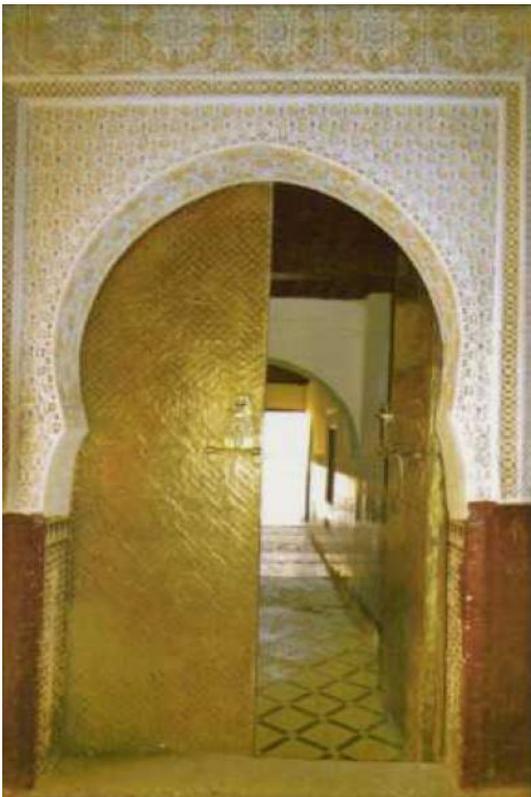


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***Maghreb Facing  
New Global Challenges***

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**Beyond the 'Arab Spring'  
Russia's Security Interests in the Middle East**



**Irina Zvyagelskaya**

*June 2012*

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# Summary

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The reconfiguration of the regional system of international relations as a result of the Arab revolutions has engendered fresh challenges for Russia, related, amongst other things, to deteriorating relations with the USA and other Western powers. Charting its course in the Arab world, Russian policy stemmed not only from relatively narrow economic tasks (generating income for Russian companies), but also strove to raise its international profile in general and ensure recognition by major powers of its national interests, which do not depend on the international political environment.

# Contents

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<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>RUSSIA'S SECURITY INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST – GENERAL REMARKS .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>THE ARAB SPRING : VARIOUS ASSESSMENTS .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>OUTSIDE INTERFERENCE AND ITS PERCEPTION IN RUSSIA .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>THE ISLAMIST CHALLENGE FOR RUSSIA .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>26</b>

# Introduction

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Russia's policy in the Middle East is aimed at carrying out tasks which are directly or indirectly related to its security interests. In very general terms, these security interests can be formulated in terms of: preventing instability likely to arise in proximity of Russia's own borders; supporting the status of a power having its own approaches to the global and regional situation and capable of pursuing an independent course; and defense of the interests of Russian businesses (operating above all in the sphere of energy resources) as well as the military-industrial sector providing arms supplies to the countries of the region. Such a general approach may allow for a conclusion that Russian interests are, to a certain extent, universal and could be applied to virtually any region of the world. In actual fact, the hierarchy of the Russian Federation's interests, the perseverance in guaranteeing these interests and the presence of security threats, including the domestic policy dimension, are directly dictated by the specific nature of the region – its geopolitical position, Russia's traditional and newly-formed ties with the states located there and the development of local conflicts.

Russian interests are affected by a reconfiguration of the international relations system at a regional level, following the impact of the Arab revolutions, the appearance of fresh lines of tension, including the deepening Sunni-Shia rivalry and a high level of uncertainty. Russia has military-political and business ties with the Arab world, which are being sharply curtailed by the effects of the "Arab spring". The problem lies not so much in the loss of contracts and commissions but also in some more serious consequences – painful processes of reestablishment of statehood, the prospect of the disintegration of certain states and spillover of tensions to neighboring countries. The departure of authoritarian leaders as a result of the "Arab spring" has led to an imbalance in governability and a deepening of economic problems, as well as to the prospect of a crisis of secularism in Arab states, where Islamists of both moderate and fundamentalist tendencies have entered into the political arena. Indirectly, this cannot but reflect on the situation in Russia and former Soviet republics and envisages a revision of inflexible official approaches to certain leading Islamist parties and organizations. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood<sup>1</sup>, for example, despite the fact that the

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<sup>1</sup> One may presume that the attitude to the Muslim Brotherhood reflected a traditional aversion towards the organization developed back in Soviet times, among the USSR

Freedom and Justice Party has won leading political positions, figured on Russia's list of banned political movements and parties.

Over recent years, the Russian Federation has managed to build relations with various players in the Middle East, including Iran, Israel, Arab states, Hamas and Hezbollah, which may surely be judged as positive, bringing Russia certain dividends. One may agree with the analysis of the American specialist Mark Katz who sees Russian policy in the Middle East as "the art of making friends with everybody."<sup>2</sup> At the same time, under current conditions of deepening confrontation in the Middle East on both an interstate and interconfessional basis, the problem of mutually exclusive interests may become very acute. Thus, Russia's close relations with Iran- its nearest neighbor and an active player in the Caucasus and in Central Asia- and its tough position on preventing any outside military intervention or regime change under external pressure in Syria came into conflict with the approaches of Saudi Arabia, other Arab countries and also a number of Western states.

The ongoing tensions in the Arab-Israeli conflict also have negative consequences for the Russian Federation. These could include the strengthening of radical tendencies in the Islamic world and the deepening of antagonisms between various actors therein who are also Russia's partners. Along with this, Russia on the whole has developed good relations with all parties to the conflict, which allows it to make a contribution to collective efforts for a peace agreement and offer its services as a mediator to the parties involved. In the context of the Middle East conflict, a mechanism is created for interaction between the Russian Federation, the USA and the EU, known as the "Middle East Quartet".

The Middle East conflict also has a domestic policy dimension for Russia, considering that a multitude of Russian citizens live in Israel and Arab countries, the protection of whose rights and security is likewise a constituent of Russia's policy in the region. The attitude of a section of the Russian public, political groups and the expert community towards the Arab-Israeli conflict reflects a substantially narrow, but still lingering, perception of the Middle East and the conflict. In particular, they see it as an arena of opposition to Western encroachments aimed at curtailing Russia's influence in the international arena and from the areas and spheres of activity which are of significant importance to the Russian Federation.

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leadership, during a period of turbulent development of relations with Egypt. Nasser, as is known, fought tooth and nail against the Brotherhood, which posed a real threat to his regime.

<sup>2</sup> Mark N. Katz, "Rossiiskaya politika na Bol'shom Blizhnem Vostoke ili iskusstvo druzhit' so vsemi" (Russia's Greater Middle East policy or the art of making friends with everybody), *IFRI Tsentr Rossiya/NNG*, April 2010. Edited translation published in: *IFRI, Russia/NIS Center, Russie.NEI. Visions*, No. 49.

## **Russia's Security Interests in the Middle East – General Remarks**

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Despite a separate mention in the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation "Towards 2020", the Middle East, for all its importance, still does not rank first on the list of Russia's foreign policy priorities. Relations with the Commonwealth of Independence states (CIS), building on relations with the USA and the EU, and Russia-NATO relations undoubtedly play a greater role in ensuring strategic tasks than the Middle East.

The relative decrease in the region's significance amongst the main priorities of Russian foreign policy was dictated, first of all, by the basic reconfiguration of the system of international relations after the break-up of the USSR. The renunciation of confrontation with the West as the main constituent of bipolar relations, the obligation to limit commitments, given scarce resources, in pursuit of an ambitious global policy, the gradual formation of a multipolar world with a continued leading role for the USA, the exclusion of the ideological factor from the process of foreign policy decision-making, a transition to more rational and realistic approaches and estimations – all this taken together could not but reflect on Russia's approaches towards the Middle East region, where bitter rivalry with the United States once used to unfold. The traditional ties with Arab states were forcibly sacrificed in accordance with fresh circumstances. Russia could not, nor did it, aspire to sustain its former presence in the states once considered to be the center of Soviet influence.

Furthermore, within Russia itself, the destabilizing impact of Islamist organizations based, among other places, in Arab countries, began to be felt more acutely. The development, in the 1990s, of separatist tendencies within the Russian Federation which affected the North Caucasus was instigated by Islamist organizations who tried to appropriate the nationalist movement. Wishing to use the enormous mobilization potential of Islam for political ends, many radical Chechen politicians and field commanders with Caucasian nationalistic convictions (Basaev, Udugov, Yandarbiev and others), put their faith in Wahhabism after the end of the First Chechen War. Their common feature was a readiness to continue the struggle for the Caucasus by exporting the "Chechen revolution", as well as a desire to gain access to the financial resources of Islamic radicals – sponsors for whom the war in Chechnya was a symbol and an embodiment of the struggle for the establishment of an Islamic order. Notably, Khattab was considered to be one of the principal managers

of funds sent to Chechnya by the international radical Islamic organizations.

In Dagestan, where in the second half of the 1990s, and on the basis of two settlements, a Jamaat was established, both the international Islamic charity funds and the numerous non-governmental Islamic organizations based in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Jordan as well as Palestine actively cooperated with the Salafis.<sup>3</sup>

Radical external influence upon the republics of the North Caucasus inevitably resulted in the deterioration of the traditionally positive and even sometimes imbalanced attitude towards Arab countries in Russia. This, among other things, was fostered by developing relations with Israel, whose government, as distinct from Arab states, viewed the actions of the federal forces against radicals in the North Caucasus, as well as Russian policies with regard to the Kosovo problem, with sympathy.

This pendulum swing in Russian policy towards the Middle East did not signify a complete and final revision of all earlier approaches in that they reflected not only ideological preferences but were also dictated by a real need to ensure the security of the state. The Arab world continued to be economically and politically attractive, even more so as the struggle against separatism, terrorism and Islamic extremism presupposed a development of relations with Arab countries who had faced similar problems themselves and had a certain experience in neutralizing such threats.

Besides tasks which could be narrowly understood as deterrence of military and military-political threats, Russia's policy in the Middle East was called upon to become a marker of Russia's self-reliance in the foreign policy arena and of its ability to pursue its own independent course. This tendency began to manifest itself with particular clarity after the arrival of Vladimir V. Putin who, as president, attempted to redress certain "positions" that were evident under Yeltsin and ensure an approach that would testify to Russia's perseverance in defending its own interests; all without fanning anti-Western sentiment. Such an approach has been transformed into activating ties with various regional actors, resuming arms supplies and providing state support to Russian businesses.

Despite these efforts, trade and economic relations with the Arab world in the early 21st century were relatively small and unstable in character. Annual trade volume averaged 6.5–7.0 billion dollars. However, more than 90% of the volume of mutual commodity exchange was constituted by export shipments from the Russian Federation, i.e. the balance of trade was exclusively in Russia's favor,

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<sup>3</sup> For more detail, see D. Makarov, *Ofitsial'nyi i neofitsial'nyi islam v Dagestane* (Official and unofficial Islam in Dagestan) (Moscow: Institut Vostokovedeniya RAN, 2000), p. 46.

which provoked, and continues to provoke, a very negative reaction from Arab partners, who constantly point to an imbalance in Russo-Arab commercial ties. A substantial share of Russo-Arab technical and economic cooperation is attributed to investment projects in the oil and gas sector and the involvement of Russian companies as prime contractors in capital construction projects. By some estimates, the approximate volume of Russian business interests in the Arab region, which also includes financial obligations for investment and the value of orders to be executed in coming years, can be estimated at 3-4.5 billion dollars. The most important markets for the Russian Federation in this sphere are Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which account for about 80% of such obligations.<sup>4</sup>

The development of economic relations with Arab countries experienced a number of difficulties related also to the specific nature of Russian business. Among them is a desire to seek out big contracts and disregard smaller projects, ignorance of the local business environment and legislation, unprofessional management unaccustomed to working according to international standards and the language barrier. Arab businesspeople are however well versed in the non-economic risks associated with Russia – corruption, gaps in legislation, the absence of guarantees for property protection – and have preferred to make more robust investments in other countries.

Although support for Russian businesses, including in the Middle East, was proclaimed as one of the priorities of Russia's foreign policy, the bureaucratic apparatus was still not geared for such activity, especially if it did not guarantee immediate profits. Yet, despite limitations, the development of economic ties with Middle Eastern states in the form of military exports consolidated Russia's position. In the process, maintaining relations with opposing partners often led to a conflict of interest for the Russians. For instance, arms supplies to Syria<sup>5</sup> or Iran always drew sharp criticism in Israel, with whom relations have successfully developed and have a value of their own.

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<sup>4</sup> Unpublished material prepared by Alexander Filonik and Vladimir Isaev.

<sup>5</sup> For more detailed treatment of Russo-Syrian ties, see Andrei Kreitz, "Siriya: glavnyi rossiiskii kozyr" na Blizhnem Vostoke' (Syria: the main Russian trump card in the Middle East), *IFRI Russia/NIS Center, Russie.NEI. Visions*, No. 55.

## The “Arab Spring”: Various Assessments

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From a Russian point of view, the events taking place are hard to assess unambiguously, as they involve a high level of uncertainty. A growth of radicalism and nationalism in the Arab world could become a source of fresh challenges and threats, both regional and global, and simultaneously aggravate traditional antagonisms. The State's desire to secure support for Russian businesses in the Arab East is confronted by instability, the departure of authoritarian and odious, yet regular, partners, and the prospect of a new redistribution of the energy and weapons market, although new leaders in the Arab states will most likely be interested in diversifying ties and maintaining both political and commercial ties with Russia<sup>6</sup>.

To this can be added the level of outside interference into events in separate Arab countries. This has varied, but fears that military force may become the principal method of overthrowing unwanted regimes has largely determined Russia's reaction to developments in individual Arab states.

Assessments of the causes of the “Arab spring” in Russia have been extremely mixed. The perception that any anti-government action is in one way or another organized with Western assistance was cultivated during the “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet region (Ukraine, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan). Many Russians believed the objectives of these revolutions consisted in removing such states from Russia's sphere of influence and thus considerably reducing it, even in a region in which it has vital interests and thereby dealing a blow to Russian security. President Dmitri Medvedev's assessment of Arab events comes as no surprise in this sense. Speaking in February 2011 in Vladikavkaz at a session of the National Antiterrorist Committee, he assessed the developments taking place in the Arab world as follows: “Very great difficulties are in store. In some cases it may be a question of the disintegration of large densely populated states and of their decomposition into small fragments. These states, though, are anything but uncomplicated. And it is quite probable that complex developments will occur, including the accession of fanatics to power. It will mean fires for decades and a further spread of

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<sup>6</sup> Valdai Club Report “Transformation in the Arab World and Russia's Interests”, June 2012.

extremism. They tried to prepare us for such a scenario before and now they will try to bring it about all the more. In any event, this scenario will not pass. But all that happens there will have a direct impact on our situation.”<sup>7</sup> One can only agree with the conclusion that the events taking place in Arab countries may have an indirect influence on the situation in Russia. However, there is little reason to speak about a special scenario of external forces affecting Russia, modeled on the “Arab spring”.

Events in the Middle East have revived phobias, characteristic of a proportion of Russian political observers, related to the objectives of outside forces (the USA and the West in general). Thus, many people have started to speak of a theory of “manageable chaos” which is being orchestrated by the United States in the Middle East. To take one example, political scientist A. V. Manoilo, reflecting a widespread point of view, has noted that “the true aim of the revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East is to undoubtedly be found in something deeper than simply a change of political regimes and the replacement of generally loyal but not quite manageable (in view of their self-perpetuating nature) authoritarian leaders of Arab states by puppets continually depending upon external political assistance. These “revolutions” have to be examined not in the narrow sense as internal conflicts but in relation to the global policy system. Within this system, the Maghreb region is an area in which the interests of major world political forces converge. These have made North Africa a singular testing-ground and a foothold in the scramble for the whole African continent, particularly following independence. This scramble, in the opinion of many analysts, will result in a redistribution of territory and energy in Africa.”<sup>8</sup>

Attempts to reduce the entire complexity and varicolored nature of present-day social and international relations merely to the struggle of external forces for control over resources are also characteristic of observers such as Yuri Krupnov. In his opinion, the current developments reflect “an intrinsic desire in US geopolitics to bring about a reorganization and restructuring of the Greater Middle East. The objective is the same: to entrench even more controllable regimes, competent within the limits prescribed for them... what is needed is a new certified loyalty of regional leaders for controlling the pipelines and untrammelled pumping of oil and gas in the “right” directions.”<sup>9</sup>

That said, the alarmist assessments of the intentions of the USA and its allies with regard to Middle Eastern oil likewise found an echo among a section of the Russian elite and society which feels

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/222361>, 22.02.2011

<sup>8</sup> A. V. Manoilo, Doctor of Political Sciences, expressly for the Internet journal *Novoe Vostochnoe Obozrenie*.

<sup>9</sup> Yu. Krupnov, “SShA pereformatiruyut svoyu “benzokolonku” – Bol’shoi Blizhnii Vostok” (The USA are reformatting their “filling station” – the Greater Middle East), <http://krupnov.livejournal.com/184512.html>

deep mistrust towards Western actions, mistrust that was not only induced by a certain type of propaganda but was also formed under the impact of the post-Soviet policies of Western states themselves. Suffice to recall how actively Russia endorsed the US fight against international terrorism, offering its air space for assistance to NATO forces in Afghanistan and raising no objections to the establishment of military bases in Central Asia. Vladimir Putin's statement to the effect that American bases were better than terrorist ones possessed iron logic. Nonetheless, attempted NATO enlargement to include former Soviet republics (Georgia and Ukraine), could lead, if implemented, to a change in the global balance of forces – to the stationing of NATO bases directly on Russian Federation borders and even to a separation of a single ethnocultural community (the south of Russia and the eastern regions of Ukraine) by military-political boundaries. The prospect of the appearance of NATO naval forces in the Black Sea and the eventual establishment of bases, for instance, in the Crimea were regarded as a national humiliation. One-sided support for Georgia and imbalanced coverage of the events by Western media during the August war also contributed to growing mistrust.

A broad disparity in Russian assessments of the “Arab spring” events has been fuelled by the events themselves, which differ fundamentally from each other, despite the presence of common ingredients. Given the diversity of Arab countries and regimes, it would be wrong to approach them with similar yardsticks. Oil-producing states managed to restrict the growth of discontent with archaic political regimes, flooding the populations with a stream of dollars in amounts poorer states could hardly dream of. But even such a seemingly sure remedy was not applied everywhere, nor could it work everywhere. Oil-producing Libya might also have offered a “payoff” to those who spoke out against Qaddafi, but the organized opposition was already fighting not for a portion of incoming revenues but for power that would ensure its leaders access to all resources.

The problem in assessing Arab events also consisted in the fact that they did not fit into customary scenarios of insurrections or mass action in Third World countries. Protest and forms of mobilization in Egypt and Tunisia reflected the profound impact of globalization upon the modern world. Educated youth certainly identified themselves with liberal values, but to present Egyptian and Tunisian revolutionaries as puppets of the West (as was done at times in keeping with conspiracy theories still popular in Russia) was unfounded and taken as an insult by many observers in the Arab world.

It was not the poorest traditional strata, accustomed to poverty and unable to formulate the goals and projects of the revolution, but the educated class that moved to the front of the scene in the most developed Arab states, attracting behind them groups and movements of quite different social and cultural characteristics both in their homeland and in neighboring states. Egyptian politicians drew

attention to the fact that since the protests were led by educated youth and not marginals, they generally bore a peaceful character and bloodshed managed to be avoided. The traditional societal groups inspired by the protests had their own means of mobilization – the mosque, and, following Friday sermons, an increasing number of people joined the protesters. Moreover, the Islamic political parties that reflected the aspirations of the traditional strata and who were more organized and cohesive in contrast to the youth movements were able to benefit from the revolutions. In the countries where clashes were progressing in a different way that did not include the educated class, Islamists had no alternative.

Ongoing distinctions between developments in various Arab countries also involve the reaction of external players. Thus, as opposed to Egypt and Tunisia, in Libya and Syria, civil disobedience almost immediately grew into armed resistance to the authorities with support from outside.

## Outside Interference and its Perception in Russia

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The organization of the military operation in Libya and then the powerful pressure against Syria explicitly posed the question of the extent to which the current developments affected Russia's security interests. The attitude towards outside military intervention in Libya, just as the position on Syria, reflected not the ideology-driven phobias of a portion of the conservative political establishment as well as the experts and journalists associated with it, as was manifested in the case of Egypt and Tunisia, but real fears over the growth of interventionism in the Middle East.

The launch of hostilities in Libya and pressure upon the Syrian regime confronted the Russian leadership with fresh problems. Some observers were inclined to regard Russia's interest in the negotiating process between the regime and representatives of the opposition within these countries as dictated by a special - economic and military-political - relationship with the regimes and, accordingly, in the event of the departure of Qaddafi or Assad, Russia had something to lose. Moreover, it was even judged that Russia favors authoritarian rulers out of principle, fearing a growth of Western influence. In the opinion of the Israeli expert Zvi Magen, "it seems that Russia's preference, should it be required to part from the old regimes, is to support trends that are not readily identifiable as pro-Western or democratic, though the rise of radical Islamists is equally unpalatable. It seems that "moderate" authoritarian regimes in conjunction with Islamic elements, lacking a clear Western orientation, are Russia's tolerated preference"<sup>10</sup>.

The kind of regimes that will take the place of the authoritarian secular regimes in the Middle East and how this may reflect the interests of Russian security will be discussed below. Here it seems necessary to point out the following: Russia's position regarding the well-known resolution on the imposition of a no-fly zone over Libya and its subsequent reaction to events has to be examined in the general context of developments that were taking place in Libya and not only in terms of whether or not the Russian Federation lost about

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<sup>10</sup> Zvi Magen, "Russia in the New Middle East", in *INSS Insight* No. 252, 13 April 2011

4 billion dollars of prospective profits from the sales of arms to said country.

It may be recalled that the first anti-government action in Libya started on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2011, in the east of the country, namely the cities of Benghazi and Al-Beida, but as early as 21<sup>st</sup> February a massive operation using air force and tanks had begun, aimed at suppressing popular protests. On 26<sup>th</sup> February, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1970 on the imposition of sanctions in relation to Libya, providing for a ban on overseas travel for Qaddafi and members of his government, an embargo on arms shipments and a referral of the situation to the International Criminal Court with jurisdiction to investigate the circumstances of the loss of civilian lives. On 10<sup>th</sup> March, France was the first country to recognize the National Transitional Council (NTC), based in Benghazi, as a legitimate representative of the Libyan people. On 12<sup>th</sup> March, an extraordinary session amongst foreign ministers of the Arab League adopted a resolution appealing to the UN SC to close Libya's air space to Qaddafi's combat air force and stated its intention to pursue dialogue and cooperation with the NTC. On 17<sup>th</sup> March, the UN SC adopted Resolution 1973 on Libya, imposing a no-fly zone over the Libyan territory. Russia, Germany, Brazil, India and China abstained from the voting.

Russia's position on this issue was determined by the circumstances in that the regime was ready to use all military assets in order to attack the rebels, and that it had to be stopped. Nevertheless, the very notion of "imposing a no-fly zone" and the measures necessary to carry out its implementation were not formulated clearly enough.<sup>11</sup>

The fulfillment of Resolution 1973 on the imposition of a no-fly zone, dictated by a desire to put a stop to the regime's attempts to "bomb" the opposition forces, in effect turned into a hunt for Qaddafi and his family and ultimately resulted in a medieval-esque butchery of the Libyan leader. On 20<sup>th</sup> October 2011, the insurgents, assisted by the coalition, managed to take the town of Sirte. During the assault on the town Qaddafi was killed. On 23<sup>rd</sup> October, the NTC leadership announced that the country was fully liberated and that the Sharia was to become the foundation of Libya's legal system.

Unfortunately, the situation in Libya evolved as a worst case scenario. Qaddafi's murder, in the context of the military operation led by outside forces, received sharp criticism from a significant part of the international community, while the ensuing events merely underscored the impossibility of stabilizing the situation and ensuring regime transformation by overthrowing the dictator. In Libya, Qaddafi left behind a political wasteland. The absence of institutions that

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<sup>11</sup> Resolution 1973 (2011)

[http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1973%282011%29](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1973%282011%29)

constitute the basis of statehood did not allow for mechanisms of stabilization or security protection to be set in motion. The specific features of local society, on a tribal or regional basis, meant a lack of unity among various factions of the opposition, each of which was fighting for access to power and resources and was not ready for mutual compromises and arrangements. The numerous field commanders also had their own agenda reflecting not national interests but their own selfish ends. This resulted in fierce military confrontations whose scale and intensity were conditioned, among other things, by the amounts of weapons in the hands of the belligerent parties.

The negative experience in Libya, coupled with a feeling that Russia was deceived by the vague formulation of Resolution 1973, have largely determined Russia's approach to the situation involving Syria.

As we are aware, the domestic situation in Syria seriously deteriorated towards the middle of March 2011. Protests grew massively in scale and escalated into clashes with the use of arms. A significant characteristic of the actions of the opposition in Syria was that it received substantial support from abroad, including the arrival of volunteers from neighboring countries.

Mistakes committed by Syrian special services and the army, the regime's extremely slow and inadequate reaction to developments, the unwillingness, despite promises, to carry out serious and long overdue reforms, the desire by any means to keep the Alawite regime in power, a regime of a confessional minority, the erosion of the ideological principles of the ruling PASR party and the subsequent loss of management functions, as well as, external support for the opposition – all these factors led to the bitter and uncompromising character of the struggle.

Russia's policy towards Syria aimed at erecting hurdles in the way of a military overthrow of the Assad regime and an accession to power of the opposition facilitated by outside backing was conditioned by the following considerations. First, a repetition of the Libyan scenario would turn intervention into some kind of universal method for ousting unwelcome regimes and rulers. "Vladimir Putin considers the Libyan result as a win for the West and thus a defeat for Russia", declared a European ambassador who monitors intelligence reporting on the Kremlin. "He is determined that Syria will not make this a trend, and Russia will oppose collective action against Assad wherever it can."<sup>12</sup>

Second, Russia was against unbalanced approaches towards the government or the opposition which might change the established balance of forces by according military advantages to one of the

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<sup>12</sup> Jim Hoagland, "Syria's Civil War Is Bigger Than Syria Itself", *The Washington Post*, 15.12.2011.

parties, and therefore discouraged any inclination towards political settlement. Thus Russia spoke out against appeals to freeze arms supplies to the Syrian regime whilst opposition militants maintained channels of arms smuggling.

Third, if the opposition were to achieve the regime's downfall, aided by outside pressure, there would likely be destructive consequences for the entire region. Most probable is the further deepening of Sunni-Shia antagonisms, the growth of anti-Christian sentiment and the exacerbation of interethnic tensions. A spillover of violence to the neighboring states would also be possible.

As noted by the Russian diplomat A. G. Aksenenok: "The motivation of the Russian side is often perceived as fear to lose the "last ally" in the Middle East or as a wish to "take revenge" on the West for using the Security Council Resolution 1973 on sanctions for an intervention in Libya. All these are highly simplistic explanations... Another thing is, in my view, more important. Underlying the Russian position are expert assessments of the dangerous consequences entailed by the ongoing escalation of the armed confrontation in Syria. In view of its distinctive geopolitical position in the region and precarious confessional balances, these consequences, if an intra-Syrian national dialogue without external interference is not initiated, will affect the interests of all – Russia, Europe, the United States and Arab states themselves"<sup>13</sup>.

As an alternative, Russia promoted dialogue between opposition leaders and Assad without any preconditions. Any developments – be it the creation of a government of national unity, the handover by Assad of his powers to the vice-president or another scenario – must be worked out by way of a political arrangement without external pressure. Moscow was pursuing independent diplomatic efforts aimed to encourage Bashar Al-Assad to carry out the promised political reforms more quickly and to facilitate the start of a dialogue between the government and the opposition as an alternative to the policy of sanctions and isolation.

The situation in Syria became a highly complicated matter. On the one hand, Western states and the Arab League began to demand Assad's resignation and resorted to sanctions. On the other hand, the opposition, especially the section of it which was based abroad, did not show any intention to engage in dialogue with the regime, even in such a beneficial context. Russia continued to pursue the policy of political settlement, proceeding, among other things, along the lines of the Arab League proposals for crisis settlement put forward on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2011. This document provided for a cessation of violence by all parties to the conflict in order to avoid further civilian victims.

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<sup>13</sup> Alexander Aksenenok, "Rossiya – mediator mezhdru Siriei i Zapadom" (Russia, a mediator between Syria and the West.) Electronic resource: <http://ria.ru/interview/20120208/560351348.html>

The measures undertaken by the Syrian authorities for the implementation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2011 settlement (i.e. the retreat of armored vehicles and military units from cities, the release of 2,000 prisoners and the proclamation of an amnesty to armed militants in return for the surrender of arms) were considered insufficient by the Special Committee of the Arab League and, on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2011, an extraordinary session of the Council of the Arab League in Cairo adopted a decision to suspend Syria's participation in the League's work and proclaimed the its intention to impose economic and political sanctions.

On 15<sup>th</sup> December 2011, during consultations on the Middle East within the UN Security Council, Russia submitted a revised version of its draft resolution on Syria which had previously been established with the backing of China. The document clearly mentioned the inadmissibility of interpreting the provisions of the resolution as a signal for external interference in internal Syrian affairs. Russian Federation Permanent Representative to the UN Vitaly Churkin stated: "As far as the need to put an end to violence, the need to protect human rights and to accelerate reform is concerned, we deem it important to send a powerful signal to the Arab League that we call upon them to continue their efforts working together with the government of Syria."<sup>14</sup>

In US and Western opinion, although the draft demonstrated certain progress in Russia's approach, it also blamed the Syrian government and protesters for the violence and did not contain sanctions – the key element of Western demands, which had already received the backing of the Arab League. Hillary Clinton said she could not support some parts of the draft, but "hopefully we can work with the Russians, who for the first time at least, have recognized that this is a matter that needs to go to the Security Council".<sup>15</sup>

Russia's position on Syria, dictated by principles, implied political losses for Russia as well. Western states continued to place an emphasis on the intractability of Russia who, for the sake of its ambitions, was ostensibly prepared to see bloodshed continue. Hints were also made at Russia's ambivalent position regarding democracy. In many Arab states, Russia's line was construed as running counter to their policy objectives in the region, which were saliently articulated by the Saudi leadership. Thus, at the World Policy Conference in Vienna, organized by IFRI in December 2011, the Saudi position with respect to the future of the Assad regime was formulated with sufficient clarity. "Assad's government "has become a killing machine," said Turki bin Faisal of Saudi Arabia, one of the Kingdom's most senior princes, a former chief of intelligence, ex-ambassador to Washington and a man not prone to exaggeration.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://ru.euronews.net/2011/12/16/russia-text-could-break-un-syria-deadlock/>

<sup>15</sup> Joe Lauria, "In Surprise Move, Russia Submits Syria Resolution", *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 December 2011.

“The killing has to stop. . . . This kind of leadership is unacceptable. Change in Syria is now inevitable”<sup>16</sup>. An attack against the Russian ambassador in Qatar was interpreted by certain observers as a demonstration of discontent with Russia’s policy.

The firmness of Saudi Arabia’s position, as well as that of Qatar and the UAE, and their desire to do away with the Alawite regime, was determined, all things considered, by a broader context involving their contention with Shia Iran. After the Iraqi military machine was destroyed and Iraq ceased to act as a counterbalance to Iran, Tehran started to conduct a more uninhibited policy in the Middle East.

With regards to the Arab-Israeli conflict Iran began to render ever increasing aid to, and support for, radical forces that put military pressure on Israel. Iran’s anti-Israeli rhetoric and its statements on the need to escalate the struggle against Israel were addressed to the “Arab street”. The Iranian leadership, in searching to take on a leading role in the region, demonstrated a lack of readiness to “fight the foe” among Arab rulers and an inclination to follow American policy. The Alawite regime in Syria, which enjoys Iranian backing, thus turned into a target for an all-out Sunni offensive that received a new impetus both in the context of the prospects of Iran’s enhanced clout in post-war Iraq and that of an ever intensifying struggle against the Iranian nuclear program.

In February 2012, the Russian Federation and China voted against the Moroccan draft resolution for Syria which referred to Assad’s resignation.<sup>17</sup> The resolution, as was deemed by Russia’s Foreign Ministry, did not rule out the possibility of outside interference into Syrian matters. China adopted a similar position. Russia’s Permanent Representative to the UN Vitaly Churkin, after the vote on the draft resolution, made it clear that “the draft resolution put to the vote inadequately reflected reality in Syria.” He accused a number of SC Member States of hampering a political settlement in Syria, adding that Russia actively sought an objective solution that would genuinely contribute to an early end to violence and the organization of a political process in Syria<sup>18</sup>. As a result, out of 15 UN SC Member States, 13 voted in favor of the resolution and two (Russia and China) voted against. This time the position of Russia and China was subjected to criticism not only on the part of the members of the UN SC but also from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

In spite of the difficulties faced by Russia, its initially unpopular approach proved to have practical validity. The Kofi Annan plan, whose principal objective was to decrease levels of military confrontation and to launch a political dialogue, has become a new

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<sup>16</sup> Jim Hoagland, “Syria’s Civil War Is Bigger Than Syria Itself”, *The Washington Post*, 15.12.2011.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.itar-tass.com/c1/333107.html>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.lenta.ru/news/2012/02/05/say/>

element of the overall situation. As we are aware, Bashar Al-Assad assented to measures proposed by Kofi Annan. However, these measures require verification. This was precisely what was involved in Russia's proposal for the dispatch to Syria of a large group of observers – up to 300 persons, able to ensure the monitoring of the situation. On 21<sup>st</sup> April 2012, the UN Security Council passed a resolution, drafted by Russia, on the dispatch to Syria of an observer mission.<sup>19</sup> Russia even decided to provide the staff of international observers with peacekeepers.<sup>20</sup>

There is no denying that the Syrian regime bears responsibility for the situation as it stands and, as the number of victims grows, it is being judged as ever more odious. That said, the Friends of Syria group might exert greater impact on the opposition, working with it towards a strategy of national reconciliation and the post-conflict development of the nation. Currently, one is under the impression that even the most rational section of the opposition has not thought of this. Neither a program proposed by opposition forces nor a sequence of steps to transform Syria into a more democratic state have ever been made public. This means that the question as to "what will happen when" remains unanswered.

Russia's hard-line policy may also be explained by the specific features of Russia's domestic setting, namely, the election period. After the parliamentary elections that took place in late 2012, Russia saw the beginnings of a movement calling for fair elections and the democratization of the political system. This gained momentum during the presidential campaign and "hard-liners" began to actively employ various kinds of propagandistic clichés, prominent among which was the threat of an "Orange Revolution" in Russia and of a "Libyan scenario". Essentially, these options are incompatible, but in the eyes of those who accused outside forces of deliberate interference in Russia's internal affairs and Russian liberals of treachery, they came together in an absolutely logical fashion.

Accusations addressed to America have not only become a relevant testimony of patriotism but also a means of discrediting internal dissent. Charges of liaisons with the State Department were meant to stigmatize "foreign agents" who dared to call into question both the government's achievements and the election results.

Under conditions whereby candidate for president, Putin, was positioned by the political elite as the only consistent fighter against external threats, as a politician who proved his ability to steer an independent course in accordance with national interests, who

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<sup>19</sup> "Sovet bezopasnosti OON prinyal podgotovlennuyu Rossiei rezolyutsiyu o napravlenii v Siringu polnoformatnoi missii nablyudatelei" - The UN Security Council passed a resolution, drafted by Russia, on the dispatch to Syria of a full-format observer mission - <http://www.newsru.com/world/21apr2012/sovbez2.html>

<sup>20</sup> "RF primet uchastie v missii nablyudatelei OON v Siringu" (The RF will take part in a UN observer mission in Syria) - <http://www.rosbalt.ru/main/2012/04/12/969166.html>

compromises on international issues, in the context of which the Russian Federation was faced even with a hint of possibility of outside interference into the affairs of sovereign states, were flatly ruled out.

This approach was made clear by Vladimir Putin at the G20 summit. According to *The Guardian*, Obama failed to secure the support of Putin for regime change in Syria. "The US president had been seeking Putin's help in trying to persuade Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to relinquish power and leave the country. A joint statement issued after their meeting said simply that the Syrian people should independently and democratically be allowed to decide their own future, but there was no joint call for Assad to stand down, as the White House has been urging"<sup>21</sup>.

Indeed, discussion of Syria's fate, despite tensions and lack of understanding, afforded Russia the opportunity to underscore the weight of its position in international affairs.

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<sup>21</sup> Patrick Wintour in Los Cabos and Ewen MacAskill in Washington, "Obama fails to secure the support of Putin for regime change in Syria", *The Guardian*, 18 June 2012

# The Islamist Challenge for Russia

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As far as foreign Islamists are concerned, whilst Russia's approaches indicate certain differentiations dictated by foreign policy objectives, which prescribed, for instance, for the absence of relations with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the maintenance of contacts with Hamas – a branch of the same organization -, in domestic policy, things stood differently. The attitude towards radical and extremist political Islam in Russia has always been negative, considering the violent methods used by its adepts and its calls for changing the constitutional system.

In certain areas, where the challenge posed by radicals was especially strong and tangible, an attempt was even made to enact legislative measures to curb them. In this sense, the law adopted in Dagestan in 1999 "On the Prohibition of Wahhabi and Other Extremist Activity in the Territory of the Republic of Dagestan" is particularly illustrative. It specifically includes a ban on the creation and operation of Wahhabi and other extremist organizations. The law gave rise to a lot of controversy since it directly equates one of the official currents of Sunnism with extremism. Defenders of the law were nonetheless also present. Thus, the Russian researcher Alexander Ignatenko wrote: "Muslim religious figures in Russia and scholars of Islam may talk as much as they like about Wahhabism saying it is a movement that sprung up in Arabia in the 18th century under the leadership of Bin Abd al-Wahhab. But in the process of social and political practice, whether we want it or not, over the last quarter of a century, another meaning of the word "Wahhabism" has now become firmly rooted in the language – a political current whose followers, based on a specific, subjective interpretation of the tenets of Islam, conduct an activity (predominantly using violence) directed at changing the social and political system (first and foremost in the countries where Islam is spread widely)."<sup>22</sup> Not everybody agrees with such an interpretation, but the appearance of a controversial law clearly indicates a threat which, in the opinion of the authorities, emanates from Islamist radicals.

An estimated number of Muslims in Russia can be determined based on the population growth of the respective national republics minus the non-titular population. Thus, on the basis of the 2010

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<sup>22</sup> Alexander Ignatenko, "Musul'manskaya samozashchita ot vahhabizma" (Muslim self-defense from Wahhabism), *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 12.01.1999.

census, one can obtain a figure of 14.9 million.<sup>23</sup> Allowing for legal and illegal migration, the number of Muslims in Russia is much greater – about 20 million. According to a fair observation of the Russian Islam specialist Alexei Malashenko, “the discussion on their number in Russia has become endless. In my opinion, it is fruitless, since an increase or decrease in their number by 2-3 million in no way affects the analysis of problems of Russia’s Islam.”<sup>24</sup>

Russia’s Muslim population consists of two large areas – Tatar-Bashkir and North Caucasus. In principle, tendencies towards radicalization are manifested in one way or another in both areas. In the North Caucasus, where militant outbursts and criminality under Islamic slogans continue, their manifestation bears a more evidently destabilizing character. Given this, this paper focuses its attention mainly on the North Caucasus.

The fact that Russia belongs to the Islamic world is recognized internationally, and acknowledged, among other things, by its status as an observer at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. For the Russian Federation, the development of relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states is of special importance. However, Russia’s position on the Libyan and Syrian conflicts provoked a cooling of relations that took many years to build.

The emergence, in Russia and in Central Asia, of radical organizations, including those resorting to terrorist attacks, was largely associated with the domestic situation. This involved a high level of corruption, unemployment, unbalanced job and resource distribution as well as the scramble among powerful factions for the redistribution of property. As far as Russia’s regions go, the populations of the republics of the North Caucasus are faced with the poorest conditions. High unemployment in rural regions, population growth in cities not only due to natural causes but also primarily to the migration of the rural population, without subsequent infrastructure development, enhance social tensions and lead to the provincialization of urban life. The majority of the able-bodied population is employed in small businesses, including catering and construction. They constantly face extortion by officials and police, injustice and the impossibility of defending their rights in court. The locally educated class – teachers, doctors, engineers - who depend on modest budget-allocated wages are the worst-off and the most insecure. Finally, a proportion of society, which is limited in number, is constituted by officials and members of their families, who live off the redistribution of funds accruing from the federal budget. Such

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<sup>23</sup> *Predvaritel'nie itogi vserossiiskoi perepisi naseleniya 2010 goda. Statisticheski sbornik Rosstat* (Preliminary returns of the all-Russia population census of 2010. Statistical collection. Russian Statistical Committee), Moscow: IITs “Statistika Rossii” (2011), p. 87.

<sup>24</sup> Alexei Malashenko, *Islam dlya Rossii* (Islam for Russia). Moskovskii tsentr Karnegi (Carnegie Moscow Centre). Moscow: Rossiiskaya politicheskaya entsiklopediya (207), p. 10.

inequality within these societies, largely formed, in addition, on a clan basis (at the head of the Republics are representatives of clans that do not allow non-clan members access to power and property) lays the groundwork for a continual growth of tension. To this can be added the activity of the militants (especially in Dagestan), who are far from always representing “fighters for justice”, but are also used by local factions in their strife for control over resources.

One of the specific traits of the post-Soviet space as a whole, not just the North Caucasus or Russia, is the archaization of society. As things stand, it affects not only the political system but ideology as well. The people, feeling defenseless, have naturally clung to traditional networks in order to regulate personal and social life. Re-traditionalization was a means of self-preservation and self-regulation of society, and of ensuring security. The local community virtually substituted itself for the state, which was unable to exercise its basic functions in full.

Re-traditionalization, which also affected, in one degree or another, the states of Central Asia at a certain stage of their independent development, had ambivalent consequences. The strengthening of compatriotic, clan, family and mahalla-based ties signified a substantial diminution of the role of personalities, a domination of collective values and of a collective common sense and an unconditional subordination to the authority of elders. In this context, the role of mullahs as major actors increased.

Given the resulting conditions, Islamism became the main and, at times, the only channel for expressing protesting sentiment. Islamic radicalism offers simple and plain answers to most questions, its dynamism amid passivity and even deficient education of representatives of traditional (Sufi) Islam provides a number of indisputable advantages. The intellectual failure in the training of religious ministers affected not only the Muslim elite but society in general, too. It found itself unprepared to open the door to the wider Islamic world.

Openness to the outer Muslim world – propagation of religious literature, organization of the hajj, the arrival of all sorts of missionaries in recent years, led to a sharply intensified role of religion in society and to a consolidation of political Islam. This is increasingly obvious not only for settled but also for nomadic societies. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, the growth in the number of unofficial madrassahs and other Islamic educational institutions and circles has long fuelled apprehension among observers. In the process, traditional Islam is likewise heterogeneous and contradictory and its politicization reinforces the positions of radicals. Sufism, enriched by ideas of social protest and political domination, can score a victory over official Islam in this case.

The radicalization of Islam was fostered by the return of youth that had received religious education abroad. Over recent years, Central Asia has seen a shift in the generation of spiritual leaders; the

mosque has grown younger and conservative mullahs are being replaced by graduates of Muslim schools and universities in Arab countries and Pakistan. These leaders more readily appeal to disaffected member of society and, where the number of young mullahs is greater, one can observe a higher level of protesting sentiment.

Moreover, in Russia and Central Asia, the role played by radical organizations such as Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami (HTI), factions forming part of al-Qaida, Taliban, or Tablig-i-Jamaat is particularly destabilizing. It is worth noting that HTI, which originated in Palestine in 1953 and campaigned for the creation of the Caliphate, was able to convey the Middle Eastern agenda – the struggle for Jerusalem, solidarity with the Palestinians as well as elements of anti-Semitism, uncongenial to the Central Asian population - to societies where HTI was a newcomer.

In comparing the importance of both internal and external factors, external factors now attract particular attention in view of the upheavals in the Arab world as well as Turkey's policy of Islamization and the expansion of radicals in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of American troops. As correctly noted by the Russian scholar Vitaly Naumkin, "in the short-term or medium-term, in the Greater Middle East, there may be no secular regimes. Islamists will quite plausibly win in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, possibly Syria, and so forth. It is not excluded either that the last strong secular regime – the Algerian one – will in the future fall victim to one of a series of 'spring' revolutions. Quite a few liberally-minded leaders of the 'Arab spring' also express disquiet over the likelihood that religious fundamentalist forces, among which there are extremists or even terrorists, can avail themselves of the fruit of their successes."<sup>25</sup>

The Muslim population of Russia and the states of Central Asia may find itself immersed into an environment in which Islamic regimes, possibly even radical ones, predominate. This being so, as has been noted time and time again, Arab spring scenarios will not work either in Russia's Muslim regions or in Central Asian countries despite the outward similarity with the Arab states in terms of political and social problems. In Russia, social explosions with an Islamic dimension may bear an exclusively local character and may therefore be contained with relative ease. In Central Asia, as practice shows, the possibility of social explosions in the states of the region is closely related to divisions among elites. In this sense, one can fully agree with the authors of the document "What Does Arab Spring Mean for Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus", drafted by Washington's

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<sup>25</sup> Vitaly Naumkin, "O politike Rossii na yuzhnom napravlenii" (On Russia's policy on the southern track), in: *Otsenki i idei*. Bulletin, vol. 1, No. 1, November 2011 (Moscow: Institut Vostokovedeniya RAN), p. 2.

Centre for Strategic And International Studies.<sup>26</sup> It is no accident that Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan became the weakest links in the chain, where a struggle of diverse regional factions for power and influence was evident. Very different forces found themselves mobilized in that struggle – local Islamists, crime rings, members of security bodies and the traditional youth that saw no future for themselves and tried to compensate their socially underprivileged status by engaging in burglary and arson.

An elite consensus that has been reached in a predominant majority of Central Asian states (more robust in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan) may, if it holds, be viewed as a guarantee that lingering discontent will not lead to any mighty social explosions (local unrest does not count) able to reconfigure the whole political system. However, it does not mean that local Islamic organizations, active enough as they are in the absence of legal channels for expressing protesting sentiment, will not receive an additional boost. Traditional support from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan may be supplemented by Islamist endowments and governments of other Arab states, previously under secular regimes.

The possibility of an aggravated situation in Central Asia is also associated with the negative impact of Afghanistan, from where US troops will be withdrawn by 2014, and where a potential for increased activities carried out by assorted radical and extremist factions will be opened up. The impact they can exert on the states of the region upon establishing contact with local radicals may also imply, for Russia, a need for action both in the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and on the basis of bilateral arrangements.

Although revolutions and coups in the Arab world will not have a direct bearing on the setting in Russia and in Central Asia and will not become a model for the region, the new political situation, involving the strengthening of Islamists, is capable of generating an additional milieu in which growth and support of Islamic radicals could flourish in areas that are part of Russia or of vital significance for it.

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<sup>26</sup> What Does the Arab Spring Mean for Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. A Report of the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program. Algerim Zikibaeva (ed.), Serge Korepin, Shalini Sharan (rapporteur). CSIS, September 2011.

## Conclusion

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The Middle East traditionally falls under Russia's interests. Acknowledgement of this fact does not imply that these interests, as well as the Russian Federation's capacity to protect them, remain unchanged. Russia's policy, devoid of ideological preferences and ambitions typical of the USSR, and one that was able to build relations with all major regional states and non-government actors, faces security challenges.

The reconfiguration of the regional system of international relations as a result of the Arab revolutions has engendered fresh challenges for Russia, related, amongst other things, to deteriorating relations with the USA and other Western powers. Charting its course in the Arab world, Russian policy stemmed not only from relatively narrow economic tasks (generating income for Russian companies), but also strove to raise its international profile in general and ensure recognition by major powers of its national interests, which do not depend on the international political environment. For the Russian Federation, a painful experience in the case of military intervention by NATO into the affairs of sovereign states was reproduced in Libya. A tendency to turn interventionism into a universal expedient employed by the West for the overthrow of unwanted regimes under the pretext of promoting transformation has appeared. In addition, a rehabilitation of military force and external pressure upon local regimes has limited Russia's capacities to protect its own interests. This might lead to a marginalization of its policy, which would only be confined to being forced to play by the rules, and accept the results, of someone else's game.

Serious problems for the Russian Federation may also emerge in connection with the political Islamization of the Arab world and the departure of secular regimes. First, for Russia, the process of regime change, instigating a revision of foreign policy orientations, may in some cases cause complications in building bridges with new rulers. Though they themselves will ultimately be interested in diversifying ties, in a number of states, Russia will nonetheless find it hard to restore a whole range of military-political and economic ties.

Second, another negative result of the Arab Spring for the Russian Federation consists in the aggravation of relations with the Arab League, first and foremost with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, with which Russia has successfully managed to build meaningful relations in the recent years. Their objective of a "Sunnitization" of the Arab world cannot but come into conflict with the

Russian position with regards to Syria and Iran, which has indeed become a constitutive element of its overall regional strategy.

Third, for the Russian Federation a potential threat exists regarding the situation in areas with a prevailing Muslim population, and also in Central Asia, in connection with the prospect of the growth of radical Islamist influence.

Distinct from the Arab Spring, which has confronted Russian policy with new challenges, the situation with regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems to be routine (despite the changes underway) and, to a greater degree, ensures Russian cooperation with other external forces.