

# Russo-Arab Relations: an ACRPS Academic Conference

23-24 May, 2015 in Doha, Qatar

Discussions on Russo-Arab relations are made difficult by the fact that no single Arab vision of Russia and relations with it exist: Arab elites, governments and the Arab publics all bring a diverse range of views to the subject and hold different opinions of the country. Broadly speaking, one main feature of Russo-Arab relations is that they are dictated by “high politics”: Russia has failed thus far to break into the cultural mainstream of the Arab grassroots. This remains true despite the fact that thousands of Arab nationals, particularly those whose home countries were aligned with the Former Soviet Union, spent years studying in Russia and other former Soviet Republics and in many cases intermarried. The ACRPS' first conference on “The Arabs and Russia” seeks to analyze this complex, multi-faceted relationship between the Arab states and Russia. The First World War and the formation of the Soviet Union, a period which also witnessed the birth of an Arab regional order, will serve as the departure point for this conference.

While the earliest relations between what would become Russia and the Arab peoples can be traced back to the 10<sup>th</sup> Century, when a number of Slavic tribes embraced Islam, any academic discussion of Russo-Arab relations in the modern era must begin with the First World War. Arab interest in Russia was stoked by the triumph of the Bolshevik Revolution. It was in the wake of that Revolution and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire that the previously clandestine Sykes-Picot agreement came to light, and its full force was felt in the carving up of the previously Ottoman-dominated Arab Levant. The initial success of the Russian Revolution, and the Bolsheviks' opposition to Western imperialism and their promulgation of socialism as a socio-economic system that sought to achieve social justice while advancing modernity and manufacturing, won the Russian revolutionaries the respect of large swathes of the Arab elite. This respect took the shape of Communist parties aligned with Moscow across the Arab region, with the first of these forming in Palestine in 1919, followed by Syria in 1924. With time, Moscow-aligned Communist parties formed in nearly every single Arab country. Although the Soviet Union was the first non-Arab state to recognize the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1926, the interwar years were largely uneventful in Russo-Arab relations, as the Soviets were consumed with domestic political issues and the Arab states came under the yoke of imperialism.

Relations between the Arab states and Russia were complicated further with the establishment of the State of Israel on the ruins of Palestine. A year before the United States did so, the Soviet Union became the first state in the world to grant *de jure* recognition to the nascent Jewish state, only days after it first declared independence in 1948. The damage done to Russo-Arab relations by Soviet-Israeli ties was partially restored by the Cold War, and the Superpowers' competition for power in the Arab region. This took the form of weapons shipments from the Eastern Bloc countries to win over Arab backing in the struggle against the West: Czech arms deals with Syria and later Egypt matured into long-term military

cooperation between the Soviets and a number of Arab states and para-state bodies, including Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Algeria, Libya and the Palestine Liberation Organization. Israel's infamous 1955 attack on the Egyptian-administered Gaza Strip and its participation in the Tripartite Aggression the following year were watershed moments for these developments, with Arab countries rushing to secure Soviet military supplies. Soviet pressure on Israel helped to halt the aggression in these cases. In addition, Moscow's arms shipments and its offer to finance and build the Aswan Dam, which became an emblem of the modernization of Egypt under Nasser, represented a wide reaching Soviet presence in Arab affairs concerning the two vital requirements of defense and development.

Soviet weapons deals and other forms of assistance paved the way for more diverse, multifaceted relations, as thousands of young Arab students and military cadets headed to the Soviet Union for education and training. On their return, these waves of young Arabs assumed influential positions in state institutions, thus allowing for robust relations between the Arab states and the Soviet Union on the institutional level and amongst the elites, relations which remained in place until the end of the Cold War. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, many former allies of Moscow sought closer relations with the West, while the post-Soviet Russian Federation intensified its relations with Israel. Russian involvement in the Arab region continued to wane until President Putin's 2005 visit to Cairo, followed by a 2007 visit to Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, Russian involvement in Arab affairs continued to be limited until the Arab Spring, a series of events which Moscow strongly opposed, even using its veto powers in the UN Security Council to protect the Syrian regime on three separate occasions.

The resurgence of Russian influence on the Arab region following a two-decade hiatus (beginning with the gradual collapse of the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s) took a vastly different form to its previous iteration, during the Cold War, when Soviet influence served a variety of different interests. During the Cold War, the Soviets' projection of power in the Middle East and North Africa was driven by the ideological desire to export the Bolshevik Revolution, competition with the United States and the geopolitical imperative of securing access to "warm water" ports. Today, Russian interests are driven by fundamentally different considerations, the decline of American power being only the most prominent such factor. Ideological considerations no longer factor into Russian decision-making on the Middle East, and have been replaced by a pragmatic, realpolitik approach which places the country's energy and geopolitical interests at the heart of its approach to the Arab countries. One ideologically motivated factor which remains in place however is Russia's obsessive fear of the growth of political Islamists, and the influence which this might have on Muslim communities living in the Caucasian Republics of Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan.

In its attempts at renewed intervention in the Arab region, Russia has been motivated by a complex set of factors, including an opposition to the Arab Spring and a variety of its own economic and geopolitical interests. It has further been heartened by the decline in the US' ability to project its power across the globe. Cognizant of the developments surveyed above, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies will organize "The Arabs and Russia" for the month of May, 2015. It will be the fifth in a series of semi-annual academic conferences which the Center has hosted that focus on the relations between the Arab states and a second player in international affairs, and will seek to:

- Examine the nature of Russo-Arab interactions at close quarters
- Understand Russian interests with regards to the Arab region, how they change and their connection to Russia's grand designs (such as the vision of a Eurasia and plans for energy pipelines)
- Understand how the Arab states, Turkey, Iran and Israel fit into Russia's grand strategy for the Middle East, and the dynamics which govern the interactions between these players
- Define the mechanisms for influence on Russian policy, and how these compare with the tools at Russia's disposal to influence the Arab region
- Understand Russia's attitudes towards the revolutions of the Arab Spring, the motivations and premises that underpin these attitudes and any changes which have happened to them, if any
- Study the possibilities of the creation of an "Arab Lobby" in Russia, based on the Arab cultural elites who studied in the Former Soviet Union, or who presently reside in Russia
- Investigate the feasible actions that Arab actors may take in reaction to Russian opposition to the Arab Spring and to the aspirations of the Arab peoples
- Explore the extent of Arab awareness of Russian policy towards the Arab region, and the drivers that stand behind Russian policy
- Explore the possibility of moving from a phase of confrontation to one of understanding and greater affinity in Russo-Arab relations, particularly as it relates to the fate of the Arab nations and not the permanence of the regimes alone

In order to satisfy these aims, and to gain a deeper understanding of the preceding discussion, the conference sessions shall be grouped thematically as follows:

1. The Historical Perspective: the Soviet Union and the Cold War
2. Russo-Arab Relations in International and Regional Contexts
3. Russia and the Arab Spring
4. Energy: Competition along Pipelines and in Markets
5. Russia and Political Islam
6. Russia in the Neighborhood: How Russo-Iranian and Russo-Israeli Bonds Impact Russia's Relations with the Arabs
7. Russia's Concept of the War on Terror, and the War on ISIS
8. Cultural Aspects of Russo-Arab Relations and Stereotypes