

INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

At the beginning of May, Russia, Iran and Turkey signed the Astana agreement to set up 4 de-escalation zones (Idlib, North Hama, North Damascus, South Syria), to establish a ceasefire agreement for a period of six months with the possibility of an extension. The three observer-countries committed themselves to use their influence on local groups to prevent battles and the exposure of airspaces, and to allow the flow of humanitarian supplies. The US, which played no role in the build-up to the Astana agreement and it is not expected to participate in the implementation of it, criticized the biased position of Iran, which controls a large number of Shiite militia in the fight against the Syrian opposition. The Syrian opposition has rejected the agreement because of the 'partisan position' of Russia. Nevertheless, a low level of fighting has been reported in the de-escalation zones in recent weeks. The UN special envoy De Mistura spoke of an

attempt to expand the zones to other areas.

The ceasefire of the Astana agreement will be used by the regime and its allies in order to contain the influence of rebels in IS-held areas such as Homs, Deir ez-Zour and East Aleppo. 3,000 Hezbollah fighters were transferred to the Syrian desert; further regime offensives with Afghan and Iranian militia took place in the tri-border region of Syria-Jordan-Iraq. To the north-east of Tanf, the anti-IS coalition unit, Commandos of the Revolution, set up a military base, with 150 US troops and five other countries which are part of the coalition. The capture of the Tanf region allows the regime to control the Damascus-Baghdad highway and is also of strategic importance to Iran. After the attack of the Syrian Air Force base Shayrat by the US in April, a second US air strike occurred in June, targeting the Syrian regime and its allies, who received prior warning.

The sixth round of the Geneva talks was marked by fierce debates on the UN proposal to set up a Constitutional Commission to draft a new constitution, which ultimately provides for the adoption of the constitutional draft, irrespective of the political transition process or the resignation of Assad. The Syrian Opposition's rejection of the proposal of the Constitutional Commission, as well as other technical questions on governance, elections and the fight against terror, are now being debated until the next Geneva conference.

The arming of the Kurdish-dominated SDF by the US in the context of the Raqqa offensive caused violent criticism of NATO-partner Turkey. Turkey has confirmed it will not participate in the Raqqa campaign. According to unconfirmed reports, though, Turkey may not disregard an offensive, by the name "Idlib Shield", to counter rebels present in Idlib.

INTERNAL POLITICS

Walid Muallem, Deputy Prime Minister, welcomed the signed memorandum on the establishment of de-escalation zones in Syria. President Assad proposed to the rebels in these zones an amnesty and the laying down of their weapons. In the past, however, similar promises were always broken. The Minister of National Reconciliation Affairs, Ali Haidar, emphasized that the recent amnesty agreements of the past few years would not have been possible without the territorial gains of the Syrian Army.

The Syrian regime, according to official data, has gained full-control of the third-largest Syrian city, Homs, for the first time, in six years. In the context of the evacuation deal between the regime and the rebels, about 20,000 residents, as well as hundreds of rebels and their families from the be-

leaguered Barzeh district in Damascus, were transported to the Idlib province which is situated in Northern Syria. The opposition criticized this forced displacement arrangement.

In the meantime the refugee problem at the Syrian-Turkish border shows no signs of abating. Thousands of Syrians are denied medical treatment after the Turkish authorities introduced a new regulation that stipulates a quota system to treat five "non-emergency patients" per day. According to media reports, around 3,000 patients with cancer, heart disease and kidney failure are waiting at Bab al-Hawa, the last open border point. According to new Turkish entry requirements for Syrian injured persons, it would take at least one year to treat all 3,000 current patients in Turkey.

HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

At the end of April, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) issued a report with a list of 45 possible attacks with poison gas, which have taken place in Syria since 2016. Human Rights Watch also condemned the Syrian Army for "widespread and systematic" use of chemical weapons. It was also alleged that recordings of the poison gas attack in Khan Sheikhoun were made by Al-Jazeera employees. The new French President, Emmanuel Macron, described further poison gas attacks on the part of the regime as a 'red line', which if breached, would lead to counter measures.

UN organizations were deeply concerned about the security situation of civilians in Syria. Attacks from aircrafts and shelling bombardment have heavily hampered local infrastructures and harmed civilians. In an air strike of the Syrian Army in the city of Hama, dozens of white helmet rescue workers were killed. The US-led anti-IS coalition was also suspected of being responsible for the loss of 18 human lives in Raqqa.

The US government, on the other hand, accused the Assad regime of carrying out mass executions in its prisons and burning the corpses. While the Syrian regime vehemently denied the accusations, the US Department of Foreign Affairs presented satellite photographs of a building within the Saindajia Detention Center, north of Damascus.

In Rukban, at least six people died in a bomb attack on a refugee camp. In two attacks on regime-controlled villages in the province of Hama, at least 50 people were killed. In the course of a month, the IS carried out attacks in Homs and Damascus as well as other assassinations outside its strongholds, such as in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Egypt, the Philippines and Iran respectively. The attack at a pop concert in Manchester, England, is claimed to have been perpetrated by a "soldier of the caliphate" according to IS statements.

MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

On 6 June an offensive was launched on the capital of the IS-Caliphate Raqqa by the US-supported Kurdish SDF forces. With the help of the US-led anti-IS-coalition, the Kurdish troops were able to capture the first districts in the east of Raqqa, providing a significant blow to the IS as their influence begins to slowly diminish in Raqqa.

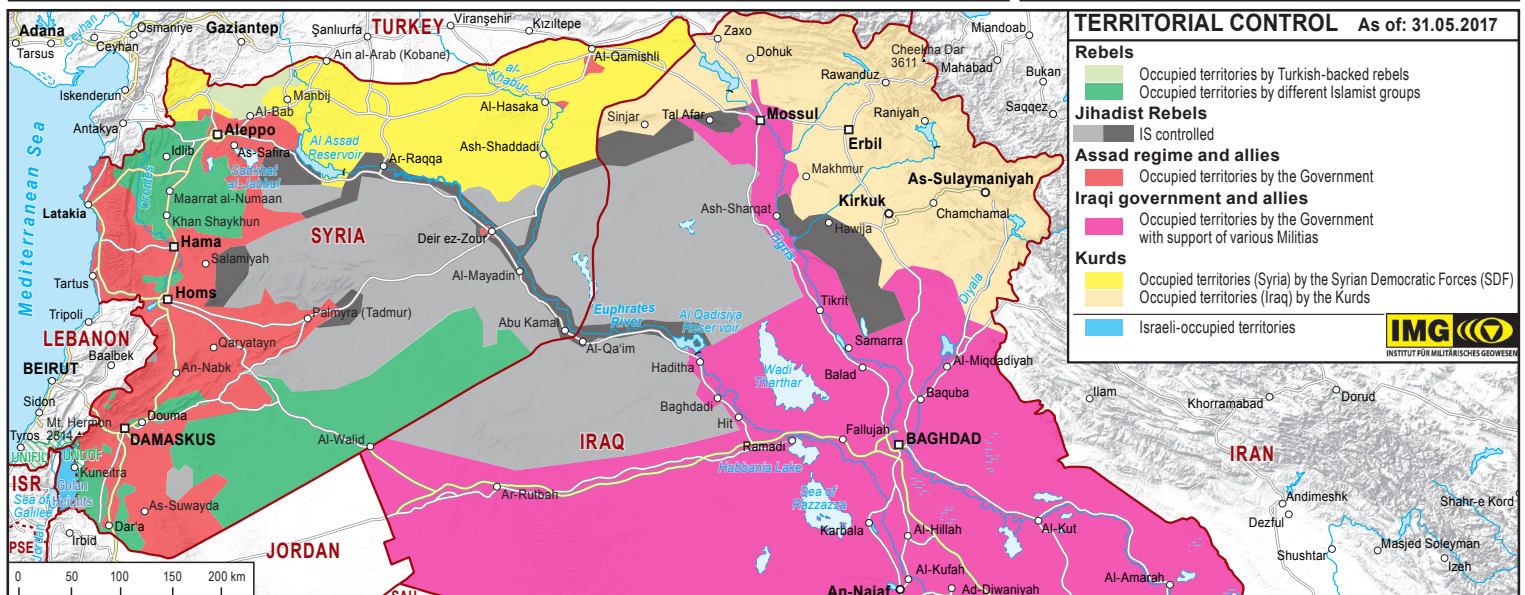
Nevertheless there are escape routes for IS-fighters and their families. Syrian media reported that the SDF forces had imposed a time limit to the IS supporters until the end of May to lay down their weapons. Russian media also confirmed that the SDF had blocked the northern escape route with American, British and French support, but had given IS supporters two ways to the south to Palmyra or west of Idlib to flee in order to weaken the expected resistance resulting in the takeover of the city.

Parallel to the ongoing armistice agreements within the framework of the Astana covenant, the Syrian regime has been focusing on numerous fronts against IS positions over the last few weeks,

with the aim of reclaiming the IS-controlled areas. There has been steady progress made by the Syrian regime on numerous fronts as units have advanced against the IS terrorists in the eastern part of the province of Aleppo and reached the Euphrates Valley. In addition, large areas along the Palmyra-Homs highway were liberated, and the Syrian army is now in full control of the highway from Damascus to ancient Palmyra for the first time since 2014 after driving out militants.

A new offensive against the IS in the eastern part of Hama province was initiated. A new front was opened to re-conquer the city of Deraa in southern Syria, which is currently under the control of an alliance dominated by Al-Qaida-linked groups, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

The US have shot down a pro-Syrian government drone that had targeted toward the US-led coalition forces in Syria, but there were no injuries or damage reported. This represents a major escalation of tensions between Washington and troops supporting Damascus.



SOURCES MEDIA ANALYSIS COMPILED BY IFK MENA-Team (Jasmina RUPP, Nasser EL-HAJ, Milutin MRVOSEVIC) LAYOUT REF III/Medien, IMG

INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

At a summit meeting in Saudi Arabia, Heads of State and Government of 55 Arab and Islamic countries as well as US President Trump agreed on comprehensive measures to combat terrorism and extremism. Saudi Arabia has a key role to play following the establishment of an international center against extremism and an anti-terrorist finance center in Riyadh. In addition, the formation of an Islamic military alliance in the fight against IS was decided, which is to consist of a 34,000 strong unit from different countries and is to be deployed in Syria and Iraq. The Heads of States condemned the intervention of Iran as a violation of the sovereignty of other countries as this may lead to destabilization of the Arabian Peninsula and agreed to put cooperative measures against Iran in the future.

Meanwhile, NATO decided to join the international anti-IS coalition without being directly involved in the combat. It will participate through training programs

for local partners and intelligence exchange.

The IS now seems to prepare itself for its continued existence as an organization after the expected loss of its strongholds in Iraq and Syria. In the course of the fasting month of Ramadan it has intensified its terror and guerrilla tactics in provinces outside its strongholds sphere. It therefore demonstrates that, despite territorial losses, high operational abilities remain a potent weapon of the group. In addition, the IS increased its efforts to recruit new fighters and suicide bombers in Deir ez-Zour and Raqqa. The new recruits are to a large extent young men and more recently also women. Women play an increasingly important role in the fight, despite not being as militarily involved as men, yet they do undergo some military training. As women are less frequently controlled in security controls in Syria and Iraq as opposed to men, this poses a new security risk, especially to those women affiliated with terrorist groups.

INTERNAL POLITICS

In the context of the military successes of the Iraqi forces against IS in Mossul, the Iraqi national security adviser, Faleh al-Fayad, discussed possibilities with the Syrian President Assad to cooperate militarily against Jihadist groups.

In view of the parliamentary election in 2018 and a likely success for the influential pro-Iranian politician Nouri al-Maliki, Prime Minister Abadi is pushing towards a coalition of influential Shiite religious and political leaders, including Muqtada al-Sadr, with the aim of isolating Maliki. Conversely, the Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr congratulated Iranian President Rouhani for re-election, but urged Iran to end its "regional policy of negative effects".

For the first time, the religious minority of the Yazidis received the approval for the formation of their first political party to join the forthcoming parliamentary elections. The Prime Minister of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), Nechirvan Barzani, met with the Iraqi Minister of Planning, Salman al-Jumaili, in Erbil. Jumaili expressed the willingness of Baghdad to support any cooperation and coordination with Erbil in order to strengthen bilateral relations. The KRG is ready to end all existing problems between Baghdad and Erbil through peaceful dialogue. The successful cooperation between the Iraqi army and the Peshmerga in the fight against IS was described as a positive example for future cooperation in other areas. Barzani reaffirmed the importance of a comprehensive plan for a post-IS-Mossul to rebuild the trust between rival forces in Mossul. Parallel to these cooperative intentions, Kurdish President Barzani announced an independence referendum to be held in September 2017.

HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

In Iraq, a regular series of bomb attacks took place in the fasting month of Ramadan, with a total of at least 35 people being killed, following attacks in Baghdad and Basra. Other suicide bombs in Baghdad, Hit, Ramadi, Baqubah and Kirkuk resulted in the death of several dozen people. The IS acknowledged all the attacks.

In the context of containing the pressures of IS in Mossul, all civilians were called upon by the Iraqi security forces to leave the old town. IS continues to take advantage of civilians as human shields. According to the UN human rights chief, 163 civilians were executed by IS in order to prevent them from fleeing the besieged districts. Meanwhile Iraqi security forces were able to free dozens of Yazidi prisoners from captivity yet still more than 3,000 other Yazidi women remain imprisoned by the IS and are mainly

used as sex slaves. According to UN estimates almost one million people have been displaced in Mossul since October 2016.

During the siege of Mossul, the Iraqi army carried out an attack on an alleged factory of IS use for the manufacture of bombs. According to figures by IS, at least 68 civilians died, while the Iraqi army denied intentionally targeting civilians. Iraq's Interior Ministry launched an investigation into allegations of human rights violations perpetrated by its forces fighting the Islamic State group in Mossul.

Meanwhile, the US forces were responsible for an air strike in Mossul, which took place in March. At least 100 civilians were killed in the operation. In addition, the Pentagon admitted its responsibility for the death of 484 civilians since the beginning of anti-IS operations.

MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

In the north-west of Iraq, pro-Iranian Shiite militias conquered the city of Baadsch in the Iraqi-Syrian border area from IS, and further advances were made towards the city of Al-Qaim. The actions of the troops are part of the strategy to prevent IS to return to areas it previously conquered. The long-term plan to clean up the Sunni-dominated Iraqi-Syrian border area by Shiite militia was carried out by Prime Minister Abadi. Karim al-Nuri, spokesman of the National Mobilization Units also emphasized that in coordination with the Syrian regime, IS is also being fought on Syrian soil. The new dominance of the pro-Iranian militia in the border area is met with

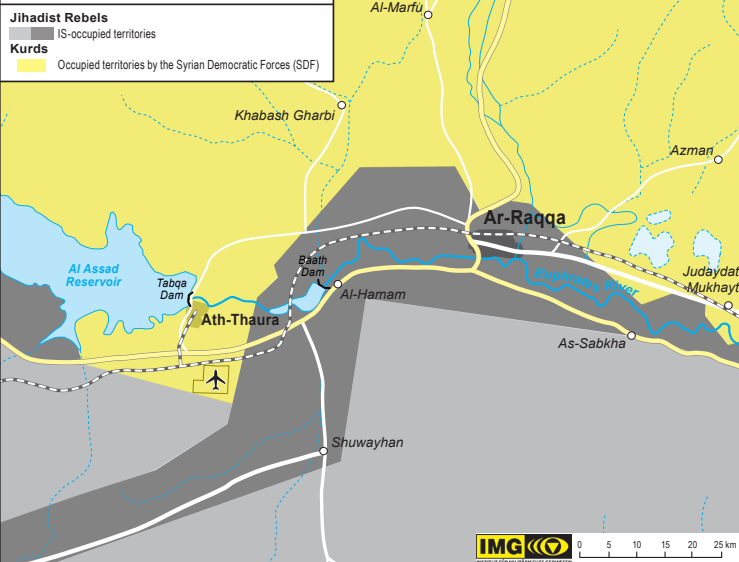
strong criticism by the Kurdish-dominated SDF forces in Syria, which have warned against entering Syrian territory. An invasion of the Shiite militia would create new tensions between the US-backed Kurds and the Shiite militia supported by Iran. Abadi also criticized the statement by the commander of the National Mobilization Units, arguing that according to the Constitution, Iraqis are not allowed to combat outside of national borders.

The Iraqi security forces (ISF) have made significant progress on the northern and western side of Mossul from IS. The armed forces opened a new front from the north to break the relentless resistance around the

last IS-controlled city quarter. The liberation of the northern Iraqi city of Mosul "is imminent" and the days of ISIL's self-declared caliphate "are numbered", the UN envoy for Iraq says. In the western side of the city, Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Forces claimed to have recaptured al-Najjar neighbourhood, which represents a positive development to weaken the presence of IS in Mossul, according to the military commander of the anti-ISIS operation in Nineveh Province. The ISF have indicated there are still 500 IS fighters as well as up to 250,000 civilians in the contested districts.

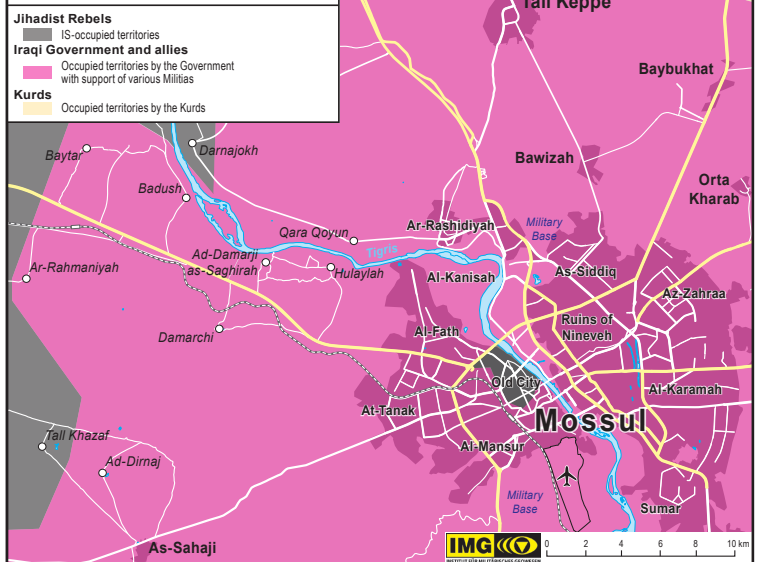
RECENT MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS IN RAQQA

As of: 31.05.2017



RECENT MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS IN MOSSUL

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