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**RUSSIAN POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AFTER THE**  
**ARAB SPRING**

Hadzhieva Bella Magomedovna (a, b)\*, Gatsieva Taita Israilovna (b)

\*Corresponding author

(a) Chechen State University, 32a, Sheripova St. Grozny, Russia, magbella@mail.ru

(b) Chechen State Pedagogical University, 33, Kievskaya St. Grozny, Russia, tannita71@mail.ru

*Abstract*

The Middle East remains the region around which there is a struggle for control of its geostrategic and energy resources by global companies. Awareness of common threats and common interests in the field of Middle East security is an incentive to establish collective political actions to stabilize the region. The Middle East region is favorably distinguished by a number of characteristics, thanks to which it is a key factor in the development of modern world politics. Firstly, this is a geopolitical position: it is located at the junction of three parts of the world: Asia, Europe and Africa, which is why almost all the leading world powers at different times tried to establish control over the Middle East, declaring it “a zone of their vital interests”. This is the largest oil-producing region, which has a huge impact on the state of the world economy and the material well-being of many states, the most important transport arteries pass through the region, it is a leader in the import of modern weapons and a number of other goods. All this attracts to cooperation with the countries of the region not only international actors, but also researchers of international relations, world and regional politics. At the beginning of the XXI century, Russia retains significant strategic scope for an active policy in the field of a Middle East peace settlement. It continues to effectively influence the position of its traditional partners in the Middle East and maintains an active dialogue with Hamas.

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**Keywords:** Middle East, Arab Spring, domestic politics, geopolitical position, actor.



## **1. Introduction**

The Middle East remains the region around which the struggle is concentrated for control of its geostrategic and energy resources by world companies. Awareness of common threats and common interests in the field of Middle East security is an incentive to establish collective political actions to stabilize the region.

The Middle East region is favorably distinguished by a number of characteristics, thanks to which it is a key factor in the development of modern world politics. Firstly, this is a geopolitical position: it is located at the junction of three parts of the world: Asia, Europe and Africa, which is why almost all the leading world powers at different times tried to establish control over the Middle East, declaring it “a zone of their vital interests”. Those who controlled this region had the opportunity to extend their influence not only to the entire eastern part of the Mediterranean and the western part of the Indian Ocean, but also to increase their political weight in world politics. This is the largest oil-producing region, which has a huge impact on the state of the world economy and the material well-being of many states, the most important transport arteries pass through the region, it is a leader in the import of modern weapons and a number of other goods. All this attracts to cooperation with the countries of the region not only international actors, but also researchers of international relations, world and regional politics.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The “Arab Spring” has become a reference point for understanding the revolution as a phenomenon in its completely new quality. Most events took place in a completely new scenario and had unexpected consequences. Thus, during the “Arab spring” a number of new trends emerged, namely: the tendency to use technological resources as one of the main ways to consolidate the population; the use of new media to engage the masses in the process of revolutionary events, as well as the use of emotional aspects during the period of exacerbation, which is primarily associated with a change in universal moral and evaluative guidelines.

In addition to the obvious risks, the Arab Spring provides opportunities for all influential international players to strengthen their influence in the Middle East region. Everything will depend on who can seize the initiative and turn the situation in their favor.

## **3. Research Questions**

Features of the Middle East policy of Russia in the context of revolutionary events in the Middle East.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

Investigate the Arab direction of Russian foreign policy and analyze the influence of the “Arab Spring” on the position of the Russian state in the Middle East region.

## 5. Research Methods

As research methods, the methods of dialectic, historical and system analysis, as well as the sociocultural research method, are used.

## 6. Findings

The attitude to the events taking place in the Arab world in Russia was not formed immediately and was not uniform from the very beginning. The confrontation with the authorities in the countries of the Middle East had different consequences, since it was a question of a relatively peaceful transformation, and of civil wars with different levels of intervention by regional and global players. Each specific “spring” was perceived in its own way in Russia, depending on the degree of its influence on Russian interests. The ground for a wide range of estimates was provided by the events themselves, which were fundamentally different from each other, despite the presence of common components. Given the diversity of Arab countries and regimes, approaching them with similar standards was wrong. On the one hand, the growth of radicalism and nationalism in the Arab world could become a source of new challenges and threats, both regional and global, and at the same time exacerbate traditional contradictions. On the other hand, the desire of the state to provide support to Russian business in the Arab East was faced with obstacles associated with instability, with the departure of authoritarian partners, with the prospect of a new redistribution of the energy and military markets.

The level of external interference in the events in individual Arab countries was different, but the fears that the overthrow of unfavorable regimes would mainly occur not by peaceful means, but by armed means, to a large extent determined Russia's reaction to events in individual Arab states.

From the very beginning of the events taking place in the Arab countries, Russia has taken a rather passive position, adhering to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of the states of the Middle East. In Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and other countries where opposition rallies were held, Moscow acted as an outside observer. As for the events in Libya, Russia took a neutral position, expressing Gaddafi's sympathy. Moscow was most active in Syria, where it took on the role of defender of the government and went on to aggravate relations with the West and several influential Arab countries (Giniyatov, 2013).

A characteristic feature of Russia's new Middle East policy is pragmatism, namely: the desire to develop a constructive dialogue both with traditional Russian partners in the region (Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, the Palestine Liberation Organization), and with countries where the position of Russia until recently was very limited (Israel). Such a policy allows Russia to successfully conclude diplomatic, military and energy agreements, gradually restoring its lost economic and strategic positions in the region.

Given the geographical boundaries and the energy and economic potential of the region, it is worth saying that the BSA countries are in the zone of increased interest of the countries of Europe and the USA. The first attempts to carry out transformations in the BSA countries were made by the United States back in 2004 in George W. Bush's projects. Therefore, leading to the determination of the causes and premises of the “Arab spring”, we identified external and internal factors. Internal, in turn, have a number

of their own subspecies, among which are economic, cultural, political, social, which is due to a large number of latent contradictions that proceeded almost without manifestations until the moment of the social “explosion”, which became the beginning of revolutionary processes. However, the situation took on a radical shape rather quickly, which is one of the characteristic features of the "Arab Spring".

The greatest exacerbation in relations between Moscow and Washington was caused by events in Libya and Syria. The Libyan revolution did not occur at the most convenient time for the United States, which focused on domestic politics and finding the best option for withdrawing troops from Iraq and Afghanistan (Baklanov, 2010).

Taking advantage of the ambitions of its European partners, the United States enabled France and the United Kingdom to play the first violin in the diplomatic struggle for the formal permission of the UN Security Council to intervene in the civil war in Libya and achieve the solution necessary for the West. If the United States represented the Libyan issue in the Security Council, then it would be difficult for Russia and China to refrain from using the veto, while the French proposal (which in fact was also the US proposal) passed successfully. In addition, as the public initiators of the Libyan campaign, France and Great Britain simultaneously assumed responsibility for equal shares of the economic and moral costs associated with the war (Hilko, 2011).

It should also be noted that, firstly, the Arab Spring was prepared by the previous course of world development in the post-war period; secondly, the impact of changes in the Arab East on the global international system is not a fundamentally new feature (as an example, the influence of the Velvet Revolutions on geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts at the turn of the 80s and 90s of the 20th century); thirdly, social networks, the Internet, mobile phones, new information technologies as a whole have become a new factor and an influential weapon of the Arab revolutions; fourthly, in the Arab world, a peculiar dichotomy of traditional absolutist and new democratic political regimes that will be close in their values to the West may develop over time; fifth, at the same time, it is not necessary to expect a quick settlement and complete stabilization of the situation in the countries of North Africa and the Middle East in a tactical perspective for several years. The processes launched by the “Arab spring” will for a long time cause various kinds of political, social, and religious breakdowns both in individual countries and in the region as a whole.

Moscow, which was regularly criticized for authoritarian tendencies and large business contracts with the Gaddafi regime, of course, did not welcome the events of the Arab Spring in general, and the Libyan revolution in particular (Sarajyan, 2018). Nevertheless, Russia managed to exploit the situation with minimal geopolitical losses and maximum benefits. By not using her veto power in the UN Security Council, Russia escaped possible criticism for supporting the unpopular dictator Gaddafi. And the easily assumed excess of powers of the West by the mandate of resolution No. 1973 gave Russia a good formal explanation for vetoing the Syrian resolution, as well as any other further similar initiative of the West (United Nations, 2011).

The greatest geopolitical gain for Russia was the restoration of its influence in the post-Soviet space and the strengthening of positions in the Middle East. Without using the veto, Russia de facto agreed to a military operation against Gaddafi, probably predicting that the Libyan campaign would distract the EU's political attention and financial resources from Eastern Europe, which once again faced

its traditional geopolitical choice: Europe or Russia. Against the background of the reorientation of the EU's attention to the Mediterranean, Russia got a real chance to change the political and economic systems of relations in the post-Soviet space to models more convenient for Moscow.

At the same time, Iran's allied Russia used the events of the Arab Spring to strengthen its influence and stimulate the Pan-Islamic movement, and Turkey significantly distanced itself from its Western allies, trying not to lose the opportunity to compete for leadership in the reformatted region. The lack of interest in Ankara and Tehran in Western intervention in regional processes has increased Russia's chances to play its own game here (Hilko, 2011).

The strengthening of Russia's positions in the Middle East was also facilitated by Obama's new approach to solving regional problems, which provided for in-depth cooperation in these matters with other influential international actors. Unlike George W. Bush, the US administration of B. Obama was interested in cooperating with the Russian Federation in solving the problems of Afghanistan, Iran, and nuclear non-proliferation, where Russian participation for the United States was extremely important. This also corresponded to the course declared by B. Obama aimed at "resetting" relations with Moscow (Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 2009).

When voting in the UN Security Council, Russia twice vetoed resolutions on Syria, which caused American politicians and their Middle Eastern allies a poorly concealed irritation. The Kremlin has been accused of defending a "bloody Syrian regime that kills civilians" (Giniyatov, 2013). Most Western experts called the military-technical cooperation between these countries, the presence of a Russian military base in Tartus, and the close personal ties of Bashar Assad with Moscow as the main reasons that Russia strongly opposed external intervention in Syria.

The Middle East strategy of the Russian Federation was built in the context of a common foreign policy strategy aimed at restoring the status of a superpower. As a result, Moscow's obvious distancing from Washington's policy in the region and the opposition of the Russian role in the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict to the United States can be traced, which should help strengthen Moscow's position as an independent player.

It should be noted that despite the events taking place in the modern international arena, the Russian Federation in the historical perspective remains the guarantor of stability in international relations in the Middle East region. Without entering into an open fierce confrontation, Russia, however, is taking every opportunity to restore peace and maintain the proper level of security in the region, with which it has been linked with many years of economic and political relations.

At the beginning of the XXI century, Russia retains significant strategic scope for an active policy in the field of a Middle East peace settlement. She continues to effectively influence the position of her traditional partners in the Middle East and maintains an active dialogue with Hamas. This fully coincides with the expectations of the Arab side, which sees in Russia the necessary counterbalance to US policy. At the same time, such a policy does not find support from Israel (InterFax, 2009).

## **7. Conclusion**

Summing up the general results, we can say that in the modern conditions of globalization and social transformations, all spheres of human relations have acquired new features or have changed at all.

In this context, the "Arab Spring" has become a reference point for understanding the revolution as a phenomenon in its completely new quality. Most events took place in a completely new scenario and had unexpected consequences. Thus, during the "Arab spring" a number of new trends emerged, namely: the tendency to use technological resources as one of the main ways to consolidate the population; the use of new media to engage the masses in the process of revolutionary events, as well as the use of emotional aspects during the period of exacerbation, which is primarily associated with a change in universal moral and evaluative guidelines.

A number of revolutions that swept the countries of the Middle East, allegedly in the desire for democratic transformation and liberation from dictatorial regimes, did not bring the expected results to the BSA countries. Today we can say that the situation in countries such as Syria, for example, has not calmed down to the present day, an indicator of which, in the first place, is the number of human casualties, especially among civilians. In addition, the Arab revolutions had a destructive effect on the economies of countries, including the prices of energy resources and the tourist attractiveness of the region.

In our opinion, the "Arab Spring" is actually a series of putsch and demonstrations that were wave-like, often with quite radical methods of confrontation that took place in 2011 in the countries of the Arab world. Such a definition, one can say, fully characterizes the studied phenomenon.

As for the consequences of the revolutionary events, it is necessary to recognize certain positive changes in the countries of the Middle East: in Lebanon – the improvement of social standards of protection by the state in relation to the working population; in Oman, the resignation of state ministers and the transfer of a number of legislative powers to an electoral body – parliament; in Bahrain – the release of political prisoners, the resignation of the leaders of some state-power bodies; in Morocco, the consolidation of the right to hold a referendum on constitutional reforms, the intensification of the fight against corruption, etc. Negative consequences can be traced in such states as: Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia, and even more so Libya and Syria.

The role of other states (USA, France, Great Britain, Russia and Turkey) in the events of the "Arab spring" cannot be denied. Each of these states had its own interest in the Middle East region, both from the ideas of ideological control, and based on the desire to have more economic opportunities to be allowed to sources of oil and gas raw materials. The desire of the governments of world powers to control the course of events, from our point of view, is quite justified, however, the question of the need for radical intervention in hostilities will remain open until the conflict runs out.

The policy of Russia at the beginning of the XXI century in the Middle East peace settlement is characterized by three main trends. First, Moscow is trying to play a more proactive and active role in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. Secondly, the implementation of this goal requires Russia to very difficult balance between friendly relations with Israel and ties with countries important to Russian interests in the Middle East – Syria and Iran. Thirdly, in implementing its strategy for an Arab-Israeli peace settlement, Moscow is guided exclusively by national pragmatic interests, the basis of which is to consolidate Russia's positions in the Middle East region.

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