



Executive Summary

Jaysh Khalid Bin al-Walid (KBW) was formed on 21 May 2016 by three small salafi-jihadi groups in the Yarmouk Basin, roughly 30km northwest of Dar'a City. Though the group's roots are in the moderate Syrian Armed Opposition, today KBW is the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Daesh) in all but name. The ties in leadership and media production between KBW and Daesh betray the two groups' close working relationship, despite Daesh not having declared the Yarmouk Basin an official *wilaya* (province). Nevertheless, KBW has expanded Daesh's influence in the Syrian South, particularly after its successful 20 February offensive against rival salafi-jihadi and moderate Opposition groups. Subsequent Opposition attempts to dislodge KBW from the Yarmouk Basin have failed, and the area has nominally become a stagnant front. However, intensified Coalition airstrikes targeting KBW leadership may have drastically curtailed KBW's effectiveness as a fighting force. Moreover, the vacuum created following the continued decapitation of KBW's leadership has led to heightened tension within the organization that could result in infighting and splintering. Nevertheless, following the liberation of Mosul, the coming liberation of Raqqa City, and the Regime's incipient campaign to retake Dayr al-Zawr, Daesh may look to increase its activity along new fronts, such as KBW's foothold in Dar'a Province, which would pose considerable security concerns to Israel, Jordan, and the fragile de-escalation zone between the opposition and Regime.

Introduction

On 21 May 2016, the salafi-jihadi armed groups Harakat Muthanna al-Islamiya (HMI), the Yarmouk Martyrs' Brigade (YMB), and remnants of Jaysh al-Jihad united to form Jaysh Khalid Bin al-Walid (KBW), the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant's (Daesh) affiliate in southwestern Syria's Dar'a Province.¹ KBW's constituent groups had been members of the Syrian Opposition in various iterations since 2012, but did not begin clashing with Opposition actors such as Al-Qa'ida's Syrian affiliate, the al-Nusra Front (ANF), until late 2014. Moreover, in HMI's case, future KBW members actively contributed to the Opposition's Southern Front Coalition as late as January 2016. Nevertheless, as HMI and YMB's affinity

¹ Khalid Ibn al-Walid (d. 642) was a companion of the Prophet Muhammad and a historic general who led the early Muslim community's wars of conquest against the Byzantine and Sassanid Empires. He is most prominently known for his decisive victory over the Byzantines at the Battle of Yarmouk in 636, fought near KBW's contemporary area of control.

for Daesh became increasingly clear, the two groups began openly clashing with rival salafi-jihadi and other Opposition groups in the south, namely ANF and Ahrar al-Sham (AAS).

Today, KBW essentially serves as Daesh's unofficial *wilaya* (province) in the Yarmouk Basin.² KBW espouses a similar salafi-jihadi doctrine, adopts similar administrative facilities, such as shari'a courts and the Hisba morality police, and uses the same media tropes found in Daesh productions, such as Daesh *nasheeds* (acapella hymns) and ritualized executions. Furthermore, Daesh has featured KBW-oriented productions on its newswire (A'maq News Agency) and its affiliated media distributors, namely al-Battar Media Foundation. Though Daesh has not declared the Yarmouk Basin an official *wilaya*, its close working relationship with KBW clearly reflects an embedded influence and presence in southwestern Syria, nestled along the Israeli and Jordanian borders.

KBW's 20 February offensive

KBW captured international attention when it launched a well-coordinated offensive against Syrian Opposition groups in the southwestern province of Dar'a on 20 February 2017. As the operation began, KBW forces attacked the towns of Sahem al-Jawlan, Tasil, Hit, and Tal al-Jumu'a using waves of suicide vehicle-borne IEDs (SVBIEDS), the activation of sleeper cells, and more conventional fighting units. Relying heavily on surprise tactics and its particularly effective use of sleeper cells, KBW managed to successfully sow chaos in the ranks of the Opposition.

When the dust settled, KBW had managed to capture a number of towns, most notably Sahim al-Jawlan, Tasil, A'dwan, and Tal al-Jumu'a, nearly doubling the group's previous territorial holdings. AAS fighters did manage to recapture their Dar'a stronghold of Hit Village on 21 February; however, KBW then expanded its control to Jibleen and al-Mazir'a on 24 February. Furthermore, in addition to its territorial gains, the 20 February offensive proved to be a propaganda and messaging boon for KBW. Daesh's newswire, A'maq News Agency, covered the developments in Dar'a and claimed that KBW had killed more than a hundred Opposition fighters, with pro-Daesh channels publishing two photo essays featuring some of these casualties.³ Additionally, KBW executed a number of civilians, including a local council leader and relatives of Opposition military leaders, as well as Opposition fighters wounded in the Dar'a City offensive who were recovering in medical centers in the Yarmouk Basin.

Given the extent of its sleeper cell networks and the seamless coordination of its multiple assaults, KBW had clearly been laying the groundwork for its attack for some time. Additionally, the KBW offensive's timing and proximity to the Opposition's Operation Death Not Disgrace cannot be ignored, as the Opposition had allocated considerable men and materiel to Dar'a City for its 12 February 2017 offensive against the Regime, which gave KBW a distinct tactical advantage (See: *Death Not Disgrace: JFS Messaging Opportunities*

2 The Yarmouk Basin, named after the Yarmouk River which flows through the basin, is an agricultural region falling along the Syrian-Israeli-Jordanian borders. Nestled in southwestern tip of Syria's Dar'a Province, the Yarmouk Basin shares a western border with Israel along the Golan Heights and a southern border with Jordan along the Yarmouk River.

3 Al-A'maq Media Outlet, 22 February – Jaysh Khalid Bin al-Walid claims of over 100 FSA casualties

in Dar'a spot report).⁴ More importantly, however, reporting suggests that KBW had recently acquired new leadership from Daesh itself, affirming the parent group's deep involvement in the offensive. Reportedly, these new leaders carried orders to immediately gather fighters and manufacture SVBIEDs in preparation for an immediate surprise offensive.



Figure 1 : KBW's territorial holdings in the Yarmouk Basin on 19 February (L) and 20 February (R), via Syria Live Map

KBW's area of control

As mentioned above, KBW nearly doubled its holdings after the 20 February offensive and now controls roughly 1,200km² of mostly rural, sparsely-populated territory in southwestern Dar'a along the Syrian-Jordanian border to the south and the Golan Heights to the west. However, prior to KBW's founding, its component groups, YMB, HMI, and Jaysh al-Jihad, had been expelled from all but a few large population centers. As such, most of the towns under its control contain fewer than 4,000 inhabitants. The largest town currently under KBW's control is Tasil, with a pre-war population of almost 16,000.

Local support for KBW is generally weak, and what support does exist is partially explained by tribal and family relations, with some families having aligned themselves with KBW or one of its predecessors earlier in the conflict. In addition to these tribal ties, through which several prominent Yarmouk Valley families contribute a large percentage of fighters, KBW also contains a small number of foreign fighters from Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries who serve in high-profile positions within the organization.

Aftermath of KBW's 20 February offensive

Since KBW's 20 February offensive, FSA and other Opposition forces have repeatedly attempted to dislodge the Daesh affiliate. Between the end of February and early September, KBW repulsed at least eight separate FSA and Opposition assaults on Tasil and other towns controlled by KBW. Additionally, KBW has launched attacks on Hit and other Opposition positions over the course of the past few months. Despite these skirmishes, the Yarmouk Basin has largely become a stagnant front without significant territorial change. However, following the 7 July agreement between Russia, the United States, and Jordan

4 On 12 February, the Solid Foundation (Al-Bunyan al-Marsus) Operations Room, comprising 35 opposition groups in Dar'a Province, announced the start of its offensive, dubbed "Death Not Disgrace", which aimed to capture the al-Manshiya neighborhood in southwest Dar'a City. The Solid Foundation Operations Room made territorial gains over the first week of fighting but failed to achieve its ultimate objective of capturing al-Manshiya. While Death Not Disgrace did result in modest military successes for the opposition, its primary effects were reinvigorating ANF's credibility and role in Dar'a Province and providing KBW with an opportunity to flank the opposition from the northwest while its resources were centered in Dar'a City to the southeast.

to establish a de-escalation zone in Dar'a Province between the Regime and Opposition forces, the latter formed a new military umbrella group on 16 August comprising 11 FSA units, called the South Coalition (*tahaluf al-janub*).⁵ Unsurprisingly, Daesh, and KBW by extension, is not included in the internationally-brokered de-escalation of Dar'a Province. As such, the South Coalition may retrain all of its guns on KBW, now that it is no longer engaged with Regime forces in the region. The South Coalition did launch a modest attack on 28 August targeting KBW positions in al-Jalin, which KBW repulsed with a series of counter-attacks and ambushes.⁶ Nevertheless, the real impact of the South Coalition's formation has not yet been felt, as neither the South Coalition nor KBW has attempted a significant operation for months.

KBW Leadership Attrition

It is possible that KBW no longer has the organizational capacity to plan and conduct an operation on the same scale as its 20 February offensive, as over the past two months alone, three separate KBW emirs have been killed. On 29 June, Abu Hashem al-Rifa'i, who had only just replaced his recently-deceased predecessor, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (not to be confused with the Palestinian salafi-jihadi thinker of the same name), was killed in a suspected US airstrike on a KBW meeting place in al-Jalin.⁷ Then, on 17 August, al-Rifa'i's replacement Abu Tayyem Ankhal was killed in an airstrike targeting KBW's shari'a court in al-Shajara.⁸ According to activists, the group rapidly announced that Ankhal would be replaced by Nader al-Dhib, also known as Abu Ali al-Asir.⁹ Al-Dhib may have since been killed on 22 August in an IED attack targeting his convoy in Jamla Village.¹⁰

On the heels of successive assassinations, activists have reported increased tensions within KBW's leadership apparatus and signs of possible violent feuds erupting between rival factions within the organization. On 24 August, Dar'a News reported that relations between affiliates of KBW's original leader, the late Abu Muhammad al-Baridi, who went by the nickname "Uncle", and the group's new leadership have greatly deteriorated, and al-Baridi loyalists may have orchestrated the 22 August IED attack targeting al-Dhib.¹¹ The growing tension between KBW's old and new guards, the latter of which includes foreign fighters sent by Daesh to assume leadership positions, may reflect a changing relationship between KBW and Daesh-proper. As mentioned above, KBW and its predecessors have historically remained hyper-local fighting forces relying on tribal and family relations to gain support and spread influence. However, Daesh's transnational outlook and leadership may have upset these dynamics. Now that KBW's command structure has been devastated by

5 "New formation in south Syria under the name 'South Coalition'", Enab Baladi, 16 August 2017, <https://goo.gl/E3fSDU>.

6 "'Jaysh Khalid' ambushes halt opposition attack in west Dar'a", Enab Baladi, 28 August 2017, <https://goo.gl/smWa6L>.

7 "Leadership of IS-linked southern Syrian militia 'wiped out' in suspected US strike", The New Arab, 29 June 2017, <https://goo.gl/XDbpBe>.

8 "Strikes target Jaysh Khalid court west of Dar'a", Enab Baladi, 17 August 2017, <https://goo.gl/4BBV35>.

9 Facebook page, Syria True Tube, Accessed 24 August 2017, <https://goo.gl/ndP3yP>.

10 Twitter post, Media Speech Center, 22 August 2017, 5:26 PM, <https://goo.gl/Y2mJCC>.

11 Facebook page, Dar'a News, Accessed 24 August 2017, <https://goo.gl/RYY9xy>.

targeted airstrikes, the ensuing vacuum may result in increasingly violent power struggles for control of the group, diminishing KBW's capacity to conduct future offensives in the region.

KBW and Daesh Media Relationship

As mentioned above, official Daesh media branches, along with unofficial pro-Daesh media platforms, have regularly featured coverage of KBW since the group's formation in May 2016. For example, al-Battar Media Foundation, an unofficial media platform run by Daesh supporters, has released three KBW videos that mimic Daesh's provincial media outlet releases. The first of these, released on 3 September 2016, featured Daesh *nasheeds* (acapella hymns), a dramatic narrative structure, and other editing features imitating Daesh media productions. The second KBW video, released on 13 January 2017, also closely followed Daesh's administrative video themes. The third video, released on 22 March, showed KBW combat footage, spoils of war seized from the Opposition, and a number of executions of alleged Opposition and Jordanian "agents", all actions echoing behavior regularly glorified in Daesh videos. Notably, the only marked difference between the KBW releases and standard Daesh productions is the KBW watermark displayed in the video. Otherwise, KBW fighters used the same mannerisms and terminology as Daesh, such as referring to opposition fighters as *Sahwat Ridda*.¹²

In addition to these releases, which could all be seen as Daesh provincial media videos in their release, structure, and production, al-Battar has also released a series of KBW written essays. These feature excerpts from the works of influential jihadi scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and Abdul-Rahman Bin Hassan (d. 1869), and cite these scholars' teachings as religious precedents and justification for waging jihad against the pronounced enemies of Islam. Furthermore, official Daesh channels have also released several KBW-branded photo essays featuring KBW Hisba policemen inspecting shops as well as the other photo essays of FSA casualties from previous clashes.



Figure 2 : A KBW video featuring its Hisba morality police in Tasil executing a man accused of idolatry

In addition to Daesh's support for KBW-branded outputs, in February 2017 the parent group also began releasing KBW productions under official Daesh branding. First and most innocuously, Daesh media outlet al-A'maq released short bulletins on KBW's combat exploits, like the 22 February blurb claiming that KBW had killed 104 FSA fighters over two days of fighting.¹³ Other videos show armed opposition fighters under attack by KBW forces,¹⁴ and two fighters from

¹² Sahwa/t ('Awakening' in English) refers to the Iraqi tribes of Anbar province who turned against Daesh's predecessor organization al-Qa'ida in Iraq, instead choosing to fight on behalf of US troops. Daesh has regularly branded FSA groups and other Sunni fighting forces as 'Sahwa'. 'Ridda' refers to apostasy.

¹³ Al-A'maq Media Outlet, 22 February – Claims of over 100 FSA casualties

¹⁴ Al-A'maq Media Outlet, 23 February - <https://goo.gl/57R8so>.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Dar'a Province (HTS, formerly al-Nusra Front) defecting to Daesh.¹⁵ Another featurette released on 26 February showed KBW capably administering a public bakery in Tasil, one of the main population centers captured by KBW after the 20 February offensive.¹⁶

While KBW maintains its own branding for the majority of releases, the fact that any releases still use Daesh branding serves as an indicator of the undeniable relationship between the two organizations and an increasing correspondence between KBW's leadership and Daesh's non-combat administration. However, despite the evident ties between KBW and Daesh, the former has escaped the same level of notoriety and attention the international community has directed towards Daesh. Tellingly, although KBW was black-listed by the United Nations Security Council on 20 July 2017 and has been the target of regular Coalition airstrikes,¹⁷ the Daesh affiliate is still able to maintain and operate clearly-branded Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram accounts. By comparison, individual Daesh Telegram accounts rarely remain active for more than a few days, suggesting that KBW is still flying somewhat under the radar.

Conclusion

On 20 February 2017, Daesh's affiliate in southwestern Dar'a Province, KBW, clearly demonstrated its ability to conduct large-scale, complex, and well-coordinated military offensives against its former allies in the Syrian Opposition. Through its well-timed assaults and effective use of sleeper cells established throughout opposition areas, KBW was able to nearly double its territory in one fell swoop. In addition to showcasing KBW's military and organizational capabilities, the 20 February offensive also established an ongoing trend of KBW exposés via Daesh media channels, which further highlight the entrenched relationship between the two groups. However, KBW has not made considerable gains since its successful February operations, and, after the formation of the FSA's new South Coalition, the International Coalition's decapitation of KBW leadership, and the reported infighting between the group's veteran members and its newer, Daesh-aligned leadership, KBW's capacity to seize more territory may be limited. Nevertheless, as Daesh continues losing ground in eastern Syria and across Iraq, it may look to its other spheres of influence as possible fallback locations. Daesh's potential to regroup in the Yarmouk Basin, coupled with the international community's relative disinterest in KBW and the reality in the south, make southwestern Dar'a Province a strong contender for Daesh's future base from which it could continue its operations and re-affirm its threat to the region.



Figure 3 : A prime example of al-Amaq bulletins concerning KBW, in this case claiming 104 opposition fighters killed in the offensive

15 Reddit, 3 March 2017 - <https://goo.gl/nAS45s>.

16 Al-Amaq Media Outlet, 26 February (Bakery resuming operation on Telegram)

17 "Jaysh Khalid Ibn al Waleed put on sanctions blacklist", United Nations Security Council, 20 July 2017, <https://goo.gl/XV8pLw>.

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