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Russia and the Arab Spring: Changing Narratives and Implications for Regional Policies

Maxim A. Suchkov | Dec 2015

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Abstract

The Arab Spring was a milestone for contemporary Middle Eastern history. The global phenomenon not only transformed the Arab world from within, but also challenged the regional status of major external players, including Russia. For its part, Russia has been critical of the nature of the “Arab awakening” from its very beginning. Moscow perceived the uprisings as another surge of West-inspired movements set to topple unwanted governments similar to those that took place in the post-Soviet space in the mid-2000s. Russia’s narrative of events, however, has become more nuanced over time. The rise of Islamists – both moderate and radical – shifted Russia’s focus to other issues important for the country’s national security. This paper analyzes Russia’s changing narrative of the Arab Spring, the overall context within which these narratives were being made, and the sources of shifting perceptions. It will also examine implications that the Arab Spring had for Russian strategy in the Middle East, and discuss Moscow’s dilemmas in dealing with regional and external actors.

Introduction

The sweeping revolutionary changes that came to be known as the “Arab Spring,” have been transforming the Middle East since late 2010-early 2011. This period, and the phenomenon of the spring, can undoubtedly be considered a critical milestone for the history of the region. Indeed, the impact of events stretched far beyond the borders of the states that fell under the revolutionary surge, and continue to resound in many ways today.² Although the root causes that brought about the “Arab awakening” had been brewing for decades, the events took many citizens of the Middle East (to say nothing of outside observers) by surprise. In this regard, the changes that swept the Arab World were reminiscent of the break-up of the Soviet Union and the disassembly of its Eastern Bloc. Images of masses taking to the street to protest, fear of governments being toppled one by one, and the diversity of reforms undertaken by governments desperate to stay in power gave birth to numerous interpretations of what the Arab spring phenomenon truly represented.³

The uprisings forced regional and foreign governments to react swiftly and persuasively to the demands of the people. This was a difficult task given the speed, the scope, and the nature of protests and calls for change. Though the protests targeted regional governments, states positioned as global or regional leaders could not afford to be mere “innocent bystanders.” Adopting a more active role under circumstances of instability and low predictability, however, was fraught with real risks for foreign policy. Therefore some states – especially those with serious stakes in the region – decided instead to monitor the situation closely and calculate potential challenges for their opponents; seizing

² Kayhan Barzegar, “The Arab Spring and the Balance of Power in the Middle East,” *Power & Policy*, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 30 October, 2012, <http://www.powerandpolicy.com/2012/10/30/the-arab-spring-and-the-balance-of-power-in-the-middle-east/#.Vb3T-fPtMko>

³ Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*, (London-New York: Zed Books, 2012), 89.

emerging opportunities for themselves as they arose. From the very beginning, however, it was obvious that there would be no easy solutions or one-way decisions. This historical period demanded from all interested players the mobilization of their political and economic resources, the carrying out of best diplomatic practices, as well as tremendous patience and strategic vision.

As a country with a historic presence and multi-level interests in the region, Russia had become one of those outsiders facing the “Arab Spring” challenge. In order to understand Russian decision-making during and after the spring, it is crucial to identify how Moscow perceived the region. Looking back, three major waves of perception of the phenomenon in Russian decision-making circles can be identified. Each wave entailed a respective narrative, and had its own sources.

The First Narrative

At its start, the Arab Spring was seen as a phenomenon predominantly driven by the West. Proponents of this idea did, however, differ in the degree to which they believed Western organizations and governments played a role in the uprisings. Some totally denied the existence of any grassroots movements and insisted that American NGOs staged the whole affair. Others acknowledged the existence of local initiatives in conducting the protests but were absolutely positive that local youth groups would not have been able to succeed without being fostered by American interest and guided in times of the crisis by Western patrons.⁴ Since practically all Western NGOs are largely considered GONGOs,⁵ Russia saw the “Arab uprisings” as nothing but a project of the

⁴ Irina Zvyagelskaya, “Russia and the Arab Spring,” *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook* (2014): 233.

⁵ GONGO – A government organized non-governmental organization. It is an institution disguised as an NGO to conduct civil society-related activities but is in fact operated by a (foreign) government for its own purposes. This model of organization was, it is believed, first introduced by Indonesian NGOs in late 1980s.

American government. Moscow officials and much of Russia's expert community genuinely believed that what was happening in the Middle East was an implementation of "chaos theory" that they deemed reckless and shortsighted.

This narrative came largely from a reinterpretation of the dominant narrative of the "color revolutions" that swept the post-Soviet space in mid-2000s.⁶ Some of these movements – like in Georgia in 2003 or in Ukraine in 2004 – succeeded in bringing to power anti-Russian governments striving for greater integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. Some – like in Armenia – failed, and saw rulers cling closer to the Kremlin. The color revolutions were regarded as a tool for George W. Bush's "democracy promotion" agenda, and at the same time a policy hostile to Russian interests in its "near abroad."

Russia's Liberals disagreed, however, and echoed the largely Western opinion of the dominant theory, that such a vision by the Russian leadership was triggered by its serious concerns over a potential revolutionary change of government enforced from the outside.⁷ This argument had merit, however, since the events of the Arab Spring were unfolding at a time when mass anti-Putin rallies took place in Russia itself. That said, it is hard to estimate how much of a driver these preoccupations were – if at all – since Moscow had some real security challenges and economic interests at stake that it feared would be at risk if Washington managed to redraw the map of the Middle East to suit its own priorities. Russia's concerns, then, can be seen at least in part as the result of what can be called "a Soviet vision of the Middle Eastern state of affairs." In other words, the Middle East was seen as a standoff zone between Russia and the West/US. This battle

⁶ Selcuk Çolakoğlu, "Russian understanding of color revolutions and the Arab Spring," *Turkish Weekly*, 30 May 2014, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/2014/05/30/comment/russian-understanding-of-color-revolutions-and-the-arab-spring/>

⁷ Stephen Blank, "Russia's Anxieties About the Arab Revolution," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, July 2011 <http://www.fpri.org/articles/2011/07/russia%E2%80%99s-anxieties-about-arab-revolution>

served as a major driving force in Russia's attempt to "save its allies" in the face of Western pressure (Libya, Syria) and find new partners in the changing environment.

However, the narrative of an American role in toppling "authoritarian governments" to install "puppet democratic regimes" remained contested by those who believed that the US had much greater control of the Middle East – or at least better ties with regional rulers – than it had in previous decades. Many, then, saw such an attempt – if it ever was meant to work this way – as a tremendous miscalculation; one that would see Washington undercut its own interests. Others preferred a different explanation, and believed that the US was being deceived by regional powers (primarily Gulf monarchies) who were more interested in regime change in Egypt and Syria than the Americans.

With time, however, the nature of the Arab Spring and its implications for regional dynamics turned out to be more complicated than initially assessed. Later developments revealed that the Arab Spring did not have similar impacts on all the countries where it occurred. These realizations formed the bases for a second narrative in Russia vis-à-vis the Arab Spring phenomenon. This diversified the Russian expert community, and led to the differentiation of types of changes in each nation that saw protests, and also differentiation in the types of Islamists that came to power in their wake.⁸

⁸ Alexey Malashenko, *Russia and the Arab Spring*, Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center Report, 2013, 8.

The Second Narrative

According to the discourse that prevailed in the early days following mass protest in the region, Russian thinkers roughly divided Islamists into three main categories:

- a) Moderates – largely defining the Muslim Brotherhood
- b) Salafi groups –which operated as political entities and despite being radicalized were fairly cooperative, and were formally acknowledging democratic procedures and institutions
- c) Radical Jihadis—for example the Ansar Al Sharia in Libya, which focused on armed struggle to disrupt the fragile formation of democratic systems

Once the distinction was made, it was critical for Russian experts and diplomats to comprehend motives of the respective groups and indicate their points of disagreement. Many in the Russian foreign-policy decision-making corps believed that contradictions within these factions of the Islamic community would severely impact political processes where they operated. There was also an understanding that Islamist-pragmatists, who would eventually have to participate in the political system, would ultimately have to face acute social and governance-related problems. They were thus not identified as a threat to the system itself, and only to their secular rivals. It was believed that radicals, however, would fight for change of the system and thus put pressure on the moderates to promote a more radicalized agenda.⁹ This potential and seemingly impending conflict was seen as key to the development of politics in the years to come.

⁹ Rossiya i novye elity stran "Arabskoj vesny": vozmozhnosti i perspektivy vzaimodejstviya (Russia and new elites of the "Arab Spring" countries: opportunities and prospects for cooperation) Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council Working Paper, 2013, 9-10.

The complexity of newly formed actors and alliances in the region diversified popular Russian stereotypes that considered radical Islamists a principal outcome of the Arab Spring. However, the new realities did not change Moscow's main concerns. The Foreign Ministry insisted time and again that by overthrowing regional regimes, as authoritarian and corrupt as they were, the result would simply be to empower jihadi extremists and not pro-democracy forces. This attitude in large part explains Russia's support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, which was rooted – among other reasons – in deep-seated fears that the fall of the president would open another Pandora's Box of radical Islamist movements. That, in Moscow's view, could have had a dreadful impact on the Middle East, already in turmoil, as well as on Russia's own "soft underbelly" – the North Caucasus.¹⁰ Thus, perceptions of the Islamist threat as well as domestic concerns both drove the Russian position on Syria.

In the 2011 Global Terrorism Index, which lists nations by the number of people killed or injured as a result of terrorist attacks per year, Russia was ranked at number eight.¹¹ The number of terrorist attacks only increased the following year, with unofficial records reporting some 700 killed, and those injured at an estimated 1,225. In response to the rising numbers, Moscow was using a mixture of tools to clamp down on terror networks running through the country, however, its grip of the region was loose at best. Concern about the growing uncertainty around the security of the North Caucasus was also fed by the increasing presence of radical Islamist elements in the region.¹²

As one way to combat the rise of radical Islamism, Russia has pursued an ideological solution: officials have actively worked to promote "traditional Islam," as opposed to

¹⁰ Robert W. Schaefer. *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 233-272.

¹¹ Global Terrorism Index 2011, *Vision of Humanity*, 17 October 2013, <http://www.visionofhumanity.org/#/page/indexes/terrorism-index/2011>

¹² Sergey Markedonov, *Radical Islam in the North Caucasus Evolving Threats, Challenges, and Prospects*, (Washington D.C.: CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program Report, 2010), 9.

“radical (Salafi) Islam;” this has been done by fostering homegrown imams and theologians, who are meant to counter the fundamentalist narrative coming from foreign preachers in the Caucasus. Early in the decade, about 5% of Russian Muslims openly claimed to be Salafi, but that number was subject to rapid change. Therefore, any potential penetration of radical ideas from abroad was perceived by Moscow as ideological fuel for what was already an alarming trend. Indeed, not only would an increase in radical Islam have meant increased insecurity for the volatile North Caucasus, but also for the Volga region where dangerous signals were also being observed.¹³

The Third Narrative

As events continued to unfold, as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) grew in power and took control of increasingly large swaths of territory, a third narrative emerged. Russian decision-makers and most of the expert community interpreted the ISIL phenomenon as a combination of two primary factors. First, as an echo of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, which —it was remembered— had led to a virtual break-up of the country and marginalization of many high-ranking officials and military men from Saddam Hussein’s government and army. Secondly, the rise of ISIL was seen as an unfortunate outcome of the Arab Spring itself.¹⁴ In this respect, the rise of ISIL came to be seen as a confirmation of initial Russian suspicions, that Islamists had “ridden the wave” of change and installed themselves in positions of power. The relative progress of reforms in countries like Tunisia and Morocco meant little to the Kremlin in terms of “progressiveness” of the Arab Spring. Instead, the situation was read through the lens of

¹³ Sergey Markedonov, *The Rise of Radical and Nonofficial Islamic Groups in Russia’s Volga Region*, (Washington D.C.: CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program Report, 2013), 14.

¹⁴ Haim Malka, “Jihadi-Salafi Rebellion and the Crisis of Authority,” in Jon B. Alterman ed. *Religious Radicalism after the Arab Uprisings*, (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefiend, 2015): 9-36.

local politics, where events in Syria and Iraq – much closer to home than North Africa – mattered more because of their possible impact close by.

Traditionally extremely susceptible to external influence, Russia's North Caucasus has been impacted by the rise of the Islamic State in three key areas: ideological, social, and informational.¹⁵ Initially, the formation of ISIL split North Caucasus mujahedeen on the issue of support for various Islamist groups operating in the Middle East. This split occurred in part over personal loyalties to groups' leaders and emirs, but also because of different ideological interpretations of what "global jihad" meant and how its philosophy should be implemented. In the spat between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL, for example, the top command of the Caucasus Emirate (CE) threw its support behind the latter,¹⁶ further solidifying links between the two groups.

The groups were not, however, identical. Both ISIL and the CE operated in "grey zones" – not only in a physical space but also in an informational one – and were united in their goal of establishing a caliphate or other extreme form of Sharia-based state entity. The obvious difference, however, was that CE was a regional group that claimed to be a part of "the global jihadist movement,"¹⁷ while the Islamic State positioned itself as the centerpiece of the movement, its new major driving force. In this respect, as paradoxical as it seemed, CE support was critical for ISIL in competing with its ideological rivals (i.e. Jabhat al-Nusra) over influence on the global umma.

¹⁵ *What Does the Arab Spring Mean for Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus?* Edited by Aigerim Zikibayeva, (Washington D.C.: CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program Report, 2011), 1-13.

¹⁶ Formerly announced as such on October 31, 2007 Caucasus Emirate (CE) is a militant jihadist organization operating in the North Caucasus. Also known as Imarat Kavkaz (IK), it is believed to be an al-Qaeda affiliate and was designated as such by the US Department of State in May 2011.

¹⁷ Gordon Hahn. "Caucasus Emirate Is a Growing Threat to Russia," *The Moscow Times*, 14 December 2014.

A key link between the groups was financial support. In December 2013, ISIL acknowledged receiving funds and fighters from then-leader of the CE Dokku Umarov,¹⁸ who has since been presumed dead. Now more powerful, ISIL had the capacity to sponsor its fellows in the North Caucasus. As Thomas de Waal of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace cautioned:

“Many of the leading jihadists of ISIS come from the Caucasus, including Omar al-Shishani, (an ethnic Chechen) who comes from Georgia's Pankisi Gorge. If even a fraction of the vast amounts of money ISIS is said to have seized in Iraq makes a way back to the North Caucasus, it could boost the militants there”.¹⁹

While efforts were made to make the groups appear united, there were some clear differences. The focus on the ethnic belonging of the fighters (Chechens, Circassians, and Dagestani) has a rather emotional component. The strategic agenda of both the Islamic State and Caucasus Emirate is based upon religion – or their vision of it – not ethnicity. This made the groups look more consolidated in substance and diverse in form.

These changes give insight into shifts in the contours of the global jihadi frontline. The movement was once made up of radicals from the Arab world, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, who joined local extremists to fight Russian forces in Chechnya and Dagestan. Now, however, Syria and Iraq are where the battle is taking place, and it is militants from the North Caucasus who travel to fight in support of their fellows from ISIL and other groups. Eventually, it was the participation of fighters that became the strongest bridge between the radical groups, something that exacerbated Russia's reaction to the situation in the Middle East.

¹⁸ Joanna Paraszczuk, “Syria Spotlight: ISIS Chechen Leader Abu Umar al-Shishani – Dokka Umarov Financed Us,” *EA WorldView*, 10 December 2013, <http://eaworldview.com/2013/12/syria-spotlight-interview-isis-chechen-leader-abu-umar-al-shishani/>

¹⁹ Thomas de Waal, “Caucasus Emir Seeks a Re-Brand,” *Eurasia Outlook*, 2 July 2014: <http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=56062>

The shift in fighters and frontlines has also meant a shift in Russian policy and position, in particular on the home front. Ironically, the participation of fighters from the North Caucasus in ISIL has meant a diminishing of numbers in Russia itself; according to different estimates about 500-2000 people from Russia are fighting for the Islamic State.²⁰ This gave Russia's security forces an opportunity to reshuffle resources, and indeed a period of ease vis-à-vis the terrorist threat burden on the national security. This was not the only factor in the domestic policy shifts, but it certainly helped lower a total number of "crimes of terrorist nature" to 78 – which was three times less than that of 2013 and four times less than in 2012.²¹

The fact that flow of radicals was outbound, however, did not mean militants would stay out of the country. Moscow well understood that these fighters would eventually return to the North Caucasus, the Urals and the Volga Region²² as more disgruntled and experienced as soon as winds shifted and they saw this front as more promising. In fact, terrorist attacks in the Chechen capital of Grozny on December 4th were alleged to be the first instance of an Islamic State attack on Russia. Even if this was not the case, as some experts opined,²³ it certainly added concerns to the Russian narrative of what the Arab Spring had changed, and what kind of challenges might result.

²⁰ "How ISIS Works," *The New York Times*, 16 September 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/09/16/world/middleeast/how-isis-works.html?_r=0

²¹ For a detailed explanation see: Maxim Suchkov, "Russia's Terrorism Threat: A Year in Review," *Russia Direct*, 29 December 2014, <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/russias-terrorism-threat-year-review>

²² See more about this in Alexey Malashenko, "Islamic Challenges to Russia, from the Caucasus to the Volga to the Urals," in Leon Aron ed. *Putin's Russia: How It Rose, How It Is Maintained, and How It Might End*, (Washington D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 2015).

²³ Alexey Malashenko, "The Grozny Attack: What's Next?" *Eurasia Outlook*, 11 December 2014: <http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=57481>

After the Arab Spring: Russia's Relations with GCC States and the Iranian Factor

When the dust from the Arab Spring settled, Russia discovered its overall image in the region was rather negative.²⁴ Moscow's foreign policy course and its staunch support for Damascus, as the protests there became increasingly violent and escalated into war, met with severe resistance especially from Gulf monarchies. While Moscow depended on soft power to improve its reputation across the Middle East,²⁵ the Gulf was the least receptive. This is largely because the interests of the majority of Gulf States diverge significantly from those of Russia; each state supports different actors and different outcomes. Both perceive the other as major troublemakers in the region.²⁶ At times what became mutually accusatory rhetoric went as far as Moscow labeling Saudi Arabia as the main sponsor of terrorism in the region; the Russian Foreign Ministry maintains that Gulf monarchies "are trying to achieve their geopolitical goals at the expense of the blood and suffering of the Syrian people."²⁷ Gulf States, in their turn, have used the same type of language, saying, for example, that the "Blood of Syrian civilians is on Russia's hands."²⁸ Rhetoric aside, what is certainly clear is that Arab Gulf countries are playing an increasingly vital role in regional politics, and their ability to exert influence over

²⁴ "Global Opinion of Russia Mixed," *Pew Research Global Attitudes Project*, 3 September 2013, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/09/03/global-opinion-of-russia-mixed/>

²⁵ For more on the issue see Maxim Suchkov, "Russia turns to soft power in the Middle East," *Al-Monitor*, 24 April 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/04/russia-middle-east-soft-power.html>

²⁶ Pavel Baev, "Could Russia become a Serious Spoiler in the Middle East", *PONARS Eurasia Memo*, No 359, February 2015, http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Pepm359_Baev_Feb2015.pdf

²⁷ "Saudovskaya Aravia finansiruet terroristov v Sirii zayavil MID RF (Saudi Arabia sponsors terrorists in Syria, says Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs)", *RIA Novosti*, 27 June 2013, http://ria.ru/arab_sy/20130627/946240899.html

²⁸ "Russia has blood of Syrian civilians on its hands," *Al Arabiya News*. 5 September 2011, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/09/05/165507.html>

peace in the Middle East seems most likely to grow. Whether this influence is constructive or destructive, however, remains to be seen.

When disagreements began to appear – indeed the monarchies’ stance was barely a surprise to the Russian leadership – Moscow was willing to read into the nature of GCC concerns. The source of the discord, however, was eventually revealed as profound: it was not so much about the support for opposing parties, but rather about key underlying principles of Russian foreign policy. The largest factor in the dispute between Russia and the Gulf is around Syria. Moscow’s justifications for its position on the Syrian Arab republic were never accepted by GCC states. For one, the GCC does not buy the idea of the importance of Russia’s Tartous naval facility in Syria, since its capacities are insufficient to support Assad. The threat of Islamists taking over the country is an even more concrete prospect often put forward by Russians when discussing Syria. However, what looks like a certain Islamist takeover to many Russian analysts and diplomats falls on deaf ears in the Gulf. Russia’s concerns about the potential destabilization of its own southern flank are dismissed by Gulf officials for two reasons: first, few in the GCC believe that a “handful of Islamist fighters” potentially returning to Russia are capable of wreaking havoc in “such a big country.” Second, the GCC never realized why this factor trumps Russia’s concerns about losing influence in the Arab world. For Moscow, the failure of GCC monarchies to grasp the gravity of these rationales first demonstrates a rather incomplete and somewhat inaccurate understanding of the fragile security structure along Russia’s southern perimeter. Second is the idea that losing influence over the GCC states is akin to losing the “Arab world” entirely. The Russians acknowledge that the GCC monarchies are critical actors in regional affairs, but at the same time Moscow understands that they are only one sub-region. Thus, while officials acknowledge that the Gulf States are being alienated through the current policy, they also rightly or wrongly, believe that their policies will not alienate the entire Middle East.

The role of the United States is also a factor in the current political cartography. The GCC states – heterogeneous as they often are in their policies – are very much irritated by what is often seen as a US-Russian standoff in the region. Russian policies indeed bear a tinge of America-centrism, and are often aimed at “balancing US regional policies,” not to mention countering them in the midst of the face-off. Any attempts by Russia to use its role in the Middle East to re-negotiate the position of the United States as a global superpower feeds the argument that Russia is pursuing a “revisionist power” strategy.²⁹ This factor was recently complicated, when Russia and the United States found themselves on the same page on the Iranian nuclear issue and countering ISIL operations in Iraq. The overall chilly atmosphere in bilateral relations between Russia and the United States will probably prevent Washington and Moscow from being outspoken about their common interests on these two issues, but both states claim, whether sincerely or not, that they act out of pragmatism. The problem for Moscow is that it is not always capable of presenting its motives adequately. As a result, the GCC often finds American pragmatism more understandable, although not always acceptable, compared to that offered by Russia.

Much of this position is the result of Russia’s Soviet past, which acts as a double-edged sword when it comes to international relations. On the one hand it grants the Kremlin a certain influence via institutional presence – as a member of the Middle East Quartet and P5+1 on Iran –based on its historical power and the fact that it has never fought a single war with the Arabs (unlike the Turks and Persians). On the other hand, this legacy means Russia is criticized for the past policies of the Soviet Union, in particular decisions to throw Soviet weight behind some regional authoritarians and antagonizing their opponents. Whether read as a Soviet legacy, as a state angling for more power globally, or as an interested party, many perceive Russia as a force in the region that is no less alien or intrusive than the United States.

²⁹ Thomas Wright, “China and Russia vs. America: Great-Power Revisionism Is Back,” *The National Interest*, 27 April 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-russia-vs-america-great-power-revisionism-back-12733>

While the US and Russia may be lumped together as 'alien' powers, there remains the sense that –perhaps due to its “revisionist power” strategy – the notion that Moscow is more sympathetic toward Tehran is another source of contention between Russia and the Gulf States. The shared interests between Russia and Iran add yet another layer of complexity to understanding Russia-Gulf relations. Linked to American activities in the region, Russia and Iran express similar concerns over the US-led involvement in fighting ISIL in Syria.³⁰ Officials from both nations argue that this involvement can only make matters worse and will likely trigger the emergence of even more terrorist groups. Experts and national media go even further, speculating that the whole American campaign against ISIL fighters in Syria may be being used as an American pretext for invading the country.³¹At the same time, Russia and Iran share a strategic vision of the South Caucasus, aiming for it to exist as a zone free of military conflicts and a region impenetrable to external (i.e., Western and Israeli) presences. The two nations also share a history of resisting sanctions, so when Russia found itself hit by Western sanctions over the crisis in Ukraine it refreshed its relations with the country whose own experience of surviving massive sanctions would come in handy for Moscow.

Russia's interests and alliances therefore are often totally at odds with those of the GCC States. For Gulf monarchies threats from Iran form today's major concern, to Russia the central challenge is that of Sunni extremism and terrorism. Moscow even views Tehran as a tactical ally in this “struggle.” In the 1990s, during Russia's two Chechen wars, Tehran was one of the few Muslim states to support Moscow's position and shared the Kremlin's vision that the jihadist movements in Chechnya were fueled from outside,

³⁰ Barbara Slavin, “Rouhani: Syria airstrikes 'will only create tragedies', *Al-Monitor*, 24 September 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/09/rouhani-iran-us-cooperation-nuclear-deal-syria-criticism.html>

³¹ “Lavrov urges respect for Syria sovereignty in planned anti-ISIL action,” *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, 21 September 2014, http://rbth.com/news/2014/09/21/lavrov_urges_respect_for_syria_sovereignty_in_planned_anti-isil_action_39984.html

including by some Arab states. While from the standpoint of Russia's national security interests this is clearly the most important factor in policy decisions, Gulf States do not see Iran as an ally. Rather, Gulf monarchies see only the "other Iran" – the one fueling radical Shia groups across the region and undermining GCC security interests. Understanding this difference in threat perception is key to making sense of the current relations between Russia and Gulf monarchies. So, while the differences may not be overcome, they must be realized as a source of diverging motives in respective foreign policies and identified as a likely spoiler in relations for the foreseeable future.

Bad blood between Russia and the GCC States does not, however, mean a guaranteed strengthening of relations with Iran. Russian-Iranian bilateral relations remain complicated and there is no lack of mutual suspicion, stereotypes, or conflicting interests. Iran understands the current situation as well as Russia's concerns in the Caucasus – a region where Tehran rivaled Moscow for centuries. Given their mutual histories and involvement, Iran is well aware of the region's complex ethno-political and socio-religious mosaic and indeed retains programs that allow the silent projection of soft power on societies historically and culturally associated with the Persians (specifically the North Ossetia). Moreover, Tehran has not yet given up on the idea of becoming a more influential power in the South Caucasus. While popular discourse often continues to see Russia as "the lesser Satan," following Khomeini's famous statement that the United States was "the Great Satan," – an allegory deemed by some analysts to be a reflection of a strategic vision Iran has toward contemporary Russia given its Soviet legacy – the Russian public does not share the sentiment of affiliation. A 2013 poll showed that 40% of Russians believe Iran's influence over world affairs is negative (only 10% view it as positive).³² So despite the common vision that Russia is Iran's main backer outside the

³² "Views of China and India Slide While UK's Ratings Climb: Global Poll," *BBC World Service Poll*, 22 May 2013, http://www.globescan.com/images/images/pressreleases/bbc2013_country_ratings/2013_country_rating_poll_bbc_globescan.pdf

region, the nature of their relations is more of a classic Eastern-style game of speaking softly, disagreeing tacitly, and dealing behind-the-scenes on issues of mutual long-term interest. Where the US-Iranian relationship has been described as one of “bitter friends, bosom enemies,”³³ Russian-Iranian relations have a much longer history and in many ways a more nuanced agenda. However, if one were to coin a concise definition for their current dealings, it could easily be “compelled adversaries, pragmatic pals.”

Following the flurry of change, re-alignments, and new regional political geography in the wake of the Arab Spring, the ruling elites in the Gulf have urged a new Russian approach to the region. Clearly, contemporary Russian policies do not fall in line with those of the GCC, and it is obvious that many in the region do not consider the current Russian narrative persuasive enough. The problem of narrative is exacerbated by the prevalence of Western mass media as a primary source of information. Reading Russia through an American frame tends not to communicate the nuance or even the major concerns that drive Russian foreign policy. With other channels of communication limited, conveying the intricacies and importance of each position is difficult. This problem of communication is at the heart of the continuing tension in Russia-Gulf relations. Therefore, as Moscow considers the implementation of its regional policies, it should think about backing them up with arguments that are understandable to the Arab world, not just its domestic constituency. Expressing the logic of Russian concerns is a key step in changing relations, since the Arab world, and in particular the GCC States, is not always ready to acknowledge the factors driving Russia's Middle East policy. Changing the message may aid in the problem of real dialogue on issues of strategic importance, of which there has been little. Even with conflicting priorities, given the involvement and interests of Russia and the GCC states, discussions should begin on, for example, what comes next for Syria when Assad is gone? If the country's fate is similar to that of Iraq and Libya, with a real threat

³³ See more on the issue Barbara Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies; Iran, the U.S., and the Twisted Path to Confrontation*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2009).

of the Middle East left in shambles, Moscow would be most likely to continue to cling to what has thus far been its guiding principle: better the devil you know than the devil you don't.

Russia's New Middle Eastern Policy

For Moscow, the Arab Spring brought with it political opportunities along with the need to restore influence in the region. These factors pushed Moscow to craft a new foreign policy course; the boosting of its activity having come after Western sanctions imposed certain limits on Russia's policies in Europe. Moscow was thus compelled to seek better political and economic opportunities in other important regions where it has historically had sound influence. The philosophy driving Russia's new Middle East policy has been made up of a mixture of tactics and interests, and is always informed by the fear of getting dragged down into complicated political and security puzzles – a bitter lesson learned from the Soviet experience. Moscow keeps a high public profile in three prime areas – the Iranian P5+1 talks, the Israeli-Palestinian “Big Four” negotiations, and the Syrian track – but finds it essential to work actively behind the scenes with critical regional powers to create potential leverage that will balance major external forces, primarily the United States. This behind the scenes activity is bolstered by Russia's shrewd grasp on the regional nuances, as well as serious academic and expert schools dedicated to area studies. Although not immune to its own miscalculations, Russia has proved skillful in building on American fallacies. Cooperation with Egypt and Bahrain exemplifies this trend to a certain extent; this comes as part of a strategy to build relations with America's 15 major non-NATO allies. With Cairo, this is nothing new – arms and ammunitions sales have amounted to some \$2 billion, and mutually encouraging rhetoric has helped forge personal ties between Vladimir Putin and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who visited Moscow in August 2014 on his first official foreign visit. Earlier in February 2015, after seizing power

in a coup, Sisi traveled to Russia as his first choice in foreign destinations – a clear message to US authorities that Egypt has “places to go” besides Washington.

But relations with Manama — a longtime stalwart American ally and home to the US Navy's 5th Fleet – are especially interesting to watch. Under its current economic constraints, Russia is considering new sources of income and therefore views Bahrain as a key partner in the Gulf. The bilateral agenda is dominated by energy, investment, and financial concerns. In late October, after Putin and King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa met in Sochi, the two states established their first-ever direct air connection, with Bahrain Gulf Air being the prime carrier, despite the threat that it might fall under US-led sanctions against Russia.

Although it would be premature to presume that Russia is eating America's lunch in the Middle East, public relations is also important in the building of relations. Since Russia cannot boast huge popularity in the Gulf, expanding its economic and information presence in the region could pave the way for cooperation elsewhere. A good public relations strategy and putting focus on communicating interests would go a long way to soothing tense relations in the Gulf and internationally.

At the same time, it must be recognized that in all of Russia's Middle East and foreign policy involvement domestic fine print plays an enormous role. The overwhelming majority of Russian Muslims are Sunnis, whereas Moscow's much-buzzed cooperation with Iran and Syria makes observers assess Russian policies in the Middle East as “pro-Shiite.” Whether it is a correct description or a failure to view Russia's Middle East strategy from outside the box, the Kremlin has to take the issue into account. Therefore, working alongside Egypt and the Sunni leadership of Bahrain and Palestine – whose leader Mahmoud Abbas visited Russia's North Caucasus³⁴ twice – not only expands Russian

³⁴ Mahmoud Abbas' Visit to Karachay-Cherkessia // PONARS Eurasia. – March 22, 2013: <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/article/mahmoud-abbas-visit-karachay-cherkessia>

political and economic horizons but also helps consolidate support for the country's leadership from its own Muslim constituency.

Finally, the recent deal with Iran may too become a new game-changer in the region. The deal is not the culmination but rather the beginning of some serious, complicated, multi-level work for Moscow in its relationship with Tehran where real challenges and opportunities for the Russian state stretch far beyond those sugarcoated in diplomatic courtesy.³⁵ As Iran's influence is likely to grow with the lifting of sanctions, it will most likely attempt to restore its presence in some of the niches Russians have filled over the years. Moscow will have to craft a coherent strategy in order to let the competition acquire an adversarial tint. In a nutshell, although Russian activities in the Middle East after the Arab Spring have been oriented toward specific countries, the country aims at larger systemic effects from its policy in the region.

The Arab Spring has unleashed powerful forces that have been hibernating for decades. Some of these forces are not necessarily constructive and cannot always be controlled. In this sense, it did not make the region more secure or more predictable. The number of interested players multiplied while the relationship between them became less structured and more chaotic. This is the new reality that regional and foreign powers, including Russia, have to recognize. In dealing with such a complicated region, there is definitely no elevator to success; one has to take the stairs.

³⁵ Laura Mills, "Russia Hails Iran Nuclear Deal, But is a Mixed Blessing for Moscow," *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 April 2015

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