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Locals Concerned following Syrian Security Services' Release of IS-affiliated Militants

More than 20 militants and security personnel of the Islamic State/IS, including combat engineers and perpetrators of assassinations, were released

Introduction:

The Syrian security services released several of Khalid ibn al-Walid Army-affiliated militants, which pledged allegiance to the Islamic State Organization/IS that is also known by the Arabic acronym Daesh in the Yarmouk Basin area, Daraa province, between January and August 2019. Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ, for its part, documented the names of 20 released militants and security personnel, among whom are combat engineers and others responsible for former assassinations, who are famed for committing ghastly violations of the civilians' rights, residing in the Yarmouk Basin, Syria's south, during IS control of the area in the past few years.

According to the testimonies, STJ managed to obtain, both IS militants and security personnel were let out based on a release order issued by Syrian government-affiliated security services. Local activists, however, reported the release of more than 50 militants in Syria's south, who have been detained by these security services after the Syrian government¹ took over their areas of control in western Daraa, for the Yarmouk Basin, held by the IS-affiliated Khalid ibn al-Walid Army since late 2014, was the last of southern Syria's strongholds to be regained by the Syrian regular forces in August 2018.

Activists and civilians based in Syria's south said that the release of several former IS militants is likely done to meet the Syrian government's premeditated intention to tighten its grip on Daraa province, through pushing the former IS militants to conducting attacks for the benefit of the Syrian government, which are to help it rid of its opponents by claiming the presence of sleeper cells in the province, for several civilians based in the western parts of Daraa stressed that the Syrian government has lately set up numerous checkpoints and summoned massive military reinforcements and tanks into the surroundings of Dael, Ibta, Tafas and Shaikh Sa'ad towns, in addition to the city of Nawa.

On the same note, a significant part of the Yarmouk Basin's population is seriously concerned over the decisions providing for the release of IS/ Khalid ibn al-Walid Army militants, especially the residents who have been subjected to gross violations by IS and who, during the interview, expressed extreme fear of these fighters' return to their areas.

Affiliation to IS, STJ's field researcher said, has become one of the most common charges that any person in Syria's south can be easily accused of, especially because those facing the charges of cooperating with IS are getting released with no bother.

¹In July 2018, the Syrian regular forces took over Daraa province, under a settlement deal between them and the Syrian opposition's armed groups. The deal was implemented in two stages under the auspice of the Russian Military Police. The first stage covered the northern rural parts of the province and the Lajat; the second stage, nonetheless, aimed at its remaining parts and the Yarmouk Basin, which the Syrian regular forces controlled in early August 2018.

In a former report, STJ had shed a light on several of the practices and violations committed by the IS/Khalid ibn al-Walid Army against civilians in the Yarmouk Basin during its reign in the past few years². It also published another report, documenting the death of several civilians in the explosion of mines left by the IS/Khalid ibn al-Walid Army in the Yarmouk Basin following the Syrian regular forces' control of the area.³

1. Briefing on Khalid ibn al-Walid Army:

In May 2016, the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army was founded in Syria's south, particularly in the Yarmouk Basin—western Daraa, on the border triangle with Jordan and the occupied Golan — comprising a military coalition of Salafist Islamic groups, with its nucleus being the Liwa Shuhadaa al-Yarmouk/ Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade, deployed in the area of the Yarmouk River valley, near the Jordanian borders. The Army was formed through the integration of three of the most prominent armed groups in the Yarmouk Basin area, which are:

1. **The Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade:** It is one of the most powerful armed groups in the Yarmouk Basin, formed in late 2012, when it rose to fame for kidnapping 20 Philippiian staffers of the United Nations Peace Keeping Forces in March 2013⁴. The armed group pledged allegiance to the IS in April 2015, however, covertly.

Starting in late 2014, the Brigade embarked on violent clashes with the al-Nusra Front/al-Qaeda while the armed groups of the Southern Front, affiliated with the Syrian armed opposition, preserved a neutral position of the military action. The case was thus until the Harakat al-Muthanna al-Islamiyah/Islamic al-Muthanna Movement declared its unison with the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade in March 2016, when it fought beside the latter, and they together took over the town of Tasil, western rural Daraa, kicking all the troops of the opposition armed groups out of it.

2. **The Islamic Muthanna Movement:** The group was formed in 2012, becoming one of the key military powers in Syria's south, especially with its spread in various areas in the south, such as Masaken Jaleen, Sahem el-Golan and Tasil in Daraa, in addition to Saida el-Gholan, Ghadeer al-Bustan, al-Rafeed, Naba Alsakher and Bariqa in al-Quniatra, consisting of about 1000-1500 personnel.

² "ISIS Imposes Siege on Al-Hayt Town in Order to Capture it Following Expanding its Control on the Western Daraa Countryside," STJ. October 22, 2017. Last visited: September 6, 2019. <https://stj-sy.org/en/279/>.

³ "Landmines Kill Many and Threaten the Lives of Thousands in Hawd al-Yarmouk Area, Daraa," STJ. December 12, 2018. Last visited: September 6, 2019. <https://stj-sy.org/en/1074/>.

⁴ For further information, refer to the following link:

<https://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARACAE9B2FH520130510>.

3. **Jaysh al-Jihad/al-Jihad Army:** The formation of the group was announced on January 31, 2015, including several brigades — Saraya al-Jihad, Jund al-Islam/Islam's Soldiers, Abu Baseer Group, Zou al-Nourain Brigade, Harakat Mujahidi al-Sham/al-Sham Jihadist Movement, Jamaat Shabab Ahl al-Salaf and al-Bunyan al-Marsous. Al-Nusra Front/al-Qaeda managed to annihilate this armed group in northern rural al-Quniatra in February 2015 with a resolution passed by the Dar al-Adel Court in Houran on the charges of belonging to the IS. The remaining troops of the army, Harakat Mujahidi al-Sham, sought refuge in the areas held by the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade and joined its ranks during the clashes in western rural Daraa.

It was a bloody fight that the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army embarked on against the armed groups of the Southern Front/armed opposition in the area since 2014 up to August 2018, when IS was repelled after several of the armed opposition groups joined forces, a body that came to be called the allied forces, with the Syrian regular forces in July 2018, seeking to combat and put an end to IS in the area.

2. Serious Violations Committed against the Yarmouk Basins' Residents:

Since 2014, the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army/IS in Syria's south has committed several war crimes and breaches of human rights against the locals, leaving the people behind with too many pains to deal with in the towns where it operated in western Daraa, such as al-Shajrah, Jamlah, Ain Thakar, al-Qusayer, Adwan, Tasil, Nafa'ah, Sahem el-Golan, Jaleen, Muzayraa, Shabraq, Bait Arah, Kuyeh and Maria. During its reign, which lasted for years, the number of people held captive by IS amounted to 25 thousand civilians, whom it prevented from leaving their areas extending over 240 square kilometers. For years, these people were forced to endure all forms of suffering caused by the Khalid ibn al-Walid/IS' practices in the Yarmouk Basin.

Almost no family was spared the practices of IS, which varied between execution, beheading, cutting hands, stoning, lashing and confiscation of properties, not to mention the enforcement of the IS' general regulations, including the restrictions imposed on men and women's dress code, for shaving was prevented, beards and mustaches⁵ were to be kept as Sunnah dictates. Men, in addition to this, were to keep their pants⁶ short to a certain extent while banned from smoking, among many other practices covered by the IS-approved regulations.

⁵ The mustache is to be trimmed, and the beard is to be kept long.

⁶ All men were forced to shorten the length of their pants so that the rim of the pants does not get in touch with anything that would affect its cleanness.

In August 2018, the Syrian regular forces took over the Yarmouk Basin area, from where the IS/Khalid ibn al-Walid Army withdrew quickly, a few days into the offensive, which the Syrian regular forces and the forces, affiliated with opposition armed groups —which concluded a settlement deal with the Syrian government and came to be known as the allied forces — have embarked on against the area backed by the Russian Air Force. The IS declared surrender, losing its enclave, and succumbed to an undisclosed deal with the Syrian government. In addition to this, about 430 militants, personnel of the IS/Khalid ibn al-Walid Army, out of the no less than 1200 militants which make the total number of the IS fighters, along with their families, were to be transported to the eastern rural parts of Suwaida and the desert in eastern rural Homs, according to a settlement deal, in return for the release of the remaining abductees, held captive by the IS in rural Suwaida — 36 men, 20 women and 16 child abductees⁷. About 350 other militants, however, sought the area's villages and its valleys as a hiding place while the rest escaped to Syria's north, Idlib in particular after they blended with the fighters who refused the settlement deal.

In the aftermath of its control of the Yarmouk Basin, the Syrian government worked on returning all the military barracks into the area, neighboring the occupied Golan. The Syrian Arab Army/SAA-affiliated 4th Division, consisting of former militants of the opposition armed groups, managed to impose order through erecting checkpoints in the full range of the area.

3. Dozens of the IS/Khalid ibn al-Walid Army-affiliated Militants Released:

Between January and August 2019, dozens of the IS/Khalid ibn al-Walid Army, both militants and security personnel, were released, for local activists have estimated the number of the fighters let out with more than 50 militants and security personnel. The residents of the Yarmouk Basin area were taken aback by the return of the fighters who have been arrested earlier on. The released, for their part, did not give any details on what they had gone through nor the reason for what they have lived. The parents of a number of the arrested fighters mentioned that their sons are to be released soon after they are transferred to the Adra Central Prison by the Air Force Intelligence Service.

Speaking about the population, a significant number of the Yarmouk Basin's residents are yet afraid to speak their mind concerning the release of former militants of the IS/Khalid ibn al-Walid Army. The local activists, on their turn, believe that this fear has a natural source to it and that it is only legitimate, for the terror created by the Army and its association with the

⁷ "Another Agreement Concludes to Move ISIS Elements to the North Countryside of al-Sweida in Exchange for the Release of the Kidnapped", STJ. August 3, 2018. Last visited: September 7, 2019. <https://stj-sy.org/en/657/>.

Syrian government being scandalized are sufficient to make the people cautious about voicing their opinion. Under the pseudonym Mohammad H., a local activist justified this state of fear with the following:

“It became evident to the people, who were placed under the mercy of IS in western Daraa, that the release orders providing for letting out fighters of the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army, detained by the [Syrian] government-affiliated security services, make a relationship between the Army and these services more likely. Accordingly, the concern of recruiting them once again, especially after many princes and sharia scholars, as well as their affiliation with the Syrian security forces were overtly exposed following the Army’s control of the Yarmouk Basin area. Of these persons are 'Ibrahim Youness', dubbed 'Abu Khattab', who was one of IS security personnel while working for the regime’s security services, 'Assad al-Na’asan', another security personnel, who worked for both IS and the regime-affiliated military security service, and 'Marwan Mohammad Abdulfatah Zain el-Abdeen', known as 'Abu al-Muthanna', who functioned as al-Hissbah⁸ Prince while working for the regime at the same time, in addition to 'Abdullah Faraj', from al-Qunaitra, who has been working for the Syrian intelligence services since he pledged allegiance to the IS in 2016. These and others, commanders and sharia scholars, are famed for their crimes.”

STJ managed to document the names of several former militants and security personnel of the IS/Khalid ibn al-Walid Army, who have been released by the Syrian government since the beginning of 2019 up to August. This information have been cross-referenced by several local sources in Daraa province such as Tajamou Ahrar Houran/Assembly of Houran Liberals, in addition to the testimonies of residents in the Yarmouk Basin, who managed to identify the released fighters. The sources said that the majority of these militants joined the ranks of the IS in mid-2015 and have all committed ghastly violations of the civilians’ rights; they also added that the Syrian regular forces, upon controlling the Yarmouk Basin, have given a blind eye to many militants and did not even arrest them, who are now in the Yarmouk Basin and al-Qunaitra.

The following is a list of the names of the IS/Khalid ibn al-Walid Army-affiliated militants and security personnel, who have been released:

1. Marwan al-Sudi from the Abu Hartain town, an IS militant.
2. Hussian Ali al-Mousa from the Musairteh town, an IS militant.
3. Muhanah Yahiya al-Braidi from the Jamlah town, an IS militant.
4. Ali Ahmad al-Braidi from the Jamlah town, an IS militant.
5. Abdullah Ahmad Abu Nouh from the Jamlah town, an IS militant.

⁸ Al-Hissbah is a governing service under which the rulings of Sharia are enforced.

6. Mohammad Ahmad al-Nabulsi from the Nafa'ah town, an IS sharia scholar and one of the persons who supervised the forced collection of Zakat/alms from the area's residents according to the Tajamou Ahrar Houran.
7. Muwafaq Hamad Mohammad from the Jamlah town, an IS militant.
8. Ali Ahmad al-Thiyab from the Jamlah town, an IS militant.
9. Mustafa al-Jamlawi from al-Qusayr town, an IS militant.
10. Bassem Mahmoud Mohammad from the Jamlah town, an IS militant.
11. Ashraf Mohammad al-Braidi from the Jamlah town, an IS combat engineer.
12. Omar Hayel al-Refai from the Nassib town, an IS security personnel.
13. Youssef al-Fankhour from the Ain Thakar town, an IS militant.
14. Ahmad al-Bezim from the Jamlah town, an IS militant and an armored vehicle driver.
15. Wael Mohammad al-Jamlawi from the al-Qusayr town, an IS militant.
16. Ahmad al-Massri from the Nafa'ah town, an IS militant.
17. Ammar Mohammad al-Braidi from the Jbab town, an IS security personnel.
18. Mohammad Abdulsatar al-Braidi from the Jbab town, an IS security personnel.
19. Bilal Zain el-Abdeen from the Tasil town, an IS militant.
20. Dawoud al-Saleh from the al-Rafeed town, al-Qunaitra, one of the IS personnel in command of the assassinations conducted in southern rural al-Qunaitra.
21. Mohammad Muhana al-Braidi from the Jamlah town, one of the IS top security personnel, who supervised the attacks on the posts of the Syrian opposition's armed groups according to Tajamou Ahrar Houran.
22. Nourallah al-Ghouri from the al-Rafeed town, al-Qunaitra, an official of the al-Hissbah service. He has been lately transferred from the Palestine Branch 235 to the Adra Central Prison and will soon be released, according to information obtained by STJ from local sources.

4. Ill Intentions Feared:

Based on the meetings and interviews conducted by STJ's field researcher with civilians from several areas in Daraa, as to fathom their opinion concerning the release of former militants and security personnel of the IS/Khalid ibn al-Walid Army, the researcher sensed an increasing concern among the people of Syria's south, who fear the recycling of the IS by the Syrian government and revitalizing it again, creating an allegation to initiate a military and security campaign in Daraa's areas, over which the government is trying to have full control. In the past few months, the province has been bearing witness to terrifying number of assassinations, which, according to the researcher, have reached their peak in August 2019, for the assassinations, which targeted reconciliation mediators, troops of the Syrian regular forces, officers, directors of municipalities, in addition to persons considered as agents for Iran and Hezbollah in Syria's south, have taken a toll on about 29 persons; the perpetrators' identity is, however, unknown yet.

In Daraa province, the Syrian government has so far failed to establish full control under the settlement deal⁹, and light weapons are yet carried up by the opposition's armed groups in areas such as Tafas, Daraa al-Balad, Tal Shihab, Nawa and As-Sanamayn, where pro-regime locals have, in the past few months, started calling for an urgent military and security campaign so that the Syrian government have ultimate power over the area and withdraw arms from it, limiting their ownership to the Syrian regular forces.¹⁰

Activists and civilians, in the areas subjected to the settlement deal, considered that the release of several IS militants highlights the ill intention that the Syrian government withholds for the area, seeking to tighten its grip on the Daraa province through triggering former IS militants to execute attacks in the interest of the Syrian government, which will help the latter eliminate its opponents on the claims of having IS sleeper cells in the province. In western Daraa, civilians have pointed out that the Syrian government has lately set up several checkpoints and summoned massive military reinforcements and tanks into the surroundings of Dael, Ibtta, Tafas and Shaikh Sa'ad towns, in addition to the city of Nawa.

What aggravated the civilians' concerns the most was the news released by media outlets on July 27, 2019, reporting that the IS has adopted an attack on a checkpoint of the Syrian regular forces on the road between Melihit al-Atash town and the city of al-Hrak, north-eastern Daraa, causing the death of six soldiers, among whom the militant called Abu Malik al-Ansari blew himself up via an explosive belt.¹¹

5. Yarmouk Basin's Residents Gravely Concerned:

STJ interviewed three victims in the Yarmouk Basin area, who suffered violations by the IS/Khalid ibn al-Walid Army's militants, during its reign, who all expressed worries about the release order of these militants and their return to the area. STJ preferred not to disclose the true identity of the witnesses for security reasons.

Faeqa M., a 45 years old mother of a number of children and a resident of the Yarmouk Basin, west of Daraa, lost her husband after militants of the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army arrested him

⁹ Administratively speaking, the Syrian government is in control of the full range of Daraa's areas; nonetheless, there are a few areas in Daraa that are yet out of the government's security and military dominion, where Syrian regular forces-affiliated troops and security personnel are banned from entering several towns— Muzayrib, west of Daraa, for instance.

¹⁰ On August 17, 2019, the locals of the As-Sanamayn city went on the streets, demanding that security presence be reinforced and the Syrian government have full control over the city and the province. On the protest, they expressed their rejection of the actions aimed at sabotage and the assassinations that targeted people from the city. They also stressed the necessity of withdrawing the illegal weapons and limiting carrying up arms to the army and the security forces.

¹¹ "IS Adopts Suicide Attack on Syrian Regime Post in Daraa", Arta FM. July 28, 2019. Last visited: September 8, 2019. <http://www.artafm.com/news/17381>.

while he herded his cattle in an area considered a frontline with the Southern Front, affiliated with the Syrian armed opposition. The arrest was, then, backed by a death sentence, for her husband was accused of Redah/apostasy, which is a charge targeting all those who deal or cooperate with the militants of the armed opposition or the Syrian regular forces. She recounted to STJ the following:

“The sentence against my husband was passed in no time. He was executed by a firing squad. I tried to save him; I sought them in an attempt to gain their sympathy, hoping that they might show him some mercy and release him. But, alas, they assured me that my husband was dealing with apostates. They stressed the idea by showing me a chat between my husband and a relative of his, who joined an armed group under the Free Army. The chat, included my husband saying: ‘I am herding my sheep; none of them is here,’ with an indication to IS militants. This brief chat was his crime and based on which they sentenced him to death. What worsened my tragedy was the mutilation of my little child’s leg in the explosion of a landmine left by the IS/Khalid ibn al-Walid Army while he was herding the cattle in late 2017.”

In the interview, Faeqa expressed deep fear over the release of the militants of the IS/Khalid ibn al-Walid Army from the detention facilities of the Syrian security services. She said:

“I wish that they never return. I have lost everything; my husband; my cattle and my car. They have even confiscated two pieces of gold which I kept. When I demanded that I get my husband’s belongings back, the Sharia prince told me that their ownership belongs to the Islamic State now. They have robbed us of everything; I pray to God that they never return to our areas.”

Mahmoud F., a resident of the Nawa city and one of the people who survived the practices of the IS/Khalid ibn al-Walid’s militants, as he was arrested while on a visit to a relative in the Tasil village late 2017 to be released at a later date. He told STJ the following:

“They arrested me because I had not committed myself to the demanded length of the pants; they also found a pack of smokes in my pocket. During the investigation, I was so scared of them that I admitted working for a relief organization. I wish I never said that, for they detained me for three months and subjected me to istitaba/repentance-seeking lessons. To be released, I also paid a fine of 25 thousand Syrian pounds and even had to pledge to refrain from working for relief and other organizations, which they referred to as the blasphemous entities.”

Mahmoud also expressed his opinion concerning the release of several of the IS/Khalid ibn al-Walid Army militants in Syria’s south, saying:

“If the IS is to come out once again, I shall call everyone to leave the country. They show no one mercy, and their goal has clarified. That is to create an allegation for the Syrian government to storm Daraa and subjugate it to its ultimate hegemony.”

Hamid B., a 22 years old eyewitness and a resident of the Hayt town, west of Daraa, has lost one of his relatives during the clashes between the IS and the opposition's armed groups. He narrated to STJ what happened back then:

“When the factions of the Free Army united with the government forces to combat IS in the Yarmouk Basin in July 2018, I bore witness to one of the incidents which serve as a proof for the extent of IS' affiliation with the Syrian Intelligence services. Militants from the Hayt town managed to hold captive a sharia prince called 'Abu al-Hareth'. He was arrested while trying to sneak out of the Yarmouk Basin with civilians after it was cordoned. One of the militants could identify him and immediately put his rifle to the IS militant's head. 'Abu al-Hareth', then, asked the militants to allow him to speak with the military operation's officer, affiliated with the regime. When they refused, he literally told them: 'I am on your side. I am an intelligence officer.' He also showed them a security document confirming what he said. The information he unfolded failed to mitigate the militants' anger, so he tried to lure them with money, offering them about \$30 thousand in return for his release. The militants, however, took the money and killed him. What I am trying to say is that our fears have grown limitless of the reformation of the IS in the area once again.”

It is important to mention that STJ's field researcher could not verify Hamid's testimony by matching it with that of another independent source.



History

Syrians for Truth and Justice was conceived during the participation of its co-founder in the Middle-East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program, who was driven by a will to contribute to Syria's future. Starting as a humble project to tell the stories of Syrians experiencing enforced disappearances and torture, it grew into an established organisation committed to unveiling human rights violations of all sorts.

Convinced that the diversity that has historically defined Syria is a wealth, our team of researchers and volunteers works with dedication at uncovering human rights violations committed in Syria, in order to promote inclusiveness and ensure that all Syrians are represented, and their rights fulfilled.

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