

Suruc, Oct 25 (AP) - Just over a year ago, Afshin Kobani was a teacher. Now, the Kurdish Syrian woman has traded the classroom for the front lines in the battle for Kobani, a town besieged by fighters from the Islamic State extremist group. The 28-year-old Kurdish fighter, who uses a nom de guerre, said she decided to join the fight in her hometown when she saw IS advances in Syria. "I lost many friends to this, and I decided there was a need to join up," said Kobani, who declined to reveal her birth name. "This is our land - our own - and if we don't do it, who else will?" Perched on the other side of the Turkish border, the Syrian town of Kobani has been under an intense assault by IS for more than a month. The town - surrounded on the east, south and west by IS - is being defended by Kurdish forces in Syria. Among those fighters are thousands of women, an unusual phenomenon in the Muslim world in which warfare is often associated with manhood. In April, Kurdish fighters created all-female combat units that have grown to include more than 10,000 women. These female fighters have played a major role in battles against IS, said Nasser Haj Mansour, a defense official in Syria's Kurdish region. The Kurdish women now find themselves battling militants preaching an extreme form of Islam dictating that women only leave the house if absolutely necessary. Earlier this month the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which monitors events in Syria, reported IS militants beheaded nine Kurdish fighters, including three women, captured in clashes near Turkish border. After more than a year of fighting, Kobani has risen through the ranks to become a commander of a mixed-gender unit. "We are just the same as men; there's no difference," she said. "We can do any type of job, including armed mobilization." There is nothing new about Kurdish women fighters. They have fought alongside men for years in a guerrilla war against Turkey, seeking an independent Kurdistan which would encompass parts of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. The campaign for Kurdish independence has been pursued mainly by leftist militant groups that championed gender equality, such as the Kurdistan Workers Party in Turkey. Suicide bombings have long been part of the Kurdish women fighters' battleground repertory. Early this month, Deilar Kanj Khamis, better known by her military name Arin Mirkan, blew herself up outside Kobani, killing 10 IS fighters, according to Kurdish forces. Haj Mansour, the Kurdish defense official, recounted that Kurdish fighters were forced to withdraw from a strategic hill south of the besieged town. Khamis stayed behind, attacking IS fighters with gunfire and grenades as they moved in. Surrounded, she detonated explosives strapped to her body. The Kurds then recaptured the position - but lost it again on Wednesday. In Kobani, Sheikh Ahmad Hamo's daughter Rukan signed up for the fight for Kurdish independence at the age of 18, and was quickly sent to Iraqi Kurdistan, in Iraq's north. That was eight years ago. For the first six years, she didn't contact her parents or her nine siblings. Her mother, Salwa Moussa, traveled to northern Iraq in March last year in the vain hope of seeing her daughter. Five months after that, she phoned home. "When she called, she had a mountain accent. Her mother didn't recognize her," said Hamo. "When we talked to her, we were happy, but we were also crying." Rukan Hamo's 23-year-old brother Ferman was killed fighting in Kobani this month. The sister didn't make it to the brother's funeral. Her parents don't know when, or if, they will see her again. In the dust-blown cemetery of the Turkish border town of Suruc, a corner has been laid out for the casualties among Syrian Kurds fighting in Kobani. Of more than 30 dead, 10 are women. "It's not strange that women are fighting," said Wahida Kushta, an elderly woman who recently helped prepare the body of a young female fighter, 20-year-old Hanim Dabaan, for burial. "There is no <https://twitter.com/ElenaBecdifference> between a lion and a lioness."

