

RUSSIA'S "RETURN" TO THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE ARAB UPRISINGS

LEONID M. ISSAEV

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Abstract: The onset of the Arab uprisings in 2011 marked the beginning of not only a new order in the Middle East, but also the start of Russia's "return" to the Middle East. Russia would increasingly position itself as one of the key actors which the new regional order would depend on. Researchers have mainly analyzed the Russian presence in the Middle East in terms of Moscow's geopolitical interests. While such an approach is valuable, it does not fully encapsulate Russia's true motives and strategies in the region. Specifically, overemphasizing Russia's geopolitical interests hinders us from seeing the strong influence that domestic challenges, including the growing protest activity against the Russian regime in the 2010s, have played in shaping Russian policy towards the Arab uprisings.

The Arab Uprisings as a Crisis of the Authoritarian System

While the dominant narrative today in Russian media and official statements paints the Arab uprisings as an American conspiracy, in the early days following the onset of protests in 2010-2011, Russian officials in fact primarily attributed the uprisings to internal grievances.

The Arab uprisings were initially attributed by Russian media and authorities to a number of grievances, among them, the dissatisfaction of educated young people with their social status and lack of future prospects. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that: "The driving force behind the events that were taking place in Libya, which we observed in Egypt and other countries, was mostly the educated youth"¹ Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Mikhail Bogdanov declared in July 2011: "As for the root causes of the current turmoil in the Arab countries, in my opinion they lie both in the socioeconomic and political spheres... The irremovability of leaders and political elites in general, the low degree of social mobility, the late nature or even absence of urgent reforms, high unemployment, corruption, and other social diseases - all these internal conflict factors accumulated for many years and detonated at the beginning of this year."²

At this stage, emphasis was placed on the domestic reasons that led to the wave of protests in the Arab world.³ Russian diplomats strongly refused to characterize the protests as being similar to the color revolutions, that is, the wave of revolutions mostly in the former Soviet Union countries in the early 2000s which Russia and China often see as American machinations. Russian officials welcomed the desire of the region's countries to follow the "democratic path," but insisted that the initiative for reforms should come from the people.⁴ In his March 2011 interview, Sergey Lavrov, referring to United States' (US) involvement in the political crisis, pointed out that the Americans did not immediately formulate their approach to the situation in Egypt as had it unfolded rapidly under the influence of domestic processes.⁵

"Color revolutions" and the threat to Russia

The situation changed dramatically in late 2011 – early 2012, which in many respects can be attributed to domestic political processes in Russia. First of all, protests erupted in Bolotnaya Square in December 2011, provoked by the complete falsification of the 2011 parliamentary elections and preceded Vladimir Putin's nomination for a third presidential term in early 2012. The Russian authorities and the pro-government media began to actively advance the narrative that the Arab uprisings were color revolutions inspired from abroad. The underlying rationale behind this was to delegitimize the events in Bolotnaya Square by putting them on par with the protests in the Arab world, while emphasizing the absence of any internal reasons for the anti-regime demonstrations. Vladimir Putin, who was Prime Minister in 2011, stated during the traditional presidential-hotline broadcast that the opposition was always unhappy with the results of elections, that this was an "absolutely normal thing" and that the elections were "objective and honest."

Russia's position on Syria in the United Nations (UN) Security Council, following Vladimir Putin's arrival in the Kremlin, served to only strengthen such a thesis among the Russian authorities.⁶ At a meeting of the Security Council in 2014, President Putin stated that the authorities would do everything possible to prevent such color revolutions from occurring in Russia. According to the BBC, Putin also equated them with extremism, which, he said, was used in the modern world as an instrument of geopolitics to redistribute the spheres of influence.⁷ As the President's Press Secretary for the President

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Dmitry Peskov noted in an interview: “In the Middle East, a chain of color revolutions took place, which was supposed to be limited to controlled chaos, but turned into an absolutely uncontrolled thermonuclear process.”⁸ Commenting on the anti-corruption rallies in March 2017, Vladimir Putin also used the narrative of color revolutions (as exemplified by the Arab uprisings) to explain the events. Comparing these rallies to the Arab uprisings and Euromaidan,⁹ he noted that they “led to chaos ... This is a tool of the Arab uprisings: we know very well what it led to. It also became an occasion for a coup d’état in Ukraine and plunged the country into chaos ... Anyone who transgresses the law should be accountable under Russian law.”¹⁰ It is no coincidence that in justifying its pre-2015 position on Syria, Moscow focused on preventing external interference, drawing parallels with Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. At the same time, the Russian authorities’ rhetoric began to take a pronounced anti-Western tone, which in turn encouraged Moscow to pursue an increasingly deterministic policy in the Middle East.

Thus, even if the dominant view in Russia in the initial stages of the Arab uprisings was that there were objective preconditions for the uprisings, the narrative started to significantly change after the events at Bolotnaya Square in Moscow and especially intensify after the events in Ukraine at the turn of 2013 and 2014. The narrative tool of “conspiracy theories” began to widely dominate the Russian media and statements of political figures.

Since 2012, the Russian authorities have carried out a massive propaganda campaign that portrayed the Russian protests as a consequence of US efforts to destabilize Russia by staging a color revolution. Russian officials simultaneously began to present Arab regimes as the victims of American intervention. One argument that began to take root was that the US was testing new information technologies to mobilize anti-government protests in the Middle East, only in order to subsequently apply them against the current Russian regime. As a result, the Putin regime used these charges of conspiracy to not

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only discredit opponents by crafting a narrative linked to the negative experiences of Arab countries, but to further strengthen its own legitimacy.¹¹ In other words, in the context of its confrontation with the West and its need to strengthen its grip over the country, the Russian leadership chose to weaken the opposition by linking their protests directly to the Arab countries' negative experiences.

This narrative coincides with a supposed dichotomy between democratization and stability, which has gained an important place in Russian social and political discourse after the mass protests in Moscow in 2011-2012. Since then, the Russian political establishment started to actively promote the idea that stability should serve as a key criterion for the effectiveness of any political regime. The Arab uprisings only served as vivid confirmation of this argument. For example, the authoritarian but stable dictatorships¹² of Syria's Bashar al-Assad or Egypt's Abdelfattah al-Sisi were believed to be opposed to various kinds of projects for democracy that only resulted in radical groups coming to power.

This explains why Russia's political solutions are top-down — that is, aligning with the entrenched regimes, even dictatorships — rather than bottom-up, that is, siding with the revolutionaries that aim to change the status quo. Moscow has not only saved the regimes of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, Abdelfattah al-Sisi in Egypt and Khalifa Haftar in Libya, but further works to promote conflict resolution scenarios in the UN Security Council that only serve the interests of Middle Eastern dictatorships. This, in Moscow's view, suits Russia's interests better than supporting popular struggles for political rights and human dignity. These interventions, nonetheless, tend to only exacerbate the causes that led to these revolutions.

“Return” to the Middle East

After the Russian invasion of Syria in 2015, the Russian authorities' rhetoric began to take a more pronounced anti-Western character, which, in turn, pushed Moscow to pursue an increasingly deterministic policy in the Middle East. In the Syrian case, President Putin

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presented not only the Assad regime as a legitimate force struggling against terrorism, but his own self as well as fighting a war against terrorism, which represented a threat not only for the Syrian regime and the Middle East, but also for Russia and the entire world.

President Putin has clearly continued to construct a convenient foreign policy reality and seeks to impose his discourse, primarily on the West, in the framework of the international agenda. But compared to previous periods when rhetoric and propaganda were the main instruments, Putin has moved on to taking concrete actions to “create facts on the ground” (such as the Russian intervention in Syria or the participation of Russian private military contractors in the Libyan conflict) and promote the decisions that he takes based on his ideas on reality. The war in Syria is portrayed by Putin as the result of deliberate actions by the US and the West at large to destabilize and overthrow stable authoritarian regimes in Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Tunisia and Egypt. In this case, Assad is the legitimate president of Syria and the guarantor of stability, while the West is equipping the so-called opposition, which is in fact no different from the terrorists of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). In this paradigm, “all those who advocate the overthrow of the legitimate authority of Assad are terrorists, and allegations of the atrocities of the regime ... are ‘active measures by [Western] intelligence services’ and anti-Syrian propaganda.”¹³

The main mass of the Russian electorate is nostalgic for the Soviet period with its “stability” and sense of being a great power, albeit often at the cost of a comfortable life. It is the return of this feeling which has given rise to a colossal surge of patriotic sentiments after, for example, the annexation of Crimea. Therefore, the military operation in Syria beginning in autumn 2015 was logically consistent with forming the image of Russia as an important actor in the international arena with which the United States and the West were now forced to reckon. It is noteworthy that the Russian population often expresses its readiness to *endure difficulties* in exchange for identifying itself as a notorious great power.

This narrative undoubtedly reached its apogee in Vladimir Putin's address to the Federal Assembly (which can actually be considered as pre-election statements) in March 2018: "While surprising, despite all the problems that we faced in the economy, finance, defense industry, in the army, Russia still remained and remains the largest nuclear power. No, no one really wanted to talk with us, no one listened to us. Listen now."¹⁴ In this case, one can clearly see not only the emphasis on Russia's foreign policy ambitions, but also the justification of the problems that the Russian population had to face due to its leadership's actions, the preservation of its status as a nuclear power and the increase of its imperial ambitions.

In the international arena, Russia increasingly began to be ranked among the superpowers with which other had no choice but to deal with.¹⁵ Therefore, after the downed Russian bomber on the Turkish-Syrian border in October 2015, Turkish leadership came to realize the need (simultaneously forced and built on common threat perception) for cooperation with Russia in Syria, and subsequently Libya and the South Caucasus.

Similar trends were observed in Russia's relations with Saudi Arabia. Since the onset of the civil war in Syria, Riyadh has strongly criticized the Kremlin for its stance on the conflict.¹⁶ Nevertheless, by 2017, there was a feeling in Saudi Arabia that solutions for "the Syrian riddle," should be sought not only in Washington, but also Moscow.¹⁷

Conclusion: from dominance to cooperation

Despite its earned status of a "superpower" by the early 2020s, the Russian regime has been increasingly challenged by its need to retain superpower consideration. The regime's propaganda activities under Vladimir Putin have resulted in establishing a broad consensus in Russian society that Russia can have a future only as a "great power."¹⁸ This however presents the Russian authorities with the difficulty of preserving its great power image in the face of a shortage of economic resources. It should be noted that this is a problem that has haunted Vladimir Putin throughout his entire reign.¹⁹ This problem however is further escalating due to the Russian economy's continuing crisis, on the one hand, and the steady demand among Putin's electorate for a tough foreign policy to combat external pressure on Russia, on the other hand.

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The Russian regime sees the solution for this problem, at least in the Middle East, in departing from its previous policy of dominating the region in favor of integrating itself into the region's collective security institutions. In other words, Russia is unable to sponsor the political process in Syria, Libya or Yemen, offer an alternative to the Iranian nuclear deal's Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or the "deal of the century" to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. However, Moscow can come up with initiatives to create international institutions for resolving conflicts and maintaining security in the region, primarily under the auspices of the UN, where it holds a special position as one of the permanent members of the Security Council. This, in turn, allows the Russian regime to solve two problems at once. On the one hand, this strategy guarantees Russia's right to be an integral part of the region's political process given its status as a "superpower" whose opinion must be reckoned with. On the other hand, it also allows it to share responsibility with the rest of the participants and, therefore, optimize its resources towards solving domestic political problems. This strategy thus allows it to find a better balance between its foreign policy ambitions and the need to minimize the costs of maintaining "superpower" status.

Thus, as the Russian authorities convinced the world community that Russia's voice in the Middle East should be heeded, it became increasingly important for them to create sustainable mechanisms that would maintain their positions in the region while minimizing costs. Not interested in acting as the sole or even main sponsor of the settlement of one or another of the Middle East conflicts, the Russian regime has in recent years, instead, been actively imposing collective security mechanisms on the world community. The creation of such structures from Russia's point of view could simultaneously solve both of its problems. By enforcing collective security agreements on the region, Russia reduces its economic cost by distributing responsibilities and financial obligations among a wide range of participants, while still ensuring the image of Russian influence and the need to listen to Moscow's voice.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leonid M. Issaev earned his PhD in 2014 from the Institute for African Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences. He is currently a senior lecturer at the Department for Political Science at the National Research University Higher School of Economics. He is the Deputy Chair of the Laboratory for Sociopolitical Destabilization Risk Monitoring at the National Research University Higher School of Economics and senior research fellow at the Institute for African Studies at the Center for Civilization and Regional Studies, which is part of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS). He is a member of the Scientific Council of the Russian Political Sciences Association (RPSA) and the Russian Sociological Society. He is also an expert on the Middle East and Northern Africa at the “Valdai” Club and the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC). Together with Askar Akayev, Andrey Korotaev and Sergey Malkov, he is a manager at the Russian Academy of Sciences program “The Mathematical Modeling of Global and Regional Dynamics Within the Context of the Modernization of Science and Education”. He teaches courses in Islamic political philosophy and political systems and political processes in the Arab world.

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Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza Floor:6

No:68 Postal Code: 34197

Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey

Telephone: +902126031815

Fax: +902126031665

Email: info@sharqforum.org

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