

Amineh—“No Bigger Than a Kalashnikov” A Peshmerga in Parliament

Amineh Kakabaveh and Johan Ohlson
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BUXUS EDITION, 2021, 286 pp., 26 illustrations, hardcover
ISBN 978-3-949379-03-1

October 2021

For two weeks in July 2021, the fate of the Swedish government rested on the shoulders of one of the country's most outspoken and staunchly independent members of Parliament. A former Kurdish peshmerga (guerilla fighter), Amineh Kakabaveh has lived a dramatic and inspiring life. Arriving in Sweden as a refugee at age eighteen, she was essentially illiterate but quickly learned Swedish. She worked while attending school, eventually earning a university degree. Involving herself in local politics, she became a member of the Swedish Parliament for the Left Party in 2008. That same party later moved to expel her, ostensibly for pushing too hard in her fight against honor culture - crimes committed against women with traditional backgrounds, in the defense of “family honor”.

True to her principles, she remained in the Parliament as an independent socialist representative which put her in a position to cast the decisive vote to end the 2021 governmental crisis. As a result, the Minister of Justice was compelled to negotiate with her about eight specific demands she had posed to gain her support - including to stop state aid for independent religious schools, reduce the tax burden for seniors living on a pension, and expanding the protections for women and children at risk for honor crimes.

Strong-willed and combative, her whole life has been a struggle for freedom and justice, particularly for the rights of women in traditional cultures and against honor crimes and religious fundamentalism. Today, her fight is more relevant than ever. Her biography, *Amineh-“No bigger than a Kalashnikov”* (BUXUS EDITION, 2021), written together with the author Johan Ohlson, chronicles her extraordinary journey.

Amineh Kakabaveh grew up in a poor Muslim family in Iranian Kurdistan and experienced the Islamic revolution that brought the Ayatollah Khomeini to power in 1979. As a girl, she was forced to leave school after less than two years. Soon the new Islamist regime invaded the mountainous regions of Kurdistan, attacking and occupying her home village. Her brother and her uncle joined the Kurdish peshmerga. With the oppression increasing, she tried to continue her education in secret by listening to the broadcasts of the outlawed socialist Komala Party. At age thirteen the religious militia confronted her with a choice for her rebelliousness: forced marriage or execution. Ever defiant, she chose a third option - making a dramatic escape to join the peshmerga in the mountains. Her boldness was not without consequences; her father and brothers were severely beaten and tortured as a result.

Moving constantly between Iran and Iraq, life as a guerrilla was hard, but proved to be an oasis for a young Kurdish girl yearning to experience the freedom and opportunities denied her by the strictures of theocracy and poverty. As part of her training, she learned to ride a bike and swim - after first sewing her own swimsuit. She was even able to have a boyfriend.

For more than five years she continued to fight with the Komala peshmerga, advancing to the position of personal bodyguard to the Kurdish socialist leadership. Eventually, she left Kurdistan and moved to Turkey, as an UNHCR refugee, before finally managing to settle in Sweden. When she was examined by a doctor after her arrival, a mysterious defect was detected in her blood. These were the markers of Saddam Hussein's chemical weapons to which she had been exposed when entering a Kurdish village in Iraq, soon after one of his regime's poison gas attacks.

After only ten years in Sweden, Amineh was a university graduate and a trained social worker. In her work among immigrants, she once again encountered the problem of honor culture and its associated crimes, only this time in Stockholm's culturally diverse suburbs. As a school counselor in a part of the city where the majority of residents were migrants, she realized that several of the students in the ninth grade - at fourteen years old - were married and some were pregnant. Recognizing the growing influence of religious fundamentalism and cultural oppression, she publicly warned about these problems. Certain members of the Left Party tried to silence her, accusing her of discrimination. Taking matters into her own hands, she started the Swedish chapter of *Ni Poutes Ni Soumises* (Neither Whores nor Submissives), a grass roots organization fighting for women's rights and against honor culture.

This pattern was to repeat itself when she pressed the issue of the "balcony girls": women killed by members of their own families, by being pushed off their home balconies, to preserve the family "honor". And again, when she protested against the disappearance from Sweden of young migrant girls who were forced to travel to the Middle East or to Africa to get married during the summer holidays. As a result of her activism, she was eventually expelled from her party as a "troublemaker".

Amineh has paid a high price for staying true to her principles. She has been ostracized, accused of racism, and is living under constant threat of death from religious extremists and right-wing nationalists, both within Sweden and abroad. She has been frequently attacked by her political opponents, but just as often her views have been vindicated. In recognition of her accomplishments the Swedish news magazine *Fokus* named her "Årets Svensk" (Swede of the Year) in 2016. Her exciting and deeply affecting biography traces a young Kurdish woman's odyssey from poverty and war to the highest levels of politics, while taking on the most difficult challenges facing women in both traditional and modern cultures today. These include the problem of integration, segregating, honor crime, child marriage, gender mutilation and other forms of cultural, religious, and patriarchal oppression affecting millions of young children and women in many countries. She shares this struggle with thousands of Kurdish women fighting against Daesh/ ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

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