement. A Roca explains that her goal is not just to train these women to fight, but to train them to be leaders in their community.

They are preparing those people who are leading in as as a leaders, as as you know, commanders, to lead the community, the society to be knowing their surface. This is what they are trying to building here. And uh yeah, they are seeing people from different parts of Syrium. Even last time, there was a last before they graduated the last group, there was a Turkmen in this group, and untually anyone speaking promotes stupid's history.

The Rojavan movement has been heavily Kurdish dominated. Critics of Rojava regularly make the case that it is really a Kurdish supremacist movement, but Arabs, Armenians, Turkmen, and members of other ethnic groups make up an increasingly large percentage of the soldiers in the SDF. So they are teaching them about the democratic nation because for them, the core of democratic nation philosophy is the woman free woment, so without the filment that no one will could be able to implement.

Up to this point, what she's saying is what we've heard before, but it quickly becomes clear that she's actually trying to make a more nuanced point this project and who are going to implement this projected those people who are teaching them about the democratic nation, because that was probably unclear to a lot of people.

What have all Rockett was saying through Hubbad is that in addition to fighting, the women who train here are expected to go back to their communities and helps spread democratic values among them. This is the long game for Rojava, and it's the only real long game that the Kurdish founders of this movement could hope to have. The STF has made education and history, politics and ethics as much of a priority as armed training because they consider spreading this education to be something that contributes to their immediate physical security.

It's a democratic nation. On all the other wars here it's a sectarian war, so they're one of democratic nation, which is diversity and include all the nationalists. We in the United States are currently receiving a crash course on what happens when a society loses any kind of shared conception of history and ethics.

At its very worst, the sort of collapse and shared understanding can lead to civil wars and ethnic cleansing. Kurds in this part of Syria are no stranger to ethnic cleansing. They have been victims and also perpetrators. Kurdish fighters were active participants in the Armenian genocide of nineteen fifteen to nineteen seventeen. The Armenian genocide is too complex a topic to cover in detail now, but it's worth noting that Key denies it ever happened.

Overwhelming evidence proved that somewhere between one and two million people were killed on the orders of the Ottoman Turkish government. Many nations around the world have officially recognized the Armenian genocide. The United States is not one of them. Before he took office, Barack Obama promised to change this fact.

He did not keep that promise. Top Obama advisers Ben Rhodes and Samantha Power have recently acknowledged that they view this as a mistake. Rhodes explained to Politico every year there was a reason not to. Turkey was vital to some issue that we were dealing with, or there was some dialogue between Turkey and the Armenian government about the past. The main reason Turkey was too vital to offend is the massive air base the United States maintains in the Turkish city of Inserlik.

The fact that this air base includes fifty nuclear warheads complicates matters further, but the issue of the Armenian genocide is not complicated in Rojava. Abdulla Augelon began writing about the need for Kurds to atone for their role in the Armenian genocide in the late nineteen eighties.

In two thousand nineteen, on the International Day of Armenian Genocide Commemoration, the SDF announced the creation of its first all Armenian military brigade. The men and women of the YPG and YPJ learn about the Armenian genocide is part of their training, one way or the other. The goal of all this is to promote self defense. One of the basic listens that's we are giving it's uh self defense, self defense culture.

We wanted to build in this character of those fighter that self defense it's a you're right, it's a legal right for any human beings to have it. Unfortunately, in this region there have been a lot of different armored actors and they have been different behaves against the other, different humans. When we wanted to build them just self defense way that we don't want any as a literary forces, you know it to control them, to control their character that's not occurring ground or whatever.

So yeah, we want to because we want to implement the line the philosophy lines of Agel and that's it's about the freedom of the woman, and we wanted the self defense with the freedom and in the character presentive of the crew kind of the treat of the woman to be a It's not lost on me that one group's ideological education as another group's brainwashing.

The Turkish government's contention would certainly be that the girls and women of the space are all being brainwashed to serve a terrorist group no better than al Qaeda or ISIS. Fortunately this was an area in which I was able to do some more investigation. I could see that haval Rocca had a notebook full of instructional materials for the day's courses.

I asked if we could see it. She handed the notebook over and let me take photos of the training material. I did not have time to gather a comprehensive collection of every lesson, but I walked away with the class syllabus in the full text of a one course unit. The syllabus was for the first thirty days of the two month training, and it lined up with what haveval Roca had claimed during our interview. The first few days focused on rules for behavior and procedures in the YPJ and STF Basic Order and Military Discipline.

Day six starts with courses on criticism and self criticism, the tech mill system. We talked about earlier and ysical and moral values. Much of the course centers around reading the works of Adlaglan. His booklet The Democratic Nation is studied on day fourteen, Liberating Life, another booklet is on day sixteen, Women in the Family, and on day eighteen.

All of these books are available in full for free on the website Aujalon Books dot com O C A L A N B O O K S dot com. You can read them yourself if you want a deeper understanding of the course

material. For our purposes in this podcast, I'm just going to read some selections I found interesting from Liberating Life, The History of the Loss of freedom is at the same time the history of how woman lost her position and vanished from history.

It is the history of how the dominant male, with all his gods and servants, rulers and subordinates, his economy, science, and arts, obtained power. Woman's downfallen loss is thus the downfallen loss of the whole of society, with the resultants sexist society.

The sexist male is so keen on constructing his social dominance over women that he turns any contact with her into a show of dominance. The depth of a woman's enslavement and the intentional masking of this fact is thus closely linked to the rise within a society of hierarchical and statist power. As women are habituated to slavery, hierarchies from the Greek word hierarchy, a ruled by the high priest, are established, the path to the enslavement of the other sections of society is paved.

The enslavement of men comes after the enslavement of women, and another quote housewife iszation is the oldest form of slavery. The strong man and his entourage defeated the mother woman in all aspects of her cult through long and comprehensive struggles. Housewife iszation became institutionalized when the sexist society became dominant.

Originally, the term hierarchy referred to the government by the priests the authority of the wise elders. Initially it had a positive function. We may perhaps even view the beneficial hierarchy in a natural society as the prototype of democracy. The mother woman and the wise elders ensured communal security and the governance of the society.

They are necessary and useful fundamental elements in a society that was not based on accumulation and ownership. Society voluntarily awarded them respect. But when voluntary dependence is transformed into authority, usefulness, and a self interest, it always gives way to an uncalled for instrument of force. The instrument of force disguises itself behind common security and collective production.

[20:21]

This constitutes the core of all exploitative and oppressive systems. It is the most sinister creation ever invented, The creation that brought forth all forms of slavery, all forms of mythology and religion, all systematic annihilation and plunder, the emotional intelligence of woman that created wonders, that was humane and committed to nature, and life was lost. In its place has been born the cursed analytical intelligence of a cruel culture that has surrendered itself to dogmatism and attached itself from nature, that considers war to be the most exalted virtue, and enjoys the shedding of human blood, that sees his arbitrary treatment of women and his enslavement of man as its right.

I into remind everyone again that these words I just read are part of the mandatory training program for a militia in the Syrian desert.

I'll read one more quote before we move on. The male has become a state and turned this into the dominant culture. Class and sexual aggression developed together. Masculinity has generated ruling gender, ruling class, and ruling state. When man is analyzed in this context, it is clear that masculinity must be killed. Indeed, to kill the dominant man is the fundamental principle of socialism.

This is what killing power means, to kill the one sided domination, the inequality and intolerance. Moreover, it is to kill fascism, dictatorship, and despotism. After concluding our interview with Havalaka and taking photos of the course materials, we break for coffee into smoke.

While we're resting, a young woman wearing fatigues, a bright flower Kafia and Hello Kitty Socks gently steps into the room. She looks to be in her mid twenties, with straight black hair, a handsome angular face, and large, intelligent brown eyes. She introduces herself as a friend, Missie. She tells us that she is the Wye pj's media representative at this base.

Shortly after arriving, we told have All Rocca that we wanted to interview some of the soldiers here about their lives. Have Alla Freene tells us that her job is to sit in during the interview and make sure we're respectful of her soldiers. Many of these women are just seventeen or eighteen years old, and a

number of them have traumatic histories that lead them here. She wants to make sure we don't press our subjects to talk about things they aren't comfortable sharing.

This concerns me a bit. The request is not inherently unreasonable, but it's only proper journalistic skepticism to worry that a media representative sitting in on an interview might be there to control or restrict the answers given. By a subject. I decided to keep an eye on Havla Freen during the interview. We step away and set up for our first interview in a small side room.

All of the women we talk to today A volunteered to speak. The first is of All Kurdistan, a square jawed woman with coke bottle glasses who gives me very strong librarian pipes. Kurdistan Barran. She's from original She came for ideological training. She is a member of the The MMS or Manbij Military Council is one of the many militias that works under the broad umbrella of the SDF.

Have All Kurdistan joined back in two thousands sixteen, and during that bloody period of the war, there was not much time for ideological training. Now that things have calmed down, the SDF center here to finish learning. She reached adulthood in one of the most traumatic and trying circumstances imaginable of all Kurdistan's adolescence coincided disastrously with the meteoric rise and expansion of the Islamic State.

The soldiers of the Caliphate conquered her home and she was forced to live under their brutal rule for years of her life. Did she suffered during ISIS when it was controlling the Remember what happened? She was once in the market and she has to argue with the one of the ISIS members fighters. So they took her to a jail and she stand the jail for fifteen days and they're supposed to kill her.

So anyhow she survived. She managed to get out and be released, and she was waiting on this came. She joined that it was obvious that if all Kurdistan had more to say about her time in ISIS jail, But for the moment, I moved forward with questions. I wanted to know how all of the radical political ideas of the large Alan had sat with a young woman just freed from ISIS captivity.

[24:23]

And somehow this education it was sometimes making like a comparision for me about my ex life en slavery life, she said, and my new one. You know, I was like questioning all my ex life. Oh you're As we moved on, she told us about her first time shooting a rifle. She found it fun and wanted to keep shooting after they ran out of bullets.

She also told us about her first time in combat during the grinding battle to retake Raca from Isis. So somehow, you know, like our animate wasn't easy and it was eis So the first time when I went there, I have a feel I have. I was somehow afraid. I was like, you know, it's a new for me to to be there.

[25:04]

But at the same time, I was like super concentrating and you know, take care to do all these things. When she mentions the importance of paying attention, she's referring to the fact that every Isis battlefield was absolutely filthy with unexploded ordinance. This is something I experienced myself during the Siege of Mosel, stepping through neighborhoods that had been liberated by Isis minutes earlier. Not only were the streets filled with duds unexploded bombs from coalition aircraft and artillery from the Iraqi Army, but the whole fucking place was booby trapped.

To helen back, veteran soldiers would point out specific wires looped across doorways and the entrances to alleys. They take me around and show where those wires connected to piles of high explosives. They'd also point out numerous abandoned vehicle based i e. D s and suicide vests littering the ground like straight condoms on the San Francisco sidewalk um.

So before you said you wanted to enjoin Mark Jars revenge for what happened when you were living on the Isis and for all the women, then you went to the capital, to Rocca and chase them out. Do you

feel like you know you've got that revenge? No? Not yet, I mean she said, like as I said, like I when I threw myself.

If all the woman's are not free, I'm not the take it didn't take our evenge and we were going to if we didn't completely defeated Isis from the roots. Were still are working on that. I didn't get our revenge it. Jake pressed a little further, asking how of all Kurdistan believed she could get revenge for the crimes Isis committed against her and the other innocent people of Northeast Syria struggling resistance.

We have a determination, this is the only way to the conversation moves on and eventually we wind up on the subject of male supremacy and the nicab the full head covering garment isis made mandatory for all women. How does she feel when she sees that we were in rock yesterday and then we're more women than I've seen anywhere else in Rosia? How does she feel when she sees that? Does she feel like sort of that those attitudes of male supremacy that are still very deeply ingrained are kind of the roots of ISIS.

I feel so pitiful for them, and I saw them. I feel like for that we have to resist that in order to say free all though so many this because this closet, this thing is represented ISIS.

It's representing ISIS mentality, which is enslavered in the woman because of that, wanted to change one or two to you know. Next, I asked her how she thinks the men she has served with, particularly the older men, have adapted to serving alongside women.

[27:34]

Both have all Kurdistan and have all the friend. The hPG im mediately is on burst out laughing, had been away and he is a male. At that point, have all the friend speaks up. While I wait for Hobbat's translation, I wonder if you might try to walk back the claims of lingering bias among male soldiers in the STF.

Those for those others struggle those for those, it's it's higher than the others, you know. Yea. So the idea, she said, like, yeah, we cannot change anything. Are not the history of the oppressed of the woman. It's a long history, fast out and years ago. So this mentality have been, uh, you know, take a place in the community for the women men.

Everyone likes still believing in that. So to change it that it's another they are not it's gonna attack. Even what she's saying, training there, and she's referring to the month of required ideological training, have all A friend admitted freely that the trainers at this academy we're taking on an almost insurmountable task fighting against generations of entrenched misogyny.

It's like, I need a lot of time to be changed. So even now we are with our colleagues, the men colleagues in a different she said, colleagues there we are. There are our friends, they are were all commardes, they are and we're fighting together, we're taking training, we are have a living together. But that is the end. We have our struggle. We have our struggle as a woman, because if we did, we're not going to be free.

Ourselves and explained to them how it's important to understand that for them also, we cannot get our results from our struggle as much as we have a man in this mentality, we have to keep struggling because in order to get this level of equality, gender equality between us, and they understand how how we have to share everything together.

It's need time and we are like doing that, right, I said, like as she he's asking specifically about this elderly men or the demand who are a little bit other than the others. It's more difficulties there for sure, because they are they have this three archy mentality, Uh, you know, more in their character than the others, so we can't change it faster so they those for those men, it's higher us struggle.

It's certainly fair to say that of all the Frame was not shy of admitting the shortcomings and imperfections within the SDF. I grew less worried that she was sitting in on the interview in order to somehow restrict the information I received. Her true purpose for being in the room became clearer when Jake asked his next question two things and as well say it's too drama action, don't feel the post

to answer, but I want to know why, what the argument was in the market with the Isis guy and what it was like.

Kabat translates the question and we see the reaction of All Kurdistan's face before she begins her response. She maintains her composure, but the story that follows is clearly not easy for her to tell.

Of Ala Frine puts a hand on her comrades knee and looks her in the eyes. She seems it wants to be telling of all Kurdistan. You can do this, and you don't have to do it if it's too hard. So the problems are the argue. It started because she was fully warning this n villa and everything. But there is a built, Kabat said, belt there the man who stopped of All Kurdistan was a member of the his ba isis Is religious police.

She'd been out shopping with her siblings but was forced to send them home and head to jail. Of All Kurdistan continued to tell her story, and of course neither Jake or I could understand what she was saying, but we saw very clearly the shock on Hobart's face as the story went on. That is no, so yeah, they took her to the center.

They still all her gold, money, all the properts that to us with her, everything towards with him. And also they put her family his name on unless that's you know, always they were gonna double checking on them or whatever. And they first wanted to kill her, you know, excusing her.

[31:52]

Then they changed it to one thousand five lashes. Yes, lashes as the whipping someone in the back with a long leather bull whip. I'm sure you're wondering right now, how many lashes does it take to kill a person? Can a human being survived fifteen hundred of them? And the answer is that not all lashes are created equal. In eighteen forty six, a young British soldier died in London after receiving just a hundred and fifty lashes, and two thousand and four, a fourteen year old Iranian boy was given eighty five lashes and died, but that was due to the whipper accidentally hitting him in the head.

And two thousand eight, Saudi Arabia sentenced a doctor to fifteen hundred lashes for prescribing a princess medication that led her to a drug addiction. The doctor survived, but he also received only fifty lashes per week until his sentence was fulfilled. There are cases of human being surviving more than fifteen hundred lashes in a single terrible beating, and so haveval Kurdistan's punishment was not necessarily a death sentence.

Receiving that many lashes will, however, completely shred the outer layer of skin on your back down to the bone. I have read accounts of modern people who received fifty two a hundred lashes. They described the pain as incomprehensible.

[32:59]

This lashes. It was by three persons because if one of them get tired, he will not get it strong, you know enough, So they try to hold that in your head. Three strong men wore themselves out beating this woman's back into bloody ribbons. One thousand, five hundred lashes, three persons changes, each one of them five hundred to keep strong as much as I can, and they still didn't break her mask.

And because the woman have a predetermination, she means that have all Kurdistan's desire to be free, to escape isis is what kept her alive through the beating.

[33:41]

For a few seconds, Jake and I just sat in silence processing the story we've heard to recover from that kind of injury to be able to like going to the world and like that's a serious injury, just make a in

the whole. But she did recover, and once she did, she used the same determination that had seen her through the beating to affect her escape from ISIS controlled territory.

Once she was free, she joined the SDF. If she had a weapon training and comrades with the same no man would ever whip her again. We take a break after that and then sit down to interview another young fighter. As before, have All a Friend sits in on the interview.

Our next subject is younger than have All Curdistan and gives her age is nineteen. She wears camo fatigues with curly hair that has slicked back on top. She tells us she spent four or five years of her life under DASH control and gives her name as Because I am not great at reading Arabic, for the rest of this episode, I will refer to her as have All Revenge Revenge Friend.

You have to admit it's a pretty badass nickname. I asked her what specific moments come to mind when she thinks about revenge her brother joint having included with the ISIS. So she wanted to take revenge those ISIS members who are who are recruiting all the others in order to using them as a tool, I guess, or in a very dehumanizing way against the other population.

But the how how they destroyed our country, So I wanted to take revenge of order. I asked her how her brother explained his decision to join ISIS at the time. So, my brother, who has already liked this religious background a friend, he was always like uma in different mosques for the others look like So once he decipted for a party five days and he completely disappeim that when he returned back with you what that he's having included with the US because my cousin, he is a mere inn dash and he included my brother and the mirror is a leader within the Islamic state.

[35:54]

About revenge lived under ISIS for almost five years, basically the entirety of her adolescence. She only escaped because the STF eventually liberated her hometown. I asked her, what was the very first thing you did once you realized you were free? So the first thing Hobart said, veil there in case it was unclear because as I said, so blush as to that closet, which she is completely dehumanizing, I guess us and looking to us not as a human being.

I asked her next if she can remember the very first time she saw a woman carrying a gun. Her voice almost breaks as she answers to the dentist. And I saw a woman with a wakman and I was looking to make a conversion.

How oss how she is there? And in short, she first saw a woman of the y PJ. After escaping Isis control. The sight of a free woman with a rifle was shocking, mind blowing. After so many years under Iceis control, she decided to join. I asked her how it felt the first time she held a gun of her own.

My dream it was to join the And it was like I always I feel like it's an illusion or imagine I never I'm gonna happen. So whenever I was just doing that, I hold it. When it was for me, like I hope for myself, it was like already I have there a courage and wild to holded this hope for my teacher, to hold myself.

You know what felt like. I was ready for that. I was a dreaming about it. I have a sporting you, so I dreamed about this my dream of my left year. Next, I asked what would she do if a man ever tried to make her put on a knee cob again? The woman and our regions, for sure, we're going to try to deface myself. We conclude our interview with of all Revenge have all A Freen gives her friend a cheerful poke on the cheek.

I find the gesture striking, and I tell her son, you talk about friend that her pride and her friends has written all over her face when they talk, and her pride Linda Chicken, She didn't Tobacco said, I don't want to.

She as a WANs They struggled and then they get the achievements and they I cannot highline sprint and I'm proud of thing. Have Alla Frien had initially not been willing to give an interview herself, but I've grown increasingly interested in her throughout these interviews. I started this process suspicious of her, but her relentless positivity and supportiveness towards her comrades had thoroughly won me over. I ask again if she might want to talk, and this time she says yes.

My name is a free Maso. I joined the YPG myself. I'm from a Freen. My family's origins had a lot to do with me joining.

My family loves their homeland. This had a big effect on me. When my brother was martyred by ISIS had an even bigger effect on me. I was thinking about it for a year. Joining the military is not easy thing. For a year until throughout all I was thinking about it, Will I go? Could I do it? I dwelled on it a lot because as a civilian person, your life will pass into a new life.

That is, you take on a new life through your own choice. This created a big contradiction in me. I go, I don't go, I go. What happens? I joined like everyone else have Alla Freen is shoeless.

Well inside her socks have bright English words written across them. Never give up. When I joined, of course, I was scared. At first. I told myself I wouldn't tell my family. No matter how much a family loved their homeland, they love their child even more. And so when I joined, I didn't tell my family. I said I was just going to school and that i'd be back soon.

When I had arrived to the Haval's they passed the information to my family that I had joined the y PJ. At that time, my father came to me. I'll never forget what he said. He told me, this is your spirit. Then you have chosen the way that's before you. Who am I to keep you from this? But know also that if you betray this movement and come back home, I will throw you out of the house.

But she made it through her training and she joined the wye pj's media center, essentially acting as a reporter or a pr agent for the militia. After receiving the basic YPJ training, I joined the media center. The first time I went to the front, I didn't go as a fighter. The first combat I ever saw was in Telera Fat.

Perhaps you've heard of it. It's towards Shabbah. When you, as a woman, have just joined the military, you wish to fight and experience war. Though we as women are completely against war. When you see your society and your people under authoritarianism, you are forced to defend your own society. That time, I didnifire my gun because my comrades didn't allow me.

They said, you are part of the media team. They protected me from threats. I had my weapon as well as my camera, but recording was my goal in the fight. I can play a role as part of the media team. My goal was to communicate to the public the reality of the war. Have all, a friend did not consider the defeat of ices to be the end of the y PJ struggle.

She comes from no surprise, the city of a Frien, which is currently occupied by Turkish BacT Islamist malicious. There is a pain inside me. The occupation of a freen has increased my thirst for events. Every piece of news from these people have been kidnapped, to those historical landmarks have been destroyed.

Every new story like this increases my pain. This pain also pushes me to take revenge. But the liberation of a friend and the victory in the war against Turkey was not nearly the end of her ambitions. Like Koreum Schamid, the head of the Woman's Economic Development Center we interviewed back at the beginning of our journey, a free Massa is a true believer. Now the goal of every fighter in YPJ is to liberate her mind.

Because yes, it's true we have joined the y PJ, and thus we liberate our bodies. But this is not enough. We also have to liberate ourselves from the capitalist system. Throughout history, the first city states were built on the basis of exploiting the woman. If we go back to history, we see that it was the women who created everything in natural societies.

Before the rise of city states, women were leaders. But after the system of city states was built up by men, they began a pressing women for the first time history. Throughout the last four thousand years, a system has been built up over the woman. It doesn't allow her to work, to go outside, to take up the gun, even in her own home, she is not allowed to express her opinion.

Even when you get married and should live a shared life, you cannot express your own opinion. You aren't free to say what you want. Our goal is to bring an end to this mentality. We don't say that women should take a higher position than men. Our goal is a quality between women and men, to make it possible that our society can live with a free mentality.

Neither women nor men should be the oppressor. There should be equality. I have many many more questions, and I wish I could have stayed there for hours asking them. But this is a military trading

academy, and our interviews have come up against one of their daily training exercises, a long march in full gear with rifles. Jake, Kobot and I are invited along, and so we lace up our boots and head into the scorching heat of the rojab In afternoon, the training platoon has already marched off, so we hop into a Lawns van to catch up with them.

We're hopping out. We're about to be on control with the White PG training union. Notches about let's see here about young women, nearly all of whom are carrying kalashnikovs, wearing fatigues and heads wrapped against the desert heat, some wearing hats, somewhearing Caffia's.

It's an interesting mix of colors, from the the b DU camouflage which could come straight out of the US military, to the colorful, beautiful head scarves, some of them with floral prints and little silver dangly bits on the end, some women choosing to walk with their heads completely uncovered, others and ball caps.

Most of them are clearly very new to holding a gun. Others, like of all Curtistan, carry their rifles with an easy familiarity born from hard use.

We march with them for a while, and eventually the column comes to arrest by the shade of a copse of small trees. As they rest, the different squad leaders, including have All Curtistan, move around and help their comrades with minor uniform issues, instructing them on how to readjust bits of gear or the best way to relax while carrying an a K forty seven.

I'm struck by how profoundly different this feels from the stereotypical image of a boot camp. No one here is yelling at anyone. Instead, instructors and students make frequent gentle physical contact, touching each other on the arms and shoulders. They giggle toss pieces of grass at one another during playful arguments. Yet all the same, they learned the proper way to march with their guns and move in gear through the hell of Assyrian summer.

The White Pj's reputation on the battlefield speaks to the fact that the style of training is effective. After a few minutes of rest, the unit packs up and moves out, continuing its marks through the desert, I stand and watch them pass. I look at of all Curdistan, marching with her back straight, despite the mass of scars that lurk beneath her uniform shirt.

Like her, nearly all these young women spent years of their lives living under Isis, forced to wear long black robes covering them from head to toe. Even in scorching hundred and ten degree days like these, they were helpless, the unarmed victims of a death worshiping colt built on hateful masculinity. As they march past me, I split my gaze between their trumping column in the Turkish border wall, which looms as ever on the horizon.

For all I know, there are bullets for every one of these young women waiting just a few miles away on the other side of that fortification. And yet the tears that threatened at the corners of my vision are not tears of sorrow, because there is one thing, and only one thing that I know for certain.

These women will never be slaves again. Shout Chou chou partijiano or game sin do be moy.

[47:19]

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8. The End of the Women's War

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Welcome to the Women's War, a production of I Heart Radio. It's July two thousand nineteen, and I'm celebrating the end of our journey in Rojava by getting a tattoo. Since arriving in Rojava, I've been surprised by the number of tattooed folks that I've met.

On our first full day out in kamiche Law, I asked a heavily inked a Sayish Man for his artists contact information. Kabat called and set the whole thing up, and so the day after our visit to the y p J training base, we headed back to Kamichlow to meet my man Jake, and I had kind of expected that this would be our last hurrah in Rojava. We had originally planned to spend this day visiting Al Hole, the refugee camp slash prison camp for Isis wives, but that fell through and A Kabat wasn't sure if it would be possible at all.

With no more work to do, I felt like getting a tattoo in Rojava would be a worthwhile experience, and I was right. It turns out there aren't a lot of tattoo artists in this part of the world. And the guy that SI each officers set us up with was the same person who did all the ink for the y A t or anti terror units the YPG Special Forces.

These folks are the equivalent of Rojava's Navy seals, and most of them were trained by elite U S troops to carry out surgical strikes against Isis are contact today. The guy who's going to take us up to meet the artist is a soldier in the y A t. Alon parks his van in the middle of a neighborhood in Comichelo, surrounded by tall, blocky apartment buildings, and we wait for our contact to arrive. A van pulls up.

[01:29]

It's similar to Alan's, but newer and festooned with stickers bearing the face of a de la augelon on its front and rear. The driver has a fluffy mustache and tattoos covering his arms and hands. He is easily the most heavily inked person I have seen in Rojava. His most prominent tattoo is an M four assault rifle on his forearm. Oh my god, Chabbat says with a laugh, he looks like a mafia guy. We park next to each other outside a nondescript apartment building and we all shuffle out of our vehicles.

The y A T Man is tall, well built, and wears a glock nineteen strapped to his hip. He leads us up the stairs and towards his artist's apartment, and while he does we talk. He informs me that he got his very first tattoo in two thousand eleven after being arrested by the Assad regime for lighting a police car on fire. He spent three years incarcerated.

The artist's apartment is about seven flights up. It's the only finished home on that floor. The doorway leading to what would be his neighbor's place is unfinished and the empty hole is filled with old debris. It looks like whoever was constructing this building stopped when they were about eighty percent done and never came back to finish it. The artist's apartment is nice, though, a simple and comfortable one bedroom. He has a PlayStation and some controllers in front of a TV, a swamp cooler, and a couple of empty beer bottles, surrounded by three floor level couches that line the walls of the room.

He hands me his phone with his Facebook page loaded up and I skimmed through dozens of pictures of the other tattoos he's given. A striking number of them featured devout Christian imagery. He tells me that a lot of his customers are local Armenian Christians. There's also a lot of militant imagery tattoos that would not have looked out of place in an American legion.

Meeting bloody, grizzly bear claw, soaring eagles, a hanged man, numerous rifles, handguns, and knives. Our special Forces friend points out his favorite tattoo on his left arm, of a V for victory sign superimposed over a Kurdish flag. He rolls up his sleeve and shows me a very surprising tattoo, an enormous tenage tall depiction of an American sergeant's rank chevrons. As a member of the y a t he trained and fought alongside American soldiers.

The marine he worked with the most was a sergeant, and he got this tattoo to honor his friend. This soldier will remain the only person I speak with in Rojava with thoroughly pro American convictions. He considers U S soldiers to be his friends and battle buddies, and he deeply admires them. He does not think the United States will pull out of Rojava, likely because he can't imagine the soldiers he fought alongside abandoning him.

I spent a large part of this trip debating with myself about what tattoo to get. In the end, I settled with something simple, the words bahladan Gianni on my right shoulder. It means resistance is life, and it's the closest thing to a national motto this non nation has. I'm not an expert on tattoo guns, but I have received a number of tattoos over my life, and my artist's tool looks new or at least well cared for.

His ink is high quality, and it stood up well over the course of the last year. At least, he tells me he has it smuggled in from regime controlled Syria. The only part of the procedure that's less professional than the experience you'd have over in the United States is the fact that he cuts a hole in a cigarette packet and wedges the cap of a water bottle in there to use as an ink reservoir.

I don't get an infection, so clearly he took the precautions he needed. Once the needling starts, Kabbat is fascinated. She's never watched anyone get a tattoo before it whirre does she finds it. Kabbat is also clearly intrigued. We beat around ideas for tattoos she might get.

I suggest an illustration of the mama's, but she says that would look too crowded. Want a simple tattoo. That's good. And a few months after this, Chabat will send me a picture on telegram of a new tattoo she's gotten the name of her brother's anna.

[05:10]

Jake and I sort of expected that this tattoo would be our last hurrah in Rojava. But later that afternoon, while Jake and I rest on our porch, Kabat texts us with some good news. She'd succeeded in getting permission for us to visit al whole. After all, we would in fact be able to tour Rojava's most infamous prison camp and interview some of the Isis brides and turned therein. On our first full day in country, we visited Judge Amina and toured one of Rojava's Isis courts.

She'd talked a very good game about the importance forgiveness and humane treatment of prisoners. This would be our chance to actually observe the ground level realities of this justice system, and it would also be potentially dangerous. Ol Hoole is an awkward mix of refugee camp and open air prison. Thousands of refugees from the Civil War lived there, alongside a small concentration of ISIS brides and their children.

These inmates live in a separate, fenced off section of camp. Their status is noncombatants means that they are given more leniency than captured fighters. They're allowed to receive guests, gifts, and even have money wired to them from ISIS supporters abroad. It would be a mistake to see these women as less devoted to the dreams of the caliphate than they're mostly dead husbands.

Two weeks before our arrival, and ISIS bride stabbed an assage guard in the back with a smuggled in knife. Photos of the wounded man in the hospital infirmary with a blade shutting out of his shoulder went viral in the global media. Every new week brought stories of stabbings, attempted stabbings, and mass stone throwing. By ISIS prisoners against their guards. We woke up on the morning of July excited and a little bit nervous to see the reality for ourselves.

Kabat and Alan picked us up early in the morning, and as we downed coffee and started our drive, I talked with Kabat about the news. Did you hear the news yesterday about what Rada one said? Uh, just that he was gonna like, regardless of what happened with the negotiations over the borders of the Turkish Army, was gonna wipe the IPG off the map.

Essentially, she means that he's welcome to try. Kabat is confident in the ability of her friends in the SDF to protect their home looking up at the Turkish border fence and myself, I'm less certain, but Kubat's confidence in this matter is not based on any sort of ignorance about combat.

On our drive to al Holekbat decides to show us some footage on her phone from a project still in progress of her embedded with the female fighters of the YPG. It's harrowing stuff and it includes absolutely terrifying close footage of a US air strike. It does not look like the sort of footage that someone should have been able to actually record and survive.

Kabat explains to us how she got the shot, how they get something from the already, so we have to know we have to come of course, you know. So I don't know, and I just want to come in out of that kid on the other side telling She tells us that she almost wasn't able to set the shut up because the place where she was positioning her camera was so exposed to ISAs sniper fire that one of the YPG officers didn't want to allow her to go out.

I have a because you have to sit down for a child.

I have to, as you was gonna, I have to put the camera. I'm telling you, I will not stand. Oh I know there is a fucking sniper. Then, I'm telling you I was gonna just put the Camira has that I love that I'm not here for That's the first time I've heard you say fuck.

We drive on through more yellow, rolling fields, past green orchards, over burned scars, and around small towns. Finally we reached the camp. Our whole stretches from horizon to horizon. Seventy tho people live here. It is in a or misplace, a refugee camp the size of burning man. As we take it in, Jake calls it the Islamic state of al Hole.

Kabat replies exactly. Jake hands me his phone and shows me an open Telegram channel used by many of the Isis brides in this camp. Telegram is a social media app that allows for encrypted communication. After Facebook and Twitter successfully purged most ISIS accounts, Telegram became a popular gathering place. The Isis brides of al Hole use it to organize fundraising from supporters abroad and to plan attacks on guards and visiting journalists.

They share pictures of homemade knives with no apparent concern that they might be busted. Days ago, when we had visited the Women's Economic Development Council, I had had a little embarrassing snaffoo with my pocket knife and an assaish guard. Since then, every time we had entered a military or police building, Kabat had reminded me to leave my knife in the car.

As a lan parked the van and we prepared to enter ol Hole, Hobat looked back at me and said, Robert, I think it would be a good idea for you to bring your knife. I clipped my CRKT inside the waistban of my pants and we hop out of our van and walk up to the intelligence office, where the Assaysh guards at this facility do their best to coordinate some form of security for our whole.

[10:08]

We're let into a small trailer with a desk, two couches, and a mercifully powerful air conditioner. Two items sit on the desk, a crude, handmade Isis flag and what looks like a slam fire shotgun built out of PVC and tape. Jake and I are staring at both when our first source for the day, a young female Assayish officer, steps into the room. She explains that the gun was built by Isis children and has been confiscated. It was more likely to have been a toy than a serious attempt at building a weapon, but they took it anyway.

The Assaysh officer tells us that she would prefer we not use her name, and she does not wish to be recorded, but she agrees to talk of will abide by those terms. This is the first time in Rojava that someone has refused to be recorded, but her reasoning makes sense to me. She has family in the area. Isis sleeper cells are numerous, and the Isis families in l whole regularly communicate with the outside world.

The danger to her family is real, but she herself has been the victim of violence numerous times. Here, she pulled out her phone and shows us a picture of an enormous human bite mark on her left arm. Then she rolls up her sleeve and shows us the wound itself, partly healed now but still bruised a deep pinkish yellow. The story behind the injury is harrowing. She was attacked by a mother, a little girl, and her son.

The mother shoved her to the ground, the daughter bit down hard on her arm, while the sun grabbed a nearby fuel can and doused her with gasoline. She managed to flee before they could light her on fire, but the whole experience was very traumatizing. After that, she tells us she refused to meet with any of the families without armed back up. Always they are beating us, she tells me.

She shows us pictures of wounded internees beaten by Isis prisoners who essentially act as his Ba or religious police inside the camp. There are murders here she tells us, and many attempted murders. Cobbat chimes in at this point and tells us last time we were here it was worse than the front lines. The Assaish woman explains that Isis flags are banned here, but pointing to the flag on the desk, she informs us that the guards find ices propaganda almost daily, much of it is made by the children of Isis brides.

Jake shakes his head and tells her, I don't know how you tolerate this. She responds, it is because countries don't care about this. There are sixty four nationalities here. Every day they are beating us. They throw rocks at us. Always we jump in the car to protect ourselves. You cannot do anything.

[12:17]

We are obliged to drive in armored cars because they break the windows on the regular ones. Their countries will not take them back, so we are obliged to take care of them. Most Western governments have washed their hands of citizens who join the Islamic State. Their attitude is embodied by the actions of the British government towards Shamina Biggun, an Isis bride who had her citizenship revoked, which left her and her newborn child trapped in a refugee camp in Rojava.

On March eight, two nineteen, the news broke that her malnourished child had died in the camp. The issue of what to do with isis Is foreign volunteers is one of the most complex problems left in the wake of the caliphate's collapse. It is easy to see why Western governments would want to abandon their wayward citizens. After all, many of them burn their passports and even renounce their citizenship, but doing so leaves these people trapped in northeast Syria, where the self administration of Rajava has no choice but to take the best care of them that it can.

Unfortunately, their resources are scarce, and this has led to the nightmare situation where dangerous radicalized extremists live in the same camp as Iraqi and Syrian refugees, blameless civilians, guilty of nothing worse than being caught up by the vagaries of war.

Since the Isis wives have international supporters who donate money to them, they're able to live relatively well, and their wealth gives them power over the non Isis internees. They also have the benefit of being organized, which allows them to exercise violent power over the other groups in the camp. Our guard tells us that she's seen Isis woman attack the Iraqi and Syrian i d P s. Just yesterday, an Iraqi refugee was beaten for not wearing a head scarf while inside her tent.

A few hours later, they burnt down the tent that held a UNICEF school for children in the camp. Our source describes a constant drumbeat of violence. The Caliphate's territorial possessions have been officially destroyed in Syria, but the Islamic state lives on in these daily acts of hate. For now, the SDF and its assage guards have been able to keep the violence in l whole from spilling outside the camp.

But everyone here knows that war with Turkey is coming, and the chaos it brings will provide the inmates here with opportunity. I ask our guard what she sees coming in the future, and she tells me it is like a nuclear bomb. It is going to explode into all of the world. The physical material in this bomb is the children of these Isis brides.

Our guard explains, right now, you can see the Isis mentality in the children. We are not going to attack them, so they wield their children against us. Despite this, she tells me she truly does believe that it's possible to rehabilitate these people and even to release them someday. But any kind of de radicalization work in l whole is made nearly impossible by the sheer volume of people here.

She also expresses deep frustration with the NGOs who come here to ostensibly offer aid. They've provided many of the Isis brides with cell phones and internet access in misguided attempts in misguided acts of humanitarian compassion. A few days ago, she tells me, I wanted to go into the camp with a captured Isis men and a ninja. Yogai told me I should go in without my gun.

He treated me in Isis like we are the same. Jake says he wishes the country's making up the coalition would at least build a proper prison here. If they aren't going to repatriate any of their wayward sons and daughters, we hope, she says in response, they don't. Her biggest frustration personally is the fact that the Isis brides, being strict Muslims, are allowed to all dress in the long black na cob with even their faces covered by thin black cloth.

This makes it much much harder for the guards to effectively police them, since dozens of women dressed in head to toe black cloth are all functionally identical. One woman can throw a rock or even slash a guard with a razor blade and then melt back into the crowd. It's a real problem, but the wearing of a na cob is an issue of religion, and religious freedom is protected under the Roshavan Constitution.

The NGOs keep a tight watch over everything to make sure the Asaish don't restrict the Isis brides by forcing them to bear their faces. Every day. They are beating us, she tells me, and if they kill me, who will say anything. After an hour or so of talking, our interview subjects arrived outside.

Before we came, Kabbat had informed the guards that we wished to interview any Isis brides who wanted to talk. Two came forward, and we will hear from them very soon. But before our Asaish guards signaled for them to be let in, she gave Jake and I a very serious talk. She wanted us to know that these women had rights, including the right to end the interview at any moment. If they did not want to answer a question, we could not compel them to do so.

She asked if we understood, and Jake and I said yes. Then she bid farewell and exited the trailer. We would be allowed to conduct our interview in total privacy, with no guards sitting in there. From America. Trying to explain to them that we are from South America, asked you from the Caribbean. Okay? They were like, SI com com gotcha.

Yeah. I was wearing a little trouble understanding South America. Can they take all the black people out from the interview? Is immediately surreal. Both of our subjects are very tall and covered completely by the nakab. We can only see their eyes and a thin sliver of black skin around them.

But they speak like my Caribbean friends back in Los Angeles, the same slang, the same speech patterns, only they're talking about their time is willing members of one of the most violent terrorist organizations in human history. We came with our husband's UM's here making said we're coming here. Ra is a journey or immigration. Historically, it refers to the prophet Muhammed's flight from Mecca to Medina in order to escape persecution.

ISIS followers use the word to describe the act of fleeing their homelands for the caliphate. Basically followed our husbands. He gave us advice, and you just followed him. And now we're here for four years. Four years when you came and to day to me in two thousand and was there was it your husband's that told you about this place? Did you see like in the beak or anything like that, like were the magic the beak? Was? Isis his premier magazine during the group's heyday, and it frequently urged its readers to depart the land of Shirk the decadent West to join the Islamic State.

There wasn't really much dad magazines.

[18:32]

But you know it was our husband's who was really the once who was telling us this is what me to actually for me when um in fourteen, I didn't know anything about Syria. You know. My brother who happens to be her husband, he was really athletic, he was a world boxer. He was a lawyer, very why educated, almost party guy, you know.

And then after my father got killed, my father died in my country, my family just made this break turn around, you know, like I don't know, like we got this wake up call, you know he did. You don't know, really when people died, that's when they become godly then more or less, you know. So then we started trying to find a Slam. And then my brother came him one day and he said he's going to Syria.

And I started laughing. I'm like going awhere because you know, I dressed just like all the Red Cross woman dress. I never worked this before, you know, cloves, and I never wore all those things. I was into makeup and pay persons and all these crazy things, you know, which I still like, but um. And then after digging up, I was trying to find out why, what's with Syria? What's with Syria? What's with Syria? And then I heard it's strick Sharia, which is what I like because my country.

Yes, it's the Islam, but it's mixed. It's really mixed. Like one minute we see the Muslims in the mushy, the next minute and behind them the big truck for Carnivale and you see the Muslims weaving that he drivel like I was kind of confused. You know, both women were so friendly and casual. It was jarring ticket reminders of what absolute hardliners they both were.

After all, who gets angry at carnival? So I said, let me try to see what Syria is about kind of thing, and then we opted to come to Syria, which was in November. Why are you why I like it? From what I understood before, it's let me see if you want to if you really understand what the Islam is, and I mean, if you really understand what it is, I think for me, I like it.

I really like it. You know, it's balanced, it's not extreme or it's not killing killing killing, even think it's extreme and it is killing killing. You don't think Isis was extreme? Yes, some parts of it I found. I wouldn't say extreme, But some parts I think I expose myself to even my children to too much violence, for example, the beheadings and some of the stuff like that.

You know, I think it wasn't necessary for me to show my children, I thought, And I told journalist before because I had an interview before. I can't remember I can't remember her name. For me, I found, yes, you could tell them, Okay, this is what happens when you do so so so so so, but I thought us I should show them balance you have, you should have rathma, mercy.

You know, it's not always about kill, kill blood, blood blood, you know what, There is mercy and I think that's why now when the kaim so many children, so aggressive, even when you guys come, they were spelt in stones and alban which I hate.

[21:27]

I really dislike it. She's expressing that she dislikes it when other isis wives and kids throw stones at the Sish and then the way some like how the parents stop to their children, you know, talk when you see them kicking? Come on? You know what? Then you wonder what what's the purpose? What? Come

on? You know? So, But for me, Islam, whether you choose this way or you choose that way. You're a Christian, you're a Muslim, you're gay, you whatever, that's your choice, that's you, you know, but this is just me.

You stand when you arrived in the Islamic state, how did it actually you've been expected at the beginning, because this Islam excited at the time, there was a caliphaith uh it it matched pretty well because I wasn't really exposed to much killers.

We were in RockA and there were air strikes, but they were really mild, so it was still very much like my country. But on the sher it wasn't crazy. It was an extreme then please note that an extremist may not be the best judge of what is and is not extreme. We had a normal life now, it was a normal life. We had tea parties for jama parties, we had um what else.

Yeah, it was just it was really Addie, I don't know, you know, really Addie Irene. That really cool, you know, until all the bombers came. Then you got this week up call what am I doing? Where am I kind of thing, you know. But the beginning it was cool, It was calm, you know. You learned the day they found out a lot of things that we taught that we were perfectly before.

You learned differently when we came here, you know. But even in the beginning that we're hitting people in the street, in the square. But that's the thing, we never actually saw these things, you know what I would you not know about it.

[23:16]

You knew it existed, but we never witness yeah, like you would see the children. I don't like these things. Really, I knew it happened today. Then because I heard my neighbor saying, oh, they killed somebody in the square, but I never ran to I don't want to see it. Yes, my that's it, my son, because he's at that time, you know, the boys in the street, they just came back from school. Money. I saw this man being headed today.

[23:39]

He was stung up, strong, up like this. So they store in this place. And I saw people being stone to that in my da but in Rapper and the earliest I was never, I never witnessing, but I heard about this. I knew its existed. You understand what kind of effect do you think that had on yourself? Of course a very violent one. You know, it was very violent. But at the beginning we all thought it was you know, we thought it was a uk.

This is a punished mind for this, and everybody's like, you know, top beer is just the name for the one Arabic phrase every American knows, Allahu akbar. She's saying that the trauma of witnessing these executions turned her son into a more fervent Chihati. Next I asked how both women wound up in the custody of the SDF the end, and you stayed as long as we possibly could.

And then my son, who is not applicating because of the house and his foot, well it went black immediately and irustrated. Well, actually, I don't know exactly what hit the house. Something hits it. I think it was a power Yeah, And I stayed in prouble two days after hoping it could get better because Bugoos is a name that lives in infamy here.

[24:51]

It was the last territorial holdout of the Islamic state in Syria. So something explosive hits. Two days I realized, you know, I can't stay. I can't stay anymore, so I did. I made a decision that I would have to out. So I walked up. But initially a lot of people think that, um, the people who stayed in Bagos are like war mongers.

They're like they send so much hate and they love. There were actually a lot of people who wanted to leave with the first and second Coodna then when I opened up, but then we saw videos and then some of the women example, and one of my friends she said, you're going to pick a gate.

They rape women and they do women. There's a lot of people who wanted to leave. They were afraid to come here. And that's why nobody that that's why few people left before until it got too extreme that colors people just picked up. There's like colors going to ram then whatever. We already exposed to whatever, you know, So that's when people left. But I really dislike hearing people say, oh, these back, these people, these back, these people.

[25:57]

There are some people who really wanted to leave and were a italy because of the situation that we talked we would have been exposed to here and did you did you believe that as well? But like if you were casted by the STF that it was because remember we exposed to the Islamic safe for a very long while. And if you see uh Kaffir or Pika king, whatever you want to call them, the next thing is he going to think they're going to abuse you automatically.

And then we're thinking, okay, the women will treat you like this and the man's going to repe here and they leave you to start when they leave you like so a lot of people were afraid, what's the reality? What's it like here? What do you care that I saw? It wasn't like that. I would like for a situation where we were starving to that literally starving to death, and it was a massacre every day, someone next to you, walking over someone's body, someone's hand.

So here it's actually you're living, and you know ex camel by far, it's much there. Would you much different? Would you say the SDF the guard to your respect, your your human rights.

[27:02]

I won't say the guards at all. I would say red cross that I because I think once what the Red Crosses around or Red cress Land or whoever. You see a difference in the guards to be here when these people are not around to monitor their actions than the peak women shut a boy in his hands pelting stones, which, as I said, I really hate, you know, but that's not I don't think.

I think that was a little drastic, you know, shooting him in his hand. But I can understand how how ingrediable, because I myself hate it. You know, sometimes the wo mental children, you know pelled, they like when the trucks are going, pell them with stones, or pell the mustache fowl because the calf, the caffe, the caffer.

[27:44]

But if you think about it, even that is rough from allot you know, that is almosty from allow to be a monsa who was still treating you well, which I think is from a lot. You know what, I come and be killed, husband's killed this one, or you know you family killed this will killed their parents and whatever, and they still have more see which I think is pellstones pelt. It doesn't make sense. And at the end of the day you you pelled misstach for you all these things and then your child end of the tomorrow.

And it was clear that both of our interviewees were different levels of radicalized. I'm sure you've picked up on it too. The quieter one seemed to be watching her loquacious friend. She spoke up to let us know that the STF guards were vicious, but quieted down while her companion explained why it wasn't so unreasonable for a guard to have shot a boy in the hand for pelting him with rocks.

She credited Allah for the mercy she and her fellow captives experienced here, acknowledging that she and her fellow dash He's had killed family members of many of the guards, and that their treatment

by comparison had been gentle. It was as close to a ringing endorsement as a prisoner of war is likely to give. In fact, the more we talked, the clear it became that at least one of these women feared her fellow detainees more than the guards.

Even how you guys picked us up. I'm wondering if I go back home and he's sitting coming out of the vehicle, now we're going to think we are just so. You know, you talk to the kaffir, and that means you told them something. And that's why so many women are hesitant to you know, when they see they're walking up as a direction. I'm telling you, you know, because they don't want to be seen with two guys because of that reason. Next thing you know, you're kind is being bullied to.

Your child's killed somewhere. I should note here that kafar is an Islamic slang term for nonbeliever. I asked next what both women wanted for their lives after this. They expressed a desire to return home and live a normal life. You deserve that, though, like you've been a part of a group that have flaughtered people, traded women as slaves, killed people's children. There's eleven thousand march from the YEPG that have died from a stop the Islamic state.

You know, I don't need to be rude, but like you, I realistically I agree with you. I mean, why should you deserve that? Sometimes the sisters a boy the gate that kwats and they're like, um, open the gate, open, They open the gate. These guys don't have no rama, And I'm like, what rama? Rama is an Islamic term that means mercy.

We kill these people husband's, the wives, the children rahma. I'm like, come on, that's kind of thing. And then but at the same time, it's not a one sided killing. The killing has come from both sides. I've lost two husbands, so what what what like? How do you look at it now? But both sets up times? So therefore what picture? And then after you say bags, I don't think I could let necessarily say dish was behind was a madness? Was massacre? I didn't think, well what what? What was like? The my mental I think my mentor is gone.

It was crazy. Banks was crazy to have a clean actually shoot at you that even you to know, like the certain noises I hear.

I'm still like, there was an orphanage with your team children and they bomb the orphanage. Come on, they bombed my children hospital, they bomb who time fighting was happening? It was just very careful because you don't want to come to us yesterday, because you want to stay, We're going to shoot at you constantly and kill children. How to me, how do you justify that part? But no one will see it that way? You on the song now when you look at how you've been traded after being captured by the STF.

If the war had gone the other way and your site had one and captured them, how do you think they would have been treated? Honestly, I can't see because you never arrested me as a girl girl, you know, as a as a note about local normal citizen.

For me, because I grew up my pack listen I did was psychology and social work before, so I haven't really I know, balanced and opened a lot of things, you know, like for example, one of the gymerlists game and I hugged her when she left, you know, Hi, by I see the money street high are we going? So for me, I will treat you the same that for me, I don't know about them.

For me, this is my personality. I'm a very happy, go lucky place and that's me. Whatever you choose to do with your life, that's you. But obviously I would try to introduce you to Islam kind of thing. You know, I was good. Well, I mean if it weren't Muslim that I don't know what you know? Okay, what about us, we're worked Western journalists.

You guys cut the heads off. Of course a few weren't Western journalist and we're not Muslim. Yeah, I would really dealt with you. See, I don't know how the man yet in terms of the man, how the man tells me things? You just saw to be headings at the television and ever you come on. You knew you James Foley was bad. Like we were reporting in this region around the same time.

Like I knew if I was captured, that's what was going to happen to me. Especially if you were on the other side. I would imagine to stay. But everyone's cases not the same. That's as much as I could see, So I can't say, yes, you would have been killed. Men the men, and they never exposed us like a husband's. They never really exposed as someone.

Both women had a tendency to waffle when we pressed them directly on Islamic state atrocities and the fact that if our situations had been reversed, Jake Cabot and I would not have known nearly so much mercy as they now enjoyed, you know, like um, like did they never exposed? That's what all the men would deal with? The men kind of thing, you know. So I really don't just see the videos of it or what hav in the cases and then we would find them.

But in terms of the women, I can tell you who I would be with you, do you understand? But in terms of the many, I think you would have been beheaded. Honestly, does any of that kind of the brutality of the of of what was going on there, does any of that make you rethink your decision to be a part of it? Um, I don't even know what it starts.

Ye oh no, that's a big question given all you've been through. I don't really need to think about that question, because I've seen it come to the brutality come towards us as well.

And this is so I don't know what I know what I want to say, because I've seen a lot of serious things on my side as well, which the world has not been the eyes have not been opened to this.

Can you understand? Maybe? Why not? Though? Like just just like from my point of view. You know, it's like if someone if ices start up, they're cutting off heads, they're putting women in veils, and I understand you you don't mind it because it's your side of things, right, but they're pushing that on everybody.

You know, they're cutting off a journalists head just because he doesn't have the same ideology. Can you not see how then that we're like, well, yeah, killed him, Like frankly, you know, it's a war and we don't want that so as to be stopped. Like can you understand why the retailer you happened or do you see it differently? I don't know. For me, I never even like I'm here and you're saying this, and for me what I talked before, they killed it because you don't have the proper idol ideology I took.

For me, I thought they would have exposed you to what they taught, the proper ideology and not just kidnap you and kill you. You understand. I don't know if that's what happened, but not that we're sing it. I don't know if that's what what happened or if they I don't know. I really don't know. Some of the things. I'm telling you, we really don't know because they were captured with what happened in these prisons, what conversations, what chances from me, I don't legend all days it did to converted the religion they obliged it, all days it did to convert.

When herbart says that Isis obliged the adies to convert to Islam, she's referring to the genocide that the Caliphate carried out upon the members of that religious minority. They did not like that. You know, I actually know it's two years Eily women.

I met in Raca and they were slaves, a Bosnian guy and I can't remember the other person. And I got really good friends with her, you know, I remember that in the blue building on in one of them. Anyway, I can't remember. And from what she told me, she said that she really loved hustling a slave master and she accepted.

Now that was either a lie or an example of a terrified and slave person trying to avoid punishment. In either case, it pissed Jake Cabot and eye off she and the other place. You know, That's what I've talked to at this point more than a hundred years who saw all of the men in their village lined up and shot and their bodies thrown into a hole.

Um, what can justify that? Who's there? Far? Is that enough to justify killing all the men that they're cafar and some Yeah? For me, this war is never ending and it's on both side, and one side will only see this story.

On the other side, we'll just see this on my way continue right way way is the right way. That's how I see it, and that's why I say, whatever you believe, you'll be your way. I'd be my kind of thing, you know, when I just try to keep the balance in between.

We always be busy. It seems to me though that I'm sure that there's there's bad things done by guards here, but on the whole, your your wealth fed, you're safe from at least nobody's bombing you, nobody's shooting at you. Um. The threats that you face on a daily basis are from other people that you were members of the Islamic State with UH and the SDF is allowing you.

You're allowed to wear your new cob, You're allowed to continue to worship yesterday. That is what all the guys that it's my mood to Nicole, it is mam mood to wear black. It is mamluty went blue and all those things. You will see that they will take this off. Yeah, I think it just it's just a matter of thing.

Yeah. As of nine months later, prisoners and al whole are still allowed to wear their in a cop It seems that you've been shown more toleration though than for example, if I or Jake wound up in the custody of the Islamic State, then we would have been shown or if you go sent to the Iraqis or the regime, Yeah, you wouldn't be seeing here.

[38:23]

One thing, I just want to say that it's weird to me to you know, you're a black woman. Black we would have been impressed from start time and you just justified that your ZD woman it was okay because she loved her slave master, like just going on. I don't know what she said. I don't know the history of the z You're not the history of n slave now, but I don't know her ish. I never asked, you know, like what about the z DS.

Why I just knew she wasn't slave. I don't know how fine it went. Anything wrong with having slaves. I didn't What do you mean, like how he she was a slave? F very weird that I don't know this very just was very unknownal But slaving Islam is not like slavery backing. There's you're supposed to.

There's certain rules you have to follow. You have to show Rachman, you must feed them, and you must take care of the profound irony of black women. Justifying slavery to two white men was not lost on me. Somehow, that didn't make it funny. But I talked to you slaves who claimed they were That doesn't mean what I'm saying.

[39:25]

That doesn't mean that's a slam. If that's what they were doing and they were wave, then yes, these women could have taught a course on weasel words to an audience of congressmen. I suspect some of their care came from a desire to be freed eventually and to return home to the Caribbean. Admitting to having watched executions and cheering for the rape of slaves. Wouldn't danger that she missed the West, miss the Caribbean.

Um, I missed the beach for certain things. I missed my family there. Now not true? Would your mother think of this. I think she was my mother's against everything, but you know she's my mother's Christian mine, she's Muslim.

A lot of the women in the camp parents at Christian keep from me, catalysm on these other things. People. But do you want to like if your country would take you back, would you leave this place and go back a lot of people from my country were to go back to think just what everybody know? You know? Why don't would you still wear the nicob if you went back to your country? Yes? I don't think.

I don't know how it is in Barbados. It's been four years were in it. So if I was more uncomfortable with so why not but to walk around in the street with it? Yes, you also be targeted, but in my country, I don't think it's Um, it's something, it's normal because they are women in my country who were ni cap you no one who wake gloves and all these things.

But colors? What how old are you both? I'm two with the jury? Um, are you comfortable giving your names? I am Aliyah ap to Hack. You could just give a first name too, that's better Abby? Oh yeah, and Abbey? And you were born in Trinidad and you were born Barbados.

Yeah, I feel like you were perhaps more missing things at my country. I missed my mom. Yeah, she was my best friend, you know still is.

I guess what I really missed my mom? I missed that relationship. This is the most genuine emotion we see out of either of them during the interview, and I'd be lying if I said it didn't break my heart a

little bit. Both Aleiah and Abby are unrepentant members of a genocidal terrorist group, but they're also still human beings, and it sucks your head up a little bit to think about.

Aliah and Abbey made several strong protestations that they never sought to insfringe on anyone else's liberty. They just wanted to be able to live life according to the strict rules of their interpretation of Islam. But as we talked to them, it became clear that what they really meant is that they wanted the chance to live by their rules in a place where no one else had the choice to live any other way.

For me, it was because everyone else around me was on the same page, which is what we all went talking to be together in a place where we all had the same Akida the same thinking. Here we spoke with a young woman who lived under ice is I think for three years, who went out in in a cob with a silver belt that was bought by the Aba and was punished by being lashed hundred times in her back.

Do you think that's a fair punishment for the crime, even from you have Three different men had to whip her because their arms kept getting tired. We always about these things, and there is nowhere in Islamic list a difference between Islam and a persons you'll belief.

Just as I said, is a difference between qualita and a difference between Islam. So it's interesting to me that Aliah and Abbey reacted to this story of isis brutality the same way many Iraqi Muslims I spoke to and Mosel related to stories of the Caliphate's brutality.

The differences those Muslims had chosen to take up arms against the group perverting their faith through sadistic violence. They fought and died to put an end to this monstrosity. Aliyah and Abbey, however, joined under the Islamic state you Uh. They attempted to enforce a variety of laws which you could say, we're not you know, part of Islam is written, but that's still what the Islamics State tried to do.

Whereas a government like the one that exists in rojaba Um, you can live strict under Muslim law if you want, but you're not forced to. Why would you prefer to live in a system where people are forced to live a certain way as opposed to one where you could choose to live as a Muslim or choose not to and not be punished either way, and not just recom I think on the this Islamic State, I wouldn't say it's forcing anything.

You weren't, but other people were. Now I found very free. Actually, I think at this point we get to a very important truth about both of these women in particular and religious extremists in general.

They are supremely selfish people because we we actually when we came from our country and went towards that city, you were forced And yeah, like what you said with the you know, I can understand that question that people weren't like the Islamic State wasn't just setting up a new country in an in the area and just saying we want to live this and everyone who wants to live this way, we can move here.

They were they had an army, they conquered territory, and so people were forced to live a certain way. The house you lived in, someone was chased out with it doesn't does that seem wrong knowing the history of Islam? I don't see one, because hasn't that same thing happened in the history.

I think that's if you need to know the history of Islam first time, you'll be able to put two one to together. You know what about the history of Islam. I'm just about being good to your fellow person. Religion aside, you chase someone out of their home, I don't know. I'd be annoyed if someone did that to me. Like that's something that has happened from the history of from like time in memorial has happened from not just Islam.

It's happened with Columbus. And then you know they chase the armor Indians, I would force them to live on in them. So it's something that has been uncle that's historical. Do you not think that's aple can be broken and we can make better societies that don't talking about this since I've seen the same logic used by fascist extremists in the United States, people who believe the colonization of the Americas and the enslavement of black Africans were both justified because other people in history also did bad stuff.

This is probably not surprising, but neither of these women expressed any true remorse for the crimes that they had enabled. They did, however, grudgingly accept that things being what they were in tournament by the SDF was about the best option they had left.

You want to go to Iraq, you would prefer to stay here with the SDF as opposed to that? What type of people? No, If we have to stay here, then the last isis prisoners sent to Iraq.

A bunch of former French citizens had in fact been tried and executed immediately upon their arrival. The fact that execution is banned under Rojava's constitution was probably the only thing keeping Aliyah and Abby both alive. Our time together was drawing to an end, but I had one last question I wanted to ask them both. I you know, one of the videos that I watched before I went over to Ract the first time it was produced by the Islamic State, was a young boy, maybe seven years old, with a handgun executing a man and mosl um.

If one of your sons were to take up jihad and at their current age, kill one of the guards here or me, or hurt or him, would you be proud of? Probably not? But how would you feel? I guess it's more open ended.

First I would want to know why, because they're too far I feel.

First I would be scared about what would meant happened to him. That's my first thing that I would feel, rather than know why did he do it? Because of course I have a lot of hate within me for people who have us here in prison. So you know, just the other day I heard some months some woman was shot, So I how do I see? Like my mental Like I said, I've seen too much.

So I think that's it. If you guys were exposed to what we were exposed to, I think the courspens maybe a little. Maybe you may also see it from our point of view too.

You know, yes, I agree, I totally agree with some of it. Thinks you were saying that some of it we been too extreme. But to see a child do that, then you need to sit down and find out why, what was going on in his what did he see that he had taken up. What does it respond Because we all came from, like I said, a massacre coming down to the end. A lot of people are angry.

We have no guns to shoot, but we have no weapony, nothing, but this plane comes out every day night. We kind of have been exposed to it because we've both done front by reporting and people that are clashing with ices, so we've seen what they do doing. For I was in prison in Turkey with some Chechen ISIS and they wanted to cut my head off.

So we have seen was pent down by an ISIS. Yeah, like we've kind of seen you know what I'm saying, We're not coming from a complete place of nativity, you know what I mean. It's never been bombed by an aircraft though, and I that seems like I've watched them bombed places, and that does seem like the scariest thing I can imagine. I'll say that there's a certain kind of respect that I have for anyone who's survived an experience like that.

It seems like it would be it would free your sanity. Yeah, and that was it. After used to face talk with ISIS, or at least what's left of it. We called our guard back in and she returned them to their tents, where, for all I know they still reside today.

Our next scheduled adventure was a tour around the camp, but before we went off to do that, our Asaish guard came back in and suggested we might want to interview one of the non Isis civilians and turned in this camp with them a young person who was initially described by the guards as transgender. So this person we're about to meet is you would say, transgender noise, Let's not complete trans gender, it's just like you know outside.

Cobot explained that the guard had good naturedly gotten some of her terms wrong. The person we were about to interview was a young girl who lived and presented as a young boy. This didn't seem to be a matter of how this person identified. It was a practical strategy for avoiding violent attention from the Isis brides to just to protect herself.

[50:55]

They came from Aleppo, a city largely destroyed in an unsuccessful attempt to free itself from b Shar al Assad. So she came to Racca with her mother and her uncle's her mother's brothers. Okay, so she came with them on been yeah, because of as in case that was hard to understand.

This poor kid's mom took her in her siblings to Rocca and into the domain of the Islamic State because it was safer than Aleppo. Then, during the U s s d of shelling of that city, her mother was killed, so she still with her uncles aunties. They drove her until they moved to Then they delivered her. They married her to her courage. She was years although she married.

This arranged marriage lasted six months. She was thirteen and he was nineteen. Her husband fled, eventually abandoning her to the hell that was Bugoos. She lived through the last battle of the Caliphate, just like the two brides we've spoken with earlier. When ISIS resistance collapsed, she was taken into custody like the rest of the civilian survivors. The whole nature of ISIS and radicalization meant that the STF couldn't just release all these people.

Many of them were innocent victims like this kid and her siblings, but others were like the ISIS brides you just heard from and their children, one of whom tried to burn a guard alive recently. You don't want those people let out to have the run of Rojava. This is why innocent civilians displaced by war are held in the same massive camp as Isis Brides. Our new little friend has family outside of the camp, and they tried to get her out, but her aunt and uncle live in Aleppo, which is controlled by the regime, and to make a long story short, bureaucratic confusion makes it impossible for her to leave now, so she remains here with her younger siblings, and since she is the oldest, she's made it her business to take care of them.

This necessitates the disguise they got too. Managed to protect my siblings at the same time to serving them and helping the queue with them.

Isn't just a man I can give the assistance pasta. The disguise also protects her. The Isis Brides have formed something akin to a mafia within the camp. The guards cannot be everywhere and there are seventy tho people in ol Hale. Being a young girl out of in a cob would make her a target, and they started the osest woman.

They started to tell her, while you are not wearing the fullest as she said at that moment I decided to wear my to her dispoige appe. During her time under Isis she had heard terrible things about the SDF, so they will always liked taking us. They are they are if they were going to capture, they're going to converting to a six labor, they were going to put you on a prison, and always about things about them.

She claims she never believed the propaganda, though, and she has clearly become a favorite of the guards here. They slip her extra food, watch over her and her siblings, and help keep her a secret. That's all that can be done. At the moment she leaves, cheerious can be, but Hobart, Jake and I are all bummed as hell about her situation. Sure I would like at least get it back to her aunt.

To at least get her back to her aunt. Yeah, just why why? I don't know what she thought it would be her mom.

Now that we're all properly piste off a disheartened, it's time to finally go out into the hurly burly of al Hole. We meet up with our guards, two armed sdfmen, and we head out on foot. They've had too many vehicles damaged by rock throwing to one a drive before we head outbat make sure I have my knife in my free hand. So we're about to walk through all whole camped, through the tents, through the market.

We've got two WHITEPG guards with us, both of them armed with a K forty seven. If we're swarmed and attacked by Isis brides, the guns won't be of much use. One of our guards even points to his a K forty seven and says, essentially, if they come at us, these aren't going to help.

[55:17]

It becomes immediately clear why this is Our hole is massive, filled with countless thousands of tents and crowds of people. There are few guards, and the maze of tents could discourage a crowd of armed Isis brides. At any point. They could come right out on top of you, knives and razor blades drawn. As

we walk into the camp and a young child and I read Adidas shirt walks by looks questioningly at me. Ahead, I see two Josh brides and film the cops, one carrying a baby, and then a crowd of people.

Further into the market, we walk past crowds of Isis brides, some escorted by guards, some not. Whenever I look at them, they flipped down the little face shield in front of their eyes, turning them all into uniform, eyeless masses of black fabric. It is unsettling, to say the least, particularly as we get further in.

At several points were surrounded by isis brides, all faceless but staring at us. They look like ghosts. It is one of the eeriest experiences of my life. It is a bit like being inside the Islamic State, with our guards being the human equivalent of one of those tanks people sit inside to watch sharks. As we get further into the camp, we reached the market, a bustling square filled with large tent based shops.

This surprises me. I've seen refugee camps in Ukraine, Serbia, Hungary, Iraq and now Syria. All of them have some sort of internal economy, but the market here is the largest I've seen. In general, our whole is dusty, but clean, orderly and well maintained. I do not believe anyone who has visited refugee camps around the world could fault the SDF for what they've established here, given the resources available to them.

The frightening aspects of this place have nothing to do with how it's run, and everything to do with the fact that it hosts thousands of ISIS sympathizers and unfortunately, lots of children are trapped in the middle. Is Jacobot and I wander through. We meet a young black boy around ten years old, who identifies himself as an American. We're in America.

[57:16]

Where in America? Are you from Trinidad? How do you come to be here? Where's your father? Now? Ye? Sorry to hear that. It becomes clear that he meant from the America's in that and he said dead not fall in Shahid when he talked about his father.

The fact that he calls his father a corpse and not a martyr is telling the fury rolling off. This boy is palpable in his eyes. I said, I'm sorry to hear that. Yeah, air strike Joel. I don't know that I've ever seen more anger from a person.

He walks off alone into the dusty crowd, and we continue our walk to the market. Is that's a market. There's shops, a pretty wide variety of products, dozens and dozens of stalls. Uh. For a prison, people seem to be about as free as you could expect them to be.

We ask our guards to take us on a walk up to the walled off ices compound within the camp. It takes about a half hour on foot. As we trek, our guards greet individual internees they know personally most of the people. They stopped to speak to our little kids, including one chubby wheelchair bound boy. Both of his legs are missing from the knee down, the consequence of a US air strike.

He looks like he must be in constant pain, but he's all smiles and laughter when we meet him. Is clearly a favorite of the guards. A small four wheel buggy rolls past, basically a golf cart. Two kids are holding onto the back as it drives, and one of our ASA guards yells at them, tutting that they might fall off and hurt themselves.

The y behind this has made clear. As soon as we reached the outskirts of the Isis compound, we see a small crowd of guards gathered around where one of the kids we saw earlier is lying in the dust. Blood pours down the front of his forehead. Another child, possibly his brother, tries to help him up. When the guards see what's happened, one of them dashes in and grabs the child hosting him up on his chest and sprinting off to the medical center to see to the boy's injury.

We head inside the compound. The Iis camp is immediately and deeply bizarre because most of the Isis brides and their children are foreigners. This place is incredibly diverse, with every conceivable nationality represented. The boy passes me and it shared with the Australian flag. It says fair Dingham Assie.

Most of the children here will not talk to us. Many of them are clearly European or American. Though we see one white, blondhaired boy, perhaps twelve years old. His arm is bandaged. He was shot in Bugoos fighting for the Caliphate. We do not spend long in the little Caliphate. It is depressing here. You can see in the eyes of the internees how many of them are still loyal.

As we exit and walk back to the assay Is headquarters where we'd parked our car, we see a young woman sitting out on a bench, looking for all the world, like she was waiting for a ride. My eyes are drawn to her because from the neck down she's dressed the same as a dashi, but her head is uncovered and she wears lipsticks. Sitting next to a pile of water purification tablets, a bunch of bread, and uh several sheeps of paper in a folder, she tells Coat that she is from Aleppo, like the little girl we met earlier.

She decided to join the Islamic State, and she fled from Rocco with them and wound up on the killing fields of Bagoos. But now she's in ol Hole and she's won herself an elected position on the camp's local commune. I ask her opinion on the democratic confederalist system.

Where is she hoping to go out? Lama is A I'm gonna stay in literatory. You don't want to go back to the regime. Is there a job she would like to do? Her training she'd like to give when she gets out Fisily had she wanted to join the military forces.

All whole is not a place of optimism, But this last interaction, the final interview of our trip to Rojava, does leave me feeling optimistic.

And I will need that optimism because two months after we leave, Turkey's invasion begins. Hundreds upon hundreds are killed and hundreds of thousands are displaced. The Turkish army occupies more of Rojava's land. They conquer the city of Sarakane, forcing the stf out of villages and towns that just weeks before, Jake, Cabat and I had driven through safely.

Artillery fire lights up the sky around peaceful Derek. While Jake and I watch in horror from the safety of our homes in the west. Cabat risks her life to do her job once again, and as I typed these words, she and Alan are still okay. During our road trip, Jake and I had played Cabat an old Irish rebel song, go on Home British Soldiers. She'd liked it a lot.

A few days into the Turkish invasion, this song goes viral among supporters of the Rojavan cause soldiers, have you got no great fights? The revolutionary spirit alone was not enough to hold the line, and so after the invasion, the military leaders of the SDF were forced to allow the Syrian regime and the Russian army in.

There was no other choice with the Turkish army bearing down on their positions. At this moment, the Syrian regime is too militarily weak to enforce its rules on the people of Rojava, but Bashar al Assad has made it clear that he does not intend to let the self administration remain autonomous forever.

The people of Rojava and the SDF have made it equally clear that they won't let that happen without a fight, and true to their nature, the STF has doggedly resisted the invasion. Jin War was abandoned briefly and then reoccupied. Kobani, Kamishlo and Derek still endure and resist. The teachings of Abdulla Agolan are still preached to young men and women at YPG and J training academies.

The Mamas and their peers still continue their experiments and ground up social organizing. The ideas of Moray Bucchin have not been abandoned, but from where I sit, it is deeply unclear if this experiment will continue in the long run. As always happens in war, brutality has bred more brutality.

The Turkish government has continued to carry out the ethnic cleansing campaign that began in Afron, forcing Kords out and bussing in Arabs. They have executed political leaders, tortured, captured female fighters, and carried out drone strikes on civilian targets. In response, Anti Turkish partisans have escalated their own brutality. On April twenty eight, twenty twenty, a truck bomb was detonated in Turkish occupied Afrin, killing fifty three people, including twelve Turkish backed fighters and eleven children.

The SDF officially condemned the attack. Turkey blames it on the YPG. I cannot tell you who is responsible, but for days afterwards that old George Orwell quote from Homage to Catalonia ran through my mind. The fact is that every war suffers a kind of progressive degradation with every month

that it continues, because things such as individual liberty and a truthful press are simply not compatible with military efficiency.

But as of right now, Rojava still endures. Kobani, Kamischelo, Derek and gin War all still resist. It is a resistance defined by compromise and painful uncertainty, but it is not death. And Rojava's future is still unwritten.

And as the terrible news of the last seven months has reached my door, I've studied myself by remembering that last interview we conducted an ol whole with a former Isis supporter who had been converted and liberated by the Rojavan's system. As long as this revolutions ideals can take root in the hearts of men and women, even men and women who once pledged loyalty to the Islamic state, anything, it's possible.

Oh my god, this is she's not here. She's still got a lot of the dress on, but slowly getting out. MS no, no, I have a hope.

When he said there is a hope, there is a hope if a LiPo the most radical isis Cyrian isis they are in this effort, spetting in the council and coming up. There are lines in this new system. I think we have a hope. Nat As at all chow well show chow chow chow a dinner at all your rado vessel Bai Janoo, damia bell a chow wellas chow and a child chow chow Dejano dyb are Jimmy said nosey molly chaow gave me day breath jallow gave the day you royal, But de chando will bet a child and a child and a child chow chowder, say your royal hip, Dejano baby said, Babby said, does want danyellow? Who better? Chowder and a child and the child child child Spida? Does me want danyall? So don't do burger belly, don't don't anything againteed get us set, I don't Oh bell A chow bella chow Belle chow chow chow in againde get us set, I know me okay, bellful was do the fut de chann No, Let's go bell A chowd bell A chow chow chow chow doling pure and fun.

Dechano more. I leave Belle? What's doing shadow? I leave chow time.

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Hey, everybody, I'm Robert Evans, and if you have been watching anything happening in America lately, probably pretty worried, what with the far right insurrection to install an authoritarian fascist state that just happened, and the promised additional far right insurrections to try and get things right where they got things wrong before, and all of the other terrifying things that are happening.

The violet fascists in the street with guns threatening to hang and execute political leaders. It's a messed up time, isn't it. Prop Pretty terrible, man, And it actually happened, like not in our imagination. This is not a simulation. It really happened. It really did happen. And I got you here with me and Sophie because I figured maybe since it really happened here, we should talk about some other places in times where it it being a fascist insurrection has happened, and how people tried to fight it, how they were successful, how they were unsuccessful.

So maybe we can learn from the mistakes of people in Italy and Germany and Spain. Yeah, maybe we can learn from their mistakes so we don't make the same for once.

Yeah, that would rule I like not making the same mistakes that led to dictatorships in other countries. That'd be yeah. So if you don't want to make the same mistakes, listen to Behind the Insurrections on the I Heart Radio app, Apple podcasts, or wherever you get your podcasts.

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Robert Evans
The Women's War
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