

In contested Syrian town, neighbors bridge divide

by [Dominique Soguel](#) in the [September 2, 2015](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) It was the first day of the holy month of Ramadan when two former neighbors reunited in Akcakale, a Turkish border town. Both were hot, thirsty, and impatient to return to Syria once the border gate reopened.

The two men and their families had been displaced by forces fighting for control of their town, Tel Abyad, in northern Syria. Fadil Omar Rasul, who is ethnically Kurdish, fled in 2013 when Sunni Arab jihadists took over the town. Abu Ibrahim Barho, who is Arab, returned home. But earlier in June he too crossed into Turkey as Kurdish-led fighters backed by U.S. air strikes drove out the self-styled Islamic State.

Now they were both going home.

“When I saw them again my joy was from here to the sky,” Rasul said. His longtime neighbor was equally moved. “We hugged and cried and cried,” Barho said.

The story of these two neighbors speaks to the collapse of central authority in much of Syria and uncertainty over what, if anything, will replace it. The capture of Tel Abyad this summer forced some 23,000 civilians to flee over the border into Turkey.

“In the same way that IS came and expelled Kurds, the Kurds have expelled Arabs,” said Abu Malik, an Arabic teacher from the village of Ayn Aroos and a former district councilor who stayed in Tel Abyad during the Kurdish offensive. “They consider most Arabs to be IS. If you pass a checkpoint and happen to be fasting or sport the slightest of beards, they accuse you of being IS.”

Locals complain of a stringent curfew in Tel Abyad that allows them to circulate for only a couple of hours.

In July 2013, when IS established its domination over Tel Abyad, tensions also ran high. In the predominantly Kurdish neighborhood of Al-Leil, the two families packed up and left town. While the Arab family said they simply fled the fighting, the Kurdish family say they were evicted from their home by IS militants wearing black.

Barho and his family returned days after the violence subsided, once IS had consolidated control, and watched as refugees from other areas and two families of foreign fighters occupied vacated Kurdish homes. Barho's family didn't like the jihadists, but as conservative Arab Muslims, they didn't feel threatened.

Not so with Rasul, the Kurdish neighbor. He left his wife with her parents in Kobane and spent the next two years roving and tilling farmland in Turkey. Amid all the upheaval, the neighbors stayed in close touch.

"Many of our Arab friends deleted our phone numbers after IS kicked out the Kurds from Tel Abyad, but not Mr. Barho," said Rasul, swinging an arm around his old friend. "We used to live wall to wall. For us, this business of Kurds against Arabs is just politics. Between neighbors it doesn't matter."

The arrival of the YPG, the dominant Syrian Kurdish faction, in Tel Abyad means that Rasul and his wife could go back to check on their home. But while he's delighted that IS has been driven out, he reserves judgment on what comes next.

"I am a Kurd but I still have to decide whether I like PKK rule in Tel Abyad," he said, referring to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, a group banned in Turkey. "If we don't like the atmosphere, we will leave again."

Before the 2011 uprising against Syria's dictatorship turned into all-out war, the population of Tel Abyad district was about 200,000, the majority of them Arabs, according to official data at the time. Kurds were the second largest ethnic group with 20,000, followed by 15,000 Turkmen and 385 Armenians. Some Arab groups in the area maintained good ties with Kurdish people, while others gravitated toward IS as its power expanded.

Now the question is whether Syrian Arabs are paying the price for their perceived sympathies in the aftermath of the jihadists' retreat.

"The Arabs who have returned to Tel Abyad now are no more than 1,000 to 1,500," said Abu Yazzen, another former councilman in Tel Abyad.

Barho and Rasul were back in their houses this summer, among hundreds of other families testing the waters in Tel Abyad. "We were very well received," said Fatma, Barho's daughter, speaking by phone. "No one harassed us for being Arabs, but the security situation is not stable yet so we are just staying indoors."

Others complain that the Arab rebel factions that helped the YPG take the town have no presence there. “We had hoped to see the flag of the Syrian revolution fly over Tel Abyad, but no,” said Abu Salim, an Arab resident. “The international coalition is helping Kurds partition Syria. In our eyes, both the PKK and IS are terrorist groups and occupiers.”

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