

# The Arab Spring – Implications for the Russian Federation

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## Abstract

The Arab Spring led to a major transformation of political systems of the region's most countries; an increase in the significance of radical Islam in the political life; a degradation of the security environment. In addition, changes in the region's economy cannot be overlooked. The events connected with the Arab Spring gave the Russian Federation completely new challenges. The country has to yet again define the character of its relations with Muslim countries and adapt its foreign policy to the new post-revolutionary reality. The Arab Spring also represents a challenge for Russia in its internal affairs.

**Keywords:** Arab Spring, Russian Federation, Islam, Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Libya, Islamic State, Middle East, Ummah

At the turn of 2010 and 2011, the region of the Middle East and North Africa was dominated by a wave of protests and social unrest which swept through most countries of the region. Even though the scale and consequences of the events baffled the international community, it should be noted that protests or rebellions are not a new phenomenon in the Muslim World (like the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979). The outbreak of social protest was triggered by many factors, often unseen by the West mostly due to the efforts of dictators who created an image that their regimes were stable, modern, and were fighting terrorism (Dzisiów-Szuszczkiewicz). Economic, social and political factors were the main reason for initiating the events in the Middle East and North Africa. For many years, the Middle East had been dogged by problems connected with high unemployment, illiteracy, low income among a significant proportion of the population, and corruption (Dzisiów-Szuszczkiewicz). Demonstrators on the streets of Arab towns also protested against despotic regimes which some researchers, such as J.A. Goldstone, call “Sultan”, which in simple terms, describes regimes whose leaders strive to maintain and expand their power, frequently at the expense of formal institutions (Goldstone).

The events in the Middle East first assumed the form of civil disobedience. People in towns took to the streets and demanded that the leaders of their countries step down. Subsequently, the situation developed in a few directions. In Tunisia and Egypt, the authorities made attempts to break the civic movement but eventually gave in under the pressure of growing protests. Protests in these two countries although violent, with many people killed, did not turn into a civil war. With the stepping down of these countries' respective presidents, the situation stabilized and made it possible for the country and society to function (Barhouma). In Jordan, Algeria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Mauritania, Sudan and Oman, the authorities managed to convince their societies that they would initiate new reforms which would cater to the people's urgent needs. Societies once again trusted the ruling class and the protests petered out (Zdanowski).

In Syria, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain the authorities took a tougher stance. Either the protests were broken up by force (Bahrain) or long-lasting civil wars broke out (Libya, Syria and Yemen). The direction in which the events developed was affected by the balance of forces between society and the authorities. The situation in individual countries was similar as far as the course of events is concerned yet at the same time very distinct due to different political and economic conditions (Zdanowski).

The Arab Spring in the Middle East illustrated how difficult it is to forecast political events in this region. Revolutionaries in each country acted in different conditions, representing totally distinct social groups. Previously, it had been an Islamic society – backward, resistant to any change. Together with the outbreak of the revolution it turned out that it is an open-minded society which is fighting for universal rights (Czajkowska and Diawoł-Sitko). It cannot be expected, however,

that the spontaneous social uprising will turn society into a mature and civil one overnight. The Arab Spring showed the world the importance of social media in bringing about social and political changes as it played a vital role in the context of the events that unfolded in the Middle East. At the beginning of 2010, there were 17 million Internet users in Egypt, of which as many as 4 million used Facebook, which was one of the key carriers of information during the Middle East revolution (Stepanova). The events in the Middle East contributed not only to the changes in the social and political landscape in the region. They also forced the leading players on the international scene to adjust their policies concerning this area and for some they became a source of potential threat. The Russian Federation also faced new challenges in relation to the Arab Spring.

The Middle Eastern region has been of interest to Russia for many centuries. Development of commercial contacts with the Byzantine Empire has been happening since the times of Kievan Rus. The Middle East also saw competition between the Russian Empire and European superpowers for access to the Mediterranean Sea through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles (*O kontrole nad prolivami Bosfor i Dardanelly*). The Middle East in the “cold war” period was an extension of the global bipolar rivalry. The United States and the Soviet Union had a strong impact on the region which, to their mind, represented a territory of great strategic importance. The period from the early 1960s to 1973 may be regarded as the pinnacle of the Soviet Union’s influence in the Middle East. After the Yom Kippur War, the Soviet Union slowly began to lose its foothold in the region. Communist ideology was incompatible with the assumptions of Nasserism and the Ba’ath party. Only some of their elements coincided (Ożarowski). Perestroika was crucial for the Kremlin’s Middle East policy as it forced Russia to resign from political involvement in peripheral regions. In the aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation withdrew politically from the Middle East. In the early 1990s the country focused on the its political and economic transformation as well as restoration of relations with the Western countries. In the new geopolitical situation, the Russian Federation was not able to have such a strong impact on the international scene as the Soviet Union once did (Bryc).

A change in the attitude of Russia’s foreign policy concerning the Middle East region began when Yevgeny Primakov became the Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Russian Federation in 1996. The main doctrine of Russian foreign policy in the mid-1990s was the so-called Primakov doctrine. Its main goal was the restoration of Russia’s international position through the creation of strategic alliances, including those in regions that Russia had traditionally had influence in, such as the Middle East. Vladimir Putin continued this by giving importance to relations with Middle Eastern countries. Due to the close proximity of the post-Soviet region or, in many cases, a common religious, ethnic or political identity, the situation in the Middle East is of keen interest to the Russian Federation (Bryc).

## Reaction of the Russian Federation to the Events Connected with the Arab Spring

When at the beginning of 2011, the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt were overthrown, a question arose about how predictable this entire situation was. The main reasons for the Arab Spring had been known long before the first anti-government reactions appeared. The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, in an interview in mid-March 2011, expressed an opinion that “nobody had precise forecasts of these events,” and he referred to the anti-government reactions as “the expected surprise.” “Expected because problems, predominantly in the social and economic spheres, had been accumulating for many years. The regimes which had been in power in many countries for over a decade had lost contact with what was really happening in them, what problems society was facing,” said Lavrov. He noted that the United States together with other countries very often drew the attention of the region’s countries to their problems, sometimes even helping to resolve them. He also admitted that events in the Middle East had been a surprise as “they occurred very quickly and influenced many countries at the same time” (Solov’ev).

Regarding mass protests in the Middle East, it is worth citing the words of Vitaly Naumkin, Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, who noted that “mass protest of young people, not inspired from the outside, mostly educated and with liberal views, are a precedent, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia. One may not, however, equate what happened in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and other countries” (Naumkin).

The first mass protests in Tunisia commenced in mid-December 2010 and led to the resignation of the President Ben Ali on 14 January 2011 (*Tunisia since the Arab Spring: timeline*). The reaction of the Russian Federation was rather restrained. A representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Alexander Lukashevich stated the following in a press release. “Moscow is alarmed to see the development of the situation in Tunisia. We believe that it is in the interest of all Tunisian people to come back to the normal and stable situation in the country in order to prevent confrontation, especially an armed one. We consider it a priority to restore peace in a democratic way through constitutional dialogue and with no violence” (*Zajavleniie oficial’nogo predstavitelja MID Rossii A.K. Lukashevicha v svjazi s sobytjami v Tunise*). Subsequent comments of representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were similar in tone. Russia reacted in a positive way to the parliamentary elections in October 2011, and the presidential elections in December which were won by Mohamed Moncef Marzuki (*Rossiiia podderzhivaet stremlenie Tunisa k fundamentalnym peremenam – MID*). The Kremlin was also enthusiastic about the parliamentary elections

conducted at the end of 2014 and the presidential elections, stressing that they were an important step on the way to democratic transformations in this country (*Moskva nazvala parlamentskie vybory v Tunise uspešnymi*).

Anti-government protests in Egypt from January 25 to February 11, 2011 forced the Russian Federation to pay greater attention to the processes in the region (Schwartz). This time the head of one of the leading Arab countries was overthrown. Already on February 9, 2011 Alexander Saltanov, the vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, made a special visit to Egypt (*O vizite v Egipt Special'nogo predstavitelja Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii po Blizhnemu Vostoku, zamestitelja Min Inostrannyh Del Rossii A.V. Saltanova*). From the very beginning, Russia took a really moderate stance, refraining from overtly supporting any particular party.

The Russian Federation reacted in a neutral way to mass protests in Bahrain, where on February 14, 2011 supporters of the opposition gathered in the town of Manama, demanding from the king, political liberties and an end to the infringement of Shiites' rights in this country (Nyathi). In official statements the Ministry stressed that the best method to get back to normal in the country back to normal was dialogue between the authorities and the opposition in a peaceful and violence free-atmosphere (*O situacii v Korolevstve Bahrejn. Soobsheniie dlja SMI*). Subsequent events in this country were received by the Russian Federation in a similar moderate tone (*Kommentarij Departamenta informacii i pečati MID Rossii po situacii na Bakhrejne*). From the very beginning, the Russian Federation also carefully watched the unfolding situation in Yemen. On November 23, 2011 a peace plan prepared by the Gulf Cooperation Council and signed in Riyadh. Under this peace plan, the incumbent president would step down in favour of the vice-president. Siergiej Kozlov from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, was present at the ceremony (*Jemenskaja Respublika*).

The reaction of the Russian Federation to the conflict in Libya was different than in the aforementioned countries. The country's initial reaction to the events in this country were similar to those which Russia had expressed to the events in Tunisia and Egypt. However, together with the escalation of the crisis and increasing violence, Russia began to criticize the authorities in Tripoli for using armed force against civilians. This criticism could be seen in Russia's support for resolution no. 1970 of the United Nations Security Council, imposing sanctions, mostly an arms embargo, on the regime of Muammar Gaddafi. Russia, however, abstained from UN Security Council resolution no. 1973, which formed the basis for the NATO intervention in Libya (*SB OON i Liviia: prigovor mezhdunarodnomu pravu*). Russia imposed its first sanctions on Libya in March 2011, shortly after adopting the aforementioned resolution no. 1970. Six months after the outbreak of the crisis in Libya, the president of the Russian Federation, Dmitry Medvedev, signed a decree under which Russia imposed additional sanctions on Libya. Russian airspace,

for instance, was closed to Libyan airplanes, with the exception of humanitarian aid. Restrictions also concerned to the personal finances of the Libyan leader and his closest associates (*Rossiiia vvela novyie sankcii protiv Livii*). However, in the case of Syria Russia's stance different. From the beginning of anti-governmental protests in this country till today Russia is consistent in its supporting of Damascus (Kleshhenko).

## Russia faces up to new challenges

The formulation of new foreign policy rules in relation to the Middle East is currently one of the biggest challenges that the Russian Federation is facing. Changes to the international situation in the Middle East were reflected, for instance, in the latest Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, which was approved by the President in February 2012. The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation specifies the country's main priorities, directions, aims and targets of Russia's foreign policy. This document, along with the Constitution, federal acts and the Concept of National Security of the Russian Federation, represents one of the foundations of Russian foreign policy. Initially, the Arab Spring was interpreted as an event intentionally inspired by Western countries, aimed at weakening the position of Moscow in the region. Since 2012, there has been a shift in Russia's perception of the Arab Spring, which began to be understood by Russia as a willingness to return to the roots of civilization. It is perfectly reflected in the Concept of Foreign Policy which says that "these days we observe a return to the roots in individual civilizations and cultures, which is particularly visible in the context of events in the Middle East and Northern Africa, where political, social and economic change is often effected under the slogan of introducing values based on Islam" (Chernenko).

As observers note, after the death of Muammar Gaddafi, Russia was left with only one serious partner in the Middle East – Bashar al-Assad. Syria may be counting on the support of the Russian Federation as it is one of the main markets for Russian weapons. Syria is also important for Russia for strategic reasons. The port of Tartus is the only Russian naval base outside the territory of the former Soviet Union. What is more the base has direct access to the Mediterranean Sea (*Rossiiia ne budet sozdavat' v sirijskom Tartus bazu VMF*). Moscow's involvement in the Syrian conflict is motivated by two main reasons: firstly, Russia wishes to challenge the American hegemony in the international arena and secondly to help Bashar al-Assad's regime in the struggle with radical Islamists who in the view of Russia are regarded as serious enemies of the Russian Federation. Keeping President al-Assad in power is motivated by a range of Russian interests. Syria has become a bulwark in preventing the United States from extensively using its military forces. In addition, Russia strives not to allow for a regime change in Syria through

intervention from the outside as this could have dangerous consequences for post-Soviet countries on the peripheries of Russia, including Russian Federation regions populated mostly by Muslims. Russia does not want the Libyan precedence to be repeated, i.e. military intervention of Western countries under the slogan of human rights protection. The Russian Federation considers the al-Assad's secular dictatorship to be the best guarantee of not allowing extremists connected with Saudi Arabia and Qatar to gain power.

It is also worth looking at the opinion of Syria's leader, Bashar al-Assad, on the relation with the Russian Federation. He expresses his clear support for strengthening Russian presence in the Middle East. According to Assad, thanks to increased Russian involvement, the region will be more stable and the balance of power will be restored after it was lost after the breakdown of the Soviet Union. "Increasing the Russian presence in our region will contribute to the stabilization of the situation. Russia plays a very important role in strengthening stability in the world," the Syrian leader said in an interview for the Russian TASS agency in March 2015. Al-Assad also noted that there is some similarity between the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine. In his opinion, in both cases there is a common goal: "to weaken Russia and create a puppet state" (*Asad predlozhit Rossii rasshirit' voennoe prisutstvie na Blizhnem Vostoke*). It is also worth stressing that a very important problem that the Russian Federation will have to face is the possibility of spreading extremism to Northern Caucasus and Central Asia. The most serious source of radicalism is the Islamic State, which had increased its influence every month to include territory in Syria and Iraq (Khramchikhin).

## The Arab Spring: Its Impact on Russian Muslims and Russia Itself

Islam in today's Russia is by no means homogenous. First of all, it must be noted that in recent years the division into traditional and non-traditional Islam has been used more and more often. Traditional Islam comprises groups of Muslims that arrived in Russia and who built their identity before the revolution and continue to reside in the country to the present day. Non-traditional Islam predominantly consists of groups that arrived in Russia after 1991 and deem it necessary to revive the religion and, in a way, purify it. Russian Muslims mostly include Tatars, Bashkirs and inhabitants of Northern Caucasus. According to the latest census, Russia is inhabited by 14.5 million followers of traditional Islam. According to unofficial data today's number of Muslims in Russia exceeds 20 million. The majority of Russian Muslims are Sunnis, the Hanafi, and in Caucasus the Shafi'i school is present with Sufism being widespread there as well. In seven federal units, Muslims represent the majority of the population, namely in: Ingushetia – 98%, Chechnya

– 96%, Dagestan – 94%, Kabardino-Balkaria – 70%, Karachay-Cherkessia – 63%, Bashkortostan – 54.5%, and Tatarstan – 54%. In Moscow alone, the number of Muslims is two million, while in the Moscow Oblast it is 650 000 (Malashenko).

Muslims living today in the Russian Federation also consist of immigrants whose numbers continue to grow. They come mainly from Central Asia – Uzbekistan, Kirgizstan and Tajikistan as well as from Afghanistan. Their number is estimated to be from one million to 3.5 million. So the structure and demography of the Muslim population in Russia appears to be rather complex. According to a prominent Russian scholar, an expert from Centre for Central Asian, Caucasian and Volga-Urals Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Professor Mikhail Roshchin, the Russian authorities are now facing a major challenge and trying to understand this situation though, for instance, supporting, mostly financially, traditional Islam (Roszczyn). In his opinion, non-traditional, radical Islam is also growing in strength, even though it is not financed by the state. In all places where there is relatively strong armed underground (in Dagestan, Ingushetia or Kabardino-Balkaria), funds are raised from protection money, as financing from other regions and countries is increasingly difficult due to the increased transparency of banking systems (Roszczyn).

The Arab Spring also reverberated among the Muslim community in Russia. Official standpoints of Muslim leaders concerning events in the Middle East were convergent with those of the government. The Chairman of the Russian Council of Muftis admitted that “adopting a UN resolution on Libya lies in the interest of the Muslim world.” Referring to the reasons for the riots there, he said that “if somebody has been ruling a country for 30 years, not giving society any social benefits, then it is normal that people walk into the streets and demand economic and political changes” (*Glava Soveta Muftiiev Rossii Podderzhivaet operaciju protiv Kaddafi*).

According to Ruslan Kurbanov, an orientalist, the greatest interest in the Arab Spring in Russia can be seen among the Muslim youth that use the Internet and speak English and Arabic. It is precisely this group that supports revolutions in the Middle East in the hope that the Arab-Muslim world is going to change in the years to come. People of older generations present rather balanced views, mostly convergent with the official policy of the authorities (*Vliianiie arabskoj vesny na Rossiiu i rossijskikh musul'man*).

Events connected with the Arab Spring forced the Russian authorities to change their attitude towards Muslim education. The issue of young Russian citizens leaving the country to get an education in Muslim states has been discussed for a long time. It was not infrequent that graduates of Arab universities were influenced by Muslim radicals; in addition, they learned about Islam from textbooks from Saudi Arabia. Young Muslims returning to their homes often became missionaries of a tradition different from the Russian tradition of Islam (Mukhietdinov).



In the Russian Federation there are officially 97 Muslim universities. This data, however, includes all educational institutions on a tertiary level, including both higher madrases, and universities together with their branches. However, many experts and official representatives of Muslim clergy claim that the most serious players in the system of Muslim higher education in Russia are universities from cities such as Moscow, Kazan, Ufa or Makhachkala (*V Rossii budut otkryvat'sia novyie Islamskiiie Universitety*). In Dagestan alone there are 13 licensed universities (Mukhietdinov). Most Muslim organizations in Russia take the stance that only those who have already received higher education in Russian Muslim universities are allowed to attend foreign institutions. The strictest stance taken in this matter is from organizations from Northern Caucasus as they are in favour of introducing an absolute ban on young Muslims leaving the country to be educated in Muslim states (*Kto vliiaet na religioznoe obrazovanie rossijskih musul'man?*).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation recommends that Muslims refrain from leaving the country to for education in Arab states, especially those where there have recently been revolutions. Instead, the Ministry proposes going to, in the opinion of civil servants, safer countries in South-East Asia. An open meeting of the Bureau of the Clerical Muslim Board for the European Part of the Russian Federation was held on December 25<sup>th</sup> 2012 in Moscow. A representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Konstantin Shuvalov, expressed an opinion that despite the fact that Arab countries have so far offered Russian Muslims a satisfactory level of tuition, the ongoing political changes had forced the ministry to seek new opportunities and directions. The representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation stressed that the education of Russian students abroad should be at most additional and that it was a priority for the next few years to develop Muslim education within the country (Manonova). The Russian President, Vladimir Putin, also referred to the issue of educating Russian Muslims abroad in June 2015. According to him, the priority was to establish a competitive system of Muslim education within the country. To support Muslim education in the country, the authorities earmarked 894 million rubles for 2014–2016 (Majorova).

The Russian government's fears of extremism stemming from the Arab Spring are not groundless. Dagestan's capital, Makhachkala, saw mass protests in February 2013 with one of the slogans on display objecting to Russian policy towards Syria (Magomedov). However, radicalization does not only concern Northern Caucasus. Russian authorities paying attention in this area, underestimated the threat resulting from the deteriorating situation in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. In these regions, the attitudes among the Muslim youth are being perceptibly radicalized. The whole process is complex, but an important factor is migration, both internally from Northern Caucasus and externally from Central Asia. This combination means that radical ideologies permeate Russia (Bogodvid).

A fundamental problem for both the Muslim community and the Russian authorities is the increasingly active participation of citizens of the Russian Federation in military activities conducted in the Middle East. During his visit to Russia in June 2015, the Mufti of Syria said in an interview for the TASS agency that nowadays between five and seven thousand citizens from Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent Countries were part of the army of the Islamic State. "About 70 thousand people from all over the world is fighting on their side (...), some of them come with their whole families, and they are trained in Turkey. These people are financed by interests in Saudi Arabia. There are still new volunteers, mostly from Tatarstan, Kazakhstan and other states of the Commonwealth of Independent Countries," noted the Mufti. He also went on to say that "we thank Russia, China and India, which have helped us to live without the support of the International Monetary Fund. Today Syria is fighting for Russia, and also for Crimea and Chechnya. If Syria falls, terrorists will go to Russia" (*Verkhovnyj muftij Sirii: porjadka 7 tysjach vykhodcev iz Rossii i stran SNG voiuut na storone IG*). At the end of May 2015, the Russian public was shaken by the case of a 19-year-old female inhabitant of Moscow, a student of philosophy at the prestigious Moscow State University who flew in secret to Istanbul in order to travel to Syria and join the Islamic State. The woman was detained at the Turkish-Syrian border and deported to Russia. After her detention, the woman was in a very bad mental state and said she did not not exclude the possibility that during the recruitment she was given psychiatric drugs (*Varvara Karaulova poprosila Otca Kupit' Fruky i Igrushki*).

Despite certain frictions between the authorities and the Muslim structures in Russia, both sides go hand-in-hand against politicizing Islam in the country, especially in the context of processes visible in the countries affected by the Arab Spring. In March 2011, the final document of the National Convention of Muslims stressed the necessity to make the public aware of the fact that Russia is a democratic, secular and multi-faith country (Makharov). The Arab Spring seems to be the event that has opened a new chapter in relations between the Russian Federation and Muslim countries. At this time, Russia is struggling to maintain its influence in the Middle East region. Syria remains the most important area of influence and this country will probably remain Russia's main partner in this part of the world for the foreseeable future. The Islamic State remains an important challenge for Russia and the international community alike. Vladimir Putin fears expansion of Islamism to Russia, especially to Caucasus as well as to Central Asia which the majority of immigrants coming to Russia are from. Only a common front against the Islamic State, with the involvement of the Russian Federation, may be effective in preventing the threats posed by the Islamic State. The Arab Spring also represents a challenge for Russia in its internal policy. The authorities will have to face, above all, the growing radicalization of moods among the Muslim population.

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