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Case Analysis

Russia and the Arabs

The Rise of Pragmatism and the Waning of Ideology

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Introduction

Since the outbreak of the revolutionary activity across the Arab world at the beginning of 2011, Russia has chosen a stance towards these revolutions that can be described as the most circumspect of all international positions. Russia issued no official comment whatsoever on the Tunisian revolution, and warily monitored the fall of its old friend and ally Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. Later, Moscow directly opposed the position taken by most other international players about the need to end Qaddafi's war against his own people, even after the latter had threatened to exterminate every last man and woman. Vladimir Putin went so far as to describe NATO's campaign against Qaddafi as a "crusade". While not giving much attention to the crisis in Yemen, Russia has categorically blocked Western attempts to bring an end to the Assad regime's repression of the popular revolution in Syria.

As it became clear with the progression of the Arab Spring that the revolutions were achieving some measure of success against the authoritative regimes that had traditionally been Russia's allies, Moscow proved unafraid of contradicting its own previous statements. Such switching of tactics, and the combination of political principles with their opposites, have been standards in Russia's pragmatic game since 2000. This formula enabled Russia to transition in a rather astonishing manner from the camp of those solidly opposing change in Libya in March 2011 to that of those demanding Qaddafi's ouster only two months later (in May 2011). In fact, it rushed to open up channels of communication with the National Transitional Council (NTC), considering the latter to be a partner in dialogue; the NTC reciprocated by announcing its commitment to Russia's interests, and stating that it would honor existing contracts in post-Qaddafi Libya.

The Russian media was not slow to pick up on this propensity for double-dealing; a prominent headline at the beginning of June 2011 was "Russia Willing to Recognize the Revolutionaries Without Abandoning Qaddafi". Five months after the establishment of Russia's firm position in support of the Qaddafi regime, President Dimitry Medvedev announced on August 12, 2011 - as the revolutionaries began to emerge victorious in Tripoli - his country's plans to endorse every article of the no-fly resolution over Libya. After the revolutionaries entered Tripoli in early September, Russia rushed to undo damage potentially caused by its initial position, inviting the leader of the NTC to visit Moscow in order to discuss future interests.

In regard to Syria, Russia began by rejecting any international attempt to condemn the regime (in March and April 2011) and adopting Damascus's description of the opposition as a collection of armed extremist gangs. However, two months later, Moscow's position was revised to support the opposition, actively endorsing and officially extending friendship to the Syrian people rather than placing its bets on transient regimes. In September 2011, Russia took on the guise of the

wise politician, warning Damascus that “the international community’s patience [had been] exhausted.”

In the international arena, Russia continued campaign of diplomacy; at the beginning of October 2011, along with China, it used its veto to kill a UN Security Council resolution condemning the Syrian regime. The very next day, meanwhile, Moscow issued a statement declaring that the Syrian leadership should resign if unable to resolve the crisis in its own country.

In light of these unpredictable policies, many have questioned Russia’s staunch early support of Arab regimes, a position that seemed to pay little heed to the ambitions and motivations of those populating the region. Why, subsequently, did Russia suddenly shift its position to straddle the fence, hedging its bets in the direction of future benefits? Does the Russian position simply reflect the outcome of short-sighted calculations based on immediate circumstances, or is it rather an indication of a more enduring stance vis-a-vis the Arab people? How does Russia evaluate potential gains and losses? And, does the priority of restructuring its own domestic affairs have anything to do with Moscow’s wary attitude toward the Arab revolutionary movements?

This paper argues that the Russian position (initially negative, but more recently, increasingly pragmatic) toward the changes in the Arab world is governed by several factors. Among these are historical legacy, geopolitical calculations, a sense of ideological crisis, and cautious misgivings from the secretive ruling elite.

Historical legacy

While the Russians have been global players on the international political scene since the tenth century CE, Russia’s foreign policy relations with the Arab world, in the official sense, only developed after the end of the First World War. For the ten centuries preceding the rise of the Soviet Union, the relations between the Arabs and Russia were mediated by the presence of Islam, which had been adopted by some of the people of the Volga, Ural, Siberia, Turkistan and the Caucasus regions.¹

¹ On the roots of Russia’s relations with Islam, see the journey of Ibn Fadlan, who arrived in Bulgarian territories in 921 CE: Bin Fadlan, Ahmad *The Journey*, edited by Shaker Luaibi (Abu Dhabi: Dar al-Suwaidi, 2003). In more recent history, there is the clash between Russia and Islamic opposition movements. See:

Gammer, M. *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar: Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnia and Daghestan*, London: Frank Cass & Co, 1994.

Prior to the Soviet era, there were no official relations between Russia and the Arab world, in contrast to the well-developed relations between the Arab world and Iran and Turkey (the Ottoman Empire). The Arab world, under Ottoman rule since the sixteenth century CE, was the object of very limited Russian attention. Issues of mutual concern between both sides were limited to cultural matters, such as the religious pilgrimages undertaken by Muslim and Christian Russian pilgrims, who would cross by land over the Arab Mashriq to reach holy sites in Palestine and the Arabian peninsula. Moreover, the Russian Orthodox church was known to be a protector of Orthodox Christians in Syria and Palestine before the Ottomans. Commerce and trade projects between Russia and the Arabs were very limited. However, Russian consuls were posted in the cities of Lattakia, Aleppo and Beirut from the 1830s onwards, and dozens of Orthodox religious schools were established in these cities and others, under Russian sponsorship.²

After the Bolshevik revolution, the Communists began to show more interest in the Arabs, based on the revolutionary categories proposed by Lenin in 1920. According to Lenin, the Arab world was classified within the third category, which included oppressed people burdened by foreign colonialism who sought a champion to aid them on the path toward liberation. However, the interest paid to the Arabs was relatively insignificant, with communist energies mainly focused on regions falling into the first of Lenin's categories (the working class of the advanced industrialized countries of Western Europe), and, to a lesser degree, on the second category (the bourgeois democratic movements in Eastern Europe). Eventually, even this glimmer of Russian interest in the Arab world dissipated as Moscow became caught up in the struggle over Europe between the two world wars, and also because no Arab political class emerged from the anti-colonial independence movement that Russia could support.³

After the Second World War, the Arab nationalist movement succeeded in capturing Soviet Russia's attention once again. In this movement, Moscow found a partner suited to its attempts to wage a proxy war against capitalist imperialist power. Some Russian communists expressed their doubts early on about the Arab unification movement, considering it to be a "tactical move by reactionary forces". Nevertheless, they also acknowledged that the Arab unification movement posed less of a threat to Russia than the Islamist or Jewish unification movements.⁴

² Kreutz, A, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* (London: Praeger Security International. 2007), p. 2.

³ Ibid, p.6

⁴ Walter Lacoer, *The Soviet Union and the Arab World*, Beirut: al-Maktab al-Tijari lil-Tibaa, 1959. Pgs. 45, 57, 118.

Following the tripartite attack of 1956, Soviet Russian relations with the Arab world began to advance rapidly. It could be argued that their common ground in the modern era was fundamentally military in nature; the Czechoslovakian weapons deal (which was, in fact, a Soviet deal) to Abdel Nasser's Egypt in 1955 was the launching point of relations between the two sides.⁵

The approach being adopted by today's Russia is a pragmatic one; Russian pragmatism toward the Arab world in fact has deep roots (as compared with the ideological approach it took during the Soviet era). In describing relations with the leader of the Arab nationalist movement, Khrushchev said, "Abdel Nasser is no communist; in fact, he throws communists in prison, but I understand him and he understands me, and we support him because he is a nationalist leader who expresses the hopes of his nation".⁶

The reality of the Cold War's juxtaposition of the communist and capitalist camps mandated the Soviet Union's support and prioritization of the Arab world, despite the region's lack of capitalist and bourgeois development, and also its lack of social and economic groups in which the communist model could be established. These factors played a role in the breakdown of the Soviet model in the Arab world after the 1967 defeat, which was a blow to the perceived might of Russia's military and economic presence in the Arab world.

Although there had been extensive Soviet activity in Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s, Arab-Russian relations were greatly dampened when Anwar al-Sadat suddenly and radically moved toward the American camp and dismissed the Soviet experts from the Egyptian army. The relations between the Arab world and Russia declined to the point of being limited to the Arab Mashriq, specifically with Iraq and Syria. The latter took over the leadership of the steadfastness and resistance effort in opposition to Israel after the signing of the Camp David agreement.

Contrary to the popular view that Soviet Russia's weight in the Arab world collapsed with Operation Desert Storm in 1991, the reality is that it had begun to weaken almost a decade before this, when the Soviet Union took the position of distant observer toward the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the subsequent siege of Beirut. Gorbachev's rise to the head of the party in 1985, and his focus on internal reforms, led to a complete Soviet withdrawal from the Middle East. The Madrid Peace Conference of 1991 coincided with the Russian acknowledgement of American hegemony over the policies of the Arab world in general, and the Palestinian cause specifically. The legitimate heir to the Soviet Union (the Russian Federation) emerged onto the international

⁵ Ibid, 265.

⁶ Alexei Vassiliev, *Russia in the Far and Middle East*, translated by the Arab Center of Journalism, and edited by Hamdi Abdul Hafiz (Moscow, 2001), p. 189, 194, 372.

political scene crippled by internal problems, and devoid of any ideological attraction or motivation. As a result, Russia lost its favored status vis-a-vis the Arabs, becoming just one of many regions and international forces seeking to forge military and economic alliances with the Arab world.

When the seasoned politician Yevgeny Primakov rose to his position as Foreign Minister in 1996, and later as Prime Minister in 1998, Russian interest in the Arab world returned to the forefront. This reignited interest did not spring merely from appreciation of the geopolitical position of the Arab world, but also from Primakov's national vision - drawn from the heyday of the Soviet era - which saw Russia as an international pioneer on the global political stage.⁷

The events of September 11, 2001 and the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to restrictions on Russia's interests in the Arab world. Various forms of collaboration and cooperation were frozen, becoming limited to weapons deals and oil and natural gas drilling concessions in the Western Sahara. Despite the geopolitical losses that struck Russia following the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and the growing tensions in the Arabian Gulf, these same events also generated vast wealth for Russia, as the conflict drove up the price of oil and natural gas. Russian wages have risen by 75% in the past decade, and poverty levels have been halved due to a surplus in the federal budget, which has led to increased popularity and civilian trust in the Kremlin's leadership.⁸

Further complicating Russian-Arab relations is the interwoven and yet diffuse nature of Arab opinion, which cannot be represented by one voice; in contrast, Russia has only one official perspective, as expressed by the Kremlin. There is no single Arab stance toward any issue in Arab countries; each Arab state has more than one public position, deriving from the multiplicity of local and regional dynamics.

Russia's position vis-a-vis the Arab revolutions

Western attitudes towards the Arab revolutions have been characterized by pragmatism, if not to say opportunism. It is in the interest of the post-colonial policies of Western countries in relation to the Arab world to keep authoritarian regimes in power, as they uphold agreements and treaties unilaterally and without consulting their populace. A new Arab world founded on democracy is, by all measures, of concern to former colonizers. When Western decision-makers turn against Arab leaders in support of the opposition, they are merely hastening to guarantee a

⁷ For more details, see: Primakov, Y, *Russia and the Arabs*. (New York: Basic Books, 2009)

⁸ Kreutz, A, Op. Cit., p. 5.

place for themselves in these countries' futures, (on the belief that every dictator will face a moment of reckoning when his crimes are exposed).

Russia's line of thinking is not too far off this track, the difference being that it neither sings the praises of democracy nor applies it internally, and similarly does not demand it of any other party in the international arena. Thus, the starting point in understanding Russia's chilly attitude toward the Arab Spring is the recognition that there is no actual conflict between its strategic interests and the long-term goals of the West. Russia's disagreement with the West is over methods and tactical mechanisms. It is quite obvious that Moscow, like other global centers of power, hopes for a stable, authoritarian Arab world that will not oppose its interests in the long-term.

In short, one can say that the Russian attitude to the Arab revolutionary movements is defined by two major factors: internal struggles, and fear of revolutionary contagion.

Internal Russian struggles

Since 2000, the ruling regime in Russia has been characterized by its extreme conservatism. It does not endorse any revolutionary projects, and has adopted an incremental policy-making program that moves extremely slowly, albeit steadily. Rather than Western-style democracy, the regime in Russia embraces what it calls "constitutional democracy". This is derived from the concept of the state of institutions, based on respect for the authority and legitimacy of ruling bodies, with vast power placed in the presidency – not entirely dissimilar from a totalitarian system. In turn, this power-controlling regime offers its population the promise of real progress toward improving social and economic structures, with the goal of returning Russia to a position of global leadership once again.⁹

Russia's reception of the struggle for democracy in the Arab world has been chilly, as has its attitude toward the battle against corruption accompanying the downfall of the various ruling regimes. This is not very surprising when one considers several specific aspects of Russia's domestic situation over the past decade.

Russia is the last country that could credibly advocate democracy in the Arab world, or anywhere else, for that matter. Both inside and outside its borders, Russian officials have tampered with

⁹ See Atef Motamad, "Putin's Russia...Reviews at a Crossroads", Aljazeera.net, March 3, 2004. <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/E7229B7E-16DE-48F9-80D1-12F2304B2F20.htm>

parliamentary elections, and actively concentrated power in the ruling party (the United Russia Party). The arrangement of the transition of power has been effected by striking deals, distributing interests, restricting the media, and arresting (sometimes then eliminating) dissidents. Consequently, corruption has spread at a rate that marks Russia as one of the most corrupt nations in the world, with a soaring economic gap between the rich and the poor.

More than a third of Russians consider the ruling party to be a party of crooks and thieves. They have little choice, however, but to trust in the present government - not out of a sense of conviction and contentment, but rather in the desperate hope that stability will continue.¹⁰ This situation bears similarities to that in many Arab states (including, among others, Egypt), whose ruling regimes had struck a tacit deal with the silent majority whereby the regime monopolized political and economic power in exchange for promises to ameliorate living conditions.¹¹

Russia suffers from a pathology that perceives a dichotomy between democracy on the one hand, and decent living standards and economic levels on the other. In the 1990s, a liberalized outlook and democratic climate were accompanied by economic plundering of the state, a drop in living standards and shocking economic crises. On the other hand, the totalitarian rule of the first decade of the twenty-first century brought economic stability, higher standards of living and a rise in salaries and welfare benefits. Popular expressions emerged to express this juxtaposition, in which the Russian people distinguished between democracy and poverty versus totalitarianism and luxury, to the extent that the choice became one between bread and freedom. This has led some members of the Russian opposition to state that “the model that is ruling Russia today [the Medvedev-Putin duo] is no different from the Communist era, which was also dominated by a one-party rule, a totalitarian economy, the militarization of the state and the cult of the individual [a reference to Stalinism].”¹²

Moscow believes in the Russian sufficiency principle, considering itself to be more self-sustaining than other nations, and is therefore uninterested in applying or copying European models. The most salient characteristic of Russian sufficiency is the country’s healthy supply of self-confidence, accompanied by a deep-rooted sense of entitlement to gratitude from the Western alliance and European states for having saved Europe from the Nazis and liberated

¹⁰ Dmitri Trenin et al, "Russia in Mid-2011", *Carnegie Moscow Center*. June 22, 2011. http://carnegieendowment.org/files/russia_in_2011.pdf

¹¹ For more details, see Graeme Herd, “The Great Arab Revolution: Challenges, dilemmas and Opportunities?” http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/GCSP_TheGreatArabRevolt_ChallengesDilemmasOpportunities.pdf

¹² For more details, see Atef Motamad, “Russia’s Reprisal of its Global Polar Role...The Crisis of Transition” (Beirut: Arab Scientific Publishers and Al-Jazeera Center for Studies, 2009)

major European capitals from Hitler's invasions. The collective memory of this, experienced firsthand by older cohorts of communist elders, and echoed by succeeding generations of young Russians, does not place the Western democratic model in a favorable light.

The ruling party in Russia finds many excuses for its adoption of an undemocratic and totalitarian system. Among the most significant of such excuses are the country's ethnic and religious divides, as well as the great geographical distance between the provinces and the seat of government; both factors aggravate the danger of separation and secession in various regions. Several nationalist groups within Russia (particularly the Slavic ones) find themselves accepting the rule of the iron fist and agreeing to a centralized and totalitarian state in exchange for the state's maintenance of control of the vast country, wary that democratic change may bring about demands for separation, secession and the demise of the federal structure.¹³ One of the flaws of the Russian federal system is that it is constructed on the logic of the predominant ethnic majority (the same failing that eventually shattered the Soviet Union), which perhaps explains why the Russian federal union remains nothing but a hypothesis, unsuitable for actual implementation and incapable of adapting to a democratic model.

Fear of revolutionary contagion

While Arab revolutionaries were taken aback by Russia's unenthusiastic and wary attitude toward their struggle, many of them remain unaware of the internal particularities of Russian politics. The most significant of these is the Kremlin's extreme concern over the potential arrival of similar revolutions at its own doorstep. The Arab and Russian paradigms share many similarities: totalitarian regimes, power transfer arrangements whereby power is exchanged between a small handful of military and intelligence officers, glaring polarization of power, and unfair distribution of services between the center and the provinces.

Opponents of the Kremlin inside Russia found in the Arab Spring the opportune moment to spark revolutions within Russian territories. Some went so far as to assert that their country has in common with the Arab world the deterioration of many basic standards of living. Examples are the erosion of intellectual circles, the decline in the quality of human life in general, political oppression, taxing consequences of war, and bloody conflicts in the separatist regions. Those calling for revolution in Russia expect the revolution to save them from the continuing deterioration of the "genetic supply" of the nation: the brain drain to Europe, the US and Israel, combined with the spread of drug and alcohol abuse throughout the nation. They believe that a

¹³ For the map of the Russian Federation, see, Yannis Tourlays, *Atlas of Russia and the World* (Moscow: Rosman Publication House, 1989), p.14

Russian Spring corresponding to the Arab Spring could restore the chances of meaningful engagement between the people and the regime.

Significantly, the Arab Spring coincided with a wide-ranging Russian conference on the twentieth-year anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some participants affirmed that Russia was heading for the same fate as the Soviet Union, which had also been formed of states of differing ethnicities, religions and ambitions. Russia is a complicated vessel that forces together a wide variety of republics and regions within the boundaries of its tenuous union.¹⁴

Some scholars, such as Yevgeny Satanovsky, argue that the revolutionary movements in the Arab world could have a direct influence on the republics of Tataristan and Bashkortostan deep in the Russian heartland, with Islamist and nationalist fervor spreading into these two regions.¹⁵ This account takes into consideration the fact that the two republics seem to be pursuing a peaceful democratic pathway similar to that of Tunisian and Egyptian revolutionaries, in contrast to the bellicose and confrontational stance of the Chechen Republic in the Caucasus.¹⁶

However, the repercussions of the Arab revolutions may not be confined to the Islamic nationalist republics in the Russian heartland or the Caucasus. They could, in fact, engender a chauvinistic counter-response from Russian groups seeking, rather than to promote democracy, to instill a form of neo-Nazi fascist nationalism (particularly after the decline of the dream of Slavic national unity). This could lead to xenophobic attacks against immigrants and non-Russian ethnic groups, and fears that Russia is experiencing demographic erosion in relation to ethnicity.¹⁷

Fortunately for Russia, the Arab Spring seems to have been slightly delayed. Following the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), the peaceful popular protest which was suppressed by the police state in Uzbekistan (2005), and the two successive revolutions in the Kyrgyz Republic (2005 and 2010), Russia has gained considerable experience in dealing with the popular protests at its borders in Central Asia, the Caucasus and Eastern Europe. Russian leaders are certain that these protests have received financial and political

¹⁴ See the intervention by **the editorial director** of the Russian **Mir** magazine **Georgy Bovt** “Twenty years since the collapse of the Soviet Union. What next?” on the Russian *New Region* website, June 11, 2011. <http://www.nr2.ru/moskow/335092.html>

¹⁵ Kavkaz Centre, “Arab revolutions to revitalize Islamic movements of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan”, March 30, 2011. <http://www.kavkaz.tv/eng/content/2011/03/30/13989.shtml>

¹⁶ For more on the differences between the Chechen and Tataristani approaches, see Atef Motamad, “Russian Islam between confrontation and conciliation”, *Aljazeera.net*, 5/10/2004. www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/36944F13-E413-4633-8307-3827ED86ED32.htm

¹⁷ Bilan, V, “What Awaits Russia if a National Revolution Wins Out?”, *New Eastern Outlook*, Feb. 02. 2011.

support from the United States and other Western nations. Fortunately for Moscow, these revolutions have all failed, not one of them succeeding in achieving its people's dreams of increased prosperity and freedom from external interference. Thus, not only does Russia consider the Arab Spring to have arrived late, it also perceives its odds of success to be no better than those of previous similar experiments on (or near) its own soil.

By dint of the Kremlin's monopolization of the press, in force since Vladimir Putin's ascent to power in Russia in 2000, the Arab revolutions have inevitably been portrayed in a negative light. The Russian media, most prominently TV Channel 5 and *Izvestiya* (a news channel) refrained from using the word "revolution" to describe the ongoing events in the Arab world; instead, they used words like "upheavals", "protests" and "clashes", portraying events more as civil conflicts than as popular revolutionary uprisings. The Russian media broadcast statements made by President Dimitry Medvedev, in which he described the events in the Arab world by saying, "these states are difficult, and it is quite probable that hard times are ahead, including the arrival at power of fanatics. This will mean fires for decades and the spread of extremism", going on to suggest that these countries would become dwarf versions of city-states.¹⁸ Similar perspectives were disseminated by officials predicting that "Libya and Syria will become havens for terrorists", after Libyan revolutionaries entered Tripoli and the conflict in Syria worsened.

Those propagating these views support them with political analyses that interpret the ongoing events in the Arab world as elitist or "top-down" movements, and claim that the Arab Spring is really nothing but a series of coups against the various incumbent powers. Russian international relations expert Leonid Sokianin argues that "using the word 'revolution' to talk about what is going on in the Arab world is somewhat exaggerated, and gives a positive sheen to the events in that region; however, the matter is really nothing more than a conflict between political elites and between those who support or oppose the president in each Arab state."¹⁹

In the viewpoint of Russia's statesmen, if the Arab revolts were not an active American conspiracy, then they certainly rode in on the back of the new American stallion, social networking. The Internet websites that contributed to the success of the revolts, particularly Facebook, Twitter and Google, are all American technological products enabled by cheap mobile phones produced in China and widely available across the Arab world.²⁰

¹⁸ Etling, B, "The Russian Media Ecosystem and the Arab Spring, *Mediacloud.org*, May 2, 2011.

¹⁹ On *Deutsche Welle*, in an interview with Leonid Sokianin titled, "Russia and the Arab revolutions...Neutrality and the Language of Interests", May 14, 2011
dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,15085940,00.html

²⁰ Greg Lindsay, "Arab Revolutions Using Chinese Mobile Phones", on the *webplanet* website, June 20, 2011.
http://www.webplanet.ru/knowhow/gadgets/cm_silence/2011/06/20/chinese_phones.html

These analysts claim that the revolutions succeeded due to virtual activists who infiltrated the Web, created relevant webpages, and unrealistically inflated the numbers of subscribers. They openly speculate as to whether it is in fact merely coincidental that Wael Ghoneim (the activist who helped spread word of the Egyptian revolution on the Internet) is a manager at Google's Middle East offices.

Interestingly, the pro-regime gangs that have surfaced in the Arab world today, willing to set their countries alight and physically attack revolutionaries, have similar Russian counterparts. Since 2005, the Kremlin has taken pre-emptive steps to respond to the possibility of any revolutions (following the Orange Revolution in Ukraine) to organize these groups under the direct supervision of the Russian president (then, Vladimir Putin). The groups are formed of gangs of Russian school-age youth and university students who have been brought together and told that they are fighting Western imperialism and defending Russia; that "Russia is only for Russians", as well as other ultra-nationalist, chauvinistic slogans.

The most influential of these groups inside Russia is called Nashi, meaning "our men" or "our followers". Some warn jokingly that Nashi is nothing but the Russian version of "Nazi". However, oddly enough, this youth movement so closely resembling Nazi youth organizations in fact operates under a banner of anti-fascism. Who, then, are the fascists in Russia? The members of Nashi respond: "all the traitors and agents and opponents of Vladimir Putin".²¹ This is reminiscent of the words of the ruling party in Egypt, which accused those opposing the gas deal with Israel of being "agents" and "traitors to the nation".

For the past two years, wary of (yet preparing for) internal revolts, current Russian president Dimitry Medvedev has issued statements with strong echoes of past decisions taken by the Egyptian, Syrian, and Tunisian regimes, such as considering all non-governmental organizations which receive Western funding to be institutions of espionage, and considering any gathering or show of dissent to be a crime against the nation-state. As the Arab revolutionary movements gained strength, President Medvedev addressed a gathering of the highest security officials in Vladikavkaz, close to the conflicted Caucasus region: "Let us face facts. They [the Western powers] are plotting the same scenario for Russia, and they will do everything in their power to execute this".²²

Also, as in the Arab world, the Russian government is attempting to divide and dismantle the opposition in several ways, one of which is through accusations that the opposition is conspiring

²¹ Belov, O, "Nashi Versus Nazi: Anti-Fascist activity as a means of mass youth mobilization in contemporary Russia", *Anthropology of East Europe Review*. 2008, Volume 26, No. 2, p. 48-55

²² Abdullaev, N, "Kremlin Sees Peril in Arab Unrest", *Moscow Times*, Feb. 24, 2011.

with the West. Other methods are co-opting and reproducing the opposition's ideas, attempting to seduce opposition figures with the lure of powerful leadership roles, and sully the reputations of individuals vying for official positions. The result of all this is that, today, the number of Russian opposition figures can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

3. Geopolitical Considerations

Russia's relations with the Arab world for the past two decades stem from three primary geopolitical considerations, as described below.

The world-system crisis

Russia's foreign policy derives from its perception that the world has been in transition since the collapse of the Soviet Union; it does not accept the idea that a unipolar superpower has ruled the world during this period. While recognizing its own technological disadvantage as compared with other world powers, Moscow is confident in its ability to overcome this shortcoming through the intellectual resources and capabilities of its people.²³ Meanwhile, Russia is concerned about America's stated aim to promote democracy throughout the world, believing that "in their attempts to export democracy, Americans, with their ignorance of history and the realities of the countries they are targeting, are like the Trotskyists, who demanded to export the proletarian revolution across the world, whether or not these countries met the necessary revolutionary conditions."²⁴

Perhaps the biggest dilemma of the global systems crisis in the post-Cold War era is that the diminishing of Russia's geostrategic status over the past two decades has led to its being surrounded on all fronts by global crises. The war in Afghanistan, the cross-border struggle between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the NATO airstrikes that depart from the Baltic states and from military bases in Central Asia, Turkey, and Eastern Europe, the attack on Serbia along with support for Kosovan independence, and the European military's control of the Mediterranean and the Arabian Gulf are all examples of such crises.

In October 2011, when Russia used its veto in the Security Council to thwart the American-European project to condemn the Syrian regime, it clearly demonstrated its opposition to the transformation of the Security Council into an arena for the practice of international hegemony

²³ Yevgeny Primakov, "The World Without Russia...Political Shortsightedness and its Consequences", translated by Abdallah Hassan (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 2010) p. 17, 35.

²⁴ Ibid, 49.

(or rather, that it opposes and will hamper the imposition of such hegemony). Russia is attempting to achieve this by bringing together a new global alliance consisting of the BRICS countries (an acronym formed with the first letters of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). The BRICS nations all stood by the Syrian regime in the Security Council in October 2011: Russia and China used their vetoes, and India, Brazil and South Africa abstained from voting, thereby refusing to condemn the regime.

In this phase, during which the future of Russia and the future of the global system remain undefined, Moscow is placing the Arab world in its real place in Russia's strategic security circles. The Arab world, for all its revolts and stagnation, will not cross beyond the fourth circle of Russia's strategic security concerns. The troubled Caucasus and the separatist ethnic enclaves within Russia form the first circle, the post-Soviet Union independent states are the second, and China, India, Iran, Turkey, Greece, the Balkans, and Central Europe form a large set that make up the third national security circle.

Faced with the difficulty of looking southwards toward the Arab world and the Middle East, Russia has instead directed its foreign policy efforts of the last year toward the Asia-Pacific axis. There are a number of reasons for this, the most important being the need to develop underprivileged regions in Russia's Asian landmass, eastwards through the Ural mountains and Siberia and continuing until the Kuril islands and the Chinese and Alaskan borders. Another possible reason is Russia's attempt to capitalize on China's economic ascendancy - especially given that in 2010, China took over from Germany as the Russian Federation's biggest trading partner, becoming technologically competitive with South Korea and Japan.

In this new strategic plan, Russian experts admit that the country has few interests in the Arab world; in this region, it reacts to America's military behavior without having to take actual proactive measures.²⁵

On the other hand, Russia has enjoyed improved relations with the United States since President Obama's election. Some observers suggest that this has to do, in part, with the fact that Obama has listened to his advisors' suggestions that "if you want to win over the Russians in foreign policy and to put an end to their attacks on you, you should stop accusing them of violating human rights (in Chechnya for example) and you should stop giving them lessons in democracy".²⁶

²⁵ Dmitri Trenin & al. (2011), Op. Cit.

²⁶ Lilia Shevstova, "Seeking the Light", *Novaya Gazeta*, April 22, 2011.

This glimpse into the global dimension of Russia's position towards the Arab revolutions cannot be complete without taking into consideration Russia's relations with Israel. Over one million Israelis are of Russian or Soviet origin, and 5-6 million Russian families have relatives or friends in Israel. Some Russian analysts affirm that the current government, unlike Soviet leadership in the past, has no interest in isolating Israel (in case the Arab Spring should succeed). This is particularly relevant in light of the strong cooperation between Moscow and Tel Aviv on terror-related issues, and their shared awareness of the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism, which is threatening Southern Russia as well as Russia's vital interests in Central Asia.²⁷

Military ballasts

After the United States, Russia is second in the world in exporting weapons.²⁸ Furthermore, while the United State's exports are split somewhat evenly between developed and developing nations, 90 percent of Russia's clients are developing nations.²⁹ One of the paradoxes of Russia's arms trade in the Arab world is that its successful marketing of weapons is due in great part to campaigns that disseminate fear, frightening the various factions in conflicts across the Arab world and to the work of intelligence agencies that encourage confrontation between opposing groups. Here, Russia's arms traders and manufacturers, themselves not sufficiently adept at these campaigns, benefit greatly from the efforts made by the United States in this domain.

The Arab world is the second-largest market of Russian weapons (15 percent) after the developing Asian states, which receive 62 percent of Russia's arms exports. Russia is also the chief exporter of weapons to Africa, and second only to the United States in the Asian and South American markets. Following the collapse of Communism and the increased Western influence over Arab policies, Russia's weapons exports to the Arab world have receded to fourth place, after the US, the United Kingdom and France.³⁰

A look back at the wars that have broken out in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War proves that the final word in conflict resolution has been written by navy warships and military bases from overseas. Here, Russia is hobbled by the weakness of its capabilities in global maneuver weapons. Its naval capabilities cannot be compared to their Western or American

²⁷ Dzieciolowski Z. "Russia and the Middle East: Post-Soviet flux". 13 Aug. 2006.

http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-middle_east_politics/russia_policy_3817.jsp

²⁸ Grimmett. R, "CRS Report for Congress; Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2000-2007", October 23, 2008. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/RL34723.pdf>

²⁹ Nup. S, "The Arms Trade is Big Business", *Global Issues*, November 09, 2009.

<http://www.globalissues.org/article/74/the-arms-trade-is-big-business>

³⁰ Nup S, *ibid*.

counterparts, particularly the American Sixth Fleet (deployed in the Mediterranean since the 1940s, initially on the pretext of combating the communist threat against Turkey, Iran, and Southeastern Europe).

Historically, the Russian navy has consisted of four branches: the Northern Fleet, the Pacific Fleet, the Baltic Fleet and the Black Sea Fleet. The first three are quite distant from the region's hot points, and the Fourth Fleet is almost trapped in the Black Sea. It does not risk entering the zone of the US Sixth Fleet, which has sole purview over a vast region stretching eastwards from the Suez Canal to the Guinea Bay in Western Africa.

Has Russia been unaware of the importance of having a fleet in the Arabian waters of the Mediterranean Sea? Russian historian and Orientalist Alexei Vassiliev responds: “the global strategic need for a Soviet fleet was clear to the Soviet military leadership since the 1930s, but the geographical situation of a mainland state, and the weakness of its industrial base, and the military capabilities on the eve of World War II all imposed limits on the size of the Soviet military fleet, and confined its use to the support of land operations.”³¹

Even at the height of its Soviet glory, Moscow had no designs on anything from the Arab world aside from military concessions and fuel reservoirs for its military ships in Egypt (in the ports of Port Said, Alexandria, Mersa Matrouh, and Salloum). Syria's Lattakia port was the Soviet favorite, with the port of Aden in Yemen being the most strategic one they had access to, situated near Somalia's Berbera port. The Arab world benefitted from this Soviet maritime presence; one of the weapons that won the 1973 October war, the floating bridges on which the Egyptians crossed the Suez Canal, was facilitated through Soviet maritime support.³²

Through the context of history, a clearer picture of Russia's anxiety over Moscow's losses due to the Arab revolutions (approximately 10 billion dollars' worth of weapons to Egypt, Algeria, and Libya) emerges.³³ Moscow's deals with Libya alone were worth approximately 4 billion dollars, including agreements to purchase new weapons and modernize the military structures that had been built during the Soviet era.³⁴ Before Qaddafi's fall, Gazprom had gained control of 33% of

³¹ Alexei Vassiliev, *Ibid.* 122, 130.

³² *Ibid.*, 150.

³³ Jacob W. Kipp, “Moscow Responds to the Arab Revolutions: Focus on Libya”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 8 Issue: 80, April 25, 2011.

http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=37832&cHash=dce03709fc775520edc8f5b9d9eb7833

³⁴ From *Novaya Gazeta*, 1 March 2011.

Italian gas company ENI's share of Libya's oil and gas fields.³⁵ As events accelerated in Libya, Russia withdrew its citizens employed in the oil and infrastructure sectors, including those who had been working on the installation of Libya's first railroad.³⁶

When the revolutionaries succeeded in entering Tripoli, the head of Libya's National Transitional Council, Mustafa Abdul Jalil, confirmed Russian fears with a statement on September 8, 2011. He announced that while he thanked Russia for not vetoing the UN Security Council resolution imposing a no-fly zone over Libya, this did not mean that future relations between Libya and Russia would not be subject to review, particularly regarding the arms trade, stipulating that "the NTC's decision to honor all previous contracts with all states does not mean that these contracts will not be reviewed, since they were made in an era of corruption and the prices may have been fixed". Russian analysts responded that this statement indicated the intention of Libya's NTC to buy weapons from the states that had helped to topple Qaddafi, at the head of which was France, followed by the United Kingdom, Italy and the United States.

Despite its current losses, Russia will benefit in the short term from the Arab revolutions, which have raised the price of Russian oil by approximately 30%. In the long term, if the spirit of revolution should spread to a country like Algeria, causing the Algerian gas supply to Europe to be compromised, this will also be to Russia's advantage, as it will then have a near-monopoly on the European demand for gas. Such a monopoly could double the Russian annual budget. On the other hand, this rapid flow of funds into the Russian economy could put it at the risk of inflation, much as the spreading scope of the Arab revolutions could provoke a global economic crisis.³⁷

The religious factor

Russia's population numbers approximately 145 million; for the past two decades, Russia has been suffering from a demographic crisis characterized by declining population rates due to various factors, including the deterioration of health services, and brain drain. There are 23 to 25 million Muslims in Russia, constituting 16-17% of the total population. Given this demographic reality, together with Russia's deep historical ties with the Islamic world, it is unsurprising that

³⁵ "Arab Spring' Bad news for Russian Arms Industry", *Intelligence Briefing*, June 14, 2011.

http://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/wtarc/2011/eu_russia0729_06_14.asp

³⁶ From *Kommersant*, April 7, 2011.

³⁷ Ivanov.E , "Consequences of the 'Arab Uprising'", 15 March 15, 2011.

<http://www.russiaotherpointsofview.com/2011/03/consequences-of-the-arab-uprising-.html>

the nation was granted permanent observer status at the 32nd meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which was held in Sana'a on June 30, 2005.³⁸

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the religious element has had an increasingly strong effect on Russia's relations with the Arab world. During the first Chechen War (1992-1994) and the second one (1999-2003), Russia directly accused states in the Arabian peninsula of supporting the Chechen separatist movement with money and manpower. After September 11, 2001, and following accusations of funding global terror, some Arab countries stopped funneling support to Chechnya. The most significant sign of this was that the Arab media, particularly in the Gulf, stopped broadcasting reports vilifying Russia or accusing it of committing genocide or ethnic cleansing in the Caucasus.

After the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Russian Muslim empathy for the Iraqi people intersected with the Kremlin's official attack on Western forces. The mobilization of populist Islamist sentiment almost got out of hand, but Moscow took control of the reins, forcing Imam Talat Tajuddin to resign from his post as the Chief of Religious Operations in Siberia and Russia's European sector due to his call for *jihad* and his exhortation to Russia's Muslims to volunteer for combat. This news coincided with reports in the Western press that British and American troops had captured Chechen and Dagestani fighters in Basra and Baghdad.

In October 2005, during the furor over the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad, the Russian leadership criticized the Western states that had published these images, requesting that they issue apologies. The Kremlin imposed a media ban on reproducing the images in the Russian press, out of respect for its Muslim citizens. When the Russian newspaper *Gorodskiye vesti* in Volgograd defied the ban, the Russian authorities confiscated copies of the newspaper and shut down its offices.³⁹

However, the care taken by Russia to manage its relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds has not always been successful. In December 2008 and January 2009, when Israel launched a destructive war against the besieged population of Gaza, many in the Arab world looked to Russia, expecting it to take proactive measures to alleviate the crisis. Russia not only averted its eyes from the conflict, but even stated officially that it "worried about the frightening images coming out of Gaza, but we also acknowledge Israel's right to self-defense."⁴⁰

³⁸ Kreutz, A, Op. Cit., p. 8.

³⁹ Ibid, 6

⁴⁰ Atef Motamad, "Arab-Russian relations in light of international transformations", working paper given at the meeting on Arab-Russian relations, Al-Jazeera Center for Research, Doha, February 2009.

Russia continues to pursue selective, often-contradictory practices in religious matters. In August 2008, it placed the Muslim Brotherhood on the list of terrorist organizations which pose a threat to Russian national security. At the same time, it has warmly welcomed Hamas leaders in Moscow. Later, after the role the Muslim Brotherhood played during the Egyptian revolution (January-February 2011), Russia went on to welcome the beginning of direct talks with the organization through their new Freedom and Justice party.⁴¹

It seems that Russia does not have a consistent attitude toward all Arab religious movements; while the ascendancy of the Brotherhood in Egypt is not of particular concern to Moscow, the same organization's increasing prominence in Syria constitutes a direct threat to Russian interests and projects in the Arab East.

Conclusion and results

From January until the beginning of October 2011, Russia maintained a relatively negative, conservative attitude towards the Arab revolutionary movements. This has gradually transformed into a more pragmatic stance, as the revolutionary forces have met with success. Similarly, Russia's support for ruling regimes has become less emphatic. Its specific attitudes have ranged from that of indifference (Yemen), to wary observation (Tunisia), to anxious monitoring (Egypt), to avoidance and denouncement (Libya), to the blocking of international intervention while simultaneously demanding rapid internal reforms (Syria).

This historical overview has shown that, over the course of one thousand years, Russian-Arab relations have been characterized by a rhythm of ebb and flow. These relations were strongest in the 1950s and the 1960s, when Russia played a central role in improving infrastructure in various sectors across the Arab world, in addition to being important on a cultural level. The 1970s marked the beginning of a continuous downward trajectory of Russia's role in the Arab world, which, since 1991, has now disappeared almost completely. Russia's foreign policy toward the Arab world in recent years has come to be defined by reaction and the avoidance of meaningful initiatives.

A review of Russia's position throughout the twentieth century towards the unitary, nationalist, and revolutionary Arab movements indicates its skeptical outlook vis-a-vis the Arab world. This outlook sees the Arab people as impotent, shackled by their inability to become autonomous from colonial powers, and still acting according to foreign agendas (whether British, French or American). Russian experts filled the media with commentary to the effect that 2011's Arab

⁴¹ From the Russian news agency RIA Novosti, August 2, 2011.

Spring was nothing but a Jewish or American conspiracy to take over the Middle East by fostering chaos and expunging from the political field tyrants who had outlived their usefulness.⁴²

Russia's stance towards the Arab revolutionary movement is dictated by the following motivations and limitations:

1. The nature of the authoritarian structure of the Russian state, which seeks to impose its grip on extremist, separatist, or otherwise rebellious regions. The regime's method of control is facilitated by a long tradition of authoritarianism and one-party systems in the country. Its acceptance of democracy makes it vulnerable to separation, dismantlement, and break-ups, as well as possible outbreaks of nationalist, ethnic, religious, or provincial struggles. All of these factors threaten the country with the possibility of internal fractures, similar to those which led to the collapse of the Soviet model.
2. Russia's fear of the spread of revolutionary contagion across its borders - particularly to the Islamist republics in Tataristan, Bashkortostan, and the Caucasus - due to the similarities between the internal situation in Russia and that in the Arab world. Moscow is trying out different techniques to stop this contagion from spreading into Russia. The most prominent of these techniques is criticizing the Arab Spring in the press, and presenting the various revolutions either as coups or as struggles between opponents and supporters of individual Arab leaders.
3. Russia considers that the context in which the Arab revolts broke out clearly demonstrates the crisis in the world system, and in unilateral American projects to spread democracy (coupled with an ignorance of these people's social and economic contexts). In turn, Russia is dealing carefully with the Arab revolts, taking into consideration its desire to achieve a balance between Arab ruling regimes, Israel and the United States.
4. Russia does not want to see the Arab Spring end with the rise of radical Islamist forces; it foresees that this would create a social and economic climate conducive to the spread of terrorist activity in the Caucasus and Central Asia. In its dealings with the Arab revolts, Russia takes into consideration the demographic, economic, and cultural weight of its own Muslim citizens, who constitute approximately 17% of its total population.

⁴² For example, see the March 19, 2011 interview on *Russia Today* with former Russian diplomat and Chairman of the Russian **Society of Friendship and Business Cooperation with the Arab Countries**, Vyacheslav Matuzov, who linked the ongoing revolutionary movements in the Arab world to the machinations of American organizations that had trained some Arab youth on US soil, then sent them back to their countries in order to strike a paralyzing blow to the Arab world.

5. Russia lacks the military maritime capabilities that would enable it to be a balancing power in the Arab world's regional waters, particularly in light of the American navy's presence on the battlefields of the Eastern Mediterranean, the Arabian Gulf, and the Arabian Sea.

Ultimately, it appears that political pragmatism is the central characteristic of Russia's foreign policy since the collapse of the Soviet Union (and the attendant collapse of any sense of ideological motivation). Marxism has effectively been replaced by pragmatism. Russia has indeed distanced itself entirely from the spirit of the proverb coined by Marx and repeated by Lenin, that "revolution is the locomotive of the people"⁴³, without which nations would collapse and the movement of history would grind to a halt.

⁴³ Marx, K, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850*, Part III: *Consequences of June 13, 1849*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969).

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/class-struggles-france/ch03.htm>