Syria: Why the De-Escalation Zones are not Protective Zones According to Western Ideas

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To end the war in Syria, Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed on the establishment of de-escalation areas at the last Astana conference. The US also seems to contribute to the concept. However, the terror militias remain a risk factor.

Russia, Iran, Turkey and Syria have already discussed the plan to establish de-escalation areas in Syria. Russian President Vladimir Putin has made it public in the run-up to the recent Astana meeting during talks with his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. This involves the gradual unification of so-called moderate combat groups of all terrorists classified as such, and the strengthening of the country-wide armistice.

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[1]deutsch.rt.com, 5/13/2017

It is not about so-called protection zones, as, among other things, Chancellor Angela Merkel had suggested in a meeting with Putin May 3, in Sochi. These protection zones are to be managed in perspective by opposition parties, in particular the Syrian National Coalition of Opposition and Revolutionary Forces (Etilaf), into which not in the least Berlin has invested generously over the years.

Sergey Lavrov, however, had already rejected this request in advance. In consultation with the Syrian government and the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) designated areas in Syria have been marked for domestic displaced persons, Lavrov had already declared at the end of January 2017. So far, however, so-called protection zones have been proposed to strengthen armed groups and — as in Libya — overthrow the government. This will not happen in Syria.

In a telephone conversation with US President Donald Trump, Putin then received approval for the idea of de-escalation. For the first time, Washington sent a high-ranking diplomat to Astana, Stuart Jones, the former US ambassador to Iraq and Jordan. Also, the UN special agent Staffan De Mistura traveled to Astana and welcomed the agreement.

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published an English version of the memorandum on its website, so that speculation about what was to be understood under the planned de-escalation areas in Syria was withdrawn.

The agreement is based on the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 from 2015. The contracting parties also recognize the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic. The signatory states are also committed to reducing military tensions and providing security for the civilians of Syria.

It is a temporary measure for the first six months. However, should the guarantee powers — Russia, Turkey and Iran — agree, the measure will be automatically extended. The exact location of the four de-escalation areas in the provinces of Idlib, Homs, Latakia, east of Damascus (Ghouta) and south of the country, as well as in the provinces of Deraa and Qunaitra, will be marked until 4th June. Between the de-escalation areas and the parts of the country controlled by the Syrian government, security zones and checkpoints, controlled by the guarantee powers of Russia, Iran and Turkey, are installed.

Unarmed civilians are be able to pass these checkpoints as well as supplies and merchandise. Parallel to the ending of military violence, economic trade is to be reintroduced in the country, heavily hit by war and EU economic sanctions. Refugees and internally displaced persons who wish to do so should be able to return to the de-escalation areas. There, all military disputes between the Syrian government, the army and the armed groups are to be negotiated.

The scheme is therefore applicable to groups which have already agreed or signed a ceasefire agreement. Weapons are to be used neither on the ground nor in the air. Medical and humanitarian aid is to be accelerated for the local population, electricity and water supply as well as other basic infrastructure to be repaired.

DAESH / IS, the Nusra Front and all persons, groups, companies and entities listed by the UN Security Council as allies of al-Qaeda or DAESH / IS are excluded from the de-escalation and security measures. Both within and outside the de-escalation areas, the struggle against these groups will continue. If necessary, unspecified "third parties" could also be used to secure the de-escalation area, the memorandum states. The Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Mou'allem, however, rejected the idea of stationing UN-Blue Helmets or other foreign armies in Syria as of May 8.

Russia has now submitted the memorandum to the UN Security Council to provide the highest level support for the plan. And the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan De Mistura, invited a new round of internal Syrian talks in Geneva on May 16.

Maneuvers from Washington or Jerusalem could be omitted this time

In January 2017, US President Donald Trump spoke very generally about "security zones" for domestic displaced persons in Syria. Russia expanded these statements into "de-escalation areas," named criteria, sought and found partners in the Syrian government, Iran and Turkey for the project, which apparently also found favor in the White House. In the wake of a series of attacks on Israel, which were not distracted by Israeli air attacks against alleged Hezbollah activities in Syria, the accusation against the Syrian army in the alleged use of poison gas (Chan Sheikhun), and the subsequent US attacks on the Syrian army base of Shairat.

In response to the alleged violations of international law, Moscow continued its co-operation with the US Air Force in Syrian airspace, which led to the end of the British anti-IS alliance. The "conflict avoidance agreement" was reintroduced in a telephone conversation between the Russian and US commanders-in-chief, General Joseph Dunford and General Waleri Gerasimov, with the Memorandum on de-escalation in Syria agreed upon in Astana and the (unofficial) approval by the US.

The US Department of State called on the armed groups to comply with the Astana Agreement and to distance themselves from the terrorist groups — "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant" and the Nusra Front under the current name of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Whoever did not, the Russian general Sergey Rudskoj made clear they would fight in the de-escalation areas and beyond. The Special Representative of the UN, Staffan de Mistura, arrived at the inter-Syrian peace talks in Geneva March 25, 2017.

Terror bands still attack Aleppo

In Syria many are watching the development with skepticism. Syria should be divided like the Balkans, it is said to the author in Damascus and in reference to a "peace plan for Syria" of the Rand Corporation from 2015. In it, some of the now proposed de-escalation areas — Idlib and Deraa — are being used in favor of the so-called "moderate opposition." The cities of Aleppo and Hama should therefore be so divided.

Others see the nationwide armistice and the perceptible abatement of military disputes with relief. In Aleppo this is clearly felt, according to doctor Emile Katti in conversation with the author. The departure of the fighters from the east of the city at the end of last year, Aleppo and the people had fresh air to breathe again.

The water supply was restored, the people wanted to rebuild. Only in the west of the city were there still rockets and shells from the Nusra front and their allies, which were in Idlib and between Aleppo and the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing in the direction of Reyhanli. The doctor pours out a plastic bag with the remains of bullets and metal splinters on the table. He had collected all this in just one week from different rooms in the Al-Rajaa Hospital where he was working. Many windows had been broken.

Turkey has to stop the supply of weapons and the transport of fighters across the border, then it will be safe again in Aleppo.

The more than 1,400 local armistices, the more than 80,000 men who had supported the armed groups, who had laid down their arms and signed an amnesty agreement, that three million people could return to their homes, Syrian Minister for National Reconciliation, Ali Haidar, said was an important and good sign that the Syrians want an end to the war.

In conversation with the author in Damascus, Haidar emphasized that the fighting in Syria would have long since come to an end, if indeed it were an inner-Syrian conflict.

But unfortunately it is a proxy war. Many foreign fighters and weapons are coming into the country. And the tactical decisions, whether the fighters agree to a truce or a new front, will be made outside the borders, abroad.

In fact, al-Qaeda-allied groups, which continue to control areas in Idlib, Hama and west of Aleppo, have already made it clear that they reject the concept of de-escalation. Each battle group that signed or adhered to the agreement agreed in Astana was attacked, the formation Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, an alliance of different groups led by Ahrar al-Sham. An Islamic sheikh, who cooperates with the group, issued a corresponding Fatwa, a religious law justifying the war against all who opposed the truce against the armistice. It was "betraying the revolution," it said in a statement.

Astana's (armistice) agreement is a betrayal of God, his prophet and all believers. It reveals the blood that was shed when trying to free Al Sham (Syria) from the hands of the unbelievers.

It is therefore the "duty of every Muslim" to lead a "holy war against the groups who wanted to betray our holy war," the explanation continues. The Fatwa applies to all these groups and "to all who work with them and allow them to fight under their flag."

The Alawites, Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, because they are Shiite Muslims, are

regarded as unbelievers for the terrorists. Shiites are regarded as unbelievers by the Wahhabi and Salafi Sunni, who must be killed.

The plan for the disarmament of the armed conflict in Syria will not be easy to implement. However, there are many indications that at the moment the US government does not plan to hinder the plan. It remains to be seen whether Washington can also put pressure on its allies in Europe, and above all on Saudi Arabia and Qatar, to support the Syrian mission.