

## INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

The seventh Geneva round of negotiations ended again without breakthrough at the beginning of July, but the UN Special Envoy de Mistura is optimistic that representatives of the regime and the opposition would negotiate directly at a table at the next talks in September. The fifth round of the Astana talks, which had just taken place, also ended without a result. The Syrian regime accused Turkey of blocking the implementation of de-escalation zones. A working group meeting to clarify the technical details of the zones will be held in Tehran in August. The Turkish spokesperson, Ibrahim Kalin, said that Turkey and Russia could jointly provide troops for the Idlib area, Iran and Russia would be entrusted with the forces of Damascus and the US and Jordan with the control of the south-west of Syria.

In the context of the increased battles in the tri-border region of Syria-Jordan-Iraq, a truce between regime

forces and opposition leaders in Deraa, As-Suwayda and Quneitra was made, and overseen by the Russian military police, Jordanian and American forces, according to Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu also fears that the established ceasefire agreement near the Israeli border will serve to consolidate Iran and its proxy forces in southern Syria. Israel will continue to do everything possible to prevent an Iranian presence near its borders. The accusation of the Wall Street Journal that Israel supports Syrian rebels near the Golan Heights with wages for fighters, food and medical goods, was rejected by Netanyahu. He insisted Israel would not interfere in the bloody conflict and would only allow the medical treatment of Syrian children.

At the end of July, US President Trump declared the cessation of the CIA program to support anti-Assad rebels. The

Train & Equip Program for so-called moderate rebels, which was established under President Obama in 2013, produced only few successes as the groups affected by the training were weakened rapidly. Already in 2015 the support was reduced to those fighters fighting exclusively the IS as well as the Al-Qaida. The discontinuation of the program, however, does not apply to the Kurdish-dominated SDF forces that have greatly benefited from weapon deliveries and combat training since 2016.

In the run-up to the areas liberated by the IS, the regime, together with its allies, Iran, is planning to continue its already launched offensive in the Euphrates Valley and to take the last high fortress of IS, Deir ez-Zour. Furthermore, they increased efforts to gain control of the entire east of Syria along the Syrian-Iraqi border, before other competing forces take advantage.

## INTERNAL POLITICS

President Assad is planning a national administrative reform to integrate the conquered territories. Thus, a committee is to promote the re-establishment of state institutions and economic development in Aleppo and Western Raqqa. The regime also criticized the plan for the establishment of de-escalation zones, given fears of a likely foreign intervention, particularly of Turkey and Qatar that could favor a possible division of Syria, and the setting up of a buffer zone in the south-west region for Israel.

In the rebel-held Idlib, after a week of fighting, an agreement was made between the al-Qaeda offshoot Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham,

supported by Turkey and some Gulf States. The province is now almost completely controlled by the Al-Qaida offshoot.

In Afrin, north of Syria, thousands of Kurds protested against a possible Turkish intervention, after the PKK-dominated YPG and Turkish troops had exchanged shots several times. YPG Commander Hemo described the Turkish aggression as a war declaration.

The expected loss of the IS capital Raqqa led to increased exit of IS commanders and their families to Al-Mayadeen. This area is difficult to access for missiles, as it lies along the Euphrates near the Syrian-Iraqi border and is currently being built by the IS as a new command and control center.

## MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

The Kurdish-dominated SDF launched the battle around the old town of Raqqa. According to American estimates, there are still 2000 IS fighters in the city. The US-backed SDF took control of the western Al-Qadisiya district and the eastern Al-Batani district. At the same time, the Syrian army and its allied militia conquered numerous villages west of Raqqa.

Meanwhile, in mid-June, a US combat aircraft fired a Syrian fighting jet in the province of Raqqa after it had targeted fighters of the SDF. The regime is in direct competition with the SDF in its battles against the IS. After the launch, Russia threatened to fire at any aircraft of the US-led coalition that flies west of the Euphrates River. Against the backdrop of the agreement of a de-escalation zone in the south-west of Syria, cooperation between Russia and the US seems to be fully restored.

Russia also fired cruise ships from the Mediterranean to IS positions in Palmyra, which had previously been withdrawn from Raqqa with heavy weapons.

In mid-July, the Russian embassy in Damascus was once

again the target of grenades by rebels, but no casualties were reported.

A de-escalation agreement has recently been reached with the FSA-related groups in the eastern Ghouta region in Damascus, via mediation of Russia and Egypt.

Syrian troops and allied forces reached the Iraqi border in the fight against the IS for the first time since 2015. The regime is competing with the US and its allies for the domination of the strategically important border region.

In the offensive in south Syria, the regime has made further progress in the fight against al-Qaeda-dominated block Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Deraa. The battles were briefly interrupted by a unilaterally declared truce by the regime, but the shooting of a Syrian fighter was followed.

In reaction to grenade shells at the Golan Heights, the Israeli Air Force responded to bombardment of the regime. Israel's Defense Minister Liberman underlined that Assad must bear the consequences for any threats to Israeli sovereignty.

## HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

The UN refugee agency announced that since the beginning of 2017 some 440,000 internally displaced persons have been able to return to their homes.

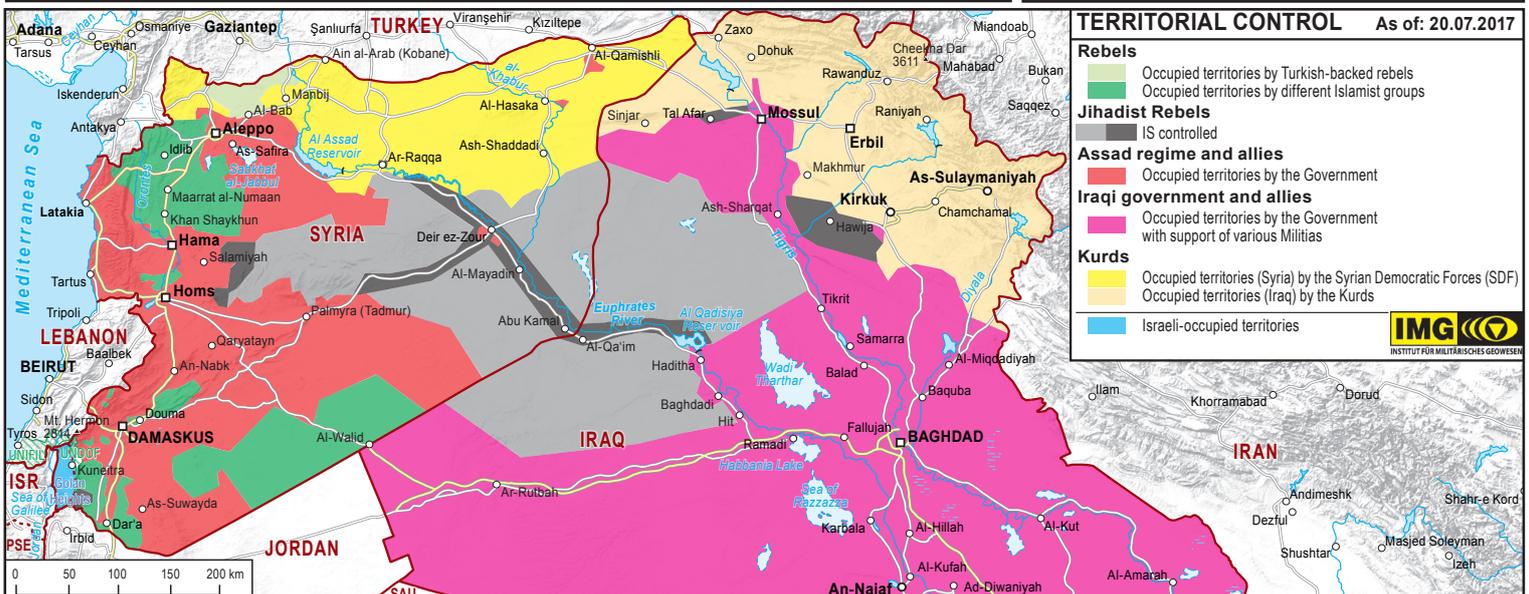
A report from the International Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) confirmed that the attack on Khan Sheikhoun on 4 April this year occurred but did not suggest any responsible persons.

Syria was shaken last month on numerous fronts of attacks. In Damascus, a series of bomb attacks occurred in early July, with at least 20 people being killed in one of the explosions. In the town of Idlib, which was held by rebels, a suicide attack occurred, with numerous dead and injured.

Civilian casualties within the framework of the air strikes of various actors remained unchanged. A bombardment of a rebel-controlled suburb of Damascus killed at least 10 people. In a US air attack on an IS-operated prison in Deir ez-Zour, at least 57 people were killed by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Shortly thereafter, another air strike in the province of Deir ez-Zor claimed 30 casualties, in which case it was not possible to determine precisely who was responsible for the attack. From the end of May to the end of June, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights recorded 472 death victims through international air raids. This is the highest number of victims in a single month since 2014.

The Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, employed a former French judge as a special investigator, whose task was to collect evidence of war crimes that had taken place during the six-year civil war, and to prepare him for any proceedings.

The SDF pardoned dozens of IS fighters who were captured in the fight for Raqqa as a sign of goodwill.



## INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

After the successful withdrawal of the IS from many parts of Iraq by the Iraqi Security forces and pro-Iranian militia, Iraqi defense minister al-Hayali concluded a new defense pact with Iran. The treaty aims to intensify anti-terrorism, border security, logistics, training and technical and military support.

In addition, the presumed death of Bagdadi caused media excitement. Russia claimed in an air strike in Raqqa in early May the IS chief was killed. The IS itself did not deny this statement through its usual communication channels, but a high-ranking Kurdish representative of an anti-terrorist unit confirmed that Bagdadi is located south of Raqqa, subject to strict security arrangements and is moving along the Iraqi-Syrian border area. The contradictory information on the death of Bagdadi could not be confirmed by independent sources.

The loss of Mosul also means major changes for the IS: the weaker the IS actually becomes, the greater the discrepancy between its public announcements and the reality on the ground. The IS itself did not acknowledge the loss of Mosul, but on the contrary, in its weekly release, Al-Naba, it says that the battle against the Shiite dictators is far from being decided. At the same time, the operations of the IS and the stand against the enemy are glorified. The IS also praised

the successful attacks by IS sympathizers in Ramadan, such as the attack on Christian Copts in Egypt, the attacks in London, Tehran and Manila, and a further four assassinations in Iraq.

In addition, the IS, through its new press contributor Abu Hassan Al-Muhajir, continues to strengthen the fighting morale of its supporters in Mosul, Raqqa, Tal Afar and other combat zones. In an audio broadcast, he calls for steadfastness, as well as new terrorist attacks in the IS provinces and outside. A new dynamic in the IS propaganda is also the call to damage the economic branches of the unbelievers by attacks, looting and abductions.

The loss of IS territory in Syria and Iraq also resulted in an 80% reduction in its income over the last 2 years. The IS economy will in the future change from a centralist bureaucratic economy to a war economy. Thoughts on the future development of the IS range from a cooperation or merging with the Al-Qaeda organization to the resurgence of the terrorist group, but this time with personnel who have many years of experience in state administration, business, terrorist financing, artillery and guerrilla tactics. UN anti-terrorist expert Jean-Paul Laborde, notes that despite the many losses, there are currently a total of 12,000-20,000 IS fighters in Syria and Iraq.

## INTERNAL POLITICS

After three years of IS rule and nine months of violent fighting in Mosul, prime minister Abadi declared the city liberated on July 9th. However, explosives, mines, weapons and hidden IS fighters are still being eliminated. The expelled Iraqis began to return in the last few weeks to the less-destroyed eastern part of Mosul. Damaged property, housing shortage, high rents, lack of water supply and infrastructure await approximately 920,000 who were initially expelled and are set to return. The greatest challenge in Iraq now lies in the rehabilitation of Mosul. From past experiences in Tikrit, a delay in reconstruction could foster intra-ethnic tensions and allow the IS to re-enter.

The ISF is currently carrying out arrests of IS combatants according to prepared lists of names. In addition, a special court for terrorist trials was established in the province of Niniveh. Daily interrogations of IS sympathizers and family members are held in prison camps and police stations.

After the successful re-conquest of Mosul, the pro-Iranian Popular Mobilization Units are preparing for the conquest of the district of Tal Afar near the Iraqi-Syrian border. In addition, an offensive of pro-Iranian militants from Iraq in the Syrian border town of Abu Kamal is currently under discussion.

In the light of the numerous victories against the IS, the future of the powerful Shiite militia is being discussed. Hadi al-Amiri, leader of the influential Badr Brigade, demanded in an interview that both the Shiite militia and its good relations with Iran should be preserved. Prime Minister Abadi also spoke out against the dissolution of the much-criticized Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units, even after the final destruction of the IS. In the context of the terrorist attacks in Baghdad, parliamentarians, who are members of the State of Law Coalition of Nouri al-Maliki, also demanded the transfer of security issues from the Baghdad Operation Command to the Population Mobilization Units. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned Prime Minister Abadi of the continued presence of American forces and their call for the dissolution of Shia militia, which would weaken Iraq.

The referendum on the independence of Kurdistan, which is planned in September, continues to draw international criticism. In addition to Turkey, Iran, Germany and the Iraqi central government, the UN also announced that it did not support Kurdistan in holding the referendum.

## HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

In Camp Hassan, where refugees from Mosul were accommodated, a mass food poisoning of 700 people took place in mid-June, with at least two people being killed.

The UN reported that the IS in Mosul has about 100,000 civilians in its power and has abused them as human shields. In an explosion, a French journalist and a Kurdish reporter were killed. Likewise, a suspected IS member detonated himself into the air in Mosul, where at least 12 people died. In a district that had already been conquered by the IS, a suicide attack fell, which killed at least three people. A suicide attack on a refugee camp in western Anbar took place resulting in 14 deaths.

The American Deputy Special Representative of the Uni-

ted Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, Lisa Grande, said a reconstruction of the basic infrastructure in Mosul would cost about USD 1 billion. Amnesty International, meanwhile, accused the US-led coalition of serious human rights violations during the fighting for the city. Measures have thus been omitted to avoid unnecessary civilian casualties, as well as densely populated areas. In addition, the UN warned of a collective punishment for alleged IS sympathizers, calling on the Iraqi government to stop such actions. According to the relief organization Doctors Without Borders, a humanitarian crisis is developing rapidly in Mosul, as up to a fraction of the people need medical assistance. In the meantime, the US accused the Kurdish YPG of repeatedly recruiting children as soldiers.

## MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

In mid-June, the last stage of the Mosul offensive, the cleansing of the old town began. Prior to this, a division had occupied the district of al-Shifaa, and the IS had been encircled. A few days later, the IS bombed the symbolically significant Al-Nuri Mosque, in which the Caliphate in 2014 was established. According to media reports, this was intended by IS to prevent the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) from celebrating victory there.

On July 9, 2017, the Iraqi government declared the battle

had ended and that Mosul is liberated. According to media, over one thousand IS terrorists were killed alone in the old town, and other IS terrorists who tried to escape the Tigris from the old town were shot.

In the struggle for the strategically important border region, Iraqi militia took the border crossing Al-Waleed in the tri-border region Iraq-Syria-Jordan at the end of June. The IS announced that it had killed 28 Iraqi soldiers and members

of the Popular Mobilization Units in this battle.

In the border area between Iraq and Iran, there was a military operation for the removal of IS agents, who were in Diyala, in the city of Naft Khaneh.

A total of 14 people were killed and 13 wounded as the IS completed a suicide attack west of the city of Ramadi. For this, the suicide bomber smuggled himself among the soldiers and blew up into the air.

### RECENT MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS IN RAQQA

As of: 20.07.2017

