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## ISLAM AND MOSCOW'S MIDDLE EAST POLICY

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## ABSTRACT

The Radicalization of Russian Islam , At the beginning of the Arab Spring, the religious aspect of the revolutions did not seem to be alarming for the West nor for Russia. As for Russia. As events escalated, this aspect turned out to be essential for Russia especially on the domestic level. In fact, the manifestation and reign of Islamism echoed with the Muslim population inside Russia and led to the emergence of opposition movements inside the country. As protests in Russia broke open in parallel to those in the Arab nations, Russia was anxiously concerned with the effect the Arab Spring could have on its domestic situation.

**KEYWORDS :** Effects , Russian , Muslims , Arab Spring

## INTRODUCTION

Russia has a large Muslim population, mainly in the Volga Region[1] and the North Caucasus, thus the Kremlin[2] wants to prove to them that it is involved in Muslims' affairs and interests by establishing a meaningful presence in the Middle East.

The Kremlin has always declared that it is willing to cooperate with any government the nation chooses. Moscow has also established a dialogue with leaders in Iran, and attempted to build ties with Hamas. In fact in 2006, when Hamas won the elections, Moscow offered to play the role of mediator between the resistance movement and Mahmoud Abbas- the president of Palestinian authorities. Russia has also tried to establish normal relationships with the Muslim brotherhood especially after the end of the Mubarak regime in Egypt.

Moscow judges Islamists based on the positions they take on issues that are important for Russia. Consequently, for the Kremlin, the Muslim brotherhood are esteemed in Egypt but regarded as a terrorist organization in Syria as they are fighting against Russia's ally Al Assad, and the same applied to Islamists who overthrew its other ally in Libya Gaddafi. Moreover, Russia absolutely opposes Islamists linked to Al-Qaeda, and accuses them of contributing to the violence Russia has witnessed in the North Caucasian region[3].

Also, Islamists and the Russian Orthodox Church share an anti-Western feeling and identity. They have their own interpretation of democracy and human rights. But Salafis object to democracy principles, just like orthodox fundamentalists who call for an "Orthodox Russia" again. However, these similarities will not probably lead to Russia and Islamists being united. Moscow absolutely refuses the Salafis, but mutual understanding can be established between the two of them (Asadullin, 2006).

## The Faults in Moscow's Middle East Policy

Putin 's foreign policy objective was to convince the world that Russia stands as a bridge between the Occidental world and the Muslim world, especially given that the country embraces around 20 million Muslims (Alhassen, 2012).

The Muslim world did not consent of Russia's role, and the West did not need any mediator to communicate with the Arab nations. All the efforts Putin made in order to conclude economic projects or to establish a regional security system failed (Shuster, 2013).

Russia's weakness in the region became crystal clear when it was unable to prevent US invasion of Iraq. Saddam Hussein was one of Moscow's few allies left in the area. Once his regime was overthrown, Al Assad in Syria and Gaddafi in Libya were Russia's remaining friends in the region. Gradually, Russia's influence in the region wilted. It deteriorated even more with the outburst of the Arab Spring.

## The Arab Spring

When the Arab Spring first started, Moscow interpreted it as a Western plan targeted at decreasing its influence in the region and pushing it out. In fact, a Russian expert once asked the following question: "Who is really ordering and carrying those revolutions" in a hint to a conspiracy theory behind those protests (Dorsey, 2012). Page 54

Post Arab Spring, Russia reversed a Russian Supreme Court ruling that declared the Muslim Brotherhood a threat to Russia's security and a terrorist organization in an attempt not to lose its ties with the post-revolutionary Arab nations. On the other hand, when President Morsi stepped down in Egypt, Russia's fear grew that he might be replaced by a pro-Western president. The concern that Islamists will be replaced by pro-Western politicians applied to other Arab spring nations too.

Also, Moscow's ties with Jordan and Morocco were never too strong, and its economic and political ties with Algeria were not affected by the uprisings in the region. On the other hand, Russia's relationships with Yemen strengthened with the emergence of the Arab Spring. The Yemeni change in regime that did not follow the typical Arab Spring shift toward democracy seemed to please Russia. Also, when Yemenis reached out for foreign assistance, they reached out to Russia among other countries. At the end, Moscow did not interfere in the nation's peace process set forth by Saudi Arabia and the United States; it feared the consequences as the situation in the country was complex and extremists were quite powerful. Actually, one Russian newspaper had stated the following: "it would be easy to get involved in Yemen, but the consequences would be serious" (Beck & Hüser, 2012) page 35. On the other hand, Moscow's direct involvement in the uprisings in Syria and Libya complicated the situation in both countries.

## The Islamic community has joined Western and Arab actors in criticizing Russia

As the conflict escalated in Syria, Russia's support for the regime made the Arab World rise against it, and even consider it as an enemy and according to the famous Islamist theologian Qaradawi, Russia "has become enemy No. 1 for Islam and Muslims because it supports the Syrian regime" and that "the Arab and Muslim world must rise up against Russia. We should boycott Russia and count it amongst our main enemies" (Carlisle, 2011) page 341.

By the end of 2012, during the fourth conference of the Group of Friends of the Syrian People, 70 countries voted for the recognition of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as the legal representative of the Syrians. Thus, Russia's efforts to play the role of a mediator were weakened.

Moreover, the conflict in Syria was aggravated by sectarianism. A Sunni Shiite large-scale conflict could also emerge from the current situation, and Assad's unwillingness to make any concessions became

problematic for the Russians, while western countries and countries of the Persian Gulf continued to supply arms to the opposition. Russia, afraid of being isolated and losing all its influence, limited its military assistance for the Syrian regime

### The Influence of Central Asia

The North Caucasus and the Volga Region in Russia have started attracting Islamists from Central Asia, leading to a raise in Muslim population in the country. In fact, Alexei Starostin, an Islamic scholar noted the following: "a sizeable number of Salafist associations and groups set up by the Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami and other extremist organizations are active in the Urals Federal District." And "They are promoting the idea of creating a caliphate and disseminating pamphlets and other literature" (Al-Sayyad, 2013) page 200.

However, the Arab Spring did not directly impact Central Asia itself, maybe because people there were never involved in political struggle especially under the Soviet rule. Still, Dorsey (2007), a scholar from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore once warned stating the following: "with countries like Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan ranked among the world's worst violators of basic freedoms, the region is feeling the impact of the revolts in the Arab world. . . . The experience of Turkey shows that giving Islamists space has produced what many see as a model for the Middle East and North Africa and perhaps for Central Asia too" Page 306. So, in other words, Central Asia could also witness conflict between moderate and radical Islamists. Such a conflict would spread to the North Caucasus region. That's why the Kremlin insists on supporting Assad's regime, as Arab analyst, Mahyu (2010), put it: "it is the threat of a Sunni fundamentalist movement headed by Saudi Arabia and looking particularly to expand into Central Asia" page 87.

### Effects on Russian Muslims

The Arab Spring must have led to discord within the Muslim community inside Russia. According to some reports, Islamists from the Middle East are also providing Russian Muslims with considerable support and even offering them asylum if need occurred. In fact, the president of the Religion and Society Information and Analysis Center, Alexey Grishin (2011) recorded that "religious extremists in Russia have not only financial support from their victorious fellows in the Middle East, but also political support through international diplomacy" page of quote Plus "the Islamist radicals' ultimate aim is to turn the Muslims into the Russian opposition force" (Russian Federation Foreign Policy, 2012) page of quote. Despite all these concerns, an uprising in Russia like the ones in the Arab World is unlikely to take place. Still, reports say that hundreds and even thousands of Russian Muslims were involved in the Syrian conflict. And there is a possibility that those fighters, after the end of the conflict in Syria, might come back and continue the struggle in Russia.

### Crafting a Post-Arab Spring Policy

The Arab Spring effects were disastrous for Russia's position in the Middle East and the world, and Russia's support to regimes in Libya and Syria earned its international criticism.

Subsequently, Moscow's diplomatic strategy must be altered as the country evaluates the balance shift of power and the outcomes of the Arab Spring. Russia must focus on developing a new strategy in the Middle East and on the national level as well, in the light of the post-Arab spring realities.

Despite the negative effects of the Arab Spring on Russia, the country can still have a major role to play. Russia still has the chance to avoid confrontation with international actors and to strengthen its relationships with some Arab countries; it can also participate in the establishment of a new security system in Middle East. It should also seek to reach a compromise for the Syrian conflict.

In parallel, Moscow should assess the impact of the Arab Spring on its Muslim community. As Russian Muslims are following with admiration the victory of Islamists in the Arab world, many opt for strengthening ties with those new leaderships. On the other hand, the country must be aware of the emergence of radicalized Islam in its community.

It seems that Islamism, in all its dimensions, is going to be a key factor in politics on all levels for several decades to come.

[1] The Volga Region is an historical region in Russia that encompasses the drainage basin of the Volga River, the longest river in Europe, in central and southern European Russia.

[2] The Moscow Kremlin, usually referred to as the Kremlin, is a fortified complex at the heart of Moscow, overlooking the Moskva River to the south, Saint Basil's Cathedral and Red Square to the east, and the Alexander Garden to the west.

[3] The North Caucasus or Ciscaucasia is the northern part of the Caucasus region between the Sea of Azov and Black Sea on the west and the Caspian Sea on the east, within European Russia.

## CONCLUSION

Russia attempted to win again the power the Soviet Union once enjoyed in the Middle East and demonstrated to the Muslims in the country that Islamic affairs and national interests mattered to the government to the extent of deploying army in the region. On one hand, Putin's plan focused on acting as a bridge between the West and the Muslim nations. Moreover, Russia had tried to prevent a number of conflicts in the region, such as the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of the Gaddafi; both regimes were Moscow's allies. In Moscow, Russian mediation in the Syrian conflict is positively viewed since Russia's policy in Syria has actually given it a strong position in the Middle East. However, its continuous support of President Assad has been criticized and has harmed the Russian position. On the other hand, Moscow's little economic and political ties have been affected after the emergence of new political figures in the Arab world after the uprisings that ended by Islamist Opposition movements developing in Russia.

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