Withdrawal from Lebanon

Karen Leukefeld

Al-Qaida from neighboring Syria. Iran and Turkey are seeking de-escalation in the civil war

Figure 1: Withdrawal from Arsal: An Islamic fighter is brought for medical treatment in Idlib (8/3/2017)

In the mountainous province around Arsal directly on the border between Lebanon and Syria, the departure has begun: 1,116 fighters of the jihadistic “Nusra Front,” which now calls itself “Front for the Conquest of the Levant” (Jabha Fatah Al-Sham); They and their relatives were taken to Syria by busses in an action controlled by the Lebanese army. A total of 8,893 people have been evacuated, reported the Lebanese Al-Manar, the Hezbollah-related news station. The Al-Qaeda offshoot Fatah Al-Sham had fought the last years in Syria for the establishment of an “Islamic State” and had penetrated as far as the Lebanese border region. Now the Jihadists are back in Syrian Idlib. They have set their positions around Arsal on fire. Apparently they do not plan to return.

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On Tuesday, Lebanon security chief, Major General Ibrahim Abbas, had negotiated the conditions under which the army again took over the entire area around Arsal. Already in the previous week, a truce had been agreed, about 300 civilians left Arsal and returned to the Syrian Assal Al-Ward north of Damascus. In addition, the conflict parties agreed on a prisoner exchange: five Hezbollah fighters for five Islamists. Hezbollah will also be present in the entire region, said Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri to the US magazine Politico. The formerly underground paramilitary Hezbollah is a recognized party in Lebanon and involved in the government.

The operation will take place within the framework of the “de-escalation strategy,” with which the guarantee powers Russia, Iran and Turkey want to stabilize Syria. In May, the states in the Kazakhstan capital Astana negotiated with representatives of the Syrian government and opposition and marked the so-called de-escalation zones. If the military activity in the zone ends, the air raids will also be stopped. There is still much to do, said the spokesman of the Russian President, Dmitry Peskov. But it is a beginning.

On Thursday an agreement came into force for the establishment of a “de-escalation area” north of Homs. As announced by the Russian Defense Ministry spokesman, Major General Igor Konashenk, Russia had agreed to “moderate opposition groups” at the end of July in Cairo. The zone comprises 84 residential areas with a population of more than 147,000. There, the government’s opponents and the Syrian army are to cease all fighting. Excluded from the agreement are the jihadist militia “Islamic State” (IS) and Fatah Al-Sham. They are to be expelled by the fighters of the other insurgent groups. In addition, the highway connection between Homs and Hama will be opened again. A “Committee for National Justice” is to operate there, which includes representatives of the opposition and various ethnic, political and religious groups. Russian military police will oversee the facility.

The Russian Ministry of Defense has assessed the development positively. Military disputes have been steadily declining in the last few months. 1,864 localities have signed local armistice agreements, and 228 agreements have been negotiated by the Great Powers. The Syrian army has regained more than 12,000 square kilometers of land, and military progress against the IS has been recorded in the north-east of the country around Palmyra and along the Jordanian border.

The ending of the CIA program to support rebel groups in Syria by US President Donald Trump could also contribute to a positive development. The German-language Internet portal of the Moscow radio station RT spread on 27 July statements by an “insider” named Ali Smajic, according to which the USA had been present for years in southern Syria with special forces. There, the US military had contacted armed groups and offered money, the commander of one of the combat groups told RT German. Authorities are now warning that former CIA participants could join the jihadist militias, which are still being financed by the Gulf States, out of disappointment.

Since January 2017 Michael “Mike” Pompeo has been director of the US secret ser-
vice CIA. When he spoke at a “Leadership Dinner” of the “Intelligence and National Security Alliance” (IN SA) in mid-July, Pompeo threw himself into the breach. He commented on Iran’s “long-term challenge in the Middle East” and provided an interesting account of US President Donald Trump’s arrival at the beginning of April of US warships in the East Mediterranean aircraft from 59 cruise missiles to the Al-Shaairat airport of the Syrian Air Force near Homs.

In April, the President had called and instructed him to find out what had happened in the Syrian Khan Sheikhun. Just before, cruel pictures of dead children had gone around the world. He had immediately assembled a “top team” of CIA experts and “outstanding partners from the intelligence community,” which had combined the evidence. On the next day, the President was presented with the results: First, chemical weapons were actually used; second, they came from the Syrian regime. Whether he was sure, the President had asked him. Pompeo had first made him speechless. But he had looked him in the eye and said, “Mr. President, we have great confidence in our assessment.” The President had not hesitated to make one of the “most important decisions of his younger days,” a “military strike” on the airport “from which the attack came.” The president had shown that he had great confidence in the CIA and the intelligence community, said Pompeo. Which also implies that ultimately it was not Trump himself, but the CIA, which ruled Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as perpetrator.

Other US intelligence officials had blamed Islamic fighters for the attack, which had been supported not least by Turkey, the Gulf States and the CIA with weapons and ammunition in Syria. Pompeo probably wanted to distract from that. Trump has now ordered the end of the CIA armament and support program for the Islamic fighters in Syria. (KI)