

Russia and the Arab Spring

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Initial Assessments of the Causes of the “Arab Spring”

Unexpected developments in Tunisia and Egypt were at first rightly perceived in Russia as a revolt against corrupt regimes that could no longer cope with the challenges of contemporary socio-economic and political life. Later, due to the growing interference of Western countries in the region's affairs, new interpretations gained momentum. The perception formed that any anti-government action was in one way or another organised with Western assistance, above all in light of the “colour revolutions” in the post-Soviet space (Ukraine, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan), whose objective, many in Russia believed, was to take these states out of the sphere of Russian influence. While in comparison to the post-Soviet territory, the Middle East is of secondary importance to Russia, rampant global rivalry made Russian politicians even more suspicious of possible Western plans and intentions vis-à-vis the Arab countries.

The NATO Operation in Libya

The military operation to establish a no-fly zone and prevent the use of air force by Muammar Gaddafi against the rebels was a turning point for Russia: it did not meet its expectations. Russia had abstained from voting on Security Council Resolution 1973, and thus made the operation possible, because it had believed in its clear-cut and limited goals. However, the hunting

down and murder of Gaddafi, the death of several members of his family, and the human losses were appalling and were even looked upon in Moscow as a form of revenge exacted by European leaders who had been dealing with the Libyan dictator for many years. Russia seems to have been deceived by its Western partners. It was thus no wonder that, after this experience, more and more observers in Russia tended to equate Arab transformations with revolts organised and staged by external powers. The fact that the US was following the events and that Barack Obama had taken the time to urge his ally Hosni Mubarak to step down could not change this perception. It was further compounded by the very active role played by the local actors, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar, who had their own distinct interests in the area, but who were also American allies and could thus be seen (for propagandistic purposes) to be conducting a pro-American policy.

The Russian Approach to the Crisis in Syria

For Russia, which feared a spillover of the instability and chaos in international relations, it was important to prevent regime change by military intervention and to save the Syrian State from breaking into pieces. The negative experience of Libya contributed a great deal to Russian stubbornness.

The prolonged and bloody fighting in Syria has made it clear that none of the parties involved has been able to achieve a decisive victory. Despite harsh criticism from the Arab world and the West, the Assad regime has proved that it enjoys the support of a significant part of the population, namely, ethnic and confessional communities frightened by the atrocities of the opposition fighters. The growing number of victims and refugees demands more active policy

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measures. The proposal of the Russian Federation Foreign Affairs Minister on the elimination of chemical weapons in Syria turned out to be a successful step; it opened the door for the Geneva II conference. The proposal was welcomed by US diplomats and the UN. In fact, this decision and further measures on the elimination of chemical weapons bore testament to an ability to compromise regardless of substantial differences in approach.

The Crisis of Secularism in the Arab World

The Arab Spring, often viewed in Russia as a great Islamic revolution, has brought to the fore Islamists of different political orientations. The rise of Sunni radicals could have serious domestic implications for Russia. Based on figures from the 2010 census and the current growth trends of the populations of the respective national republics, less the number of non-titular citizens, the country is home to an estimated 14.9 million Muslims.¹ However, if one allows for both legal and illegal migration, the number of Muslims in Russia is much greater – about 20 million. Russia's Muslim population is concentrated in two main areas – Tatar-Bashkir and the North Caucasus. Trends towards radicalisation can be found in one way or another in both regions. The emergence in Russia of radical organisations, including those that resort to terrorist attacks, has largely been attributed to domestic causes, including the high level of corruption, unemployment, specific aspects of the distribution of jobs and resources, and the scramble among powerful factions over the redistribution of property. The intellectual failure in the training of

cadres of mullahs has affected not only the Muslim elite but Russian society too, which was unprepared for multi-faceted contact with the Islamic world.

Likewise destabilising is the role played in Russia by such radical organisations as Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (HTI), al-Qaeda factions, etc. There is evidence that Russian citizens have been participating in the fighting in Syria within the ranks of the radical opposition. In the foreseeable future, instability in the Arab world, including direct military conflicts and civil war (the Sinai, Lebanon, Syria), as well as terrorist attacks (Iraq, Libya) will continue. Prospects of prolonged instability not far from Russia's borders may result in a spillover of violence and arms trafficking and the movement of soldiers-of-fortune to and from Russian regions.

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Russia was developing contacts with moderate Islamists such as the legally elected Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and was not supportive of the military coup. At the same time, however, secular regimes seem more predictable and reliable. The trip to Moscow in February 2014 of Field Marshal Abdul Fattah al-Sisi and Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy can hardly be downplayed to a mere search for an arms deal; it must be viewed in a broader political context. According to one American analyst, it was primarily American policy that caused the volte-face. "The inconsistent US policy toward Egypt has made Cairo open to offers of weapons sales from other countries, and Russia was quick to seize the opportunity for commercial and geostrategic reasons."² Moscow seems to have been motivated not so much by trade reasons as by a desire to restore Russia's relations with the new-old regime in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood has been

¹ *Predvaritel'nie itogi vserossiiskoi perepisi naseleniya 2010 goda. Statisticheski sbornik Rosstat* (Preliminary returns of the all-Russia population census of 2010. Statistical collection. Russian Statistical Committee), Moscow: IITs 'Statistika Rossii' 2011, p. 87.

² EL-ADAWY, Adel. *Egypt's defense and foreign ministers visit Moscow. Policy Alert*, The Washington Institute, www.washingtoninstitute.org/poli-analysis/view/egypts-defense-and-foreign-ministers-visit-moscow, last accessed 24 March 2014.

banned in Russia, and despite the contacts and exchanges, Russia might have had problems with the Islamists, had they stayed in power.

The Egyptian case is an exception. Unlike other Arab states affected by transformations, Egypt boasts an organised military force – an army with corporate interests. The military has traditionally controlled all spheres of public life. The Islamists failed to grind it down and weaken it. In addition, they were too hasty in trying to restrict a handful of the secular regime's significant achievements, thereby alienating the most modernised part of the population. However, the spread of the phenomenon of the Arab awakening seems to have been halted. This does not mean the end of the transformation of the Arab world, where the need for change is felt quite acutely, but rather should be looked upon as breathing room for those regimes that might have been next in line. Apparently, the coup in Egypt, the ban on the Muslim Brotherhood's activities, and the formation of a new government in Tunisia have slowed the triumphant procession of the Islamists in the Arab world, while the continuing bloody clashes in Syria have drawn a significant portion of the most radical Islamic forces.

Russia's Military-Political and Business Ties with the Arab World

Despite the efforts made, trade and economic relations with the Arab world in the early 21st century have remained relatively minor and unstable. Annual trade has averaged 6.5-7 billion dollars. There continues to be a demand in Arab countries for Russian-produced arms and armaments, which are traditionally known for being more durable than Chinese products and cheaper than similar Western makes. According to the Centre for Analysis of World Arms Trade, recent figures show that Arab countries remain significant arms buyers – accounting for 14% of Russia's arms exports.³ The Arab Spring has made it much more difficult for some Russian companies to continue to fulfil their contracts and previous agreements. Russian businesses have had problems in Libya, for example. At the same time, Russia has concluded an agreement

with the new Egyptian leaders for arms deliveries worth 4 billion dollars. Arms deliveries to Libya may also be restored, although at a lower level.

The Instrumental Role of Middle East Policy

For President Putin, policy in the region has always been more than just a regional policy. He aims at a world order in which Russia's role as a permanent member of the Security Council and Russian interests are recognised and respected. In this context, Russia insists on being treated by the West as an indispensable partner in the search for peace in Syria and a compromise on the Iranian nuclear programme. According to Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, "Two decades after the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia continues to be a major international player as a permanent member of the Security Council. Moscow espouses a distinct worldview that increasingly diverges from that of the West, and it is not shy about offering alternative solutions to a range of international issues."⁴

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One might add that, as an international player, Russia has been striving to keep the world order (probably not an ideal one) from falling into havoc; it has opposed the toppling of regimes as a result of intervention, and its Middle East policy works in the service of this image of Russia.

The Crisis in Ukraine and the Middle East

The acceptance of the Crimea and the city of Sevastopol (following the referendum) into the Russian

³ SENKOVICH, Vladislav. *The Arab World's Potential Importance to Russia's Economy, Analysis*, Russian International Affairs Council, http://RussianCouncil.ru/en/inner/?id_4=1548#top, 18 March 2013.

⁴ TRENIN, Dmitri. *The Mythical Alliance. Russia's Syria Policy*. Moscow: *The Carnegie Papers*, February 2013, p.3.

Federation has led to the most severe crisis in Russia's relations with the US and the EU since the end of the Cold War. Vitaly Naumkin, director of the Institute of Oriental Studies, points out that the closing of Syria's diplomatic missions in the United States "is interpreted as a signal that the American administration is pursuing a tougher policy with respect to Damascus, and that Washington is very likely to move away from cooperation with Moscow in resolving the Syrian crisis."⁵

Negative reactions by the EU and the US to Russian policy and the imposition of sanctions could make cooperation in the region much more complicated or even impossible. That said, one might doubt the wisdom of such an approach. Joint efforts to stabilise the situation in Syria or to ensure that the military aspects of Iran's nuclear programme will never be revived are mutually beneficial, not to mention joint efforts in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Cooperation on Middle East issues could have prevented bilateral relations from sliding even further down the slope when

other areas of mutual concern and interaction have been closed.

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Under the present circumstances, it seems that Middle East policy may become even more instrumental to Russia than before. The developments in the region in 2013-2014 have proved that the general approaches of the various global actors to events there (as different as they still are) have been getting closer. It is more obvious now that the Islamic extremists fighting in Syria pose a serious threat not only to corrupt and inadequate regimes but also to modern international relations. There is the mutual goal of preserving Syrian statehood. These sober considerations may help to overcome the present crisis.

⁵ NAUMKIN, Vitaly. *Look for more assertive Russia in the Middle East*, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/ posted 19 March 2014.