

# RUSSIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A BATTLE FOR PRINCIPLES?

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In the middle of 2012, when another round of diplomatic activity began concerning Syria, a French journalist approached this author to discuss the Russian take on this tough conflict in the Middle East. The conversation began apace. “Why is Russia supporting a criminal dictatorial regime that destroys its own people who are striving for democracy?” the visitor asked, “And why does the West support terrorists and Islamists who rush to take power in one Arab country after another, building on the material and ideological support from the most reactionary governments of the region?” I asked in response. Having exchanged our graces, we entered into the substance of our conversation.

Versions of events in the Middle East differ diametrically in Europe and in Russia. And it is not a question of propaganda or a cardinal difference in interests, even if these are relevant. Moscow and the Western capitals assess what goes on in the world completely differently. Russia, in the very recent past, has survived the catastrophic collapse of both economic and geopolitical failure, and is extremely sensitive to destructive tendencies and the threats linked to them; from experience it knows how great the difference is between intentions and realization. The West, despite the many commotions of the last decade, continues to live in the triumphal plume of the end of the 20th century, analyzing events through an ideological prism.

The Middle East is complex and many-sided where one can see indications of all possible processes. In the near future, it will become clear who is more right – Moscow with its grounded pessimistic view on the turmoil, or Paris and Washington, who prefer to see a manifestation of “the right side of history” among all the changes.

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## MERCANTILE OR GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS?

It seems that no one abroad understands Russia's position on Syria, into which is condensed the quintessence of everything happening in the Middle East; at least no one from among those with any kind of direct role attempting to sort out the bloody conflict.

In the beginning Moscow's resistance was generally explained purely as an expression of mercantile interests. Bashar al-Assad's regime is the largest client of the Russian arms sector and the military-industrial complex, frustrated by the losses of the Iranian market (cancelled S-300 contract) and Libyan market (the overthrow of Gaddafi being the consequence of Russia's refusal to veto the UN Security Council resolution), is looking death in the face in an effort to save its last partner. However, the credibility of this motive was quickly shown to be doubtful. As experts from the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies recently showed, deliveries of arms to Damascus in 2011 equated to only 5% of total arms exports. And Russia's so-called "naval base" in Tartus, described as the only such facility outside the former USSR, only has symbolic value, insofar as it comprises only a quay for ships and a dockyard for boat repairs. Moreover, since 2006 Syria has only paid Russia 1 billion dollars of a 5.5 billion dollar contract. So, finally, it became quite apparent that even without the rapid escalation of events in Syria, "business as usual" with the Assad regime was not possible.

Subsequently Russia's policy was seen with even greater perplexity abroad. Analysts asked why Moscow persistently refused to recognize the facts while desperately clinging to an ill-fated route, obstructing its own exit strategy; the regime will change and yet this steadfast support of it will resign Russia to hostile relations with any future government in Syria. Therefore, in announcements made by Russian officials at the end of 2012, everyone looked for evidence that the Kremlin and the Foreign Ministry had "woken up to reality"; a statement by deputy foreign minister Mikhail Bogdanov, not intended for wide circulation, about the possibility of the opposition winning in Syria, was treated as a sensation: Russia, under pressure, was inevitably changing its view and refusing to support Assad.

It is clear that no one has ever believed the words constantly repeated by Putin, Lavrov, Bogdanov and others, that Moscow is supporting, not Assad in

Syria, but defined principles. But people should have believed them. In order to understand what really motivates Russia's policy in the Middle East in the heat of the "Arab Spring," one must first realize that the main defining factors for it are not (in this order) the position of the country in the region, or the Syrian market, or the fate of Bashar al-Assad and his regime.

One needs to look at its policy from another angle – not as linked with the Middle East itself, as with Moscow's understanding of how international relations should be conducted. And it has been said, both publicly and officially, on more than one occasion by the minister of foreign affairs, Sergey Lavrov:

"If someone sets out to use force at any cost, then we can hardly prevent him. But at least let it be under his own initiative and let it rest on his conscience. They will not receive any authorization from the UN Security Council." This statement by Lavrov on January 18 in a press conference summing up 2011 gave the broad parameters of the Russian position. A second important and more direct statement came on July 16: "The model for how the international community reacts to internal state conflicts in the future will depend in many ways on the outcome of the Syrian crisis."

Russia's persistence is directly related to what took place in Libya in 2011. In accordance with a personal decision by President Dmitry Medvedev, Moscow departed from its usual position of not tolerating interference in the internal affairs of others' and, essentially, agreed to military action against the Gaddafi regime. This "gesture of good will" is now effectively considered to have been a mistake – in both practical and conceptual terms – and its hardened position on Syria is designed to disavow the previous "gesture" and discourage the "international community" from adopting the Libyan model as an example for future conflicts. The Libyan model, from the point of view of Russian strategists, is summarized as follows: during an internecine conflict, external forces chose the "right" side, and with their interference helped it come to power.

Events in the Middle East highlight the fact that within the Russian administration there is a conceptual conflict regarding its place in the world and how it should defend it. This is not a stereotypical standoff between "pro-Western" and "anti-Western" approaches, or "Westerners" and "nationalists". In general, the West, as a benchmark in the system of coordinates, is slowly and painfully beginning to recede – senselessly maintaining the same view in a world being defined by the East. Nevertheless, another logic is coming to the fore, a

defining of priorities in global affairs wherein Russia is not the Soviet Union and never will be, meaning that it cannot seek to participate on equal terms in all international processes.

## PUTIN'S STRUCTURAL REALISM

Medvedev's unusual decision at the beginning of 2011 not to prevent military action against Libya can be explained by various motives, but one of the reasons was more general – an understanding of priorities. During the years of his presidency, a tendency to treat Russia as a regional power was quite clearly observed. Of course, considering the region that Moscow intends to keep as its priority, a global dimension is inevitable – it is in essence the whole of Eurasia, from “Old Europe” to the Pacific Ocean. And yet it is a geographically restricted territory.

Dmitry Medvedev's resounding announcement in August 2008, that Russia intends to defend its “sphere of privileged interests” using all possible means, was taken, right after a five-day war in Georgia, as a declaration of new Russian expansionism. It was later understood that the idea was somewhat different than first thought – the very concept of a “sphere of interests” implies certain borders. The Soviet Union, for example, did not have a concrete sphere of interest, rather, it covered the whole globe, just like the US. In Medvedev's understanding, Libya did not fall under the Russian sphere. Contracts worth four billion dollars are of course good, but that is nothing more than simply business; to risk something serious, such as another standoff with the US and Europe, with whom interaction in other areas is highly important, was not worth it.

Putin, like Medvedev, does not see Russia as a global power in the same sense of the term, and his priorities are the same “sphere of interests” and his favorite idea is a Eurasian union, which would unite European and Pacific markets. However, unlike Medvedev, Putin does not consider it necessary for Russia to focus exclusively on that region. The current president looks at Russia's ability to influence other areas of the world as an bargaining chip, for exchanging capabilities that are available through the privilege of an area of direct interests. In other words, it is only through playing (albeit sporadically) on the whole field, and through maintaining its global reach that Russia can preserve its competitive

advantages and rights in its own area of the planet. In this way, the Middle East is not a zone of direct interest, but an area in an important regional game, for which holding a trump card allows one to feel more confident in other areas of contest.

In international affairs, Medvedev conducted himself – consciously or unconsciously – as a liberal. Internal development primarily defines foreign policy (which Medvedev talked about in detail during his speech to the diplomatic corpus in July 2010); various processes and events must be considered independently and decisions on each of them made separately, rather than considering them interconnected – a typical liberal approach.

Vladimir Putin looks at the world differently. In outlook, he is an adherent of structural realism. The external environment defines the conduct of states, there is a single system, and everything in it is interdependent. Actions in one area give rise to consequences in another. This is the source of his constant criticism of the West; it is not just that the “sacredness” of the principle of sovereignty comes into question, as Putin has reminded people publicly. Each instance of interference in the system violates its self-regulation, exacerbating universal chaos. And universal chaos, as Putin believes, eventually provokes chaos in specific countries, with Russia also interlinked.

Vladimir Putin is president in a time when Russia, whether it wanted to be or not, was already an inseparable part of the global system and could not insulate itself from processes taking place in it. He came to power under a slogan of stability in Russia at a time when a lack of definition had significantly grown in the world, against a backdrop of usual institutional structures. Feverish attempts by the West to strengthen the global system, as laid down according to Western patterns, led to the construction wobbling from all sides. And insofar as it is a single and whole system as never before, so the consequences of someone’s ill-thought-out moves are felt by all, without exception. Internal stabilization is not compatible with an overall increase in of destabilization. In other words, Putin found himself in an antiphase that simply infuriates him. He cannot understand the policies of leading powers that, with their actions, seem to deliberately wobble the international situation, knocking the last supports from beneath it.

Putin is not alone in his dislike of the current state of affairs, but it turns out that it is precisely he who has found himself in the vanguard of resistance. First, because Russia, despite its fall after the end of the USSR, remains one of the most active countries with clear ambitions. Second, because it is impossible to

ignore Russia on account of its raw material and nuclear potential. And finally, on the strength of the character traits of the president himself – he is distinguished by a degree of directness that is not typical of a politician at that level. Political correctness for him is a profoundly alien concept. In sum, all this makes Putin the caricature of an anti-Western front, even without seeking to build any “fronts” himself; he does not want a world geopolitical revolution and is more concerned with insulating Russia from current pressures.

In the 2000s, during Vladimir Putin’s first two presidential terms, people in the West often discussed what kind of power Russia was – an adherent to the status quo or a revolutionarily revisionist. It is now clearly a power of the status quo, but in a somewhat different understanding of the term. Moscow tried to retain principles on which resisting parties would attempt to build an international framework that is becoming more chaotic, unmanageable and therefore dangerous. It is not about influence, but self-preservation.

## NO NEED TO CHANGE POSITION

In Russia, the view of what is going on in Syria (and the Middle East as a whole) is completely different from that of the West or the Arab world. It is a bitter civil war, with rationale that is both religious (Sunni-Shi’ite) and geopolitical (Persian Gulf monarchies against Iran). At stake is not democratic power in Damascus, but the positioning arrangement of power in the Middle East, while the fate of Syria, as such, does not concern the majority of participants, especially external ones. In Moscow it is understood that with such large-scale external interference as is currently visible in Syria, it is hard to imagine that Bashar al-Assad would be allowed to remain in place. However, all Russian Middle East specialists are saying with one voice that a considerable portion of the population (although an accurate account in the context of war is not possible) is behind Assad, not so much supporting him, as much as being more fearful of alternatives presented by the opposition than by the regime.

Russia’s logic in this situation is quite straightforward. It makes no sense to alter its position – after Assad, Syria will either retain its integrity or will not, or be run by forces that consider Russia an enemy. (In Libya, Gaddafi was overthrown in large part thanks to the “non-veto” by Moscow; in taking

another position the extravagant dictator might still be ruling in Tripoli, having suppressed Benghazi. However, in any case, Russia never received the slightest gratitude from the new authorities.) But even with regards to the latter point, the example of Iraq (via a contract for arms purchases signed in autumn 2012, albeit disputed) and, partially, already in Libya, show that after some time the victors start to need a diversification of contacts, which is particularly to the advantage of Russia. To participate in the resettlement of a country that will be imposed from outside is dangerous – the results, most likely, will be lamentable, although Russia will be among those having to take moral responsibility for the future chaos. The proposal of a political process in which the Syrians themselves define their own fate is win-win: it is an obvious idea, but if this is not possible, then, alas, we did warn.

The Islamization of the Middle East greatly worries Russia, insofar as the strengthening of radicals and dogmatics there will inevitably have consequences in the Muslim regions of Russia. This has already been shown by the lamentable example of the Chechen wars in the 1990s and early 2000s. It is a particularly acute matter since Russia itself, at this stage of depletion in Soviet and post-Soviet identity, is ever increasingly endangered by inter-confessional relations. Russian Muslims are slowly grasping their rights, and this eventual realization could create a sudden rupture with Russian Orthodox Christians.

As for the geopolitical position, it is here perhaps that lies the main mystery for those trying to interpret the Russian position. Russia has one advantage over the United States, which lays claim to be the global hegemony, and Europe, which depends on energy supplies – in the most extreme situation, Moscow can simply exit. It would be a sure negative, but not a critical one. Neither the US, nor Europe, can allow this to happen. Moreover, not being more of a global power, and by forming its interests as a regional force, Russia can afford to leave the game in the Middle East; if it becomes completely overheated, Russia can “dig” out a long-range vantage point and observe from the sidelines as the West tries to cope with the “Arab awakening”. And it can wait for the next change of circumstance, which will come once it’s clear to initiators of and participants in of those changes that, yet again, not everything went as planned.

Since the demise of the USSR, Moscow’s policy in the Middle East has been, essentially, one of inertia. It has not acquired anything new in this

extremely important part of the world. Formally, as Russian diplomats and Orientalists constantly point out, Russia is in a unique position. It has (at least had – until the start of the “Arab Spring”) normal relations with all the local political participants, including monarchies of the Persian Gulf, with whom relations during the Soviet era were not good, Israel and the “ Hamas ” movement. In reality, this provided little, and incisive Russian contacts were limited to leaders with whom ties remained from the Soviet era – Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi and the Assad family. They all have their roots in a different era and their falls were pre-programmed. The new powers have some interest in Moscow, but are not prepared to orientate themselves toward it, and Russia has been dropped from the ranks of patrons. However, for countries with sufficient weight, seeking participation in the world game (for example, Egypt), Moscow has value as an important international factor. Not regional, but specifically international – global.

Yet the Middle East is changing dramatically. The “Arab Spring” has swept the authoritarian republics – and this is just the start, as sooner or later transformation will spread, including to the Gulf regimes, which today are promoting revolutionaries in Syria and other secular dictatorships in hope of canalizing social energy outward from their own states. No one can predict how the geopolitical map of the region will look in five years. Of course, it would be tempting to secure strategic positions there, but no one can yet see how to do so.

The future Middle East will likely become a source of growing risks for Russia – the fall of secular regimes and Islamization of the region could lead to more interaction with like-minded activists in the North Caucasus. Serious destabilization in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan is capable of increasing the emigration of minorities – Armenians and Circassians have already been drawn back to their historic homelands. Harsh clashes between Sunnis and Shi’ite, the acute crisis inside and surrounding Iran are fraught with the overflow of chaos into the South Caucasus, which likely threatens to rupture the fragile status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh, a very tricky conflict for Russia as the main regional power. In general, of course, Russia is unable to simply forget about the existence of the Middle East, but its vector, most likely, will be of a different nature – how to isolate itself from the emerging danger. Paradoxically, if events continue as they are now, then in a couple of years the most reliable partner for Russia in the



Middle East could become Israel, with which cooperation is gradually increasing across the most varied of areas, and with which, essentially, only one major disagreement exists – Iran. But the Iranian question will soon be decided one way or another and a new situation will emerge. And the United States, strategic patron of Israel, is becoming weighed down by the need to square away all its actions with the interests of the Jewish state, at the same time as the Arab world is undergoing a tectonic shift; America needs to adapt its strategy to the changes quickly and flexibly.

But it is a question of outlooks – both mid and long-term. For the time being, Russia is playing out the Syrian part with one aim: to prevent anything worse arising for Moscow due to fervor of the “Arab Spring”.