



Policy Analysis /
PolicyWatch 2872

Managing Washington's Flawed Partners in Eastern Syria

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Oct 17, 2017

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Brief Analysis

As rebel forces race the regime for control of the hydrocarbon-rich Deir al-Zour province, Washington needs to ensure that its proxies do not instigate new conflicts in liberated areas.

At a September 9 press conference, the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced the Jazeera Storm campaign, which aims to clear the Islamic State (IS) from the Euphrates and Khabur River Valleys in Deir al-Zour province. The offensive has been spearheaded by the Deir al-Zour Military Council (DZMC), led by Abu Khawla al-Dayri (aka Ahmad Hamid al-Khubayl). A man of alleged ill repute, he illustrates the dilemma Washington faces in a war where many of the virtuous players have long disappeared, leaving more unscrupulous actors to fight for the province's hydrocarbon resources and other material gains.

THE DZMC'S DUBIOUS TRACK RECORD

On September 14, a Pentagon spokesman noted that the Kurdish-led SDF had captured more than 44,000 square kilometers of territory during the war and liberated 2.3 million people from IS control. As that effort reaches its denouement, however, Washington and the SDF have been forced to enlist dubious partners who are little more than mercenaries looking for a paycheck. Radicalization, attrition, and defections have left them with few good options. For example, former opposition leader Sheikh Nawaf al-Bashir joined up with regime forces this spring; like many fighters, he apparently decided that being on the winning side was more important than ideology.

Abu Khawla best illustrates Washington's recruitment dilemma. According to the news site DeirEzZor24, he was

frequently arrested for stealing motorcycles before 2011. After the war broke out, he allegedly started a gang that prowled the roads looking for drivers to rob. When moderate rebels besieged the 113th Brigade in late 2013, he reportedly delivered food supplies to regime forces and smuggled out soldiers. And when IS entered Deir al-Zour province in 2014, he pledged loyalty to the terrorist organization, later fleeing to Turkey after IS cadres executed his brother.

Abu Khawla was largely unknown before December 10, 2016, when Hawar News Agency ran a story on the DZMC. At the time, he said he had formed the group ten months prior "to gather the youth of the Deir al-Zour region and work to protect the people." He claimed he had 1,000 fighters.

Earlier this year, he began making public appearances at press conferences, military graduation ceremonies, and funeral services for SDF fighters, though he never announced that any groups joined the DZMC. On February 18, 500 DZMC fighters formally joined the SDF's "Euphrates Fury" campaign to liberate Raqqa. On March 24, Abu Khawla announced that his forces had captured villages in rural parts of northwestern Deir al-Zour, heralding the beginning of a provincial campaign. The SDF periodically announced the deaths of DZMC members fighting IS around al-Shadadi.

Little is known about the DZMC's constituent forces. Abu Khawla was the group's only representative to speak at the September 9 press conference, and he has been consistently vague about its members. On March 21, he claimed that "many sons of the tribes joined the DZMC" without naming any. On September 10, he again described his fighters as provincial clansmen, later claiming they belonged to the Jabbour, al-Ukaydat, al-Muamara and al-Mushahada tribes. Other fighters come from opposition groups linked to the "Elite Forces" umbrella brigade associated with Ahmed Jarba. On August 25, seven of its factions joined the DZMC, mainly members of the al-Bakkara Youth Gathering and Shuaytat. Abu Khawla now claims to have 4,000 fighters in total.

The DZMC's absorption of al-Bakkara members illustrates the fluidity of alliances and opportunism that have come to characterize much of the opposition. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the group was previously part of Ahrar al-Sham, a hardline Salafist organization that once allied with al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. To be sure, a few rotten apples will not spoil the SDF, which includes respected groups such as the Shammar tribe's Sanadid Forces and the Raqqa Revolutionaries Brigade. Yet Washington will have to monitor Abu Khawla's forces closely to ensure that they refrain from pillaging areas they "liberate."

GOALS OF THE CURRENT CAMPAIGN

According to the September 14 Pentagon press briefing, the Jazeera Storm campaign's goal is to capture the Khabur Valley east of Deir al-Zour, with the spokesman specifically noting that the DZMC would not enter the city. Yet Abu Khawla's forces took the industrial area on Deir al-Zour's northeastern outskirts on September 10, then captured the electricity plant and sugar factory around September 16. On September 21, he declared, "We have prepared plans to liberate the eastern banks all the way to the Iraqi-Syrian border."

For now, the campaign has proceeded along two axes. The first began at Abu Fas about sixteen miles west of Shadadi, where the DZMC came down the Khabur River Valley. The second began at Abu Khashab about twenty-five miles north of al-Tabni. By September 19, Abu Khawla said his forces had advanced about 70 miles toward the Euphrates on both axes, covering a mile-wide swath in each case. The DZMC has not captured territory east of the Khabur on the Iraq-Syria border, however. Preventing the Iranians and the Assad regime from controlling that frontier is a key goal of the U.S. campaign in Deir al-Zour, since it would deny IS and Iran a corridor to funnel fighters into Syria.

On October 7, the SDF announced that the campaign had liberated around 20,000 local civilians from IS rule. Yet it remains unclear how residents of Deir al-Zour province will feel about commanders like Abu Khawla taking charge

of their communities. Although it is impossible to confirm the veracity of the many allegations against him, locals are likely to believe them, perhaps spurring some of them to forcefully oppose the DZMC's presence. Alternatively, they may decide to overlook his links with IS if he can restore a modicum of order and provide vital services. To help him do so, Washington should consider aiding (and keeping a close eye on) the Civil Council he has established to cover the province.

RACING THE REGIME FOR GAS

As the DZMC moved down these axes, regime forces rolled into Deir al-Zour from the west. On the cusp of securing a crucial victory against IS, Damascus is reluctant to share the glory with the DZMC, and Russian jets bombed the group's positions on September 16 and 25.

Damascus is most worried about the DZMC and other SDF factions capturing Deir al-Zour hydrocarbons. In 2009, the last year for which annual figures are available, the province produced approximately 35 percent of Syrian oil, according to the *Syria Report*. More important, it supplied 86 percent of the country's premium light oil, which is easier to refine and fetches a higher market price.

Thus far, the DZMC has captured fields belonging to the Deir al-Zour Petroleum Company, managed by the French conglomerate Total. These fields were pumping around 27,000 barrels per day (bpd) before the war, down from approximately 60,000 in the mid-1990s according to *Middle East Economic Survey*. Today, these fields are severely degraded, needing hundreds of millions of dollars in repairs. Even if the regime had the money for such repairs, there are no international buyers to purchase the oil.

In contrast, the regime is desperate to obtain gas from Syria's eastern fields in order to alleviate severe energy shortages. In August, Minister of Electricity Zuhair Kharboutli told *al-Watan* that national power production had fallen to 2,400 megawatts, compared to 7,100 before the war. A month later, he stated that his ministry was receiving less than half of its required 10,000 tons of heavy fuel and 20 million cubic meters of gas per day. Since an estimated 90 percent of Syria's gas production is earmarked for electricity generation, the regime has been forced to collude with IS during the years it controlled the eastern fields.

On September 23, however, the DZMC took the Deir al-Zour Gas Plant (aka the Conoco field), which produced around 5 million cubic meters per day as of 2013. This facility supplies the Jandar power plant south of Homs, Syria's third-largest plant before the war. Meanwhile, the SDF control Suwaydiya, Syria's largest oil field (which produced 104,400 bpd in 2011), and several smaller ones such as those operated by Gulfsands (24,100 bpd).

Damascus is loath to let the SDF and DZMC gain the same hydrocarbon leverage as IS, so it will likely focus on preventing them from capturing more gas fields -- by force if necessary. The competition for Deir al-Zour led to significant saber rattling last month. Regime official Bouthaina Shaaban told al-Manar television, "We will fight them whether they are SDF or IS," while Kurdish militia leader Sipan Hamo told *al-Sharq al-Awsat* that Russia's September airstrikes were "a declaration of war." For his part, Abu Khawla told DeirEzzor24, "We will not fail to respond to any attempt at provocation or approach to areas under our control."

CONCLUSION

With IS nearing collapse, Washington seeks to prevent a potential successor from emerging. This will require instilling a measure of calm, avoiding a major regime-SDF clash, and establishing a measure of control on the Iraqi border. Washington should also keep a close eye on Abu Khawla to keep his forces from alienating Syrians in liberated areas. Otherwise, the war against IS may be supplanted by a new conflict, risking the gains of the past three years while heightening U.S.-Russian tensions.

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more than a dozen times since 2011. ❖



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