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# The Russian Position on the Arab revolutions

*Nourhan El-Sheikh\**



Over the past decade, Russia has clearly returned as a major regional and international power. However, this return is marred by priorities in its foreign policy that is radically different from those that had governed the foreign policies of the Soviet Union for more than seventy years. The Russian foreign policy has become more pragmatic, free of ideological restrictions, and is governed by interests, particularly the economic ones. In this context, the Russian leadership has succeeded in making a quantum leap in Moscow's relationship with the Arab region, especially Russia's relations with the Gulf Cooperative Community (GCC), which saw unprecedented development and establishment of close cooperative relations on the basis of self-interest and economic partnership which is not subject to political fluctuations. It is difficult for Russia to give up this relationship, which is why the Arab region has earned a special place in the priorities of Russian politics and made Moscow keener on the stability of the region as a fundamental guarantor of its interests. Perhaps this partly explains Russian's extreme caution in taking a clear position on the Arab revolutions.

This report aims to understand and analyse the Russian position towards the Arab revolutions, in terms of the factors influencing this position, the potential repercussions on the course of the revolutions and the future of Russia's relations with the Arab region in the light of the expected changes in the elites and the current governments in the countries ravaged by these revolutions.

## **Russia's perception of the Arab revolutions: surprise and reservation**

Russia's interest in the revolutions that swept the Arab world since December 2010 has varied from one Arab country to another. The rapid developments in Egypt, Libya and Syria have attracted Russia's attention, followed by Yemen and Bahrain with a clear disparity in the attention, while Tunisia received no significant attention. There are common denominators that characterised the Russian position towards all these revolutions, including:

- 1- Reservation and relative caution evident in Russia's position towards the Arab revolutions, illustrated in its somewhat slow reaction. Russia was usually silent about the events until they matured or became aggravated, or until there was a displacement of power, as happened in Tunisia and Egypt. In the case of Tunisia, despite the start of the developments in December, Russia had shown no clear position until Ben Ali's overthrow and escape. With regards to Egypt, the Russian position was conservative and somewhat supportive to the regime of the former president, also until his removal from power. The same Russian position is repeated in the Libyan case, as Moscow confirmed its commitment to continue its diplomatic relations with the Libyan authorities, without condemning, of course, the rebels. The first clear and specific Russian position was in the Security Council when it did not reject Resolution 1973. Similarly, in the Syrian case, Russia continued its reservation and abstained from making any statement expressing a clear position until the situation was further aggravated with the escalation of violence by the Syrian authorities towards the citizens, and attempts by the United States and the European Union to internationalise the case and impose UN sanctions on Syria.
- 2- Emphasising the importance of peaceful change, renouncing violence and calling for dialogue and political solution within the legal framework and on the basis of national accord and rejecting the use of force by the authorities against civilians. Again, this is done without protest or direct condemnation and criticism of the ruling authorities. It is limited to a verbal behaviour in the form of statements by Russian officials and statements by the Russian Foreign Ministry, without direct intervention or coming up with initiatives or attempting mediation directly, in all revolutions, without exception.

- 3- Constant emphasis on rejection of outside interference in the course of events. Russia felt that the peoples of the region were capable of self-determination and could decide the future of their countries without having foreigners interfere in their affairs and impose their own plans. Although Russia did not veto the UN Security Council Resolution No. 1973, which deals with the threats faced by civilians in Benghazi and other areas and imposes an air embargo on Libya, it did an about-face and strongly criticised the manner in which the United States and its allies implemented the resolution, repeatedly stressing that it was a deviation from the path set by the legal decision, and that it does not support such interventions by NATO.

### **Factors affecting the Russian position: interests, concerns at home and the Western challenge**

There is a combination of factors and considerations that governed the Russian position towards the Arab revolutions.

First of all, Russian interests, and the strategic importance of the Arab states which have seen revolutions in the light of these interests. Over the past ten years Russia has been able to rebuild its relations with a number of Arab countries which are regarded as its traditional allies in the region headed by Egypt, Libya and Syria. Russia's interests in these countries have become a reality and would inevitably be affected, even if temporarily, by the state of unrest sweeping through the region and may be completely damaged with the collapse of the ruling regimes. The Russian interests are linked to three main sectors, namely: energy (oil and gas), military cooperation and technical cooperation in the fields of industry and development.

The major inflow of Russian investments in Egypt is linked to the energy sector, where "Lukoil" extracts about 650 thousand tons of oil in Egypt every year. Since 2004, the company has been conducting geological exploration works in search for oil fields, while "Novatek" has been conducting explorations for gas fields in Egypt since 2008. Libya has also gained importance in view of Russian investments and projects in the energy sector. The Chairman of the Board of Directors of "Tat Oil" Rustam Minejanov announced that the losses of the company in Libya in the event of a change of power could range between \$240 and \$260 million.

In 2008 Libya signed contracts valued at two billion dollars with Russia for the supply of weapons and spare parts for Soviet-made weapons, which represent 90% of the weapons and equipment in the Libyan armed forces. With growing Russian interests, there has been an expected estimated loss of more than \$6 billion in case of cancellations of military contracts with both Algeria and Syria at the outbreak of unrest in these countries, according to statements made by the Director-General of the Russian Centre for the analysis of the global arms trade Igor Korotherenko.

In addition to this, is the strategic importance of the Syrian Tartous naval base, used by the Russian navy that is the only supply base for the Russian fleet in the Mediterranean region. Lack of stability in Yemen threatens the implementation of contracts concluded in the framework of military-technical cooperation between the two countries estimated at one billion dollars. Change of government in Tunisia did not affect Russia's cooperation with that country, because the Tunisian army is equipped with Western-made weapons.

In addition, dozens of joint projects that have been agreed and contracted, with an estimated value of billions of dollars, would inevitably be affected either by cancellation or postponement as a result of the wave of instability that has swept the Arab countries.

In the light of expected negative consequences of these revolutions on the Russian interests, Moscow confirmed it wants to stabilize the situation in the Middle Eastern countries, since any instability in the region would directly affect and damage Russia's interests.

Secondly, the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other States has been established as the governing principle of the Russian foreign policy, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the absence of the ideological aspect in the Russian policy. Russia seeks to achieve its interests in the region through cooperation and partnership, and without direct dominance or flagrant interference in the internal affairs, a trend that is quite different from its American counterpart, which seeks to achieve U.S. interests through the occupation and direct intervention.

Thirdly, the Russian internal experience at home is what makes it more committed to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, and more cautious about revolutionary tide at home, although its leaders have denied this fear on their part. Russia is one of the countries that have witnessed waves of violent instability, especially in the Russian Caucasus region throughout the 1990s until the referendum on a new Chechen constitution in 2003.

It used excessive force to eliminate the Chechen rebels, and cannot criticise the regimes using the same method to suppress dissent at home. As evident in Russia, protests break out from time to time demanding more freedoms and democracy, and there was criticism of the ruling party "United Russia" regarding its management of the local elections held in March 2010. The Communist Party, the Liberal Democratic Party and the party "Fair Russia" were all reserved about these elections accused local authorities and "United Russia" of rigging the election results. Thus, support for revolutions abroad may instigate such domestic protests.

Fourthly, the position of regional powers and the implications of revolutions on regional stability. Russia's position is influenced by the positions of the regionally-influential Arab powers and actors, and their reactions towards the expected steps Moscow intends to take. For example, the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that, "Without a clear position by both the Arab League and the African Union, in both of which Tripoli is a member, Moscow could not consider any new steps." The fact that the Arab countries welcomed Resolution 1973 and some of them even took part in NATO operations against Libya, was undoubtedly one of the factors that prompted Russia to abstain from opposing the resolution. On the other hand, Russia sees Syria as a "cornerstone" in the security of the Middle East. Thus, its instability or the outbreak of internal civil war will inevitably lead to the destabilisation of the situation in neighbouring countries, especially in Lebanon, and leads to difficulties in the entire region. The intervention of foreign forces in Syrian affairs could constitute a real threat to regional security.

Fifth, accumulation of experience with regard to the position towards the Arab revolutions, especially Libya, and their impact on the Russian position towards the Syrian case. There was severe internal criticism by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin against President Medvedev, for not having used veto to block the issuance of UN Security Council Resolution No. 1973 on Libya. He denounced the decision and felt it was "shameful, foolish and destructive because it allows everything and is reminiscent of calls in the Middle Ages for the Crusades, and allows for intervention in the territory of a sovereign state". Polls indicated that 90% of Russians agreed with Putin's opinion. The Duma (parliament) also called on the UN Security Council to cease fire, violence and attacks on the civilian population in Libya. It called on the parliaments of France, Britain, United States, Italy, Canada and other countries participating in the military operation to support the cessation of the current hostilities, which cause damage to Libyan civilian infrastructure and lead to casualties among civilians".

It caused a clear shift in the Russia's official position towards Libya and compelled President Medvedev to call for the implementation of UN Security Council resolution, "In spirit, and not in letter, according to random interpretations by some States", and considered the NATO operations as "Blatant interference in the affairs of the Libyan state". At the conclusion of the meeting of Council, "Russia - NATO" in Brussels on 29 March, the Russian permanent Ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin asked the NATO to implement the UN Security Council Resolution literally without "sophistication in its implementation".

There is no doubt that Western countries overtaking the text of the resolution on Libya, and implementing it according to their interpretation impacted on the Russian position towards Syria, and led Moscow to be cautious about repeating the scenario of the U.S. intervention under the umbrella of NATO in the Syrian case. Western efforts failed on 28 April in a resolution of the UN Security Council condemning Syria for its use of violence to suppress the demonstrators because of opposition from Russia and China. Moscow confirmed that prefer not to resolve the Syrian crisis by imposing sanctions on Damascus, and gives priority to diplomatic and political means.

Russia has also been among the nine countries that voted against the resolution of the Human Rights Council of the United Nations on Syria at its meeting on 29 April, which was the initiative of the U.S., and was approved by 26 countries out of 47. The resolution condemns the use of excessive force by the Syrian authorities to crack down on demonstrators. Moscow has warned against foreign intervention in Syria, adding that it would only lead to further violence and may spark a civil war.

Russia learned a good lesson from the Libyan scenario, and before that from Iraq and Iran, that the output of its understanding with the United States and concluding special deals regarding its positions within the United Nations does correlate at all with the amount of losses it incurs as a result of allowing blatant American intervention in these files. This includes direct economic losses as a result of contract cancellations, as well as undermining Russia's image and credibility as an ally or a reliable partner. Therefore, the possibility of the Russian leadership repeating its position on Libya in the case of Syria is not likely, especially since Russia has regained its position as a major power that are able to resist U.S. pressure and that cannot bow to the US will. Instead, it stands firmly in the face of American plans as it did during the South Ossetia crisis in 2008.

The repercussions of the Russian position: paralysis and confusion in the face of a new system

The most important repercussions of the Russian position can be summarised in the context of two main axes:

- 1- Firstly, concerning the Arab revolutions. In this regard the limitation of Russian influence is evident by the reservation shown by Moscow, refusing direct intervention to support one party against another. Although it rejects violence and the use of force against demonstrators, it does not intervene to support them. It continues to maintain its relations with the existing power, either in Libya or Syria as the legitimate representative of the country. The influence is only limited to the positions it takes from within the United Nations, and this is important at least at political and diplomatic levels, as well as indirect influence on the course of revolutions by allowing or refusing interventions by other countries.
- 2- The second axis relates to the future of Russian-Arab relations. Change is inevitably coming, albeit slowed down for some time due to resistance by the authorities in Libya and Syria. This includes opportunities and challenges for

Russia. Revolutions have succeeded in breaking the link between the traditional ruling elites and the United States in some countries, and it may also succeed in ending the traditional hostility between some of the others and the United States, headed by Libya and Syria. There is no doubt that these developments will lead to the emergence of completely new regional variables. By the end of the transformation allies as well as adversaries or competitors will be redefined, which will inevitably affect Russian politics and alliances. The map of power and alliances in the entire region is being redrawn, in view of the rapid and radical change region is going through. This will undoubtedly change Russia's accounts and factors of its decision of its foreign policy-making. This by itself is a challenge facing Russia's foreign policy. As soon as Russia was able to put in order its status in the region by making an effort and subsequent visits carried out by its leadership to the countries in the region over the past six years, the winds of change came and led to the need to reorder again.

There is no doubt that Russia is keen on continuing its ties with the Arab world and developing fruitful strategic cooperation in various fields including political, economic, and cultural aspects. It is more inclined to translating its objectives and interests into cooperative relations that serve its own interests and the interests of the Arab parties.

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*\*Nourhan El-Sheikh, Professor of Political Science and Director of Youth Studies, Faculty of Economics and Political Sciences, Cairo University.*