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Ethnic cleansing charged as Kurds move on Islamic State town in Syria

By Mousab Alhamadee and Roy Gutman

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After receiving a crush of 13,000 Syrian refugees in less than a week, Turkey on Saturday closed a key border crossing to Syria and complained that a combined U.S.-Kurdish offensive against the Islamic State was driving Arabs and Turkmens out of Syria.

With Kurdish forces reported closing on Islamic State-controlled Tal Abyad, the Syrian town across from Akcakale, Turkey, the apparently successful offensive against the extremists has laid bare the clash of interests that has vexed the U.S.-led campaign against the Islamic State in Syria.

On Thursday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in one of first public appearances since his party lost its majority in parliamentary elections, accused “the West” of killing Arabs and Turkmens in Syria, and replacing them with Kurdish militia affiliated with the banned Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK by its initials in Kurdish.

“The West, which has shot Arabs and Turkmens, is unfortunately placing the PYD and PKK in lieu of them,” Erdogan said.

The PYD, or Democratic Union Party, is a Syrian Kurdish political party affiliated with the PKK, which has been declared a terrorist group by both Turkey and the United States. The

PYD's armed wing, the People's Protection Unit, or YPG, is credited, along with an intensive U.S. bombing campaign, with holding off the Islamic State at Kobani after a four-month siege.

Arabs and Turkmen who've fled Syria use more caustic terms to condemn the Kurdish offensive, which also is backed by U.S. airstrikes. They charge that YPG militias have stolen their homes and livestock, burned their personal documents and claimed the land as theirs.

"They forced us from our village and said to us 'this is Rojava'," the term the YPG uses to describe a swath of territory it claims across northern Syria, said Jomah Ahmed, 35, a member of the al Baggara tribe. He arrived from the village of al Fwaida with dozens of members of his extended family before Turkey closed the border.

"They said 'Go to the al Badiya desert, go to Tadmur, where you belong'." Tadmur, captured last month by the Islamic State, is more than 100 miles to the southeast of Tal Abyad.

Tal Abyad won fame in recent months as one of the most important crossing between Turkey and the Islamic State, which is also referred to as ISIL and ISIS.

It was at Tal Abyad that Hayat Boumedienne, the wife of the shooter who killed four Jews in a Paris grocery in January, disappeared after fleeing France. It was also the place where the Islamic State delivered 46 Turkish diplomats and three Iraqi employees that its fighters had taken hostage during the capture of Mosul in Iraq a year ago.

Akcakale (pronounced ak-CHAK-ah-lee) and the surrounding area has become a key transit point for those seeking to join the Islamic State, despite claims by Turkish officials that they are trying to stanch the flow.

But the push on Tal Abyad by Kurdish forces with U.S. assistance is exacerbating long held ethnic resentments. Kurdish residents of northern Syria have long accused the government in Damascus of taking their land to accommodate Arab settlers. As long as two years ago, Kurdish activists who took power when the government of President Bashar Assad withdrew vowed to push the Arabs out.

Non-Kurdish Syrians say that campaign is now under way. They say that the Kurds are trying to create an autonomous state in northern Syria and that the United States is helping.

"They told us 'We have been here 20,000 years. You came only recently from the desert. Go back to your desert,'" said Ibrahim al Khider, an Arab prince who leads a tribe of 16,000 in Deir el Zour province.

Equally bitter, Tarik Sulo, the spokesman for the Syrian Turkmen community in northern Syria, said the U.S. bombing support and the YPG ground forces "are changing the demography of the area in an ethnic cleansing." He said Turkmen, an ethnic Turkish minority in Syria, "are losing lands where they have been living for centuries."

The YPG captured two Turkmen villages on Thursday out of 20 with a total population of more than 40,000. On Saturday, its forces were reported to have advanced to the outskirts of Tal Abyad.

During an interview in Ankara, Sulo showed a McClatchy special correspondent a photograph now circulating on social media that shows uniformed YPG fighters forcing an Arab captive to kiss the YPG flag.

The Syrian Opposition Coalition, the exile grouping the United States once recognized as the leading anti-Assad political force, also has accused the YPG of “violations against civilians” in Syria’s Hasaka province. It said these included systematic displacement of civilians, compulsory military service for young residents, and kidnapping civilians “to spread terror among the population.”

The criticism by Arabs, Turkmen and the Syrian opposition points to the tactical nature of the U.S.-directed offensive in Syria. The U.S. has rejected working with moderate anti-Assad rebels and has begun training Syrians for a new force whose principal mission would be confronting the Islamic State.

In the meantime, it has found the YPG to be a willing partner whose success in fighting off the Islamic State at Kobani has become a model of sorts for combat operations in northeastern Syria.

But the U.S.-YPG alliance has triggered harsh criticism from those who say it shows little regard for the politics and history of the region or the sensitivities of NATO ally Turkey, which objected last year when the United States dropped weapons and ammunition to YPG fighters at Kobani.

It also has led to allegations that, with no U.S. troops on the ground to monitor developments, the YPG, which has its own political agenda, has been using the offensive to push an anti-Arab campaign. Local residents have accused the YPG of intentionally misleading American commanders about conditions at the Syrian town of Bir Mahalli in late April. A U.S. airstrike there may have killed more than 50 civilians, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights.

The U.S. Central Command is looking into the allegations that the U.S. is unintentionally furthering ethnic cleansing.

“As a matter of course, we neither condone any form of ethnic cleansing nor would we willingly support any such activity,” Air Force Col. Patrick Ryder, a Centcom spokesman, said Friday. “But we take any such allegations seriously and will look into them.”

He said U.S. and other airstrikes in Syria are intended to help operations in Iraq. He called them “shaping operations, meant to degrade ISIL’s resources and effectiveness, limit their freedom of maneuver and buy Iraqi forces additional time and space to regenerate their combat capability.”

Shrfan Darwish, a YPG spokesman in Kobani, denied that the militia was conducting “ethnic cleansing.” He said Kurds in Kobani gave a warm reception to Arabs who’d fled Tal Abyad after the Islamic State captured the town a year ago.

Serdar Mullah Darwish, a Kurdish journalist in Hasaka province who is not related to Shrfan, told McClatchy that Kurdish forces fighting the Islamic State had been joined by some moderate rebels and some Arab tribal forces.

But he said most residents had left the area because of the fighting and implied that Arabs who stayed in Tal Abyad had supported the Islamic State.

“When Kurds fled the city in the summer of 2013, no one said this was the ethnic cleansing of the Kurds, despite the fact that all the fighters in the Islamic State were Arabs,” he said.

But refugees who’ve fled to mainly Arab Akcakale just across the border from Tal Abyad tell a different story.

Ahmed, the al Baggara tribal member from al Fwaida, said Kurdish forces arrested and beat him for two days and invited him to join them in the battle against the Islamic State. When he refused, they expelled him and his family from his village.

But the Salman al Fayyad family, a 14-member extended family, was allowed to stay when they agreed to join the YPG, he said. If the border were open, tens of thousands more would leave, said Abdulhamid al Jasem, 25, Ahmed’s cousin.

The situation is made more complex by the acknowledgment that some residents took part in Islamic State activities when their villages were captured.

“Many of our sons got involved with the Islamic State,” said Abu Khaled, 63, who arrived at Akcakale with his five sons and several dozen grandchildren. “Some joined Quran sessions, and others took up weapons.”

A top rebel military official said that if the YPG expulsions continue – some estimates put the number at 40,000 in Hasaka alone – they will become a recruiting tool for Islamic State.

“Until now we don’t know what the coalition wants. Does it intend to fight ISIS or empower ISIS?” said Gen. Ahmed Berri, the deputy chief of staff of moderate rebel forces, using an alternative name of the Islamic State.