

Destruction and Memory. House of Martyrs.



One of the organisations to rise from the Kurdish underground is the House of Martyrs, which serves the dual function of providing social support to the families of those killed in the fighting, and constructing a physical manifestation of memory.

The interior courtyard is wreathed with flowerpots and outside, a humble garden hosts families engaged in conversation. Deeper inside one of the corridors, a sports hall-sized space is covered with pictures of the so-called martyrs, those who died for the revolution and in the years of conflict in northern Syria.

This design, whether built to facilitate healing or simply provide a respite from the chaotic streets outside, mirrors the approach already defined in the US by the Department of Veterans Affairs. In 2018, it approved its “first-ever set of Healing Environment Design Guidelines” for its facilities across the US, according to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel newspaper. Based on the guidelines, a healing space should “integrate splashing water and plants and spill outside into the grounds with paths, trees, birds and gardens,” much like the layout of the House of Martyrs.

A physical embodiment of memory, the martyrs’ centre is carefully guarded from the outside, as the building would make a symbolic target for terror attacks by ISIS, which have again become more prevalent in the region following the Turkish invasion in October 2019.



Aref Bali, the head of the establishment, sits down for a talk in yet another room covered with pictures of the deceased. “[The centre has] operated in secret since 2007,” he says, as “at that time some political prisoners were killed by the [Assad] regime, and it was important for families to have this centre.”

The institution was established “properly” in 2012, after the revolution, because “there were daily fights, martyrdoms and ceremonies at that time.” Rojava’s communes served another function by each providing “two to four members to do routine visits to the martyrs’ families,” says Bali.

Now, in parallel with the changes taking place across Rojava’s governing structures, “the board for families of martyrs was formed” at the top level, according to Bali.

As the number of the dead increased, the Martyrs’ Centre built a cemetery on the outskirts of Kobane with a large ceremonial parade ground. The cemetery thus became a “symbol of struggle,” says Bali, where the killed fighters are buried with full military honours. Kobane’s “struggle is evidenced by the graveyard,” he says, adding that the cemetery is aimed at the future generations.

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