



INSS Insight No. 282, September 20, 2011

The Arab Spring and Russian Policy in the Middle East

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In what perhaps can be heralded as a turning point in Russia's Middle East policy, seemingly coordinated statements have recently been sounded in important settings and the media by senior Russian figures (leading experts on the Middle East, politicians, and even the president himself). These statements have included criticism of the revolutionary process underway in the Middle East, portrayed as fundamentally negative and rife with risks for both regional and global stability. According to these pronouncements, the Arab spring gradually evolved into an Islamic summer by paving the way for the rise to power of forces from the radical Islamic camp in an essentially irreversible process.

In the view of these figures, while these unforeseen revolutions were jumpstarted among the younger generation by socioeconomic reasons and demands for political freedom, the younger generation does not have the power to maintain the revolutions' achievements. The reins of government will be assumed by organized systems that joined the opposition to existing regimes, including many Islamic elements that are already poised to take advantage of the situation and are soon expected to reach influential positions in the respective countries. According to the Russians, democracy does not stand a chance in Middle Eastern countries, characterized as they are by archaic societies. Future regimes can be expected to be anti-democratic and primarily Islamic in nature. Thus, these figures predict doom and gloom for most of the region's states, and the process underway is one that in their opinion cannot be stopped. There is a wistful longing for the previous regimes, as corrupt and authoritarian as they were, particularly for their stability and anti-Islamic stances. Likely future regimes will at best follow the Turkish model, or in a worst case scenario, the Iranian.

According to the Russians, this reality has dire consequences for regional and even global orders. The situation is likely to be influenced by the negative changes in Turkey, portrayed as striving relentlessly to reconstruct the Ottoman Empire, and the Iranian nuclear program, which apparently cannot be stopped and may be expected to be complete in 2-3 years. This has serious implications for international stability, especially since

additional nations in the region will work to attain nuclear power. In turn the international arms control regime is likely to collapse – a potential development that incurs major ramifications. In such a reality, the Islamic forces likely to assume power will not be partners to a dialogue with the international community, rather will strive to realize their own geopolitical ambitions.

In this context the international system emerges as inefficient, if not impotent. International organizations such as the UN and NATO have failed to confront the evolving risk and therefore enjoy less importance. The United States is portrayed as losing its influence both in the Middle East and in the international arena. Europe too is retreating under Islamic attack, and sooner or later Islam will overpower it from within. With the West declining both in the Middle East and in the world at large, Islam is set to prevail over the West.

This new apocalyptic Russian scenario is surprising, given that until recently Russia appeared as a friend and defender of the nations of the Middle East, including those with Islamic regimes, and various radical organizations (including, for example, members of the axis of evil). Russia has displayed evident support for the collapsing regimes of the Middle East and has labored to preserve the status quo, including its attempt to impede Western involvement in Libya and even more so in Syria. In addition, it enjoys positive relations with Turkey and special relations with Iran. Its warm relations with the Palestinians include support in the United Nations and support for Hamas.

At the same time, already from the start of the revolutionary process in the Middle East, Russia has, in its ambivalent way, worked to establish cooperation with the new regimes and elements of the opposition, by laying the groundwork for relations with what will likely be the region's future regimes. For example, alongside sweeping support for Assad's regime, Moscow hosted a delegation of the Syrian opposition.

Although one mustn't dismiss the possibility that the pessimistic assessment is an accurate reflection of prevalent opinion among Russia's political echelon, the notion that the statements reflect a coherent policy program should also be questioned. Indeed, it seems that in Russia there is no unanimity of opinion regarding Middle East policy. One can cite the dispute of some months ago, which spilled over into the media, between Russian President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin (an unusual event in and of itself) regarding sanctions against Libya – an example of differences of opinion on the question of Russia's foreign policy. Therefore, the picture presented above may reflect a rift in the Russian establishment and is not the result of a national assessment that obligates specific operational conclusions, and is rather supported by only some of the elements within the establishment or elements with a political axe to grind. A different explanation is also

possible, whereby we are witnessing the making of a new reality, and the picture broadcast by the Russian spokespeople reflects true concern that Russian interests in the region might be damaged.

Overall, then, the situation assessment presented raises the following question: given the complex reality emerging in the Middle East, is Russia really harboring a sense of reduced prospects for rebuilding itself as a superpower with influence in the region?

It seems that the opposite is the case. In place of the foothold it is losing in the Middle East, Russia is working to consolidate a new camp of supporters. The road to that end goes through anti-Western rhetoric; all of Russia's new visions and perspectives presented above amount to little more than a challenge to the West. By way of an apocalyptic scenario unfolding in the Middle East, the West is portrayed as the entity that failed to curb the Islamic threat because of its botched regional policy and its current weakening on the international scene. If so, the theory holds, it is time to allow the one remaining "responsible adult," i.e., Russia, to handle the attempt to stabilize the region.

