

Syrian stage of the „Arab Spring”

Syria is ruled by the Assad family of the Alawi minority. It is one of the most brutal and repressive regimes in the Middle East. Tens of thousands of people have already been killed and current events indicate, that this ruthless force may be directed against the Syrian citizens. After over a year of suppressing demonstrations, the regime finally agreed to a cease-fire under the pressure of international public opinion. In this multiethnic and multireligious country, standing on the verge of a civil war, the creation of foundations for democracy, with the support of the Western countries, seems rather unlikely in the near future. The lingering conflict reduces the possibility of finding a political solution.

It is worth pointing out that if the current Syrian regime had drawn any conclusions from the events which took place in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen and taken some preventive measures aimed at the liberalization of its political system, president Bashar al-Assad could now count on regaining some of his authority in the society and retaining his power. This would have made him “the good father of the nation” who initiated the democratization of the country. This would have helped Syria evolve in the direction of political changes. The only condition would be to begin a discussion with the opposition at a “round table”. This chance was lost when the regime sent its army to the streets.

The escalating conflict led to the deepening of social divisions and strengthening of nationalist and religious groups supporting the rulers. The increased aversion among different ethnic and religious groups created a situation, in which it is impossible to reach an agreement.

No. 82/2012
25'04'12

Institute for Western Affairs
Poznań

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The growing friction between the Alawi, who support Assad, and the Sunni, standing on the other side of the barricade, lead to the intensification of the civil war. It is possible that the hostility towards the Kurds, Druze and Christians will also grow, even though they hardly take part in the ongoing military conflict. In particular, they are afraid that the public feeling may become more radical and certain religious groups may become more important, which may enable the Muslim Brotherhood to assume power. Syria would then be ruled by another theological dictatorship. Moreover, the majority of the Syrian opposition, which is represented by the Sunni, does not guarantee any democratic transformations. This means that the support of ethnic and religious minorities for the anti-presidential activities will most likely decrease even further.

The growing importance of the Muslim Brotherhood may have significant international consequences, including the expansion of the Sunni supported by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. This lies in the interest of the Justice and Development Party (JDP), which currently rules in Turkey. The lack of agreement between the Sunni and the remaining fractions of the Syrian opposition, represented by the Kurds, is alarming for Western countries and Israel, which is a neighbor of Syria. For Syria, this means that the possibility of an internal agreement, which is necessary to build the foundations of democracy, is drifting further and further away.

Paradoxically, the mission of the former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, to obviate the conflict, may lead to its escalation. This is because a cease-fire will encourage the Syrian opposition groups to carry out more peace demonstrations. The regime of al-Assad, faced with hundreds of thousands of Syrian demonstrators, will be forced to use more brutal means to maintain power and avoid legal responsibility. The Syrian leader is at the same time aware of the fact that he may share the fate of Muammar Gaddafi or the president of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak.

The implementation of the peace program proposed by Kofi Annan may be beneficial only for the Sunni opposition in Syria, who think that Assad will not adhere to the established agreements, because this would mean his political end. The strengthening of the Sunni opposition, which would take place in case of a cease-fire, moves Syria away from democracy and leads to the rule of the Muslims. The intentions of both sides of the conflict are not sincere. The National Council of Syria, representing the external opposition, is a blend of various political organizations and religious groups. In practice, however, the Muslim Brotherhood is the dominant force within this organization.

If the Assad's regime falls, the conflict between various opposition groups, representing different ideological backgrounds, seems inevitable. This struggle for power



may become a military one. Therefore, a long-lasting internal conflict should be taken into consideration. The government is well armed and supported by many special forces. Apart from that, the Assad family has nothing to lose.

Iran and Russia are interested in maintaining the current Syrian government. The countries have certain strategic interests in Syria and they are not likely to change their stance. In spite of appearances, Israel is interested in maintaining the current status quo as well. It is possible that it will not take any action to abolish the regime. It might also have an indirect influence on the decision of the USA in this matter. It is in the interest of Israel to keep the weak regime of Assad in power, as it maintained a truce for over forty years. The weakened Syria with its compromised and isolated system of government will not pose a threat for Israel for at least a few years. It is possible that Syria, in this condition, will no longer be the political leader of the Arab countries, which may be beneficial for the functioning of the Jewish state and strengthen its influence in the region.

On the other hand, if the current Syrian system of government is abolished, its political, economic and military relations with Iran will be weakened. This will be harmful to the position of Iran in the region. Such a situation is probable and, in theory, beneficial for Israel and the USA. For Israel, the weakening of a country which has been negating its existence as a state for years is definitely a positive outcome. But the government in Tel Aviv is concerned that extremists may gain power in Syria, just like in the other countries affected by the "Arab Spring". In this case, Israel would be surrounded by countries striving for confrontation.

The fall of Assad in Syria would surely be advantageous for the USA, because it would result in the political weakening of Iran in the region. It would then be easier to exert political pressure on Tehran. However, it is difficult to expect American intervention in Syria because of several factors: Firstly, the USA led by Barack Obama, who is running for reelection, will not enter an open political conflict with Russia. Secondly, it must be remembered that Russia has a military naval base in Syria, so the outcome of an American intervention would be difficult to predict. Thirdly, Syria is not an attractive partner for economic cooperation. It is also possible that the Syrian regime will begin military action directed at Israel in case of an American intervention. In such a situation, the Party of God Hezbollah from South Lebanon could also join in. Moreover, if Syria becomes disorganized and the governing regime suddenly falls, there may be a risk of different terrorist organizations moving onto its area. Such a scenario would not be beneficial for the countries of the region.



Perspectives

The fall of Assad may cause territorial disorganization in Syria as well as secessionist tendencies of different national and religious groups. In such a case, in order to assure relative peace, an external intervention of Western countries would be necessary. Maybe even another stabilization mission like the one in Iraq. Currently, creating a framework for democracy in Syria, based on Western standards, seems impossible. Creating a government of national salvation, representing all national and religious groups on the basis of percentage parity, would constitute a chance for reconciliation. Another solution, beneficial for the democratization of the country, would be the creation of a federal state with a central government in Damascus, including three districts – Alawi, Sunni and Kurd. An intermediate solution could be a model, used previously in Iraq, based on a parity distribution taking into consideration the interest of the particular ethnic and religious groups. Because of the current international circumstances, as well as the internal situation in Syria, the solution of the described conflict relies on its duration and the political will of Russia and the Western countries to solve it.

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This Publication is financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and the Society of the Institute for Western Affairs.

