

# huck

THE DEFIANCE ISSUE

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## FEMALE FIGHTERS

“We live in a world where women are dominated by men. We are here to take control of our own future.”

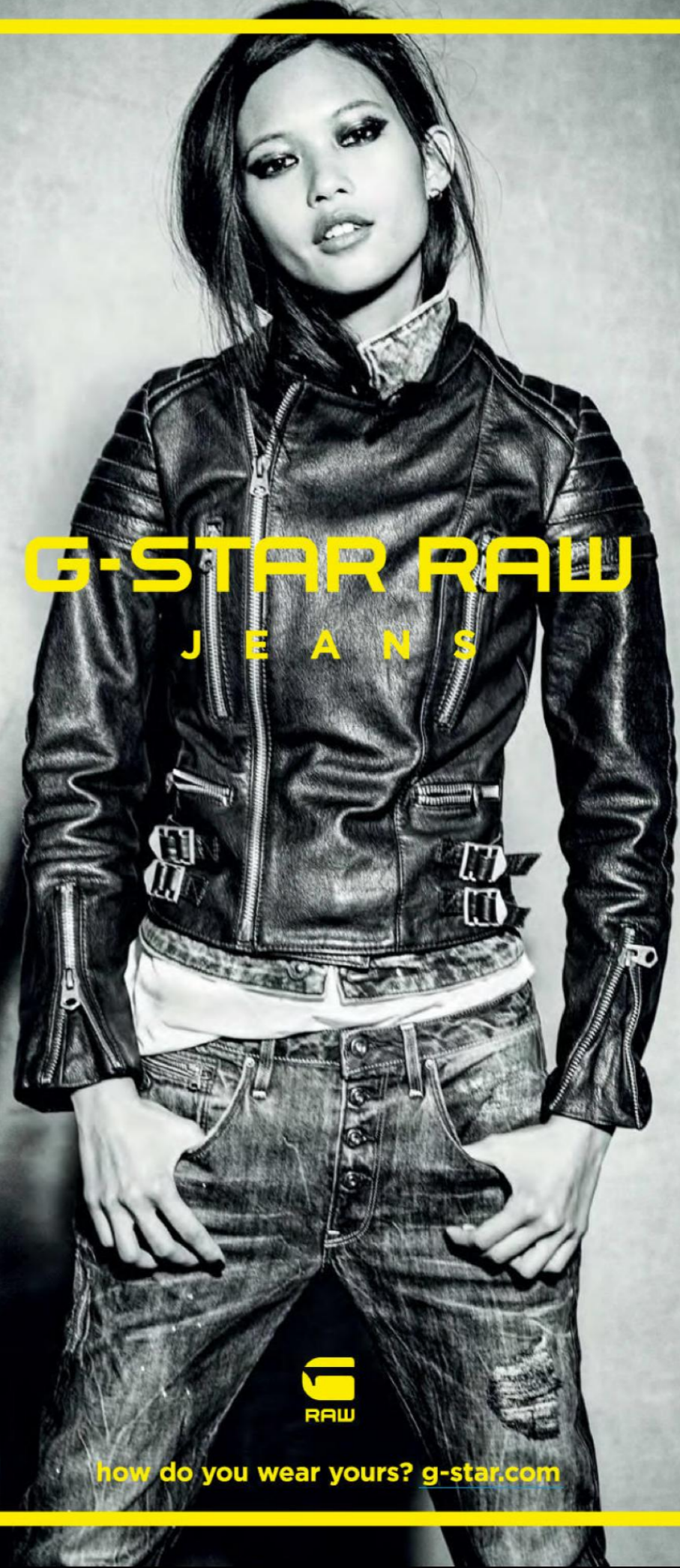


HENRY ROLLINS / IRAQ METAL / PUSSY RIOT / DAVID BOWIE / MONGOLIA SKATE



# G-STAR RAW

J E A N S



how do you wear yours? [g-star.com](http://g-star.com)

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**T**HERE'S A QUIET MOMENT in *Catcher in the Rye* where Holden Caulfield, everyone's favourite angst-ridden teen, becomes more than just a disaffected kid. Expelled for the fourth time, and cast off as a petulant cynic by all the "phonies" in his world, Holden is challenged by his sister to name one thing that he likes. "One thing? One thing I like?" says Holden. And all he can think of is a boy called James Castle - "a skinny little weak-looking guy, with wrists about as big as pencils" - who would rather jump out of a window than succumb to bullies, and ends up plummeting to his sudden death. James Castle is the true star of *Catcher in the Rye* - but Holden is our hero because he recognised that.

Defiance, like disobedience, is a prism that can distort the way we see things, depending on who's holding it up to the light. In some hands, defiance is a hostile act. In others, it's the sign of a questioning mind. Bullies can be cast as heroes - people "brave" enough to tow the line - and victims dismissed as troublemakers with the quickest sleight of hand. Right, wrong, good, bad, traitor or revolutionary - it's all a matter of perspective. Things look different from every corner of the room, depending on which side you stand.

But if, like Holden, you choose to see things for yourself - admiring the strength of the outlier instead of the safety of the pack - defiance becomes a label you wear with pride.

In this issue, we're talking defiance big and small - from freedom fighters and anti-Putin punks to feisty kids who'd rather push the plank than settle for something mediocre. People who defy conventions, and the expectations of others, to prove that there are endless ways to live your life.

So join us as we celebrate these voices of resistance - and all the phony-spotting Holden Caulfields of the world.

# Defiance



# ÖCALAN'S ANGELS



TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY NEWSHA TAVAKOLIAN / MAGNUM PHOTOS

**In eastern Syria, the war against ISIS is being waged by a feminist army. But what's driving young Kurdish women to take up arms on the frontlines, knowing they may never return?**

# A

DUSTY PICK-UP TRUCK drives along the road that passes through Serikani, leading to Al Qamishli, a once sleepy provincial town in eastern Syria. Its only cargo is an unfolded colourful scarf, casually thrown on the front seat. The truck passes by dozens of roadside billboards showing images of young female martyrs. "Without you there would be no us," reads one.

The scarf is all that remains of Cicek Derek, one of thousands of young female fighters who stand at the forefront of the battle against the Islamic State. Cicek, only seventeen, died fighting in Kobane some months ago. With her braided hair, military fatigues and courage to take on violent Islamic militants, women like her have become heroes in the West.

But it wasn't just the fight with the Islamic State that brought Cicek to the frontlines. Destined to become a farmer's wife she, like many other Kurdish girls in this dirt-poor corner of Syria, was lured into battle by a powerful ideology promising not only a free Kurdistan - a region and diaspora straddling parts of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran - but also gender equality and an end to the oppression of women. Their leader is Abdullah Öcalan, head of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged a war for Kurdish independence against Turkey since 1984, using armed forces in Iran, Iraq and Syria. And while Öcalan has been in a Turkish maximum security prison since 1999 - with the PKK labelled a terrorist organisation by some organisations and states, though notably not by the UN - thousands of his followers continue to be trained and schooled by his ideas. But what really distinguishes his principles from those of other groups in the Middle East is his carefully planned empowerment of women.

It is this lure of a new life that, since 2012, has attracted an estimated 15,000 women to join two offshoots of the Kurdistan Workers' Party - the

YPJ (Women's Defence Unit) or the YPG (People's Defence Forces). After the 2011 revolt, when Syrians demanded freedom from Assad's dictatorship, Kurdish groups like these took an independent stance believing that neither the opposition or the regime would reinstate their rights.

"I joined YPJ about seven months ago, because I was looking for something meaningful in my life and my leader [Öcalan] showed me the way and my role in society," says Torin Khairagi, eighteen (pictured on this issue's cover). "We live in a world where women are dominated by men. We are here to take control of our own future. When I am at the frontline, the thought of all the cruelty and injustice against women enrages me so much that I become extra powerful in combat."

A group of around twenty women in green overalls, who have just gotten back from the frontline in Kobane, are playing volleyball on the top of a green hill. Most of the girls, all members of the YPJ, are either in their teens or early twenties. Their faces are fresh and youthful, but their cold-stricken hands are not those of normal teenagers.

"I killed an ISIS fighter," says eighteen-year-old Zilan Orkesh. "At first it was difficult, but then I got used to the idea." Zilan describes how she broke into a loud cheer after the killing, then cupped her hands around her mouth to make the sound travel to other jihadis. "I wanted to let them all know that their worst nightmare had come true: their friend had been killed by a woman."

"The role of female fighters is much more important than the role of male fighters, because they are already free," says Farashin Mehriva, twenty-one. "But we are fighting for the freedom of all women in the world. ISIS and many other anti-women groups want to wipe women off the Earth. But YPJ won't allow that."



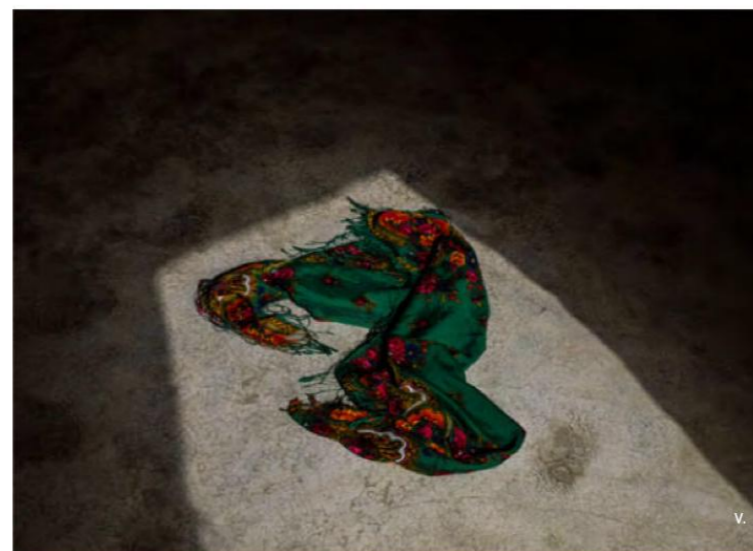
I. SUZDAR, TWENTY-ONE, JOINED YPJ FOUR YEARS AGO. "WHEN THE REVOLUTION HAPPENED IN ROJAVA, I KNEW THAT I WANTED TO HAVE A ROLE IN IT."

II. YPJ MEMBERS DURING DAILY TRAINING AT THEIR BASE IN SERIKANI.

III. BILLBOARDS IN QAMISHLU, ROJAVA, OF MARTYRS WHO DIED FIGHTING ISIS: "WITH YOU WE LIVE ON AND LIFE CONTINUES".

IV. YPJ SOLDIERS AT A CHECKPOINT WHERE THE IDENTITY OF PASSENGERS IS MONITORED TO PREVENT ISIS ENTERING.

V. CICEK DEREK WAS KILLED AT SEVENTEEN. THE ONLY BELONGING BROUGHT BACK TO HER FAMILY WAS THIS SCARF. HER BODY IS STILL IN KOBANE.



THE TRUCK CARRYING the scarf passes through one of several checkpoints controlled by women fighters. As soon as they notice the YPJ sign on the windshield, they allow the driver to pass without asking for his identification papers. The driver waves his hand as a sign of gratitude and keeps moving.

All the girls at Martyr Peyman's Base - as named after deceased fighter Viyan Peyman - joined the unit shortly after a now famous uprising in 2012, the Rojava Revolution, which not only led the Kurds to take matters into their own hands but also brought Syria's civil war to their hometowns. In January 2014, Kurdish groups, overseen by the Kurdish-run Democratic Union Party (PYD), declared autonomy over the Rojava region, abolishing the Assad government's restrictions on women's freedom - and cultural and religious expression - with a new constitution and grassroots democratic system.

Before joining the movement and turning into warriors, these young Kurdish fighters lived a typical rural life overshadowed by the Assad government and a masculine dominance in their communities. While the government prohibited them from having Kurdish names, or speaking Kurdish in public, at home they were told that politics "was no girl's business". ▶



VI. YPJ FIGHTERS DURING THEIR DAILY DRILLS IN SHILAN CAMP, IN THE BORDER REGION OF ANDIVAR, ROJAVA.

**“I wanted to let them all know that their worst nightmare had come true:**

**their friend had been killed by a woman.”**

It was the return of the first bodies of female martyrs, killed by the Islamic State, that drew many young Kurdish girls towards Öcalan’s ideas. Watching the burial of female fighters, while sitting at home with their parents and siblings, triggered a reaction that would change their lives forever.

“When I saw Martyr Deli on TV after ISIS beheaded her, I went to her burial ceremony the next day in Amuda,” says Saria Zilan. “I saw Deli’s mother sobbing madly. Right there I swore to myself to avenge her death. I joined YPJ the day after.”

Following the Rojava uprising, thousands of Kurdish men and women enlisted in military units. The commanders who trained the new members were veterans of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party - hardened fighters and staunch ideologues that had spent years fighting the Turkish state in their main base on Mount Qandil, in the North of Iraq. Arriving in Syria they brought a radical ideology, which they publicly advertised with the aim of bringing security and stability to Rojava. Soon, their membership soared.

“The majority of the members of our society are women, but the only roles they are allowed to play are those of homemakers and mothers,” says Suzdar, twenty-one. “But in this revolution, the YPJ women make up a whole army. And this is an opportunity for us women to show that we can play a different role.”

With the promise of gender equality - giving women the power they had been denied for hundreds of years - Öcalan’s ideas swept female citizens off their feet. The temptation of breaking free from a patriarchal society was so strong that, in a couple of years, rosy-cheeked rural girls developed into warriors so confident in their ways that they were ready to kill or be killed.

“Our women rush to fight ISIS, cheering with joy, as if they are going to a wedding party,” says Zin, a thirty-one-year-old female fighter, who had lived in Mount Qandil for years before she was transferred to an all-female security base in Derek, a town in northeastern Syria, sandwiched between Turkey and Iraq, that is today under Kurdish control. As she speaks about the attraction of Öcalan’s ideology, cigarette smoke from the ten fighters in the room gets thicker by the second. The walls covered by multiple pictures of martyrs fade beneath the fog.

Lying down next to Zin is Khamlin, a comrade who was shot in Kobane and almost lost a leg. She’s recuperating so that she can get back to fighting as soon as she can walk: “They opened fire and I got shot in my thigh. I was bleeding heavily. I told my comrades to just take my gun and leave. But they showed extreme bravery, staying with me during an intense face-to-face battle with the enemy, and captured fifteen of them. When we wanted ▶



VII.

to execute them, they were crying because they said they did not want to be killed by women, as that would keep them from entering heaven. I said to them, 'If you were killed by a man here, at the gate of your heaven there would have been a woman, who would then kill you again and send you to hell.' We lined all of them against a wall and shot them dead one by one."

Every woman has her own story. "My comrades and I attacked ISIS checkpoints in Talala," says Suzdar. "They were fighting back using all the heavy artillery they had. But we won the fight and seized the checkpoint and took the village under our own control. Before this, I thought that only my father and brother could protect me. But now as a YPJ woman, not only can I defend myself, but I can also protect others."

On the rooftops of the houses in Derek town, recently washed clothes dangle on the wires. Among them there is a tiny house, where Cicek used to live. Inside the house, Cicek's three sisters and her mother sit around her portrait. Above them on the wall, hangs a newly framed picture of Cicek and her mother with an inset of Öcalan in the background, along with her martyrdom certificate and a dead clock.

"I did not want my daughter to go to war," explains her mother, Nasiba, who says she has mixed feelings about her daughter's death, feeling a combination of contempt and pride. "She was only thirteen. She met a YPG member at her brother's house and he started brainwashing her. And before we knew it, she left home and went to Mount Qandil. She was seventeen when she was killed." She points to the colourful scarf in one corner of the room. "A couple of months ago a pick-up truck brought this from Kobane. The driver said that her body couldn't be brought back until Kobane is under control. We still haven't been able to bury her."

Cicek's older sister, Rojin, twenty, stares at the carpet as she scratches her nail polish with her fingers. "She was three years younger than me. We were always together. She was a very naïve and sensitive girl. But when, a few months ago, she came back from Qandil after four years, she was a different person. She was tough and confident. My mother told her, 'Please don't go back, stay with your mother.' She answered, 'I left to fight for all the mothers of the world. I cannot stay here.' She kept taking pictures in every corner of the house and with all of us, as if it was the last party of her life."

A power cut in Derek town casts a sudden darkness. The only lights to be seen are those of passing cars. Among them is an old truck that drives by slowly, carrying several megaphones that blast out revolutionary songs, which grab the attention of young boys and girls hanging around the neighbourhood idly. One by one they join the convoy that follows behind the truck. Carrying Öcalan flags, the Institute for PYD Young Revolutionaries in Derek have organised this public call for new members.

In a dark corner, away from the gathering crowd, Cicek's sister stands with a blank stare. She's listening to young revolutionaries chant along with the songs blasted out on the streets; songs about Kobane and martyrdom that urge survivors to rise and continue the path in which the martyrs' blood has been shed.

At the back of the truck is a mourning caravan, devoted to the memory of the women who have become martyrs after their deaths. Long after the songs are finished, and everyone else has left, Rojin turns to leave the trailer, lost in deep thought



VIII.



X.



XI.

VII. WOUNDED YPJ MEMBERS LEAVE THE ASAYESH ALL-WOMEN SECURITY BASE IN DEREK.

VIII. A PORTRAIT OF CICEK AND HER MOTHER, WITH ÖCALAN FEATURED IN THE BACKGROUND, ON THE WALL OF CICEK'S FAMILY HOME.

IX. SARIA ZILAN, EIGHTEEN, FROM AMUDA. "I FOUGHT WITH ISIS IN SERIKANI. I CAPTURED ONE OF THEM AND WANTED TO KILL HIM, BUT MY COMRADES DID NOT LET ME DO SO. HE KEPT STARING AT THE GROUND AND WOULD NOT LOOK AT ME, BECAUSE HE SAID IT WAS FORBIDDEN BY HIS RELIGION TO LOOK AT A WOMAN."

X. YPJ MEMBERS SITTING IN AN ARMED VEHICLE IN SERIKANI.

XI. THE GRAVE OF A YOUNG FEMALE YPJ FIGHTER KILLED BY ISIS FORCES.



IX.



Links to the Paris attacks put Brussels at the centre of Europe's debate on immigration, throwing up some heated questions. Is a lack of integration leading to radicalised teens? But at Les Ursulines skatepark a refreshing counterpoint is thriving, as kids from all backgrounds skate together in peace.

It's a cold Friday morning in Brussels and Les Ursulines skatepark is empty. The park is a concrete island in the city centre that sits between the Gothic Notre Dame de la Chapelle church, a row of elegant Flemish-style brick buildings, and Brussels' busy rail corridor, which emerges from a tunnel below. The quiet is punctuated only by the odd police siren and the crunching of metal on metal as trains make their way out into the light. In the summer months, Ursulines is a lively meeting place for skaters across the city. But on this late November day, as the Belgian capital emerges from a security lockdown, the park and surrounding streets are near deserted.

After November's Paris terror attacks, in which 130 people died, attention quickly shifted to Brussels. Police raided properties suspected as ISIS strongholds and the city was put under a three-day lockdown. Army convoys cruised the streets, businesses closed, and police requested a social media blackout. It took days for the sombre atmosphere to lift.

IF YOU BELIEVE the reports that followed Paris, Brussels is the poster child for failed integration: a divided city of immigrant ghettos, no-go zones and Europe's "radicalisation capital". But when Italian photographer Giacomo Cosua arrived at Ursulines in Summer 2015, he found a very different story. Over six weeks, he shot and became close friends with a multicultural crew of skaters who trace their roots back to Morocco, Egypt, Spain, Bolivia, Thailand, Poland, Greece, Turkey and elsewhere. Music, skateboarding and a punk attitude to life proved stronger than the cultural or ethnic differences that drive others apart. "There's no common religion or language or background," Giacomo explains. "Nobody told them how to integrate, they just have skateboarding and the friendship that brings." ▶

TEXT ALEX KING  
PHOTOGRAPHY GIACOMO COSUA



FATIMA CHAKRI



At twenty-one, Fatima Chakri is the oldest of the group. She moved from Casablanca, Morocco, to Brussels three years ago to study landscape architecture. A girl with a hijab is still a rare sight at most skateparks. "I've lived in different areas of Brussels and in some places there is not a lot of mixing," she explains. "But here in the city centre there are people from different ethnicities - it's really multicultural. I think this diversity is what makes Brussels so unique."

The friends Fatima made at the skatepark helped her feel at home. "When I first came [to Ursulines] I was a bit skeptical because I saw groups," she explains. "When you don't know anyone you can feel like an outsider, but once you start talking with people, you learn a lot. Thanks to skateboarding, I was able to open my eyes about many different aspects of life, in particular how to integrate in this society."

But there can be divisions, as Fatima readily admits. "In four years of living here, I can assure you that I've had many experiences [of Islamophobia]. Skaters accept you, but outside this world, it can be really hard on an emotional level when you get negative comments or reactions. When you are deprived of your liberty, it's hard."

As if to illustrate her point, a kid in sunglasses sidles over to join the discussion. "The police always stop me because I look Arab," he says. "But I'm Brazilian - I'm not a terrorist."

Wearing the hijab has provoked controversy in Belgium and other European countries, but Fatima insists she's never questioned her choice. "I wear the veil because of my religious convictions," she explains. "It's a form of freedom for me and I think everyone should respect others' decisions. My religion is really important, it's my source of inner peace."

As a young Arab male, Fatima's friend Ramy Taher, nineteen, is perhaps the most likely to be profiled in a culture of rising fear. He is Moroccan-Egyptian and moved to Brussels from Barcelona two years ago.

"For me, it's the opposite [to Fatima]," he says. "My family are Muslim, but I say very openly that I'm atheist. When I go on the metro with a punk or metal band T-shirt, sometimes people will look at me and say, 'Oh, Satanist.' But do people fear me cause

I'm Arab? No. People just see me as a punk."

As we walk through the city centre, the heightened security is obvious. Soldiers with rifles patrol the streets, which are littered with armoured troop carriers. One spots us and I'm sure the gun turret is tracking us as we walk. The soldier shoots us a peace symbol, as we stare down the barrel of his gun, sending a mixed message of fear and reassurance. Street vendors set up a Christmas market while two photographers scramble to snap soldiers walking past the tacky fake-snow-covered huts. To say the atmosphere is surreal would be an understatement.

"Since the lockdown there has been a notable change," Fatima explains. "My parents wouldn't let me go out, which is strange because they never forbid anything. But they were afraid. We all saw the news, we lived in terror for a few days. Eventually, I spoke with some skater friends and we needed to go out. You can't just stay inside your house doing nothing, this can't stop us from living."

As night falls, we watch trains wind between the tall glass towers, like glittering snakes, to and from the city's major international station. The great transport links that make Brussels the perfect place for the EU's headquarters are thought to be an asset for terrorist networks - and the city has long provided sanctuary to a host of sinister acronyms: the RAF (Red Army Faction), Basque separatists ETA, the IRA and now ISIS. Blame has been laid on a confusing, decentralised system of local government and a weak intelligence service. The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence claimed that Belgium provided more fighters to militant organisations in Syria and Iraq per capita than any Western European country in 2014.

MUCH OF THE ATTENTION on Brussels has focused on one area: Molenbeek - where the Paris attackers had their base. It's a predominantly Moroccan neighbourhood that suffers from higher rates of poverty, unemployment and exclusion, which have helped put it at centre of concerns about youth radicalisation. ▶



In a widely circulated *Politico* opinion piece, photographer Teun Voeten, a former resident, wrote: “When it became clear the attacks were planned in Molenbeek, I was not surprised. The real surprise? That Belgium expressed shock at the connection.” Voeten went on to describe his “struggles with Brussels’ most notorious neighbourhood,” which he found “increasingly intolerant” and “hardly multicultural”. After nine years, he decided to leave: “I could no longer stand to live in this despondent, destitute, fatalistic neighbourhood.”

Across the canal bridge from the city centre, Molenbeek has a noticeably different flavour. But for anyone who’s grown up in a multicultural city like Rome or London, signs in Arabic script and hijabbed mannequins are nothing out of the ordinary. In windows throughout the neighbourhood, there are the same posters: a black-and-white line drawing of the area’s skyline, with ‘M@LENBEEK’ written beneath.

Bie Van Craeynest knows Molenbeek well. As the coordinator at Chicago Youth Club, she works with kids from the surrounding area (the *croissant pauvre* - the impoverished canal zone). Two young men from Chicago’s spin-off boxing gym are currently in prison on terrorism offences. “I used to cheer them on during their boxing matches,” she says.

Over the last decade, Bie has watched the lure of radicalisation grow. “Before, we would lose kids to youth delinquency, drugs or just a lack of interest,” she says. “But now it’s another enemy: radicalisation. Sometimes youth organisations or sport clubs are the last fine thread that keeps people attached to mainstream

society. Once that’s cut, then basically anything is possible.”

While she’s deeply concerned by the risks for young people, she’s critical of the way Molenbeek has been caricatured as an intolerant dystopia. “Everyday life in Molenbeek is pretty chilled,” she says. “I live with and am surrounded by so many Muslim people and I haven’t changed my lifestyle.”

The young people at Chicago reflect the area’s ethnic and religious mix: it’s mainly Moroccan-Islamic, but increasingly kids with roots from sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America - often Evangelical Christians - walk through its doors. “People ask, ‘Are these youngsters integrating?’ They’re born here! Where would we integrate them in to? If you’re born here, you’re part of our society.”

Bie argues radicalisation is just the latest incarnation of decades of simmering youth discontent. “The spiritual and intellectual neglect of Brussels’ youth is really appalling,” she explains. “For thirty years there hasn’t been any investment in decent schooling, housing, sports infrastructure. If you ask the older kids, all they want is better schools. For me, [radicalisation is] just the form resistance has taken today - not just here but in other parts of the world too.”

In Brussels, tensions came to a head in the ‘90s when youths from the canal zone started riots, torched cars and fought police. That got politicians’ attention, but in recent years they’ve ignored the outcry from Chicago and others about underinvestment, racism, police violence, the rise of the far-right, crumbling infrastructure and growing Islamophobia. “Our current

neoliberal government has chosen instead to dismantle many of the social structures we’ve developed since WWII,” Bie says. “For me, it’s really important not to look at these young terrorists as monsters or aliens who live on another planet called Molenbeek, but as fruits of our society and the things that are not working.”

“These youngsters never learned how to build something,” Bie continues. “If you give young people the opportunity to shine in a positive way, it’s really rare that they don’t take that opportunity. Once you’ve built something - you don’t go back to destruction.”

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LIGHTS FROM THE business district glitter in the water as Fatima leads us along the canal to The Hangar: an old warehouse building that doubles as a DIY skatepark. We push past the teenagers smoking outside into a huge room that houses an old bus, two mini ramps, a fun box and some rails. People are dragging amps and a drum kit to a stage in the corner, but as they see Fatima enter, everyone runs to greet her with a typically Belgian kiss on the cheek.

Rumble Pit, the group’s band, begins to play. There’s Gabriel, who’s Belgian, on vocals; Thai brothers, Mulder and Bai, on guitar and bass; and Daniela, who’s Belgo-Bolivian, on drums. The others continue skating as the jam session gets underway and the roster changes constantly as people jump on stage, swapping boards for instruments and taking turns on the mic.

Daniela Legrain Sanabria, seventeen, was born in Brussels but spent most of her childhood in Bolivia. “I think different cultures here in Brussels live more or less in peace,” she says. “There are always problems because of all the clichés that we have, but you have to be careful with everything the media tells us. I don’t agree with people who say that we have to stop accepting immigrants. It seems stupid to blame immigrants because the terrorists are one person in thousands.”

The issue of integration, for European cities, is more pertinent today than ever. With tens of thousands of refugees arriving every month, fleeing war and seeking asylum, ‘integration’ is a word bandied about by politicians who stand on opposing sides of the immigration debate. But perhaps those voices focused on Molenbeek, who speak solely in defeatist tones, should take a leaf out of a book being written in their own city - a hopeful narrative of a group of teenage kids who don’t let borders stand in their way.

“Our group of skaters is multicultural and there is no prejudice,” Fatima explains. “If you’re a decent person, everyone will accept you the way you are. They don’t reduce you to your physical appearance. That’s not something you can find everywhere. Skaters do not pay attention to where you’re from, where you go or what you have in your pocket, but who you are deep down.”

Watch *Teenage Utopia: Skating Through the Lockdown*, a Huck film, at [huckmagazine.com](http://huckmagazine.com).





GENDER LOOKS BORING IN JUST PINK AND BLUE.  
THESE PEOPLE PUSH BEYOND THE BINARY.

# JACOB TOBIA

NEW YORK CITY

"NOTHING ABOUT ME IS WEIRD; SOCIETY MAKES ME WEIRD."

JACOB TOBIA HAS A STILETTO COLLECTION rivalling Ivanka Trump and facial hair most men would envy. But, this twenty-four-year old Southerner turned Brooklynite is neither masculine nor feminine. Jacob is genderqueer - or gender neutral - identifying as a person who sees beyond having only two gender options.

As an advocate, working for Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice by day and moonlighting as a writer and TV personality, Jacob pushes for non-conforming gender acceptance every waking moment. Whether it's penning a piece for *Huffington Post* asking why "dressing professionally" can't mean a clean-shaven man wearing pearls, or publicly criticising transgendered media-darling Caitlyn Jenner, Jacob is out to make equal rights for genderqueer people a reality no matter how uncomfortable it makes others. Forget Capitol Hill. Jacob knows that to see change these days is to empower the people, better known as followers and fans.

"As a child growing up in Raleigh, North Carolina, I never consciously knew that this was something that could be possible. When I was a kid, I identified more as feminine, something a boy in the conservative South is typically discouraged to do. Family, teachers and peers told me I couldn't act this way, playing with dolls and wearing make-up.

"I accepted that life would feel unnatural to me, adopting more traditionally masculine mannerisms and an outer-appearance just to have approving nods. It took a long time before I decided: no more. I can create a life that is natural for me.

"This shift started in college at Duke University. I remember painting my nails for the first time. I went to the Dollar General Store and bought one red polish and one metallic, framing it as an experiment to ease my anxiety. I realised I had painted them once before when I was about six. I must have buried that memory - that first instinct. I'm sure the shocked reaction from those around me was why.

"Through study and introspection, I realised gender isn't just two options. It's thousands of possibilities. It's not something that can be reduced to a single blue or pink

nursery. It's more of a spectrum than the way we're used to thinking about it. No one is completely masculine or feminine. Everyone is just human. I'm a natural part of how gender works and gender diversity. Nothing about me is weird; society makes me weird.

"Even my sexual and romantic attraction to other people doesn't apply to a binary framework. I'm uncomfortable saying that I am homosexual or even bisexual. I'm attracted to energy. I don't need someone to identify themselves, either. We can figure out what loving each other means together.

"I'm an active supporter of the prefix Mx. (pronounced "mix") as a gender-neutral honorific. The UK is much more progressive than the US in this way. They have government forms with the option to select Mx. But this progression is making waves across the pond. *The New York Times* published its first article addressing an interviewee as Mx. in November.

"It's about time that we have a non-specific form of Mr., Mrs. and Ms. It's a way to talk about trans-identity that gives it a direction but isn't based on a preconceived notion of manhood and womanhood. That way, people can't compare it to what they think I should be before meeting me. This doesn't just benefit

genderqueer people. It's for anyone else who wants to avoid prejudice, including women whose hot-button issue recently has been the highly publicised pay-gap.

"In America, in order to push an agenda, you need a name already. I have to achieve visibility first as an advocate in order to get people to listen. The magic happens in media first, especially via social media. That's why I'm focusing less on gaining attention politically and focusing more on storytelling. I was on MTV's *True Life* series, and I'm working on a book project now. I've got a long road ahead of me, but I know this is the path.

"Think about the case of Caitlyn Jenner. She is able to make major strides for the transgender community because of her notoriety as a former Olympian and member of the Kardashian clan.

But when Caitlyn came under fire for telling *TIME* magazine that people feel uncomfortable if you look like 'a man in a dress,' most people were thinking about it aesthetically. While rightfully aware of the hypocrisy and offensive ridicule of a woman's looks, they were completely missing the core issue.

"It's not about Caitlyn calling someone unattractive; I'm sure she misspoke anyway. To me, the comment touches me viscerally, which is why I had to speak out. Being perceived as 'a man in a dress' is a death sentence for my community walking home alone at night. We can't afford to say things that can hurt our own community, especially when forty-one per cent of us attempt suicide at some point in their lives in the US.

"So, please don't laud me for being brave. Work with me to build a world where I don't have to be." ▶

# ARABIA FELIX

KUWAIT

"IN SOME WAYS I FEEL LUCKY. IF I WERE BORN IN SAUDI ARABIA, THE DEATH PENALTY WOULD BE LOOMING."

ARABIA FELIX FIRST DONNED make-up aged ten in his bedroom, playing alone as children often do. Today, aged twenty-three, hundreds of thousands take joy in his artistry, through videos on YouTube and tutorials on drag enjoyed by adoring fans around the globe.

An online community may revere him, but at home in Kuwait, this life remains a closely guarded secret. Kuwaiti legislation punishes "imitating the appearance of a member of the opposite sex" with imprisonment or fines. His art, drag alter ego, and sexuality are all outlawed, and yet Arabia remains defiant. His make-up may embody traditional Arabian beauty, but it's also his armour - and he's preparing to fight.

"Here in Kuwait there is no gay community. Most gay people here don't even *believe* in being gay. Some see homosexuality as a disease, others say it's just a phase. For gay men in Kuwait, those who act on their sexual desire [are] associated with anal sex, prostitution and HIV. As if that's who we are.

"I have no problem with my sexuality, although I've never felt the need to come out the closet to my family. Sometimes I even limit how long I hang out with them, because the more I'm with them, the more I want to tell them about who I am, and to show them my work. The deep-rooted links between drag and queerness only became known to me later. To this day my parents have no clue.

"There were two famous actors in Kuwait during the '80s and '90s. Their drag was unattractive, unpolished and unfeminine, which is different from what I do. But they were popular; people loved them when they appeared on TV. Someone like me, can see that they may well have been in the closet, but they'd go out their way to say that LGBT people in Kuwait deserve what happens to them. They'd throw their own kind under the bus just to take the spotlight away.

"For me, drag is an art, a form that is inherently about gender, sexuality and freedom. I want to show both men and women can wear make-up, that whatever gender you are, art and self-expression should be cherished. Dressing up as a woman, and putting on make-up doesn't make you gay.

"To do what I love, where I am, I have to be political; it comes with the territory. Drag might now be an accepted art form in the West, but here it makes me an activist. Challenging ideas of masculinity and sexuality, and standing up for LGBT people in my country, is far from the norm.

"What scares me the most is not the people who'll threaten and want to hurt me, but how my own community might respond. And then there's my friends and family; our association could put them in danger.

"Last week I was doing a photoshoot with my best friend and I had painted my entire body red. I was dropping him home that night, and we got pulled over by the cops. The officer saw red paint on my nails, and immediately pulled us out the car; looking for make-up, wigs, anything.

"They interrogated us, looking to see if we shaved any parts of our body (if you shave your legs here, turns out you're gay). They found nothing, so one took our phones, searching through all the galleries. It was terrifying.

"Thank god I was lucky, because I reformatted my phone the day before. If I didn't, I wouldn't be speaking to you. I'd be in jail. If they found out about the make-up, YouTube, Instagram, and how I put myself out there? It's a punishable crime. In some ways I feel lucky. If I were born in Saudi Arabia, the death penalty would be looming.

"Once I went out in full drag here, to a convention. When I'm dressed as Arabia, I

feel powerful, like nobody could touch me. It's mostly because of the confidence that make-up and drag gives you, it's an armour that covers your entire body. That's what I love.

"If I were to go now to my mother, and show her pictures of me in drag, the first thing she will say is, 'Why are you doing this? What if you get caught? What if someone sees you?' Her concern would be for my safety and reputation, and I don't want her to worry. It's why I isolate them from what I do.

"My sisters are more open-minded, one of them knows that I'm gay and about my drag. She loves it. Sometimes I see the concern in her eyes, when I tell her I'm doing a video or a new photoshoot. I can hear and see her anguish. She worries for me, and for the entire family.

"At first I struggled with my religion. I'm Muslim, and was quite religious when I was young. There were things that didn't make sense, the way these religious rules and regulations were taught to me. I got told that gay people are sick, and that I would go to hell. It made no sense, as I believe in acceptance.

"I don't think my country will accept gay people until there's mass societal upheaval. The government is based on religion, and until that changes we'll always be outsiders. But things are changing, and fast. In Dubai, it's more open-minded right now, I've heard there are even underground drag shows where US drag queens can go and perform, and Middle-Eastern trans women are living there after transition.

"Getting online and using social media is definitely a way of changing how young people see gender and sexuality - exposing ideas that would otherwise be excluded from Kuwaiti life. I know soon I'll need to take the leap from the virtual world, and Arabia Felix will take to the physical, and maybe one day the streets." ▶



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