

Russia's Interests in the Middle East: A New Context

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Russia's interests in the Middle East can be defined as the prevention of instability that might come close to the Russian borders, protection of Russian business interests (primarily companies operating in the field of energy), and in terms of its military-industrial complex, supply of arms to countries in the region. Russia also perceives its Middle East policy as a means of bolstering its status in terms of influence and global power. The attention being paid to Syria's fate, despite related tensions and lack of mutual understanding among main international actors, has afforded the Russian Federation an opportunity to underscore the weight of its position in international affairs.

That said, the Middle East today is not at the top of Russia's foreign policy priorities. Russia's resources are limited and it cannot afford a role in the region comparable in scope and intensity to its relations with CIS countries, the US, the EU, or China.

The "Arab Spring" triggered an intensification of Russian policy in the region. Assessments in Russia of causes of the uprisings were extremely mixed. Although the majority of Russia's experts emphasized the domestic causes of the uprisings, there were also perceptions that any anti-government action was somehow or other organized with Western assistance. These perceptions were shaped above all by the "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet space (Ukraine, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan), whose objective, many in Russia believed, was to remove these states from the sphere of Russia's

influence, completely diminishing this influence even in regions of vital interests, thereby dealing a blow to Russian security.

Events in the Middle East have revived phobias characteristic of a portion of Russian political observers, with implications for the plans of outside forces (the US and the West in general). Many have begun to cite the theory of “manageable chaos,” which they believe the United States is orchestrating in the Middle East.

These attempts to reduce the complex and multi-faceted nature of present day social and international relations to a mere struggle among external forces for control over resources derived, first and foremost, from the specific circumstances of the domestic setting, that is, the election period. After the parliamentary elections that took place in late 2011, Russia saw the inception of a movement for fair elections and democratization of the political system. This movement gained momentum during the presidential campaign, and the hard liners then actively began to employ various kinds of propagandistic clichés; prominent among them was the threat of an “Orange Revolution” in Russia and the “Libyan scenario.” These options are essentially incompatible, but in the invective of those who accused outside forces of deliberate interference in Russia’s internal affairs and Russian liberals of treachery, they became inextricably and logically linked. This perception is illustrated by an interview for the mass media with a senior researcher from the Faculty of Sociology at Moscow State University who is keenly attuned to the spirit of the time: “In fact, at present foreign special services, with active support from the ‘fifth column’ inside the country, are mounting an effort to carry out a special operation in order to organize in Russia the next in a series of revolutions following the ‘Libyan scenario.’ Using various political technologies (manipulating the still immature minds of the youth, who lack corresponding knowledge and social experience), they are set to use the youth blindly for their ends.”¹

Accusations aimed at America have become not only a testament of patriotism but also a means of discrediting internal dissent. Charges of liaisons with the State Department were voiced in order to stigmatize “foreign agents” who dared to call into question both the achievements and election returns. Anti-Americanism became a new political fashion (fully consonant with the anti-Russian line of certain protagonists during the American electoral cycle), enthusiastically articulated by various Russian experts.

For example, while speaking at a rally at Poklonnaya Hill in support of presidential candidate Vladimir Putin, one of the organizers, Sergei Kurginyan, declared, “No to the orange plague!... Yes to our unity of diverse patriots. No to Americans and all who side with them.”²

Under conditions in which presidential candidate Putin was presented by the political elite as the only consistent fighter against the external threat and as a politician who had proved his ability to steer an independent course conforming to national interests, any compromise on international issues that hinted in any way at the possibility of outside interference into the affairs of sovereign states was flatly ruled out. However, there is no reason to consider the friction between Russia on the one hand, and the US and certain Western countries on the other, as a dominant trend. Anti-Western sentiments are in fact often used for tactical reasons in light of the dependence of Russia's modernization on ties with Western countries and on the connections and property of its elite in the West.

The energy factor is another important element of Russian politics that shapes the interpretation of events in the Arab world. In recent years oil prices have assumed particular significance for Russia. They have played an important role in ensuring domestic political stability, providing the authorities with a potentially successful means of fighting poverty, low wages in the public sector and in security agencies, and the most acute social problems. Moreover, the national economy found itself virtually addicted to oil, a situation that resulted in massive and fundamental problems of development that were impossible to solve using only revenues from oil. During years of high oil prices, domestic production in the Russian Federation developed very little, corruption was rampant, an enormous gap developed between the poor and the wealthy strata of the population, the infrastructure development was insufficient to meet needs, and the attractiveness of investment decreased. A form of self-complacency emerged – a belief that even in times of global crisis Russia's accumulated resources would help it come through with minimal losses. Even more significantly, energy resources became an important instrument of foreign policy.

Consequently the question of oil prices is at times a matter of the highest priority in assessing the significance for Russia of particular events that might affect it, whether directly or indirectly. The “Arab revolutions” were directly associated by some Russian experts with US attempts to impose its control over Middle Eastern oil and, correspondingly, to encroach on

Russian interests. Hence we were offered blood-curdling scenarios of increased American control over pipelines and oil sales. The Libyan events merely added fodder to these arguments, which pertain not only to the Arab revolutions but also to the situation regarding Iran. Among some Russian analysts the threat of action against Iran has engendered less concern about the potentially dangerous destabilization of the situation than it has about a new breathtaking hike in oil prices.

The benefit of high oil prices for Russia is very relative. Over the long term, according to Russian specialists of the leading academic IMEMO (Institute of World Economy and International Relations) institute, political instability in the main region of world oil extraction stimulates such processes as priority development of unconventional hydrocarbons, especially in the United States, and bituminous sandstones in Canada, as well as offshore deposits that are isolated from the local socioeconomic environment and a greater commitment to the promotion of alternative sources and reduced dependence on the import of Middle Eastern oil.³ It is not the carving up of the oil “pie” by outside forces but the strategic prospect of new energy sources that may, if the present orientation of the Russian economy towards raw materials is retained, have the most negative impact.

The Middle East conflict, a factor that has been shaping Russia’s policy in the region, is traditionally perceived in Russia as intensifying radical sentiment and military-political tension in the region. Russia participates in the settlement of the conflict both through international efforts (the Quartet of international mediators incorporating Russia, the US, EU, and UN) and on a bilateral basis. Against the background of the “Arab Spring,” US elections, and EU economic woes, the Arab-Israeli conflict gradually falls by the wayside. To a certain extent, this is connected also with the end of the Oslo process, which in the opinion of the majority of experts has exhausted itself, while the need for new approaches and ideas remains. The Quartet under present conditions is gradually losing its partners’ confidence. Countless appeals to sit down and talk continue, but they no longer convince anyone, and movement towards a settlement is clearly lacking. The US attempt to secure a long term freeze on the construction of settlements was not fully realized, while the negotiating process was in fact never resumed for both objective and subjective reasons. A certain divergence in positions developed among the Quartet, with the European Union forming its own approach to certain aspects of the settlement.

For its part, Russia was ready to support a line towards consolidation of political efforts by the Palestinians that might ensure stronger negotiating positions for them. From Moscow's point of view, sufficiently proactive steps in that direction were required, given the prospects for revolutionary change in Palestinian society. There are clearly manifested vectors of tension within this approach, and the current official leaders are not infrequently perceived by the more impatient younger section of the electorate as insufficiently legitimate. Russia has facilitated the process of national reconciliation, having made use of certain advantages allowing it to take a more active part in setting up the political process. Among these advantages are Russia's good relations with both Arabs and Israel. Moscow's relations with Tel Aviv have reached a new height with the abolition of visas and conclusion of the first-ever agreement on military-technical cooperation.

Russia's capacities are far from limitless. Nevertheless, Russia's leadership, though denouncing terrorist methods (which complicate the search for solutions and discredit any such organization), still deems it necessary to maintain contact with Hamas given the latter's strong influence on the situation and lack of political homogeneity within its leadership. Russia was able to contribute to the reconciliation of Fatah and Hamas in 2011, though for both objective and subjective reasons this process did not gain momentum.

For many years the Russian Federation has promoted its own idea pertaining to the mechanism of settlement, namely, the convocation of an international conference, although the concept increasingly requires amendment.

If one is to compare the influence of the Middle East conflict and the "Arab Spring" on Russia's interests, at the current stage the instability and strategic uncertainty generated by events in the Arab world still represent a far more serious challenge than the unsettled Palestinian problem. Moreover, the Russian Federation's involvement in international bodies dealing with the settlement is, from Russia's perspective, a positive instrumental role.

Notes

- 1 Sergei Yelishchev, "Ne dopustim 'liviiskogo stsenariya' v Rossii" ("Let us prevent the 'Libyan scenario' in Russia"), http://www.rusline.ru/news_rl/2011/12/19/.
- 2 Tzentr Kurginyana (Kurginyan's Center), <http://www.kurginyan.ru/publ.shtml?cmd=add&cat=6&id=247>.
- 3 S. V. Zhukov, *Nestabil'nost' v Severnoi Afrike i na Blizhnem Vostoke: vliyanie*

na mirovoi rynok nefi (“Instability in North Africa and the Middle East: The Influence on the World Oil Market) (Moscow: IMEMO RAN, 2012), p. 5.