Fighting erupts between Western-backed "rebels" and Syrian Kurds

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Fierce fighting has erupted between Western-backed insurgents and Kurds in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo amid growing threats of a Turkish military intervention.

The fighting began on Friday after several hundred armed opponents of the Syrian government, dressed in black and wearing black bandanas inscribed with Islamist slogans, moved into the predominantly Kurdish neighborhood of Ashrafiya.

The incursion triggered a demonstration by Kurdish residents of the district, who marched on the positions taken by the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA), demanding that its fighters leave the neighborhood. According to reports, the FSA fighters fired on the demonstrators, killing five and wounding 10 more.

The fighting that followed claimed at least 30 lives, including those of 22 combatants, before the Kurds reasserted control over the district. According to the reports, five Kurdish fighters died in the clashes, with the rest of the fatalities consisting of the Islamist insurgents and civilians.

In the course of the fighting, the Islamist forces kidnapped at least 120 Kurdish civilians in an attempt to force the area to submit to their occupation.

Ashrafiya has become a key objective of the Western-backed forces seeking to topple the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. It is on the main route leading from the northern outskirts of the city to its center and occupies the high ground of Aleppo, Syria's commercial capital.

In the face of a growing challenge from the so-called rebels, increasingly dominated by Islamists and foreign fighters armed and funded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, with Washington's collaboration, the Assad regime had relinquished control of Ashrafiya as well as of predominantly Kurdish areas in northern Syria.

In these areas, the Kurdish Democratic Union, or PYD, together with its armed wing, the People's Defense Units (YPG), have largely assumed control, carving out semi-autonomous territories.

The PYD issued a statement after the fighting, declaring, "We have chosen to remain neutral, and we will not take sides in a war that will only bring suffering and destruction to our country."

The statement blamed the bloodshed on the Islamist militias. "They started to shoot at the crowds gathered at the [FSA] checkpoints," it said. "They were protesting, calling on the armed groups to leave residential neighborhoods."

Kurds make up approximately 15 percent of Syria's 32 million people. Within Aleppo province alone, there are at least 100,000. While hostile to the Assad regime, which has long subjected the Kurdish population to political repression, the Syrian Kurds have become increasingly antagonized by the Western-backed force, who are seen as pursuing an increasingly sectarian and Sunni Islamist agenda, driven in significant measure by foreign fighters and large amounts of Saudi and Qatari arms and aid.

The Syrian PYD is also closely aligned with the PKK, or Kurdish Workers Party, which has waged a three-decade-long guerrilla war against the government of Turkey, which for its part is providing sanctuary and substantial aid to the anti-Assad insurgents.

Turkey's Islamist government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has taken the lead in organizing a military buildup against Syria, massing tanks and warplanes on the two countries' border and carrying out artillery barrages against Syrian targets in retaliation for any stray round that crosses the Turkish border.

The Turkish buildup followed an October 3 incident

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in which shells from Syria struck a residential district in the Turkish border town of Akcakale, killing five civilians. In response, the Turkish parliament passed an act granting war powers to Erdogan, while NATO convened an emergency foreign ministers' meeting to threaten Syria with military retaliation

The latest of the Turkish artillery strikes came on Monday after a shell fired from Syrian territory fell near the village of Besaslan in southern Hatay province without causing any casualties.

Just days before, a visiting top US military commander frankly acknowledged that there is no evidence that the shells landing in Turkey were being fired by Syrian government forces.

"We are not sure if these shells are from the Syrian army, from rebels who want to get Turkey involved in the issue or from the PKK [Kurdish Workers' Party]," Lt. Gen. Mark Hertling, the commander of US Army Europe, told the privately owned NTV Turkish television channel.

Of these three possibilities, it is clear that the Assad government has the least interest in drawing Turkey directly into the conflict, while the Western-backed forces have the most.

In any case, for Turkey's ruling establishment, the shells coming across the Syrian border are of considerably less concern than the implications of Syria's descent into civil war for the internal struggle between Turkish government forces and Kurdish separatists, which has grown more intense than at any time in recent years.

The conflict has been significantly affected by the Western-stoked civil war in Syria, whose regime had previously collaborated with the Turkish government in repressing the PKK. Similarly, the increasingly regional conflict provoked by the Syrian events has alienated Ankara from both the Iranian and Iraqi regimes, both of which have substantial Kurdish populations.

The Turkish state-run Anatolia news agency reported on Monday that at least one police officer had been killed Sunday in five simultaneous assaults launched on police security posts in Sirnak province, which borders on Syria. On the same day, Turkish troops backed by warplanes carried out an assault on Kurdish positions in the Beytussebap district of Sirnak. According to the Anatolia account, the assault claimed the lives of eight Kurdish fighters.

Tensions within Turkey have been heightened dramatically by a hunger strike on the part of some 700 Kurdish political prisoners scattered among 50 Turkish jails and prisons. Dozens of these prisoners, who include accused PKK fighters as well as members of Kurdish political parties, former mayors and other elected officials, lawyers, women and students, have been participating in what they call an "indefinite and irreversible hunger strike" for nearly 50 days.

Turkish prison authorities have reportedly retaliated against the hunger strikers with physical abuse, solitary confinement and depravation of water.

The strikers have issued demands that the government release PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan from solitary confinement, end restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language and respect the democratic rights of the Kurdish people.

Those who began the strike in September are feared in danger of dying, exhibiting extreme weight loss and symptoms such as bleeding, difficulty in swallowing, labored breathing and diarrhea.

On the eve of the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha, Turkey's justice minister Sadullah Ergin called on the Kurdish prisoners to halt the strike, but made no mention of their demands. The government clearly fears that if these prisoners begin dying in Turkish prisons, it could trigger mass upheavals within the Kurdish population.

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