KONGRA STAR مؤتــمر ســـتار

## Political femicide: Systematized State assassination of politically organised women

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### 1. Introduction

On 23 June 2020, Zehra Berkel, Hebûn Mele Xelîl and Emina Weysi, members of Kongra Star from the Euphrates region, were killed by a drone that bombed the house where they were staying. It was not by chance that they fell as martyrs—they were killed because of their role in the women's movement and in the construction of the democratic project that is developing in the North and East of Syria.

The aim of this dossier is to make visible the systematization of the killing of women activists by the states and their use to weaken the movements that oppose their imperialist and capitalist plans. Now, the case Zehra, Hebûn and Emina, as well as the case of Hevrin Xelef, murdered on 12 October 2019, has occurred in the context of the process of Turkish occupation of Northern Syria, and responds to the desire to stop the resistance of women, which is an obstacle to the development of the Turkish project for the region.

These femicides are not exclusive to the Turkish state, but are systematic practices by states in all parts of the world, as patriarchy is a common foundation of all of them and the patriarchal mentality has a global dimension. Across many different countries, crimes committed against women enjoy total impunity, without trial of the perpetrators or justice for the victims. Through this crimes, the oppression of women is used to oppress all the society, especially when the women that are assassinated are the ones standing in the front line defending life.

In the face of these attacks, the need for resistance and self-defense, especially that organized by autonomous women's organizations, becomes more evident. On the other hand, since these killings are practices of states around the world, it is necessary to struggle also at the global level, building alliances between women's movements and social movements everywhere that seek a transformation of society in favour of democracy and freedom.



## 2. Targeted attack on Zehra, Hebûn, mother Emîna and Hevrin Xelef

There is a long history of the Turkish state targeting women and this continues now. There are many examples of femicides committed by the Turkish state and its mentality. In the following, the case of the three women Hebûn, Zehra Berkel and mother<sup>1</sup> Emina, who were murdered in a drone attack, and the case of Hevrin Xelef, the General Secretary of the Syrian Party of the Future, who was murdered by turkish-backed mercinaries, will be illuminated.

Hebûn, Zehra Berkel and Mother Emina were murdered on the evening of 23 June 2020, armed Turkish drones carried out an air raid on the village of Helincê near Kobanê. The target of the attack in this village was a concrete house. Three women sitting together in the garden were killed in this targeted bombing: Zehra Berkel, Hebûn Mele Xelîl and Emîne Weysî. All three were activists of the women's movement Kongra Star in Rojava, who fought all their lives for women's rights and a democratic society, and who played an important role in the revolution in Rojava. Who were these women who became targets of the Turkish state?

<sup>1</sup> In both Kurdish and Arabic, mothers and fathers are said as sign of respect for the acutal name mother or father





### 2.1. Zehra, Hebûn and Emina

#### Zehra Berkel

Zehra Berkel was born in the village Berxbotan of Kobane in 1987 and she grew up in a welatparezî<sup>2</sup> family. After graduating from school, Zehra studied law at the University of Aleppo.

Zehra took a stand in the July 19th revolution. When the regime Ba'ath was still in Kobanê, Zehra secretly participated in women's meetings and work. During the Ba'ath regime, Zehra taught older women and her mother the Kurdish language for five years. In 2012, Zehra started working in Mala Jin (women's house). In 2013 she started working for the Kurdish Red Crescent, in 2015 she worked in the court and in 2017 she was appointed cochair of Kobanê Municipality and worked for the Autonomous Administration at the same time. In 2018, the third Kongra Star conference was held in Kobanê, and during this time she was elected as a coordinating member of Kongra Star in the Euphrates region while also working for Mala Jin and the Sara organization to combat violence against women.

Zehra has been involved where support was needed, she has never refused any task or responsibility.

Zehra Berkel took her place in a society centered on the struggle for women's liberation, as we can see from her own words: "I chose the line of resistance so that all women could achieve their freedom."

2 Literally translated it means those who protect their country. It means to love and defend their country.





#### Hebûn Mele Xelil

Hebûn Mele Xelîl was born and raised in the village of Pendir, east of Kobane. She was 41 years old at the time of her murder. Hebûn began to be organized as a woman at the age of 16. When meetings were held in the village, it was impossible for Hebûn not to attend the meeting.

Hebûn always defended her society and read a lot about the Democratic Nation and nature. She was trained in the political, military and ideological fields in order to do work in the service of society.

She was involved in Cizire's social work since 2013. In 2014, Hebûn, as a woman from Kobanê, participated in an unprecedented war against the Turkish state and ISIS gangs and then took her place in the work of the security forces of the Asayish (the internal security forces) of the city of Minbic. She later stopped working as an asayish for health reasons and participated in the work of the Kongra Star in the Cizire region. Finally, at the time of the femicide perpetrated by the Turkish state in Helince, she was part of the Coordination of the Kongra Star Women's Movement in the Euphrates region.

She has never accepted oppression and injustice. She has not only fought against oppression and injustice of women, but since her childhood she has dreamed of peaceful and just coexistence of different peoples. With her activism since her early teenage years, she has positively influenced not only her family but also society.





#### Mother Emine

Emine Muhammed Weysî, called Mother Emine, was born in 1965 in the village of Helince and was 56 years old when the attack took place. She was the mother of two sons and two daughters, one of them was also a member of the Coordination of Kongra Star Women's Movement.

Mother Emine was known for her modesty and big heart in the village of Helince. Emine had opened the door of her home to everyone, just as she did on the day of the attack. Despite her advanced age and health problems, Mother Emine participated in all the activities of the Women's Movement and the other people's organizations from the North and East of Syria that were held in the city of Kobane. Emine was a mother who loved her country, and did her best to serve her people and especially the freedom of women. Mother Emine was not only the mother of her children, but also the mother of all children. She took her place on the women's front in accordance with her commitment and her active role in defending her people.





#### 2.2. The case of Hevrin Xelef

Hevrin Xelef the Secretary General of the Future Syria Party was brutally executed on October 12 by Turkish-backed Ahrar al-Sharqiya by jihaddists near the M4 highway south of Tell Abyad during the 2019 Turkish offensive in Northeastern Syria. Her car was deliberately intercepted by mercenaries disguised as internal security forces of Northern and Eastern Syria, and she was brutally tortured and then executed together with her driver. The mercenaries recorded this brutal action with their mobile phone cameras and distributed it through social media. The Turkish government itself proclaimed this brutal execution a success and called it the elimination of a terrorist. This shows once again that the Turkish government is targeting women who do not fit into its Islamist and patriarchal world view, and it shows that these attacks are not only carried out by uncontrolled mercenaries but are dictated by the Turkish government.

#### Hevrin Xelef

Hevrîn Xelef was born in Dêrik and grew up in a social and political family. Her mother, Sûad, participated in many people's assemblies with Abdullah Öcalan. What she learned there about womens freedom also had a great influence on Hevrin's education and personal development. After school in Dêrik, she studied agricultural sciences in Aleppo. After her studies, she returned to Dêrik.





At the beginning of the Revolution in Rojava, Hevrîn became involved in the work of the liberation struggle. In 2012, she was also one of the founders of the Foundation for Free Science and Thought. She began to organize the establishment of civil society institutions and assumed leadership roles in the Economic Council in Qamishlo. With the proclamation of the Autonomous Administration, she assumed the responsibilities of deputy co-chair of the Energy Commission of the canton of Cizîre. In 2015, she played an important role in improving and strengthening the energy supply and ecological works in Cizîre. In these works, she devoted her attention especially to the economic needs of women and the development of women's ecology.

In 2018, Hevrîn was part of the organization and foundation of the Syrian Future Party (Partiya Sûriya Pêşerojê - PSP), with the aim of working for the interests of all social groups and the democratic renewal of Syria. In a speech delivered on the eighth anniversary of the popular uprising in Syria, she reiterated her conviction that the crisis in Syria cannot be resolved through war. She said: «Eight years have passed. The people's uprising against the crisis and the struggle of the Syrian people has been carried out with great sacrifice and has turned into a war. The enduring crisis in Syria, which has caused the expulsion and killing of the population, cannot be resolved without a political solution.»

In all the speeches, Hevrîn pointed out the importance of dialogue between the various political forces and social groups in Syria. She stressed that the people, as a whole, determine their own future and must shape their own political and social life. She worked to increase tolerance and unity among Christians, Arabs and Kurds.

Hevrin was known for her dedication to her society, her commitment and her talent for diplomatic work as she facilitated rapprochement and understanding between different social groups in Syria.



# 2.3. Why women like Hevrin, Zehra, Hebûn and Mother Emine are targeted

Women like Hevrîn, Zehra, Hebûn and Mother Emine are an unforgettable and essential part of the women's revolution in Rojava. They are symbols of these communities and their values. The democratic project that women are striving for is in complete opposition to the Turkish fascist project.

All these women played an important role in the construction of this project. Hevrin Xelef was active in the political sphere to unite the peoples of Syria in a democratic way. When the Syrian Future Party was founded in Raqqa on 27 March 2018, she assumed the role of General Secretary selflessly and with devotion. Through her political struggle, she called on all circles of society and political actors to come together and find a democratic solution for Syria.

Zehra Berkel and Hebûn Mele Xelil worked in the social sphere for a free society in which women are a vanguard. Zehra had great clarity about the aim of the Turkish state, originating in its patriarchal mentality, as well as the position that women should take by fighting against them: "As a result of the attacks and threats of the Turkish state in the region, women are attacked daily and the Turkish state is trying to destroy them. The contempt for women's rights will not succeed. We will strengthen the rights of women by fighting for them." Both were active in the Kongra Star women's movement, which with all its different areas plays a key role in the women's revolution in Rojava and the building of the democratic system there.

Mother Emine also had an important role in the building of the womens revolution. Mothers play an exemplary role in the defense of their people, with immeasurable commitment—they are the key element in rebuilding society based on democratic values and women's freedom. Mothers are the soul of the revolution and the symbol of commitment to collective values, because they care about society while resisting the violence of the Turkish State with all their strength, without taking a single step back or leaving anyone behind.

This attack is not directed at just any women—it is directed against women politicians, the women's movement Kongra Star, and against the mothers of the country who raise their children with democratic values.

As a symbol for the women's resistance against fascism, they were murdered to send a warning to women who organize themselves and rebel against the male mentality of the states. With these attacks they want to rob society of its vanguards and thus of its will.



### 3. The patriarchal mindset of Turkish state

The democratic system in Rojava and Northern and Eastern Syria is a system in which all parts of the pluralistic society have a say and the right to organize themselves autonomously. That is why the fascist Turkish AKP government fears that the pursuit of democracy and freedom could spread to Turkey and challenge its dictatorial government. The nationalist and Islamist policies of the AKP government in Turkey can be seen quite openly in its policies against women and young girls. At the beginning of this year, a draft law of the AKP was discussed throughout the country, which declares child abuse under certain conditions to be exempt from punishment. According to the AKP proposal, rapists who marry their minor victim will escape punishment. Women's rights activists worldwide have seen this as an encouragement to rape. Even politically and socially active women who stand up for women's rights are systematically persecuted by the AKP government.

In 2014, Bülent Arinç the deputy of Erdogan said at a public event that women should not laugh in public because it is not virtuous. These mentioned examples reflect the ideology of the AKP government.

The brutal murders of Hevrin's Xelef and Zehra, Hebûn and Mother Emine were complacently celebrated by Erdogan as "the elimination of terrorists". This shows how the Turkish state, with the help of its allied jihadists as well as by air force, is attacking women active in politics and society. In the case of the Turkish state, these practices are not new and were already evident with the triple murder in Paris of Sakine Cansız, Fidan Doğan and Leyla Söylemez, on January 10, 2013. The murder of the three activists in Paris was planned and carried out by the Turkish secret service MIT.

The Rojava revolution and the system that has been built since the beginning of the civil war is a grassroots democratic system that gives all social groups a voice. But what the revolution became known world wide for is that it is a women revolution. Women are encouraged to participate actively in all areas, be it politics, society or the military. In the local system there is a 40% gender quota in all areas. Since 2014, there have been women's laws specifically designed to protect the rights of women and girls. This social system built on women's liberation contradicts the conservative Islamic ideology of the AKP government. That is why Turkey is attacking Northern Syria in the name of "fighting terror".



The targeted attacks on women by the Turkish state and its jihadist mercenary groups, which Turkey uses in its expansionist and illegal occupation of Northern Syria, are comprehensive. Since the occupation in 2018, thousands of women have been abducted, tortured, raped and even murdered in Afrin alone. We can clearly see that the Turkish state is committing femicide, both against women in the areas it occupies and against women who are organized and do not accept Erdoğan's regime and it's mentality.





#### 4. Targeted killing of women political organizers by states

The selective killing of women who organize and take an active role in defending freedom is a widespread and systematic practice throughout the world and throughout history. Hundreds of thousands of women have been murdered for their political thought and practice, and on many of these occasions these crimes have been orchestrated by states and perpetrated by state military or police forces or by paramilitary groups, mercenaries or hitmen.

What are the motives behind these murders?

If we look at resistance movements around the world and in the past, we can see that women are increasingly taking leadership roles and are in the front line of multiple struggles, perhaps the first of which is the struggle for women's rights, but also in resistance to the onslaught of capitalism and fascism. In this sense, the role of resistance by women defending territories and communities against a policy of land expropriation, assimilation and genocide, usually motivated by the will of States to control the territory and society, is also relevant.

This is not surprising if we think that women are the ones who usually keep communities together, who guarantee that culture and language will survive through education to new generations and who often have stronger links with the land and nature. On the other hand, although they have traditionally been part of the most oppressed sectors of society, this has also been a reason for women to organize themselves to defend and transform their material and immaterial conditions and the system as a whole. These are the reasons why women are one of the main targets when states or business groups are prevented from developing their projects by the struggle of communities or peoples who stand up against them.

Repression and violence against women activists and organizations takes different forms, from legal and police persecution, to prison, kidnapping, sexual violence or femicide. All of these forms have in common that these women are not only attacked because of their role, but also because of their gender.

Violence against organized women in itself is direct violence against the community but also responds to other objectives that are important to mention. On the one hand, women are punished for assuming a role that does not correspond to them according to patriarchal norms, for leaving the space of the home and assuming spaces that according to the patriarchal structure are assigned to men.

On the other hand, the murders of women such as Zehra or Hevrin Xelef, also serve to



remove key elements from the organizational structure and thus destabilize and hinder the organization. These crimes also seek to discourage other women who participate or want to participate in the struggle by generating fear and a sense of threat.

## 4.1. Examples of women being targeted all around the world

November 25 is commemorated around the world as the International Day for the Eradication of Violence against Women and Girls, and it's the day on which Patria, Minerva and Maria Teresa Mirabal, the Mirabal sisters, were murdered in 1960 in the Dominican Republic. The commitment of the sisters and their firm opposition to the dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo put the state in a difficult situation, so after different periods of imprisonment and torture of Minerva and María Teresa, the state decided to put an end to their lives, together with that of their sister Patria, through the Military Intelligence Service.

The struggle of women against patriarchy and capitalist states, for the defense of land, women and society, has one of its greatest expressions in the historical struggle of hundreds of thousands of women against fascism and imperialism, in all latitudes where they are showing its darkness. Women have paid with their lives for their anti-fascist and anti-imperialist commitment. An example of this are those known as the Thirteen Roses, a group of thirteen young women, most of whom were organized in the anti-fascist resistance, who were shot by the Spanish state four months after the end of the Civil War and the beginning of Francisco Franco's dictatorship, on August 5, 1939, accused of "joining the rebellion". As well as Rosa Luxemburg, militant of various communist organizations, who confronting nationalist discourses, stood up in firm opposition to the First World War because she considered it a confrontation between imperialists. She was executed in 1919 by German para-state bodies, after a popular uprising frustrated by the state. Her body was thrown into the river, aware of the symbol that Rosa was - and still is - for the revolutionaries, especially women.

The states see in organized women the possibility of creating an example that is followed by the rest of the women, and leads to a break with the patriarchal role of submission that serves their interests; this fear is one of the main reasons for a specific attack against them. Even more so, when the commitment to women's development through their struggle and organization is made explicit. This is the case of Meena Keshwar Kamal, murdered on February 4, 1987. Meena founded the Revolutionary Association of the Women of



Afghanistan (RAWA) to promote the education of women and the defense of their rights and freedoms. She founded a newspaper and several schools, and played a leading role in opposing the Afghan government. Her murder, carried out in Pakistan, was not investigated by the authorities, and is believed to have been carried out by either the Afghan secret police or mujahedin fundamentalists, who continue to repress, threaten and harass RAWA women activists.

On the other hand, women's struggle is often linked to the defense of territory against the colonial and extractive dynamics of capitalist states. Berta Cáceres was a Honduran activist, Lenca indigenous leader and feminist, who was murdered on March 2, 2016 after leading a fierce struggle for the defense of land. Leonela Tapdasan Pesadilla opposed largescale mining projects in the Philippines organized in the Compostela Farmers Association. She was killed on 2 March 2017 by armed individuals. A tragically paradigmatic case of the murder of women organized in defense of land and the communities living on it is that of Colombia, with the murder of hundreds of social leaders in recent years at the hands of paramilitary forces. One of them is Carlota Isabel Salinas, who dedicated herself especially to defending the rights of women in the middle of the conflict through her militancy in the Organización Femenina Popular, and who was murdered last March.

Along with Colombia and the Philippines, Mexico and Brazil are the countries where most women are killed because of their political organization and activity in defense of human rights and women's rights. Mexican Marisela Escobedo Ortiz was killed by hitmen on 16 December 2010, after carrying out an intense fight against the impunity of her daughter's killer and against femicide protected by the state. Mariella Franco was a militant feminist of the Brazilian Socialism and Freedom Party and a defender of the rights of black women, especially the poor, with her role in the self-organization of the communities. She was murdered on 14 March 2018 by state agents.

Throughout history and around the world, patriarchy has been institutionalized in the form of the state as a repressive weapon against women. It continues today to fulfill its goal of dominating society through the oppression of women, including the murder of those who take a step forward to develop resistance and draw up new ways of life on the margins of the state-capitalist one.



#### 5. No justice for organized women

Impunity for specific murders of activists, and particularly women, has been widely documented by organizations such as Global Witness, Front Line Defenders, and Oxfam International. Violence and murder are often preceded or accompanied by legal persecution through denunciations, defamation of activists by labeling them as terrorists, illegal surveillance and threats.

Despite the fact that in many cases complaints are filed to bring the perpetrators of such crimes to justice, the instances of impunity are shocking.

Another issue is that when it comes to political crimes like the ones previously stated, it is just as important to bring to justice those who commit them as it is to bring to justice the intellectual authors of feminicide. Since these are murders committed either by state forces (such as the murders of Zehra, Hebûn and Emîna by the Turkish state, or of the Mirabal sisters by the Dominican state), or by para-state actors (as in the case of Hevrîn – murder of women by Turkish paid groups, or the case of many of the femicides against social leaders in Colombia), the lack of separation of powers of the nation states leads to impunity for the perpetrators, since the state justice system protects the state or para-state apparatus in charge of the crime. In other words, both the political representatives who are the intellectual authors of the murder and the armed forces (military, police, paramilitary or para-police) who carry it out on a regular basis are guilty.

When it comes to murders committed by hitmen, there are cases in which they are publicly condemned in order to clean up the image of the state or to calm down protests that have taken place in relation to the femicide carried out, but it is only a way of evading state responsibility since their involvement is not recognized and therefore remains unpunished. This was the case of Ömer Güney, the killer of Sakine Cansız, Fidan Doğan and Leyla Söylemez. Although he was imprisoned and there was evidence that the intellectual authors of the crime were the Turkish secret service, this hypothesis was never investigated.

This is how we see that states are responsible for the death of hundreds of women every year, whose only crime was to fight for a more just world, and in the face of the impunity enjoyed by these figures they are only increasing. The murder of Hevrîn Xelef, without going any further, showed the Turkish state that it could kill its political rivals through armed militias. The murder of the three women in Helincê showed it that it can murder women with its own drones for the sake of belonging to social and political movements without even having to put on a mask. This is a great threat to all women who decide to organize themselves, and to all women in general, and international bodies perpetuate this wheel of impunity and crime by the state.



### 5.1. International silence on the attacks

After the experiences of the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials to judge the crimes committed during the Second World War, and following the violence carried out during the wars in Yugoslavia and Rwanda - violence that specifically hit women, both cases being examples of how modern wars incorporate femicide as a systematic practice - a conference was convened in Rome from which the International Criminal Court emerged, linked to the agreements of the Rome Statute. This court has the capacity to judge the crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of aggression.

Despite the existence of international law and tribunals to judge specific attacks on women activists by states, since these can be considered both war crimes in some cases and crimes against humanity in all

since post-colonial wars gender violence was incorporated as a crime against humanity
states responsible for carrying out the specific murder of women involved in political activities are not being brought to justice.

In addition, another crime that the International Criminal Court can judge is the crime of genocide, but this does not include gender as a parameter for considering mass and selective murder as we speak of in this dossier as such. Therefore, despite the fact that the numbers of women murdered exceed any other genocide carried out in history, neither is the crime of genocide used to judge it nor is new international jurisprudence being created that is appropriate for it.

On the other hand, we find that different states have legal, economic and military agreements with states responsible for political femicide, and keep silent about it. This is the case with the State of Turkey and the murder of the three women in Helincê last June. Turkey is part of NATO, but none of the member states has taken any steps to bring Turkey's crimes to justice. It is the same silence of bodies such as the UN and the Security Council, which, although their aim is the "maintenance of peace and security in the world", still do not say a word about the Turkish invasion and aggression in northern and eastern Syria and the crimes against women which Turkey is continually carrying out. It is in this sense that we see how the different conventions of the United Nations General Assembly, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) or the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), are a dead letter, because despite having legal tools, the states' pact of silence on political femicide takes priority over all justice.



The issue that is evident to us is that the silence is based on a common project and mentality, that of the capitalist nation-states, which are built on the oppression of women. The same is true of international organizations, which are the result of the mentality of the states that make them up. Thus, the tacit complicity of states and international organizations in the face of political femicide shows their contempt for women's lives and the threat they see in the struggle of these women for the continuity of their capitalist-State model, which is against the people, the communities and the territory, but especially against women and their freedom.





### 6. The need of resistance and self-defense

Throughout these pages we have seen how women are attacked and killed in order to weaken our struggle to transform this world on the basis of women's liberation—to push this goal further and further away.

Nevertheless, in the face of these attacks, the need for resistance and self-defense of women throughout the world and our determination for this become more clear—especially in the context of North and East Syria. Far from dissuading women from continuing to fight, each attack on the people and on women drives forward the will to struggle, because it is clear that if we allow the fascist and patriarchal mentality of the Turkish state to advance, we are giving up living a free life in a democratic society.

In order to defend ourselves from this mentality, women must continue to build autonomous structures where they can organize, analyze society and themselves, discuss, grow and become leaders in all areas of life. We have seen until now, how the developments of the women's movement in North and East Syria in all the different fields have been crucial for the development of the whole revolution.

We see that the deeper the crisis of the system of capitalist modernity becomes, the stronger its attacks and desperation to survive. The assassination of Zehra, Hebûn, Emîna and Hevrîn should be a reason to increase the radical quality of forms and discourse, because it is clear that if we do not fight for life with all our tools, only death awaits us—both physically and as political subjects. We must enrich the struggle, adapt, and find creative solutions for the present moment, when the Covid-19 pandemic is making it difficult to organize as we used to.

We have to be able to transcend the regional level and generate alliances with women's movements around the world, since as we have seen, the femicidal practices of the Turkish state are but one example of the patriarchal behavior of all states around the world. We must continue in our struggle and meet the escalation of the violence of the Turkish State twofold with our commitment to organise and struggle, and our belief in the world we are building. We must follow the example of the women who have fallen martyr, and take up their path in building women's revolution .





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