



The Tahrir Institute  
for Middle East Policy

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# SYRIA'S WOMEN: POLICIES & PERSPECTIVES

## WOMEN IN LOCAL SECURITY FORCES November 7, 2017

### Summary

- Kurdish Women's Protection Units (YPJ) now **comprise** 35–40 percent of Kurdish military forces and strive for **gender equality** both on the battlefield, where they command mixed-sex forces, and at home in Rojava, the Kurdish-controlled region of northern Syria.
- Inspired in part by the YPJ, other Syrian women have become increasingly visible in security forces and local councils, and there are now over 1,000 women in the United States-backed Syrian Democratic Forces.
- The Syrian government, likewise, has created a **women's unit** within the National Defense Force, and the group now has about **3,000** women in its ranks.

### Overall Situation

The success of the female units in the Kurdish Defense Forces, known as the **YPJ**, has inspired the creation of all-female brigades across diverse groups, from the **Syrian Republican Guard** to the **Islamic State**. Women living in areas liberated from the Islamic State by the YPJ have also formed their own **military councils** and **police forces**, empowered by the sight of women in combat. However, they continue to face **stiff resistance** to their combat roles because of social and patriarchal pressures on women to remain at home.

While the United States does have a funding program to aid and equip vetted Syrian opposition forces, the program does not contain gender-specific provisions, and the most recent Department of Defense **budget** does not specify which groups will be receiving the arms and support **pledged** by

the White House in May 2017. Additionally, a bill aiming to increase the number of women in foreign security forces seems to have [stalled](#) in the Committee on Foreign Relations.

## Background

Women [served](#) in the Syrian military prior to 2011, primarily in administration, military logistics, and supply units. In 2012, the [National Defense Force](#) was formed to formalize and consolidate militias supporting President Bashar al-Assad, and by 2013 an all-female unit was added to the force, nicknamed “[Lionesses of National Defense](#).” Based on 2016 [estimates](#), there are now about 3,000 women serving in the defense force, including 130 women snipers in the Republican Guard Brigade. The majority of these women serve at roadblocks and [checkpoints](#), but a [spokesman](#) for the defense force reported that they also serve in combat roles.

In 2017, Al-Masdar News published a [video](#) of a women’s battalion singing patriotic songs and shooting weapons. The battalion was revealed to be a new women’s combat force. Reportedly made up of 150 women from the Qamishli region in northern Syria and led by a woman, the battalion appears to be [based](#) on the model of Kurdish female forces. Critics, however, say that these women are being used as propaganda, their roles in the war [exaggerated](#) for political ends or flaunted to present a gender-progressive [facade](#) to the West.

As early as 2014 [headlines](#) had appeared claiming that Islamic State fighters were “terrified” of being killed by female troops, primarily in reference to female Kurdish forces. But women’s participation in Kurdish security units far predates the Islamic State. Women [make up](#) 35–40 percent of Kurdish military forces, and women in direct combat are known to [command](#) mixed-sex forces. A YPJ spokeswoman stated in an [interview](#) that their battles are not only military but also moral, as they fight against oppression at the hands of extremists but also within their own society. Despite a commitment to women’s equality in the Kurdish-controlled area of northern Syria, where [at least](#) 50 percent of all political offices must be held by women, some female fighters [reported](#) joining the force to flee arranged marriages or conservative families.

The YPJ has inspired other women in the areas liberated by Kurdish forces, prompting establishment of women’s forces in places like Manbij and al-Bab. In Manbij, more than 50 women have joined the [Asayish Police Force](#), while the city’s [civilian council](#) is now expanding to better represent ethnic and tribal communities, and women now constitute at least 40 percent of its members. In nearby al-Bab, the local [military council](#) announced the formation of an all-female battalion, a Kurdish-Arab joint initiative associated with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that will be [deployed](#) against the Islamic State, inspired by Kurdish Women’s Protection Units. Aleppo police chief Adeb al-Shalaf [announced](#) in July 2017 the creation of a program to train an all-female police force to be used across the region.

More than 1,000 Arab women have joined the SDF, though they [report](#) great resistance from their families and communities. Conservative Arab families reportedly find it “bizarre” for a woman to take up arms, and in some cases are willing to disown their daughters over the issue. Despite this, the number of Arab women joining local militias has been great enough to warrant the SDF’s creation of an Arab Women’s Battalion in 2017, called the [Battalion of Martyr Amara](#), to fight the Islamic State and, they say, patriarchy.

While it has insisted on strict separation of the sexes, the Islamic State also uses women in some security forces, primarily in its internal security services, policing the streets or running checkpoints. The [al-Khansaa Brigade](#) is an all-female morality police force that patrols Raqqa to enforce proper dress code adherence and male accompaniment. Those found in violation of these laws are detained, given [lashes](#), or, by some accounts, maimed with a tool known as a “[biter](#).” The [Umm al-Rayan Brigade](#) staffs checkpoints to search women with the aim of uncovering smuggling and male activists disguised as women. More recently, as the Islamic State faced defeats in its land operations by October of this year, it called on women to defend the caliphate alongside its male soldiers.

## Policy Implications and Challenges

Although media coverage of Kurdish female fighters has at times been [eroticized](#), often portraying them as the [liberated antitheses](#) of oppressed, subservient Arab women, women’s participation in Syria’s security sector is far more important than providing it a “pretty face.” A number of studies suggest that greater women’s participation in global security forces will increase their effectiveness. Women are more likely to report [sexual and domestic violence](#) to female police officers, have fewer reports of [inappropriate behavior](#) than their male counterparts, and provide access to local populations inaccessible by male officers. The [U.S.](#) and the [United Nations](#) have recognized this, and a [bill](#) was introduced to the U.S. Senate in September 2016 to increase the participation of women in foreign security forces with U.S. assistance. It was referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations but has not resurfaced since that referral.

Though the U.S. chose in July 2017 to [end](#) its covert CIA program to arm and train Syrian rebels, the country will continue to aid vetted Syrian opposition forces through its Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund. The Department of Defense FY18 budget [allocates](#) \$500 million for Syria training and equipping programs, an increase of about \$70 million from the previous year. In May 2017, the U.S. [announced](#) that it would be funding “Kurdish elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces” while at the same time continuing “to prioritize support for Arab elements of the SDF.” This lack of specificity means that no direct gender provisions are present. If the U.S. and others wish to address issues facing Syrian women, from [violence against women](#) to [assault in prison](#), the cultivation of women in security forces is important, and merits specific action to do this.



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