

Meet the LGBT anarchists who've gone to Syria to fight ISIS

Fighters in the world's first LGBT military unit tell The Independent the time has come to 'announce our existence to people and governments who claim we do not exist'

Bethan McKernan

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The Syrian civil war has unleashed untold misery for millions of people caught between an authoritarian government, Islamic extremists and bombing by foreign nations.

But the last six years of darkness have also created the conditions for what is possibly the most enlightened revolutionary movement on the planet – the Kurdish people's attempt to seize their own destiny from others' hands. Women in particular have banded together to play a crucial part in the fight against Isis' brutality – and now, LGBT individuals are reportedly doing the same.

Long marginalised by the Baathist regime in Damascus, after repelling government forces in 2012 Syria's Kurds have managed to carve out a relatively peaceful and stable new societal order based in Rojava in the north east, flourishing despite the presence of enemies such as Isis on all sides.

The armed revolution has been the most successful ground force against Isis, and with the help of US firepower is now battling the militants for control of Raqqa, the extremists' last urban stronghold.

While the Kurdish project has encountered criticism, its wholehearted embrace of feminist principles makes it unlike any other militarised movement in the world.

Women's emancipation at the forefront of the Kurdish sociopolitical agenda, and the YPJ, or women's fighting units, have a frontline role in taking on Assad's army and allied militias, Turkish-backed forces, and Isis.

The female fighters often inspire the Arab and Yazidi women they liberate to take up arms themselves, and the movement has attracted hundreds of foreign fighters in the same spirit of the international socialists and communists who volunteered to fight fascism during the Spanish Civil War.

Now, after years of fighting which have honed both their battlefield skills and tested commitment to socialist ideals, a new chapter in the revolution's history has been announced: the creation of the first ever LGBT military unit.

The Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army (TQILA, pronounced “tequila”) is a new unit attached to the anarchist International Revolutionary People’s Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF), a relatively recently established fighting force in Syria’s north-east which claims to work alongside the YPG, or Kurdish People’s Protection Units. (A claim the YPG has denied).

“We, the International Revolutionary People’s Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF) formally announce the formation of The Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army (TQILA), a subgroup of the IRPGF comprised of LGBTQI+ comrades as well as others who seek to smash the gender binary and advance the women’s revolution as well as the broader gender and sexual revolution,” a statement from the group released on Monday said.

A spokesperson for TQILA would not give identifying details about the unit’s members backgrounds because of security concerns, but said that fighters came from a range of countries, as well as the Middle East’s ethnic groups. It is not clear how many they number – by some accounts, fewer than 20.

But the volunteers had been brought together by a shared desire to combat forces such as Isis which persecutes LGBT individuals, Heval (or “friend”) Rojhilat said by secure email.

“TQILA’s members have watched in horror as fascists and extremist forces around the world have attacked the Queer community and murdered countless of our community members citing that they are ‘ill’, ‘sick’, and ‘unnatural’.

“The images of gay men being thrown off roofs and stoned to death by Daesh was something we could not idly watch.”

Indeed, the fight for LGBT equality and for physical freedom from oppression reach a zenith in the fight against Isis, Heval Rojhilat said.

“As Queers from and currently in the Middle East... one of the most radical acts we can do is to announce our existence to people and governments who have and continue to claim that we do not exist.

“We exist and we fight against tyranny, oppression and domination with the people, who seeing us, have come to love us for who we are and not as a stereotype or something to be feared.”

One Kurdish gay rights activist *The Independent* spoke to who currently lives outside the region said he remained sceptical of TQILA’s supposed goals – and what he called the “militarisation of sexual orientation”. He was also critical of Kurdish attitudes towards LGBT individuals in general, which he said forced him to flee for fear of his own safety a few years ago.

The new unit’s spokesperson acknowledged that “there are segments of Kurdish society which retain feudal and conservative attitudes”, but pointed out that during training Kurdish troops undertake classes in which theories of sexuality and gender are critically discussed.

“The fact that these theories are being analysed and spoken about by one of the largest leftist guerrilla forces in the world, in the midst of a revolution and war, is transformative and inspiring,” Heval Rojhilat said.

And besides – the time for passivity in the face of oppression is over, he said, adding: “Self-defence is a right and duty for our community and for others who are also facing oppression, domination and exploitation.”

Abdullah Ocalan – the leader of the outlawed PKK Kurdish movement in neighbouring Turkey – uses the metaphor of a rose to describe women’s liberation.

He says that the rose is beautiful but it has thorns to protect itself. Likewise, women must protect and defend themselves against both the state and patriarchal oppression – hence the creation of the women’s fighting units.

“(TQILA) believes that this principle also applies to gender and sexual minorities,” he said. “We want peace but if attacked and continually repressed, like the rose, we have thorns and we will strike back.”

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