

# RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT... ITSELF?

131

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RUSSIA'S STRATEGY TOWARDS THE CRISIS IN SYRIA



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- Despite attempts to present itself as a neutral force, Russia de facto supported Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime by both political and military means. Moscow's main goal was to defend the regime against the pressure to relinquish power to the opposition, and also to deter any attempt at a Western/Arab military intervention in Syria.
- Various factors have influenced Russia's strategy towards the Syrian crisis. Among them are concern over strategic and economic interests in Syria as the last symbolic outpost of Russian influence in the Middle East, as well as a fear of the consequences of a regional imbalance, involving the spread of Islamic radicalism, spilling over to Russia itself. Obviously, the Western military engagement in Libya strongly influenced Russian behaviour, providing Moscow with a negative reference point.
- Of crucial importance in the Russian approach to Syria, however, is a perception that prevails among the conservative top members of the Russian ruling elite. It involves the belief in a US-led conspiracy to advance its geopolitical interests through regime change by means of both soft power technologies and the unilateral use of military force, with Syria being yet another target. But it also stems from a growing sense of domestic vulnerability, which paradoxically provokes the Kremlin to actively defend itself, both in Russia and in Syria, against a perceived external threat.
- One should not expect Russia to change its current position on the Syrian conflict. Moscow seems to be ready to accept any scenario which will effectively prevent a regime change in Syria, through prolonging the conflict and the "Lebanization" of Syria, or via an interim agreement which would freeze the status quo. This offers little room for cooperation between the West and Russia.

The EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia research programme  
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

## Introduction

The crisis in Syria has captured the world's attention for many months. What started in March 2011 as a public protest against the authoritarian regime of Bashar al-Assad was widely seen as a continuation of the Arab Spring. Before long, however, due to the brutal force used by the regime to suppress peaceful demonstrations, it slowly turned into a bloody civil war tearing the country apart, and subsequently into a humanitarian crisis and regional flashpoint. This, in turn, has sparked intensive international, mainly diplomatic activity, involving both regional and non-regional actors.

Russia was among those who reacted. As Syria's "traditional partner", Moscow actively engaged in support for the al-Assad regime both politically and through weapon deliveries, despite trying to maintain the image of a neutral observer. Such a stance has cast Russia into open and sometimes emotional conflict with the members of the Arab League, the US, and EU member states. In effect, it has contributed to the cooling of relations between Russia and the West and has damaged Moscow's image within the Arab World.

Many interpretations surfaced in a public debate on the actual reasons for Russia's position. To understand the country's strategy towards the Syrian crisis one should take the broader context into consideration. Two interrelated factors seem to be crucial in this respect: a perceived geopolitical challenge posed by the regime change policy of the United States, and a sense of vulnerability within Russia's narrow ruling elite, exacerbated by the domestic political unrest in Russia which started at the end of 2011. The aim of this paper is consequently, first to summarize the essence of the Russian approach to the Syrian crisis, and, second, to discuss its sources and their geopolitical and domestic context.

### **"Hands off Syria!" – Russia as al-Assad's supporter**

During the crisis, Russia has maintained regular direct contact with representatives of the al-Assad regime (even if on the Russian side it hasn't exceeded foreign minister level), and hailed the so-called political reforms proclaimed by the Syrian government, including the amendment of the

constitution and a partial amnesty. At the same time, and on numerous occasions as the conflict was escalating, Russia criticized the Syrian opposition, blaming it for being increasingly dominated by the radical forces applying terrorism. Moscow also subscribed to blaming the opposition, not the government forces, for the use of chemical weapons during the later stage of the conflict.

When the al-Assad regime resorted to the use of military force to suppress growing political unrest in the country, Moscow fiercely resisted initiatives by the Arab and Western countries to adopt the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions condemning the government forces and suggesting the possibility of introducing non-military sanctions against Syria (including an arms embargo). Moscow vetoed the draft UNSC resolutions three times, blaming its authors for their refusal to place responsibility for the violence on the opposition, for exerting too much pressure on the Syrian government, and for paving the way for possible external intervention in Syria.

Unilateral sanctions against Syria applied by the European Union, the US, and Arab states were strongly criticized by Moscow. When diplomatic peace efforts failed and unofficial military support for the Syrian opposition by individual Arab and Western countries grew, Russia condemned it strongly. Moscow also vehemently opposed the introduction of a no-fly zone over Syria, and criticized appeals for al-Assad to step down on numerous occasions, suggesting that it would decrease the chances of solving the conflict.

Another visible sign of support for al-Assad were the visits paid by Russian warships to the Syrian port of Tartus and/or Syrian waters. Several such visits occurred in 2012, starting in January when the Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov docked in Tartus. However, since late December 2012, Russian warships (mostly landing ships) have been making shuttle trips to and from Tartus. Between January and April 2013, at least five naval visits have taken place. Apparently, there were two reasons for this: Clearly it was a political-military demonstration by Moscow aimed at deterring the US (and some of its allies) from possible active military engagement in the Syrian conflict. But it is also plausible that the visits were used to deliver Russian heavy armaments for the Syrian regime forces.



Indeed, the arms deliveries have been the most concrete and effective indication of Russia's support for the al-Assad regime. Given the sensitivity of the subject and degree of confidentiality of the contracts and deliveries, it is difficult to compile a complete and accurate picture of the Russian weapon transfers to Syria.<sup>1</sup> Such deliveries were made in substantial quantities largely after contracts signed in early 2005 during Bashar al-Assad's visit to Moscow.

After being strongly criticized, mostly by Western governments and NGOs, of continuing arms deliveries to Syria during the conflict, Moscow maintained that such deliveries were first of all legal (perfectly true since Russia vetoed draft UNSC resolutions stipulating the imposition of an arms embargo on Syria and it was not bound by the embargo declared by the EU and the US); that they were merely in execution of "old" contracts (probably partly true since the new contract for the delivery of 36 Yak-130 trainers/combat aircraft, worth 550 million USD, was reportedly signed in 2011, but the planes were apparently not delivered); and that the weapons delivered were only defensive, and impossible to use in a civil war.

The last claim was untrue since they included not only defensive anti-aircraft, anti-ship or anti-tank missile systems (Buk-M2E, Pechora-2M, Pantsir S-1, Bastion-P, Khризantem, Igla-S - clearly aimed at strengthening the Syrian regime against any external military intervention) but also weapons which were (or could be) used in combat against the opposition forces (20 modernized Mi-25 combat helicopters).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, there were reports

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1 On this matter cf.: Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2012, SIPRI Factsheet, March 2013 [http://books.sipri.org/product\\_info?c\\_product\\_id=455](http://books.sipri.org/product_info?c_product_id=455). Accessed 25 April 2013; Letter to Rosoboronexport on Syrian weapons supplies, Human Rights Watch 6 April 2012, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/04/06/letter-rosoboronexport-syrian-weapons-supplies>. Accessed 24 April 2013; Dmitry Gorenburg, New report on Russian interests in Syria, part 2: Russian arms sales, 29.06.2012, <http://russiamil.wordpress.com/2012/06/29/new-report-on-russian-interests-in-syria-part-2-russian-arms-sales/>. Accessed 24 April 2013.

2 Dmitry Gorenburg, New report ..., op. cit; Simon Shuster, Is Russia Running a Secret Supply Route to Arm Syria's Assad?, *Time*, 29 November 2012, <http://world.time.com/2012/11/29/is-russia-running-a-secret-supply-route-to-arm-syrias-assad/#ixzz2QnPvIkB6>. Accessed 25 April 2013.

of Russian-made heavy mortars and sniper rifles being used in combat by the Syrian government forces. Several incidents were also recorded when cargo ships (or planes) carrying weapons (including ammunition) on their way from Russia to Syria were spotted and/or stopped. There were also reports of an unspecified number of Russian military instructors being present in Syria.

In general, Russia's arms deliveries were highly valuable for the Syrian government as they - according to SIPRI estimates - provided 78% of Syria's weapon imports between 2007 and 2011. Furthermore, unverifiable assessments made by the Russian think tank CAST suggested that the value of the weapons delivered increased during the conflict (from 700 million USD in 2010 to at least 960 million USD in 2011).<sup>3</sup> For Russia, however, it was still not a dominant direction since both figures represented roughly 7% of the total export by the Rosoboronexport state monopoly.

### Russia as a "neutral force"?

Russian criticism of the Syrian government was rare and vague. It was delivered mainly by President Dmitri Medvedev in the first months of the conflict. After each act of bloodshed committed by government forces in Syrian cities, the Russian MFA typically issued statements expressing concern, quoting both sides blaming one another and appealing for both to restrain themselves over further use of violence. In extreme cases (e.g. the massacre in Al-Qubeir near Hama on June 6, 2012), Russian condemnation was followed by the use of the notion of "provocation" (which suggested government forces were being falsely accused of the atrocities).

Russia claims it has maintained regular contact and engaged in dialogue with the Syrian opposition. However, after the first such contacts with members

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3 Yaakov Katz, Russia sells dozens of combat aircrafts to Damascus, *The Jerusalem Post*, 23 January 2012, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Russia-sells-dozens-of-combat-aircraft-to-Damascus>. Accessed 25 April 2013; Russia counting on Syria to keep arms exports high - report, Reuters, 31 January 2012, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/01/31/uk-russia-arms-idUKTRE80U1P520120131>. Accessed 25 April 2013.

of the Syrian National Council (the first, reported in June 2011 even before the SNC was formed, was termed “unofficial” and only the second, in mid-November 2011, involved the Russian foreign minister), they were discontinued. Instead, Moscow engaged in dialogue with other Syrian opposition groups which weren’t supportive of the SNC. These were mostly minor leftist alliances (such as the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change), marginal or even puppet opposition groups. What united all of these was resistance towards “external interference” in Syria.

Therefore, we can regard such a dialogue as part Russian PR effort and part attempt to play out internal differences within the Syrian opposition. Russia returned to the formal higher level dialogue with the mainstream Syrian opposition only in November 2012. But even then it sent mixed signals to the newly established main opposition coordinating body, the National Coalition for the Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NCSROF).

Russia also lent its formal political support to the numerous peace initiatives. In particular, it supported the Arab League’s peace initiative in November 2011, and UN Special Envoy Kofi Annan’s 6-point peace plan in March 2012. In April 2012, Russia voted twice in favour of UNSC resolutions on sending Arab League observers to Syria. The problem was, however, that Moscow resisted exerting any visible pressure on the al-Assad regime to fulfil the provisions of these initiatives, which turned out to be a failure.

Moscow also participated in a ministerial meeting on Syria in Geneva in June 2012, which constituted the Action Group on Syria, and endorsed a comprehensive peace plan on June 30, which subsequently became the main point of reference in Moscow’s official stance on the Syrian crisis. However, during the talks in Geneva, Moscow succeeded in excluding from the draft document prepared by the UN Special Envoy those fragments which included: (i) a suggestion for al-Assad to step down or prevent the members of his regime from taking part in the new Syrian government, (ii) a demand to the Syrian government to pull its troops out of the cities immediately, and (iii) a proposal to adopt the new UNSC resolution, including an option for sanctions.

Russian consent on convening a peace conference on Syria, aimed at bringing the sides in the conflict into negotiation without any precondition, and which followed the new US Secretary of State John Kerry’s visit to Moscow on 7 May 2013, was also fully in line with the previous Russian position.

### **Challenging the “US conspiracy”: Understanding the Russian strategy towards the crisis in Syria**

The various factors influencing the Russian approach to Syria could be analyzed at three basic levels: global, regional and domestic. In the public debate, regional factors, including the Russian interests in Syria and Russia’s concern over regional stability, are often prioritized. However, greater attention should be paid to certain global and domestic factors, especially Russian perceptions of the US regime change policy in connection with concerns over internal political stability in Russia.

#### ***Regional factors of Russia’s strategy: Russia’s interests in Syria***

It seems to be the conventional wisdom that Syria has always been a state of strategic importance to Russia, and its strategic partner in the Middle East. However, if we take a closer look at the factual basis for such a perception, we discover that it is not necessarily the case. Closer ties between Moscow and Damascus obviously pertain to the Soviet past<sup>4</sup> when the USSR helped build infrastructure (around 90 objects), educate students (35,000, joining Syria’s elite) and, above all, deliver weapons to Syria.

The two countries were bound in 1980 by the Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation. The end of the Cold War and the subsequent breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 revealed that Syria was marginal for the newly created Russian Federation. Trade turnover plummeted in the 90s from 2.3 billion USD (per annum in 1990) to well below 100 million USD (in the mid-90s) since the weapon deliveries were discontinued (until 1997). Political contacts were scarce. Russia seemed to be weak, distant and disinterested. What remained was the huge burden of Syria’s post-Soviet debt. And there was still

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4 For more on this cf.: W. Akhmedov, *Sirria pri Bashare As-sade i perspektivy otnosheniy s Rossiyei*, in: *Blizhniy Wostok i sovremennost*, Moskva 2006, pp. 205-222.

Tartus – not a Navy base but merely a Logistics Support Point (established in 1984) of the Russian Black Sea Fleet (not really needed since the former Soviet Navy's 5th Rapid Response Squadron operating in the Mediterranean Sea ceased to exist).

The situation changed somewhat in the early 2000s, but the real breakthrough occurred only in 2005 when the political decision was made in Moscow to scrap as much as 74% of Syria's post-Soviet debt (then estimated at 13.5 billion USD). Syria clearly reaped the benefits. The political dialogue intensified (with four visits by Bashar al-Assad to Russia between 2005 and 2010). Despite Damascus' questionable financial credibility, the trade turnover rose from 440 million USD in 2005 to 1,942 million in 2011 (a mere 0.26% of Russia's global trade turnover), mostly due to the Russian arms deliveries.

A closer analysis of the trade in arms shows that even though it grew considerably, its relative importance within Russia's portfolio was limited. According to the US assessment, arms transfer agreements between Russia and Syria rose from 2.1 billion USD in 2003–2006 (5.6% of Russia's total) to 4.7 billion in 2007–2010 (12.6% of Russia's total), but actual deliveries were considerably lower: 0.4 billion USD in 2003–2006 (2.06% of the total) and 1.2bn USD in 2007–2010 (5.76% of the total).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, according to some estimates, only 20% of these were actually paid for by the Syrians. Despite the fact that several Russian companies (Stroygazmontazh, Tatneft', and Soyuzneftegaz) were granted contracts in Syria, mostly in the energy sphere, the concrete output wasn't yet there. In all, we may conclude that even if Russian–Syrian relations visibly intensified, Syria was clearly not a priority for Moscow prior to the crisis.

On the other hand, both strategic and economic considerations cannot be excluded as factors influencing Russia's strategy. As early as 2006, the Russian Navy announced its plans to re-establish a permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea (reiterated at the beginning of 2013). Tartus was treated in this context as a future Russian naval base and

some limited work has subsequently got underway there. As for the economic aspect, almost 4 billion USD lost in Libya after the regime change, when the arms delivery contracts were discontinued, were mentioned in a Russian debate on Syria. Vladimir Putin also clearly referred to this in his programme article on foreign policy.<sup>6</sup> In such a context, outstanding Russian arms delivery contracts in Syria of at least comparable worth are not without influence on the Russian policy.

### **Regional factors of Russia's strategy: Syria and regional stability**

Numerous statements by top representatives in the Russian government clearly indicated that Russia was concerned about the mounting instability in the region, including the spread of Islamic radicalism. It was suggested *inter alia* that the overthrow of some state leaders in Northern Africa and the Middle East, especially by means of the Western military engagement in Libya, contributed significantly to this. It must be remembered, however, that the Russian opposition towards exerting pressure on the al-Assad regime occurred well before certain negative consequences of the Arab Spring became visible, whether in Libya or in Syria itself. This concerns, among other things, the growth of the role of Islamic radicals in the Syrian-armed opposition, which became discernible only at the end of 2011. Part of the problem for Moscow was the participation of radical volunteers originating from the Northern Caucasus in the civil war in Syria, since their possible future return to the region could further aggravate security problems in the Northern Caucasus.

From the perspective of Russian interests in the broader Middle East, the increase in the role of Turkey and especially Qatar and Saudi Arabia due to the crisis in Syria could have posed another problem as it challenged the existing status quo and ushered in more rivalry over influence in the region. Part of the problem was the tendency towards a shift in the regional balance between the Shia and Sunni forces in favour of the latter. The Syrian crisis has consolidated but also weakened the unofficial Shia nexus of Iran, the ruling Alawites in Syria, and Hezbollah in

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5 Richard F. Grimmet, *Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2003–2010*, Congressional Research Service, 22 September 2011, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/R42017.pdf>. Accessed 23 April, 2013.

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6 Vladimir Putin, *Rossiya i menyayushchiysya mir*, *Moskovskiy Novosti*, 27 February 2012, <http://mn.ru/politics/20120227/312306749.html>. Accessed 19 April, 2013.

Lebanon, all of which happen to be anti-American forces. However, official Moscow tended to remain silent in this respect, even though its relations with Qatar became visibly tense.

### ***Global factors of Russia's strategy:***

#### ***The geopolitical advance of the US***

Analysis of the statements made by Vladimir Putin and by conservative-minded Russian officials, researchers and commentators sympathetic to him, reveals that their attitude towards the Syrian crisis was highly influenced by their perception of the US foreign policy. They believe that the US is trying to advance geopolitically by using the two instruments of regime change: support for the domestic opposition in targeted countries by soft power means and the use of military force to overthrow unwanted governments.

Many prominent Russian experts on Islam and the Middle East argued that the Arab Spring was the result of serious internal socio-economic and political processes and that external actors, including the US, were caught off guard by the fast-developing events. However, their conservative-minded colleagues maintained that it was in fact a US conspiracy, well planned and executed with the use of modern manipulation technologies (via mobile phones, internet, social networks, etc.). They drew clear parallels between the "colour revolutions" with overthrown governments in Yugoslavia (2000), Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005), and the Arab Spring as carried out by activists trained with the use of American manuals.<sup>7</sup> It seems that such views were in fact shared by some top members of the Russian ruling elite. For example, in February 2011 Igor Sechin (in his capacity as

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7 On both approaches see: Vitaliy Naumkin, Moving from the bottom up and back down again. The Arab Spring and the global international system, *Rossiia w globalnoy politike*, 2 August 2011 <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Moving-From-the-Bottom-Up-and-Back-Down-Again-15327>. Accessed 21 April, 2013; V.Naumkin, V.Popov, V. Kuznetsov (eds.), *Blizhniy Vostok, Arabskoye probuzhdeniye i Rossiya: chto dalshe?*, Moskva 2012; Sarkis Tsaturyan, *Strategiya nenasilstvennogo soprotivleniya na Blizhnem Vostoke i v Severnoy Afrike: rol' ssha*, in: ssha, Kanada. *Ekonomika, politika. kultura* No.9/2012; Ismaskiy ekstremizm: otsenki i vozmozhnosti Rossiysko-Amerikanskogo vzaimodeystviya, in: *ibidem*.

deputy prime minister) clearly alluded to this by saying: "See, well, what senior managers of Google have been doing in Egypt, what kind of manipulations of the energy of the people took place there" [sic].<sup>8</sup>

For his part, Vladimir Putin (as prime minister and a candidate in the presidential elections) in his programme article on foreign policy published in February 2012, while listing the lessons of the Arab Spring, had this to say on the use of soft power: "Regrettably, these methods are being used all too frequently to develop and provoke extremist, separatist and nationalistic attitudes, to manipulate the public and to conduct direct interference in the domestic policy of sovereign countries".<sup>9</sup>

What was very openly challenged was the US policy on the use of military force to bring about regime change. After the Western aerial bombardments in Libya in March 2011, Vladimir Putin launched a tirade against the US policy, stating that there was a clear trend in it for the unilateral use of military force as a policy instrument, judging by what happened previously in Yugoslavia in 1999, in Afghanistan in 2001, in Iraq in 2003 and currently in Libya, which was reminiscent of the Medieval call for a crusade<sup>10</sup> (interestingly, Putin did not differentiate between those cases). This was just one example of many such statements by Putin, accusing the US of a policy of regime change by force, and of exporting "the missile-and-bomb democracy".

### ***Global factors of Russia's strategy:***

#### ***Responsibility to protect and the global order***

In various statements, Vladimir Putin accused the US of using humanitarian pretexts for military engagement. Some other members of the Russian government made it explicitly clear that it relates to the concept of responsibility to protect. The idea that any government is responsible for protecting its citizens against mass violence and, if it fails to do so, that the international community should intervene

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8 Russia's Sechin Defends Investment Climate, *The Wall Street Journal*, 22.02.2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704476604576158140523028546.html>. Accessed 21 April, 2013.

9 Vladimir Putin, *Rossiia i...*, op. cit.

10 [http://www.newsru.com/russia/21mar2011/putin\\_libya.html](http://www.newsru.com/russia/21mar2011/putin_libya.html)



with various measures, including military, has been intensely debated by diplomats and experts in international law since the early 2000s. Russia has never formally and flatly rejected this idea, however it was clearly not interested in making it a binding norm of international law and wanted to seriously limit its usage, especially when it came to prioritizing assistance for the respective governments and safeguarding the exclusive competence of the UNSC on the use of force.<sup>11</sup> But Moscow primarily criticized and resisted what it regarded as attempt by the Western and Arab countries to overuse the concept for military intervention, especially in the event of crises in the countries affected by the Arab Spring.

Russia's seriousness in this respect is evident in the fact that a whole passage was presented on the matter in the new Russian Foreign Policy Concept signed by President Putin in February 2013: "It is unacceptable that military interventions and other forms of interference from without, which undermine the foundations of international law based on the principle of sovereign equality of states, be carried out on the pretext of implementing the concept of 'responsibility to protect'".<sup>12</sup> The reason behind such a Russian approach should be considered, however, not only in the context of its vision of the global order, but also in the domestic political context in Russia.

### ***Domestic factors behind Russia's strategy***

The domestic political context also aroused concern among representatives of the Russian ruling elite over the Arab Spring in general, and the crisis in Libya and Syria in particular. The Arab Spring suddenly erupted at the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 at a very delicate moment in Russian politics:

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11 For more on this see: Gennadiy Gatilov, *Opyt krizisnogo reagirovaniya, ili kogo obyazano zashchishchat' mezhdunarodnoye soobshchestvo?*, Rossiya v globalnoy politike 6 November 2012, <http://interaffairs.ru/read.php?item=8883>. Accessed 20 April, 2013; Olga Labyuk, "Otvetstvennost' po zashchite" i pravo na vmeshatelstvo, *Mezhdunarodnye Processy* vol. 6, No.3 (18)/2008, <http://www.intertrends.ru/eighteenth/007.htm>. Accessed 20, April 2013.

12 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, Approved by President of the Russian Federation V. Putin on 12 February 2013, <http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/ns-osndoc.nsf/1e5f0de28fe77fdcc32575d900298676/869c9d2b87ad8014c32575d9002b1c38!OpenDocument>. Accessed 19 April, 2013.

about a year before the parliamentary (December 2011) and presidential (March 2012) elections.

At that time, President Dmitri Medvedev was sending out signals that he would like to remain in office for yet another term. He kept presenting himself as a proponent of liberal values, of the modernization of Russia and of constructive cooperation with the West in the international arena. This was also reflected in his attitude towards the developments in the region. In February 2011 he condemned Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi for using force against the civilian population (an unnamed aide even leaked to the press his opinion that Gaddafi was a political corpse).

Medvedev also instructed Russian diplomats to abstain during crucial voting on 17 March, 2011 on UNSC resolution 1973 on the no-fly zone in Libya, allowing the use of force to protect the civilian population, and subsequently publicly reprimanded Prime Minister Putin for criticizing the document and its implementation. When it came to Syria, Medvedev warned al-Assad in early August 2011 that if he didn't undertake the necessary political reforms, he would face "a sad fate" and Russia "would be forced to take some decisions".<sup>13</sup> Such statements were in stark contrast to those of Vladimir Putin. However, the situation ended with the announcement of Putin's candidacy for presidency in September 2011.

The announcement was greeted with disappointment within the more liberal-minded sectors of Russian society. When the parliamentary election took place in December 2011 and numerous citizen observer reports revealed irregularities and down-right falsification, mass public protests suddenly erupted in Russia, reminiscent of the very first protests during the Arab Spring.

Vladimir Putin and conservative members of the Russian ruling elite, caught off guard, clearly became concerned. Moreover, they seemed to believe that a US conspiracy was afoot, with the aim of carrying out another 'colour revolution' and with sights set on a regime change, this time in Russia. Vladimir Putin openly accused the US State Department of inciting the protests. According to him, some of its

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13 Interview of President Dmitri Medvedev, 5 August 2011, <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/12204>. Accessed 15 May, 2013.





The Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov close to the UK on its way to the Syrian port of Tartus. This visit marked the beginning of a period of an intensive Russian military presence around Syria. Photo: Ministry of Defence of the United Kingdom.

organizers acted “in accordance with a well-known scenario” and a hasty critique of the elections by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton “set the tone for some activists” and “gave them a signal; they heard this signal and started active work, with the support of the State Department”.<sup>14</sup> Even though the wave of protest began to subside after the May 2012 inauguration of Vladimir Putin, the fear of external interference has persisted within the Russian government, revealed for example when justifying the crackdown on those NGOs which received Western funding.

Yet another link existed between the situation in the so-called Arab Spring countries (including Syria) and that in Russia. It is quite possible that Vladimir Putin and like-minded members of the Russian elite may have believed in a domino effect: the “US-made” Arab Spring, followed by the military intervention in Libya, and a regime change in Syria as a prelude to the encirclement and subsequent US/Israeli attack on Iran<sup>15</sup>, with the process eventually

being extended to Russia itself. During his March 2011 visit to the Votkinsk plant (where Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles are produced), Putin criticized the bombardment of Libya, stating: “Today’s events again prove that we are right in what we do in strengthening Russia’s defence capabilities”. Even if we take his words as pure rhetoric, it reveals the deep suspicion that exists in Moscow towards the perceived US policy of regime change as a challenge to Russia.

This way of thinking can be summarized in the words of the head of the Foreign Relations Committee of the State Duma, Alexei Pushkov, an influential political commentator: “US foreign policy is aimed at neutralizing all factors which create obstacles to the American global strategy. As a result, in the last twelve years the United States has conducted four wars in various regions. In Yugoslavia it was Milosevic who was an obstacle. In Iraq, it was Saddam Hussein. In Libya, Gaddafi. Now Assad in Syria poses an obstacle for them. Today, yet another war is being prepared – against Iran, which is also an obstacle for the US. And we [Russia] are also an obstacle for them. Ideally, the US would like to isolate us when it comes to Syria, but this is impossible”.<sup>16</sup>

14 RIA Novosti 8.12.2011 (video) <http://ria.ru/politics/20111208/510441056.html>. Accessed 25 April, 2013.

15 The outspoken former Russian ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, just before his promotion to the post of deputy prime minister responsible for the defence and space industry, suggested in an interview that the planning of a Western military campaign against both Syria and Iran was already underway. *Izvestiya*, 3 August 2011 <http://izvestia.ru/news/496371>. Accessed 20 April, 2013.

16 Alexei Pushkov, *Ne dat’ sebya prizhat’*. *Glavnye vyzovy dla Rossiyi*, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 8 May 2012, <http://www.rg.ru/2012/05/08/pushkov.html>. Accessed 20 April, 2013.

## Conclusion

Despite some negative consequences of Russia's approach to the crisis in Syria, such as a cooling of relations with the West and certain Arab states as well as a tarnished image, Moscow's major goals have been achieved for the time being. No foreign military intervention or regime change has taken place in Syria. Taking into account Russia's strategy, but above all the perception of the situation among the top Russian elite, we should not expect Moscow to change its current position.

Even if there are clear risks connected with prolonging the conflict, Moscow seems to believe this constitutes a lesser evil compared to a regime change, which would bring forces perceived as pro-Western to rule the country. Consequently, the possible "Lebanization" of Syria (dividing the country into zones controlled by the various forces) seems to be an acceptable scenario for Moscow. However, Russia would support peace initiatives, including a possible truce monitored by UN observers, as it would freeze the status quo. Taking the aforementioned into account, the scope for possible cooperation between the West and Russia on Syria seems to be very limited, unless the West abandons its support for a regime change in Syria.

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