

## RUSYA VE ARAP BAHARI: YENİ SİYASİ GÖRÜNÜME UYUM SAĞLAMAK

### ÖZ

Arap Baharı başlayıncaya kadar, Rus yetkililer Ortadoğu'nun nispeten istikrarlı siyasi ve ekonomik yapıya sahip olduğu konusunda yanlış bir algıya sahiptiler. Onların varsayımlarına göre periyodik olarak ortaya çıkan olaylar bile (2003 yılında Irak'ta olduğu gibi dış güçler müdahil olmadıkça) bölgedeki mevcut güç dengesini değiştiremezdi. Bundan dolayı Moskova, herhangi bir yapısal değişiklik getirmesine ihtimal vermediği ve küçük bir çalkantı olarak gördüğü Arap Baharı'nın sadece başlangıcını kaçırmış oldu. 11 Şubat 2011 tarihinde Mısır'da Cumhurbaşkanı Hüsnü Mübarek'in düşüşü bile Rusya Federasyonu'ndaki yetkililerin olayı yeniden ele alması noktasında harekete geçirememişti. Fakat Rusya, tam olarak 20 Ekim 2011 tarihinde Muammer Kaddafi'nin öldürülmesinden sonra 'uyanmaya' başlamıştı ve aslında bu olay Rusya için 'geç kalmış bir uyanış' olmuştu. Rus analistler tarafından belirtildiği gibi, Arap Baharı esnasında kendi ülkelerinin Ortadoğu'daki siyasi kargaşada yaşayacağı kayıp diğer bölgesel olmayan oyuncuların kayıpları ile karşılaştırılabilecek düzeyde değildir.

*Anahtar Kelimeler: Arap Baharı, Rusya, Suriye*

### روسيا والربيع العربي، وضع رؤية سياسية جديدة نيكولاي اكوزهانوف خلاصة:

كان للمسولين الروس فكرة خاطئة حول اعتبارهم منطقة الشرق الاوسط على انها منطقة تتميز بالبنية الاقتصادية والسياسية المستقرة، الي ان جاء الربيع العربي وغير كل افكارهم هذه. وبحسب كل توقعاتهم هذه ،انه بالرغم من المظاهرات التي تحققت بصورة دورية ان لم تتدخل القوى الخارجية كما حدث في العراق عام 2003 فانه لم يحدث تغييرا يقلب موازين المنطقة. ولهذا السبب فان موسكو التي لم تتوقع ان الربيع العربي سيحقق اي تغيير ونظرت له على انه ما هو سوى اضطراب بسيط فلم تدرك بداية الربيع العربي. وحتى تنحي الرئيس المصري حسني مبارك في 11 فبراير 2011 لم يتناوله ولم يكن يتوقعه مسؤولو الاتحاد الروسي ايضا. ولكن روسيا بدأت تستوعب حقيقة الامر بعد مقتل معمر القذافي في 20 اكتوبر 2011. لدرجة ان هذه الواقعة كانت بمثابة البقطة المتاخرة لروسيا. وكما تم توضيحه من قبل المحللين الروسيين ، بان بلادهم لم تكن قادرة على مقارنة الخسائر التي من المحتمل ان تواجهها نتيجة توتر الاوضاع بمنطقة الشرق الاوسط بالخسائر التي من الممكن ان تتعرض لها باقي الاطراف الاخرى التي لا تحتل مكانا بالمنطقة.

**الكلمات الدالة :** الربيع العربي، روسيا ، سوريا.

# **RUSSIA AND THE ARAB SPRING: ADJUSTING TO A NEW POLITICAL VISTA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Until the beginning of the Arab Spring, the Russian authorities had the false perception that the Middle East is a relatively stable political and economic system. As they presume, even periodically emerging conflicts were unable to change the existing balance of power (unless external powers involved as it happened with Iraq in 2003). Subsequently, Moscow merely missed the beginning of the Arab Spring considering it as a minor turmoil which will be unable to bring any structural changes. Even the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt on 11 February 2011 did not make the authorities of the RF reconsider the situation. Russia literally 'woke up' only after the murder of Muammar Qaddafi on 20 October 2011, and this was indeed 'the morning after the night before'. As stated by Russian analysts, during the Arab Spring, the losses of their country from the political turmoil in the Middle East were hardly comparable with the losses of any other non-regional player.

*Keywords: Arab Spring, Russia, Syria*

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Initially, trying to keep aside from the intra-Arab conflict and limiting its reaction to the events in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen by the statements on the necessity of the peaceful settlement of conflicts, the Russian government suddenly found out that the new Middle East is not that friendly to Moscow as it was before. By 2012, the old regimes had already fallen, and the new authorities did not determine its attitude to Russia: the Russian neutral position prevented them from attributing Moscow either the status of a friend or an enemy. When the authorities of the RF changed their tactics and started clearly voicing their preferences, this new strategy also appeared to bring controversial results. The support of the regime of Bashar Assad shocked the large part of the Arab street: the understanding that Moscow supports the old dictatorial regime substantially contradicted to the image of the Russians as supporters of liberation movements in the Middle East that emerged during the 1960s – 1970s. Subsequently, this led to the cooling of Russian relations with the large part of the Arab world.<sup>1</sup>

## Losing the Grip

### *Economic Losses*

First of all, Moscow sustained heavy economic losses whose real volume is still to be determined. Thus, the fall of Qaddafi in Libya immediately led to the flee of Russian companies from this country whose consumer and investment markets were closed for them due to the controversial behaviour of the authorities of the RF during the civil conflict in this country. Although the leaders of new Libya periodically declare their intention to retain the certain level of economic contacts with Moscow, experts in Russia are sure that the situation will repeat the experience of post-Saddam Iraq where it took Russian companies about six years to return.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile only the main Russian arms exporter Rosoboronexport estimates its financial losses in Libya in USD 2 - 6,5 billion. For some companies of the Russian military-industrial complex these losses are non-recoverable: in certain cases, Tripoli was the main buyer of their products.<sup>3</sup> Russian railway corporation RZD is another victim of the Arab Spring in Libya: its current losses are estimated to be USD 2,2 billion. Taking into account the fact that the management of this company planned to work with Qaddafi's government for many decades to come, the amount of lost profit could be even higher. Russian oil and gas companies should not also be forgotten. Before 2011, such giants as Gazprom, Lukoil Overseas and

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with an analyst on the Middle East Politics, St.Andrews, June 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Igor Naumov, "Rossiyskiye Ubytki ot Arabskoy Vesny", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 29 February 2012, [http://www.ng.ru/economics/2012-02-29/1\\_arab\\_vesna.html](http://www.ng.ru/economics/2012-02-29/1_arab_vesna.html) Last accessed on 4 October 2013.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Tatneft either were involved or planned to invest in the energy sector of Libya. However, their cooperation with Tripoli has ceased.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, in April 2008, Moscow forgot about USD 4,5 billion of Qaddafi's debts to the USSR in exchange for the involvement of Russian companies in new joint projects in Libya. After the fall of Qaddafi and the freeze of economic relations between Tripoli and the RF, this sum could also be considered an irrecoverable loss of Moscow. Under these conditions, Russian experts are not very optimistic about the future of the assets of the RF in Syria: Moscow's active support of Bashar Assad leaves no illusion about the presence of Russia in this country after his fall. Meanwhile, Russia has a lot to lose in Syria. Since the early 2000s, the volume of trade between the two countries has been gradually growing. By 2012, it almost achieved USD 2 billion. Traditionally, the trade balance was in favour of Russia and this, subsequently, made Syria an appealing market for Russian companies. In 2005, Moscow agreed to restructure the Syrian government's debt to the former Soviet Union, literally forgetting about three quarters (according to other sources – only half) of the sum, in exchange for new contracts for Russian businesses. This has led to a substantial increase in Russian investments in the economy of the country (mostly in energy and infrastructural projects) which is currently estimated to be USD 20 billion.<sup>5</sup> Russian sales of military equipment to Syria are quite impressive: if, in 2006, Moscow and Damascus signed military contracts for USD 4 billion, by 2010, this sum had allegedly increased to nearly USD 20 billion.<sup>6</sup>

Although, Libya and Syria represent the two most problematic cases for Moscow, Russian economic positions were generally undermined by the outbreak of the Arab Spring across the whole region. Thus, some experts speak about the problems with Russian arms sales in the region. The continuing political turmoil in Egypt harmed the incomes of Russian grain exporters who considered this country as one of the main buyers of their product in the Middle East.<sup>7</sup> The growing confrontation between Moscow and the Gulf Arabs

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<sup>4</sup> Eldar Kasaev, 'Rossiysko-liviyskie Ekonomicheskkiye Otnosheniya' in <http://iimes.ru/rus/stat/2010/08-06-10.htm> Last accessed on 4 October 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Evseev, 'Nikotoryie aspekty rossiysko-siriyskogo sotrudnichestva' <http://www.iimes.ru/rus/stat/2008/04-03-08b.htm> (accessed on 31 May 2013); Ministerstvo Ekonomicheskogo Razvitiya Rossii, 'Torgovo-ekonomicheskkiye otnosheniya Rossiyskoy Federatscii I Siriyskoy Arabskoy Respubliki' [http://www.economy.gov.ru/minec/press/news/doc1227277900147?presentationtemplate=docHTMLTemplate1&presentationtemplateid=2dd7bc8044687de796f0f7af753c8a7e&WCM\\_Page.ResetAll=TRUE&CACHE=NONE&CONTENTCACHE=NONE&CONNECTORCACHE=NONE](http://www.economy.gov.ru/minec/press/news/doc1227277900147?presentationtemplate=docHTMLTemplate1&presentationtemplateid=2dd7bc8044687de796f0f7af753c8a7e&WCM_Page.ResetAll=TRUE&CACHE=NONE&CONTENTCACHE=NONE&CONNECTORCACHE=NONE) (accessed on 31 May 2013)

<sup>6</sup> Vladimir Evseev, 'Nikotoryie aspekty rossiysko-siriyskogo sotrudnichestva'; Aleksey Sarabyev, 'Rossiysko-Siriyskoye "nastoyashee-budushchee": voenno-morskoy aspekt' in Rossiyskiy Sovet po Mezhdunarodnym Delam, 10 October 2011. [http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id\\_4=35#top](http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=35#top) (accessed on 31 May 2013)

<sup>7</sup> Ekaterina Kats, 'Arabskiy Shchet', *Kompaniya* №33, 2011 <http://ko.ru/articles/23468> Last accessed on

caused by the Russian position on Syria tangibly limited Russian options to strengthen cooperation with the members of the GCC. For instance, during 2010 – 2011, the RF offered Qatar a number of investment projects that cost USD 10 – 12 billion in different fields of Russian economy (first of all, oil and gas, construction as well as gold mining sectors). However, all these proposals were ignored by Doha. As argued by some analysts, the political factor was not the last to determine the Qatari approach.<sup>8</sup> Even the UAE where the Russian presence in the Arab part of the Persian Gulf is probably the strongest are considered an unreliable partner since the beginning of the Arab Spring. As stated by one of the leading Russian experts on the economy of the Middle East, Eldar Kasaev, “the UAE is a member of the GCC whose main ideologists are Saudi Arabia and Qatar are famous for anti-Russian feelings. ... [As a result,] it should not be assumed that the Emirates will continue to develop relations with Moscow if the Qataris and Saudis start waging an [undeclared] war against Russia”.<sup>9</sup>

It is necessary to say that Qatar is also supposed to be one of the main Russian rivals in the gas market. After the beginning of the Arab Spring, this unofficial confrontation received an ideological base. Additional troubles are created by the fact that both the RF and Qatar are members of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF). Subsequently, the political confrontation often influences the behaviour of these players within the framework of this structure. Thus, in 2011, Russia deliberately sent to the summit of the leaders of the GECF countries in Qatar a delegation whose level was far lower than that required by the protocol. In 2013, the Qataris responded in the same way when the meeting was held in Moscow.<sup>10</sup> Taking into account that the two other members of the Forum, Libya and Egypt, are busy with the domestic situation, such behaviour of Moscow and Doha does not make the GECF an effective organisation. This, in turn, harms the interests of all participants.

## **Losing the Face**

The troubles in the Russian economic relations with the members of the GCC are the results of changes in the perception of the RF in the Middle East. Probably, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011 were the most important tests for the image of Russia in the region. In the first occasion Moscow managed to come out victorious: its negative diplomatic reaction on the war in Iraq and voiced concerns that the Saddam's WMD threat was just a pretext for the Americans to change the

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4 October 2013,

<sup>8</sup> Eldar Kasaev, ‘Rossiya i Katar: Prichiny Ekonomicheskoy Stagnatsii’ in <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=17847> Last accessed on 4 October 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Eldar Kasaev, “*Ekonomicheskoye Partnerstvo Rossii i OAE: Tekushchee Sostoyaniye i Politicheskiye Riski*”, <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=18069>, 4 October 2013

<sup>10</sup> Kasaev, “*Rossiya i Katar*”.

disliked regime in the foreign country found positive feedback in the Middle East. However, the very modest reaction on the events of the Arab Spring bewildered the Arab street and even caused certain disappointment in Moscow. The attempts of some Russian officials and analysts to present these events as another possibly outside-inspired movement which will not bring many changes in the political structure of the region only strengthened the further criticism of the authorities of the RF.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, the support of the central government by Moscow in the Syrian conflict was the last straw to break the camel's back. When, in 2012, the Russian diplomats first vetoed the UNSC resolution on Syria, the RF became closely associated with all things the Arab Spring was supposed to fight against: violence, dictatorship and bloodshed. As stated by an expert on Russian-Arab relations Irina Mokhova, "almost all media resources from Morocco to Lebanon (with the exception of Algeria and Syria) became moderately critical on Russian efforts in the Middle East".<sup>12</sup>

The crucial role in this process was played by the newspapers and TV channels of Qatar and Saudi Arabia whose public opinion on Russia was and still is far from being positive. Taking into account the influence which *the Asharq Al-Awsat*, *Al-Hayat* and *Al-Jazeera* have on the public opinion in the region and outside of it, Moscow was doomed to lose the information war for the Middle East. Thus, on 29 September 2012, *the Asharq Al-Awsat* published an editorial article by Tariq Alhomayed which accused Lavrov in fabricating the facts about the situation in the region. Moreover, the stance of Moscow on Syria was just an invitation for the discussion on other topics sensible for the RF such as the state of democracy and Muslim minorities in Russia. For instance, in July 2012, *Al-Jazeera* voiced concerns about the domestic policy of Putin and called him "the dictator of the XXI century". The active polemics on these issues in the Arab press led to the further demonizing of the image of Russia. Subsequently, on 12 October 2012, in his interview to state channel Qatar TV one of the leading religious figures of the Middle East, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, called Russia "enemy number one" of Islam and Muslims.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Political Defeat***

The negative changes in the perception of Russia in the Middle East are closely related with another challenge to Moscow's interests in the region posed by the Arab Spring: the shrinking of the number of countries ready for a dialogue with the RF. First of all, the fall of the old partners of Moscow such as Qaddafi substantially questioned the future of Russian relations with the countries previously headed by these dictators with Russia. As assumed by Russian analysts, the U.S., E.U. and even China have much more chances to

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<sup>11</sup> Mokhova, "Obraz Rossii v Arabskom Mire".

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

become the partners or even allies of new regimes than Moscow. According to them, the approaches of these non-regional states to the Arab Spring appeared to be more intricate. Thus, the U.S. and E.U. openly supported the revolutionary movements whereas the Chinese created a reliable safe net by establishing close economic contacts with local private business whose interests are independent from the type of domestic political regime. Russia had none of these advantages.<sup>14</sup>

As it has been already mentioned, the Arab Spring hampered the development of Russian relations with those countries whose governments became interested in the establishment of closer political and economic ties with Moscow in the 2000s. The members of the GCC represent the most notorious example. The Russian support of Bashar Assad diverted them from Moscow. After 2011, it took about two years before the RF could finally resume the effective discussion of bilateral, regional and international issues with Saudi Arabia.

Finally, the Arab Spring put a serious threat to the dialogue between the Russian authorities and the religious leaders of the Middle East. The positive development of these relations are traditionally seen by Moscow as one of the factors directly influencing the political stability of the country: until the majority of Muslim religious leaders consider the situation with the rights of the Russian Muslim community normal, this, as believed by the authorities of the RF, seriously limits moral and financial assistance to radical Islamists acting in the South of Russia from abroad. Thus, in May 2012, the Russian authorities supported the organization of the international meeting of Islamic theologians from 23 countries in Moscow. The event was held under the slogan 'Islamic doctrine against radicalism'. The list of invited participants included such prominent figures as Secretary General of the World Council of Muslim Scholars Ali al-Qaradagi and vice-president of this organization Abdallah Bin Bayyah. The meeting ended with the adoption of the declaration condemning religious radicalism. It also called upon Muslim theologians to be very careful when using such terms as caliphate (*khilāfā*), jihad (*ǧihād*) and takfeer (*takfir*) since they could justify the activities of religious extremists. This document was considered to be the serious diplomatic success of Moscow. However, the impact of this achievement was undermined when, a year after, the similar meeting was held in Cairo. That time, the gathering blessed the activities of the Syrian opposition and called the civil war in this country 'a jihad'. This statement indirectly affected Russia by logically posing it as a country supporting the side against which the holy war is waged. It could be hardly called a coincidence that the organizing committee of the Cairo meeting did its best

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<sup>14</sup> Aleksandr Shumilin, Rossiya i "Novye Elity" Stran "Arabskoy Vesny": Vozmozhnosti i Perspektivy Vzaïmodeystviya, (Moscow: Rossiyskiy Sovet po Mezhdunarodnym Delam, 2013), p. 34.

to maximally include the participants of the Moscow meeting in the list of invited people.<sup>15</sup>

## **The Reasons for Failure**

There are several reasons explaining why the Arab Spring appeared extremely harmful for Moscow's ties with the region. First of all, this was determined by the general ill approach of the Russian authorities to the Middle East. Seeing the region as a play ground for their games with the West, they did not pay attention to what was happening in the Middle Eastern countries. As opposed to the Soviet or Imperial times, Moscow's foreign policy towards the Middle East lacked direction and credibility. Policy priorities towards individual states and the region as a whole were contradictory and ill-defined. Russia refrained from diplomatic initiatives, while its links with regional governments were not used constructively. Thus, since 1991 and until recently, Russia neglected such factor as soft power. The creation of the Arabic service of the state Russia Today Channel in 2007 and the creation of the Russian cultural centres in the Middle Eastern countries during the 2000s were bold, but insufficient moves.

While the U.S. and Europe were busy with the creation of the pro-Western groups within cultural, economic and political elites of the region through different cultural, humanitarian and educational programmes, Moscow minimized its cooperation with the Middle East in this field. Moreover, it literally cut relations with those pro-Russian groups formed during the Soviet times. Subsequently, during the two decades after the fall of the USSR, these pro-Russian elements either perished or lost their influence without the support of Kremlin. For instance, this was the case of Syria where as stated by some analysts, the pro-Russian group was almost completely eliminated in the struggle for power after the rise of Bashar Assad in 2000. However, Moscow realised this only in 2011 when it tried to re-establish connections with people previously loyal to Moscow. As a result, in the events of the Arab Spring there were few people both on the side of the regime and on the side of revolutionaries who could lobby the interests of the RF.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, before the Arab Spring, the Russian authorities developed the dialogue with the Middle Eastern countries primarily on the governmental level neglecting ties with non-state economic and political actors who could have created the safe-net for Russia during the Arab Spring. Subsequently, after the fall of the ruling regimes in Egypt, Libya and other countries, Moscow was compelled to start its relations with new authorities of the Arab states

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<sup>15</sup> Dmitriy Nechitaylo, "Severokavkaztscy v Grazhdanskoy Voynе v Sirii", <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=18111> Last accessed on 4 October 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Vladimir Akhmetov, "Russkaya Komanda' v Sirii?", <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=17868> Last accessed on 5 October 2013.

from scratch.<sup>17</sup> The existing close connections of Kremlin with major Russian governmental and semi-governmental corporations also played the negative role. It is not a mere coincidence that the majority of the success stories of Russian business in the Middle East are related to corporations affiliated with the government. The Russian government spares no effort to support its economic behemoth. On the contrary, medium and smaller businesses (as well as Russian industries which are considered to be of secondary importance for the economic elite) usually do not enjoy this level of support. As a result they are doomed to encounter numerous problems with Iranian realities on their own. After the outbreak of the Arab Spring, this situation had negative implications for Russian interests in the Middle East. The close support of the business interests at the government level led to the association of the Russian business with the Russian state, and, thus, made it dependent on the fluctuations of the political situation. Subsequently, the lost of political positions in the Middle Eastern countries caused the lost of economic position. The ties of medium and smaller business with the private sector would have preserved Russian presence in the region. However, the creation of these ties was never encouraged by the authorities of the RF.

By 2011, Russian foreign policy-making on the Middle East was fragmented as it involved several policy-making actors with conflicting agendas - the Presidential Administration, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Trade and Economic Development, the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, NGOs, as well as governmental, semi-governmental and private commercial companies and even the Russian Orthodox Church. In the absence of long-term policy goals and priorities, Moscow took a case-by-case approach sticking to the principle of momentary profit and balancing between all regional forces.

The Russian attempts to follow the principle of open doors and be friends for all were relatively inefficient even before the Arab Spring. Thus, during the 2000s, the periodical efforts of the Russian authorities to maintain equally good relations with Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel without acknowledging problems existing in the relations of Riyadh, Tehran and Tel-Aviv with each other only irritated Moscow's partners. For instance, Moscow attempt to upgrade the Russo-Israeli relations during the visit of Putin to Tel-Aviv in 2012 without admitting the threat paused by Tehran's nuclear program was, from the very beginning, doomed to be futile. In addition to this, since the 1990s, the Middle Easterners have been keeping somewhere in the back of their minds the thought that post-Soviet Russia is more oriented to the West. This, in turn, did not add much trust to Russia.

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<sup>17</sup> Shumilin, "Rossiya i 'Novye Elit' Stran 'Arabskoy Vesny'".

The events of the Arab Spring only confirmed an old wisdom that it is hard to be a friend for all. This was proven by the civil conflict in Libya. In 2011, the attempts of Moscow to play in a shuttle diplomacy between the rebels and the government of Qaddafi raised a lot of questions in both camps. On one hand, the leader of the Libyan Jamahiriya was confused by the fact that Russia which, in 2008 – 2010, was actively developing relations with Tripoli suddenly started to persuade him to start negotiations with his enemies and, possibly, to leave the throne. This could not be considered otherwise than treachery. On the other hand, the opposition felt the moral and military support of the West and wanted to end the dictatorial regime. Under these conditions, any attempts to persuade them to start the dialogue with the opponent could probably only rise questions about whether the authorities of the RF wanted the peace or tried to postpone the final blow to Qaddafi.<sup>18</sup>

Last, but not least, the attitude of Moscow to the Middle East as a trading item in the Russian relations with the West also played its role. Thus, as it had happened previously, in 2011, Moscow decided to use Libya as a trading item in order to bargain preferences in its relations with the U.S. and E.U. On 17 March 2011, the Russian government did not veto UN SC resolution 1973 which paved the way for the U.S. and E.U. intervention in the Libyan conflict. Subsequently, the RF imposed sanctions on Libya and it was the first to stop arms exports to the regime of Qaddafi. In the eyes of the pro-Western group of Russian ruling elite these steps were worth making: in 2011, Moscow still hoped to reset relations with Washington, and the military contracts with France also played their role. Nevertheless, this time, the losses did not justify gains. The situation itself had changed: if, for instance, the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement of 1995 when Russia agreed to stop military assistance to Iran had significant, but not crucially negative effect on Tehran, Moscow decisions on Libya probably determined the destiny of Qaddafi. In other words, in 1995, Russia only cheated Iran whereas, in 2011, it betrayed the regime of Qaddafi. Under these conditions, the image of the RF in the Middle East suffered heavy losses: according to the traditions of the region, a treachery (no matter who is a betrayed person) is never forgotten.<sup>19</sup>

Treachery is also considered a sign of weakness (as well as the strategy of balancing between different forces: a strong player can afford to clearly

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<sup>18</sup> RIA Novosti, “Margelov: RF Aktiviziruyet Kontakty s Opozitsiey i Vlastyami Livii” RIA Novosti, 27 May 2011. [http://ria.ru/arab\\_ly/20110527/380644465.html](http://ria.ru/arab_ly/20110527/380644465.html) Last accessed on 5 October 2013.

<sup>19</sup> “Medvedev Podpsal Ukaz o Sanktsiyah protiv Livii”, VoA, 12 August 2011 <http://www.golos-ameriki.ru/content/russia-lybia-medvedev-sanctions-2011-08-12-127578108/241893.html> Last accessed on 5 October 2013; Zhenmin Zhibao, “Rossiya Sklonyaetsya k Uzhestocheniyu Sanktsiy protiv Livii”, Zhenmin Zhibao, 15 August 2011 <http://russian.people.com.cn/31519/7568885.html> Last accessed on 5 October 2013; “Bastrykina Poprosili Proverit Deyatelnost Medvedeva na Fakt Izmeny”, Nakanune, 4 February 2013. <http://www.nakanune.ru/news/2013/2/4/22299398/> Last accessed on 5 October 2013.

demonstrate his preferences). This, in turn, assured the opponents of Russia in the region that in other cases the opinion of Moscow could be ignored. For instance, since the very beginning of the Arab Spring, the Qataris have been periodically repeating the idea that the RF has long lost its status of the centre of power in the international politics, but it still tries to return to it by playing the role of a minor troublemaker and supporting the dictatorial regimes.<sup>20</sup> The representatives of the Syrian opposition went even further: when persuading the American and European policymakers to intervene in the civil conflict in Syria, they argued that Moscow has no real levers on the West. As an example they referred to the situation with Yugoslavia in 1999, Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011. According to them, in all cases the Russian government was compelled to deal with the U.S. and NATO behaviour as granted.<sup>21</sup>

## End of the Game?

However, it is still early to say that, after the beginning of the Arab Spring, Russia completely lost its position in the Middle East. On the contrary, if the period 2011 – 2012 was the time of a serious stress-test for Moscow, the events of 2013 demonstrated that Moscow still has all the chances to preserve its presence in the region. As stated by some experts, by 2013, the negative implications of the Arab Spring for the RF had been finally counterbalanced by positive trends.

## Rethinking Approaches

First and foremost, by 2013, Moscow reconsidered its approaches towards the Middle East. The Russian foreign policy on the region became tougher in defending its red lines and, at the same time, more clever. Thus, Moscow started to look at the domestic situation in the region more carefully. Currently, Russia does not conceal its interest in a dialogue with almost all forces in the Middle Eastern arena. For instance, over the past two years, Russia has established contacts with the different groups of the Syrian opposition.<sup>22</sup> Thus, if until the summer of 2012 the Russian authorities were dealing mostly with semi-legal and moderate opposition forces, such as members of the National Coordination Council, by autumn 2012, the Russians were looking for contacts with members of the Syrian National Council. And in 2013, these contacts were established at different levels. Finally, on 10 February 2013, in his interview on the Russian television channel *Rossiya 1*, Russian Foreign

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<sup>20</sup> Kasaev, 'Ekonomicheskoye Partnerstvo Rossii i OAE'

<sup>21</sup> Interview with an expert on Syria, Washington DC, May 2012; interview with an expert on the Middle East, St. Andrews, June 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Ministerstvo Inostrannikh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii, "Intervyu ministra inostrannikh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v programme 'Voskresniy vecher s Vladimirom Solovevim' na telekanale "Rossiya-1", Moskva, 10 fevralya 2013 goda' [http://mid.ru/bdomp/brp\\_4.nsf/2fec282eb6df40e643256999005e6e8c/02eb-c66354ef10e544257b0e0045ad41!OpenDocument](http://mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/2fec282eb6df40e643256999005e6e8c/02eb-c66354ef10e544257b0e0045ad41!OpenDocument) (accessed on 31 May 2013).

Minister Sergey Lavrov acknowledged that Moscow has links with “all groups inside the Syrian opposition without any exceptions” and uses them for the periodic exchanges of views. As an example of such dialogue, the foreign minister referred to his recent meeting with the head of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, Sheikh Ahmed Moaz Khatib, on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference on 1-3 February 2013.<sup>23</sup>

The agenda of such meetings has never been made public. However, information leaks allow analysts to assume that the Russian authorities are talking about ways not only to bring about a ceasefire between the Syrian government and the opposition, but also to start negotiations. Moscow is probably trying to demonstrate that, under certain conditions, it will be ready to deal with the new Syrian authorities after Assad’s fall or resignation.

These declarations are supported by the examples of Russia’s relations with the other Arab countries in which authoritarian regimes have recently fallen: namely, post-Mubarak Egypt and post-Qaddafi Libya. Moscow was one of the first to start a dialogue with the Egyptian government after the fall of Mubarak’s regime. In November 2012, Lavrov visited the country and confirmed the Russian government’s readiness to pursue political and economic cooperation with Egypt, regardless of the Islamist background of Egyptian president, Mohamed Morsi. The same thesis was probably used by Lavrov during his meeting with the head of one of the largest Libyan parties – National Forces Alliance – Mahmoud Jibril in Moscow on 27 February 2013. As noted by some analysts, both in the case of Egypt and Libya, Russia tried to play on existing mistrust to the U.S. and E.U. among political groups in the above-mentioned countries. The signal sent from Moscow was simple: close ties only with American and European leaders did not save Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Qaddafi from their fate (i.e. there is a necessity to relay on alternative force which could be represented by Moscow). It is highly probable that the same thesis is (or will be) used by the Russian authorities in their contacts with the members of the Syrian opposition.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, it is not the same tactics of open doors which Russia used before the Arab Spring. Russia is ready for the dialogue with many regional groups but not with all of them: any connections with the radical Islamic groups are not an option for the authorities of the RF. This Russian principality brightly contrasted with the behaviour of some Western countries which could apply radically different labels to the Islamists fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, Libya or Syria. With the return of Putin, the role of the Middle East as a trading item in Russo-American and Russo-European relations became less obvious. On the contrary, Moscow set certain red lines (such as

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with an expert on Russian foreign policy, Moscow, February 2013.

the unacceptability of foreign military intervention in Syria) whose crossing by the West could cause the retaliatory measures of the Russian government. At the same time, this Russian stubbornness was accompanied by the success of the Kremlin's diplomacy in 2013. Thus, Moscow received the support of its stance on Syria from China, India and a number of other countries. In September 2013, it undermined the U.S. attempts to form the coalition for the military intervention in Syria and stepped with the initiative on the termination of the Syrian chemical arsenal. The later proposal (at least, temporary) allowed Moscow to neutralise American efforts to use the WMD of Assad's regime as a pretext for the military operation against Damascus. Finally, whenever Putin raised the Syrian issue on the sidelines of the meetings of the leading world powers such as the G8 Summit in Loch-Erne (17-18 June 2013) and G-20 Summit in St.-Petersburg (5-6 September 2013) he was always more persuasive and eloquent than his opponents. This was not left unnoticed by the public opinion in the Middle East. On one hand, in the eyes of those regional states which managed to preserve positive or neutral attitude to Moscow the Russian authorities managed to rehabilitate themselves after the ambivalent foreign policy on the region during the period 2011 – the early-2012. The authorities of the RF proved that they are able to keep a given word. On the other hand, the regional opponents of Russia such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia were compelled to recognise the Kremlin as an important player whose opinion should be taken into account. Thus, such influential newspapers as *the Asharq Al-Awsat* and *al-Hayat* considered the failure of Obama to persuade Putin to change the Russian stance on Syria during the G-8 summit in Loch-Erne as a pure victory of Russia whereas the U.S. administration was accused in 'opportunism and weakness'.<sup>25</sup>

## Brave New World

The Arab Spring has changed the political map of the region. Its outbreak caused the formation of a new system of regional relations which roughly divided the Middle Eastern countries in the following three groups:

1. Countries aspiring to the role of the architects of the Arab revolutions and leaders of the new Middle East (first of all, the GCC members which were and still are actively involved in the process of the overthrowing of dictatorial regimes in Libya and Syria)
2. New regimes emerged as the outcome of the Arab Spring which are trying to find their own way of political development (such as Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen)

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<sup>25</sup> Grigoriy Kosach, "Pozitsiya Rossii po Siriiskomu Krizisu v Arabskoy Presse posle Vstrechi G8", <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=17779>. Last accessed on 5 October 2013

3. “Fragments of the old world” or countries which lived through the turbulence of regional uprisings and managed to preserve their old regimes (such as Algeria).

As it appeared by 2013, all these three groups have their own interests in establishing a certain level of good relations with Russia. Thus, for such countries as Algeria whose governments are concerned with the growing influence of the Gulf monarchies in the region as well as scared to repeat the destiny of the Qaddafi or Mubarak regimes, Russia is seen as a reliable partner and protector. The Syrian experience shows that the RF under Putin is capable to outbalance the Western influence and can guarantee a certain level of security for its partners.

For instance, approximately since 2012, analysts argue about the intensification of Algerian dialogue with Moscow. In spite of certain setback in military cooperation (which, however, has temporary nature and, to a certain extent, determined by the decision of the Algerian authorities to diversify the sources of military supplies), Algiers could be called one of the closest partner of Moscow in the North African region. By 2013 the volume of trade between the two countries achieved the level of USD 2,7 billion and continued its growth. After the beginning of the Arab Spring, Algeria and Russia have been confirming their decision to strengthen multidimensional cooperation within the framework of the declaration on strategic partnership signed by the authorities of these states in 2001. To a large extent this behaviour of Algiers and Moscow is determined by common threats and challenges posed by the aftermath of the Arab Spring. They are equally concerned with the rise of Islamism in the region, intense Western interference in the Middle Eastern affairs and the growing influence of Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Both countries are also worried with the perspectives of their presence in the European gas market as well as with the attempts of the E.U. to diversify the sources of hydrocarbon imports.<sup>26</sup>

During 2012 – 2013, in order to have a constant opportunity to exchange opinions on these issues, Algeria and Russia substantially increased the number of working meetings at different levels. Thus, in September 2012, Lavrov met with his Algerian colleague Mourad Medelci on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York. In November 2012, Deputy Minister for Maghreb and African Affairs Abdelkader Messahel visited Moscow. In February 2013, Lavrov made Algiers a part of his North African trip. During his stay in this country, the Russian Foreign Minister had consultations with Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika and Medelci. In return, the later visited

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<sup>26</sup> Ministerstvo Inostrannikh Del Rossiyskoy Federatsii, “Intervyu Ministra Inostrannikh Del Rossii S.V.Lavrova Alzhirskoy Gazete “Al-Khabar””, 3 Iyulya 2013’, [http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/BRP\\_4.nsf/fa711a859c4b939643256\\_999005bcbbc/c48f6a5826b92fc544257b9d003f674f?OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/BRP_4.nsf/fa711a859c4b939643256_999005bcbbc/c48f6a5826b92fc544257b9d003f674f?OpenDocument) Last accessed on 5 October 2013

Moscow on 25 June 2013. Finally, during 1-2 July 2013, Minister of Energy and Mines Youcef Yousfi and the head of the Council of the Nation, Abdelkader Bensalah, represented Algeria at the GECF summit in the Russian capital.<sup>27</sup> The results of this meeting demonstrated that this country remains the reliable partner of Russia within the framework of the Gas Forum, thus, outbalancing the uncooperative behaviour of Qatar. On the bilateral level, the Algerian authorities do their best to coordinate the efforts of the two countries on the European hydrocarbon market (as reported by some analysts, the issues of Russo-Algerian energy cooperation in Europe are coordinated by special president envoy to the GECF, chairman of the board of the directors of Gazprom, Viktor Zubkov). In response, the Kremlin provides the Algiers with moral support and expert assistance in its negotiations with the E.U. on energy issues. The Russian oil and gas companies such as Gazprom, Rosneft and Sroytransgaz are also actively involved in the development of the hydrocarbon reserves of Algeria. In the spring 2013, for the support of the activities of Russian companies in this country, Moscow and Algiers held the meeting of the bilateral commission on the trade, economic, scientific and technological cooperation.<sup>28</sup>

However, not only old partners decided to strengthen their relations with Moscow. New regimes also intended not to cut ties with RF. Their decision was determined by the two following groups of factors. On one hand, even though in the majority of cases Moscow is hard to be called the main political and economic partner of the Middle Eastern countries, the level of relations with the RF achieved by the beginning of the Arab Spring could not be immediately downgraded. Thus, in the case of Egypt, Cairo was dependent on the imports of Russian grain. By 2011, the Arab republic bought about 4,8 billion tonnes of this product from the RF and, thus, it made Moscow one of the guarantors of Egyptian food security. Given the dependence of the budget incomes of this Middle Eastern country on tourism, it was also the unaffordable luxury for the Egyptians to lose 2,5 – 3 million Russian tourists annually visiting Egypt by 2012. Apart from this, since the early 2000s Cairo demonstrated certain interest in cooperation with Russia in the field of oil, gas and nuclear energy as well as mining, tourism infrastructure, high technologies and space. By 2012, the subsidiary of Russian oil company Lukoil, Lukoil Egypt, was conducting geological exploration in the Gulf of Suez whereas another Russian company Novatek was going to make the geological survey of the el-Arish gas block in the Mediterranean Sea. Finally, Russian companies SMV Engineering and Verteks took the decision to invest their money in gold mining and complex ore extraction.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Eldar Kasaev, "Alzhir: Ekonomicheskiye Svyazi s Rossiei i Sostoyaniye Energeticheskogo Sektora", <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=18101> Last accessed on 5 October 2013

<sup>29</sup> Eldar Kasaev, "K Voprosu o Torgovo-Ekonomicheskikh Svyazyakh Rossii I Egipta", <http://www.iimes>.

On the other hand, as it was mentioned above, the Arab Spring proved the Middle Eastern countries that the dependence on one political and economic partner (no matter, the U.S., U.K., France or Russia) is dangerous. According to some analysts, the fall of Mubarak left the Arab street with a bitter after-taste: the neutrality of Washington was considered as a certain treachery of its fallen ally.<sup>30</sup> Under these conditions, new regimes tried to diversify the range of their main trading and political partners. Thus, both Morsi and post-Morsi administrations were very fast to confirm their loyalty to the Russo-Egyptian friendship and the treaty on strategic partnership signed by Medvedev and Mubarak in 2009. As a result, in 2012, Lavrov visited the Arab Republic for two times (on 9 – 10 March and 4 – 5 November). This provided the ground for the two meetings of Putin with Morsi. One of these took place on the sidelines of the BRICS meeting in Durban on 27 March 2013. The next time, the Egyptian president visited his Russian colleague on 17 – 19 April 2013. The meeting took place at the presidential residence in Sochi. The range of discussed questions included possibilities of Russian assistance in the development of the nuclear programme of Egypt, the continuation of Russian exports of fuel and grain to the Arab Republic as well as options for providing Cairo with the loan of USD 2 billion.<sup>31</sup> After the fall of Morsi government, the Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nabil Fahmi, visited Moscow in order to confirm that the political turmoil did not affect the bilateral relations.<sup>32</sup>

The restoration of Russo-Libyan dialogue is also possible. Although the political situation in this country is far from being stable, Moscow tries to support a certain level of the dialogue with the Libyan political groups. The first sign that these contacts may potentially lead to the resumption of economic cooperation was received in September 2013. As reported by Russian media sources, on 24 September 2013, Russia delivered to Libya a military consignment consisted of 10 infantry fighting vehicles (IFV) BMP-3 (according to other sources, antitank missile complexes Khризантема-S developed on the base of BMP-3) as a symbol of the new era in the military ties of the two countries. The high ranking military officials, Gen. Abdel-Salam Jadallah Obeidi and Brig.Gen. Yousef Abu-Hajar, were sent to take part in the official ceremony of the transfer of these IFVs to the Libyan side. According to some analysts, it could not be a mere coincidence that the arrival of this military equipment was preceded by the visit of the Algerian Minister of International

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ru/?p=16844 Last accessed on 5 October 2013

<sup>30</sup> Interview with an analyst on the modern Middle East, Moscow, August 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Vitaliy Bilan, "Vizit Prezidenta ARE M.Mursi v Rossiyu I Egipetskaya Yadernaya Programma", <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=17374> Last accessed on 5 October 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Ministerstvo Inostrannikh Del Rossiyskoy Federatsii, "O Peregovorakh Ministra Inostrannikh Del Rossii S.V.Lavrova s Ministrom inostrannikh Del Egipta N.Fakhmi", [http://mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/newline/ECF7E11312785 DD644257BE8004A55AB](http://mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/newline/ECF7E11312785 DD644257BE8004A55AB) Last accessed on 5 October 2013.

Cooperation and Foreign Affairs, Mohamed Abdelaziz to Moscow in September 2013.<sup>33</sup>

There is a hope that the fall of regimes in the countries previously friendly to Russia does not mean the end of partnership between the RF and these states and the experience of Russian-Iraqi relations could be given as an example here. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, arms and energy markets of this Middle Eastern state were considered to be lost for Moscow. Kremlin analysts believed in the inevitable political and economic reorientation of Baghdad to Washington. However, the late 2000s were marked with the massive return of Russian oil and gas companies to Iraq. As it appeared, Baghdad was interested in this: the Russians were ready to work in difficult conditions for less amount of money (as compared with Western companies). They were and still are actively cooperating with the authorities of the regions where their companies have projects by employing the locals, donating money for charity needs, developing social infrastructure and establishing good relations with local warlords. Subsequently, by 2013, Baghdad started signing agreements on the development of oil and gas fields with Russian companies on more favourable conditions than usually offered to foreigners. Moreover, the Iraqi authorities closed their eyes on the active penetration of the energy giants from the RF to the part of the country controlled by the Kurdish regional government.

In 2012, Russia and Iraq signed the package of military contracts whose overall volume is estimated in USD 4,2 billion. According to these contracts Moscow was supposed to sell to Baghdad anti-aircraft complexes Pantsir and attack helicopters Mi-28. As it was argued by some military sources, Russian military contracts with Iraq signed in 2012 were not limited by the above-mentioned vehicles. According to them, the main reason for the Iraqi interest in Russian arms is the mistrust of Baghdad to the Western partners and the wish to diversify the range of the suppliers of military equipment.<sup>34</sup> It is notable that even the corruption scandal (Moscow was accused in bribing some Iraqi officials in Baghdad in order to have these contracts signed) which emerged around these military deals shortly after the sides reached the agreement upon them did not lead to the cancellation of the contracts.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Igor Korotchenko, "Liviya Poluchila Pervuyu Partiyu Novikh Rossiyskikh Vooruzheniy Posle Sverzheniya Kaddafi", VestiFM, 30 September 2013. <http://radi Vesti.ru/blogs/post/80001> Last accessed on 5 October 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Viktor Nekhezin, "Rossiya Prodala Iraku Nedodelanniye Vertolety MI-28", BBC, 28 June 2013 [http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/international/2013/06/130628\\_iraq\\_russia\\_helicopters.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/international/2013/06/130628_iraq_russia_helicopters.shtml) Last accessed on 5 October 2013.

<sup>35</sup> "Irak: Kontrakty na Pokupku Oruzhiya v Rossii ne Otmenyalis", BBC, 13 February 2013. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2013/02/130213\\_iraq\\_contracts\\_russia.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2013/02/130213_iraq_contracts_russia.shtml) Last accessed on 5 October 2013.

In general, by 2014, even the toughest opponents of Russia among the Middle Eastern countries demonstrated their intention to talk to the RF. Probably, this was determined by the firm position of Kremlin on Syria and its persistence in preserving contacts with the region after the return of Putin. In all these cases, Moscow demonstrated that its opinion should be taken into account. Under these circumstances, the members of the GCC states were compelled to maintain the dialogue with Russia. The visit of Prince Bandar Bin Sultan, Secretary General of the National Security Council and head of the Saudi Intelligence Agency, to Moscow on 31 July 2013 and the meeting of Putin with General Shaikh Mohammad Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces on 16 – 17 September 2013 are, probably, the most notorious examples of this. In the first case, the details of the talks between Putin and Prince Bandar are still not official. Putting speculations aside, analysts argue that this was an unofficial attempt to bridge relations between the RF and the Kingdom, which was tangibly undermined by the Syrian crisis. As noticed by an expert on regional affairs, Naser al-Tamimi, in spite of existing contradictions, Moscow and Riyadh have certain topics for constructive dialogue including regional political stability and bilateral cooperation in the fields of energy and space.<sup>36</sup> For instance, in 2004, Lukoil Overseas signed the contract with Saudi Arabia. According to the document, this company was granted a 40-year long concession on the exploration and development of the gas field in the Rub-al-Khali desert. For the implementation of this project, Lukoil Overseas and Saudi Aramco established the joint company Lukoil Saudi Arabia Energy Ltd. (LUKSAR). The share of the Russian company is 80%. In 2006, the exploration works of LUKSAR resulted in the discovery of a new hydrocarbon field whose estimated resources achieve 85 million tonnes in equivalent fuel. Currently LUKSAR is making an assessment of discovered reserves in order to begin the development of the field. By August 2011 the accumulated investments of the Russian company had achieved 300 million dollars.<sup>37</sup>

As believed by some analysts, during the visit of Prince Bandar, the Saudis decided to use the energy leverage to influence the behaviour of Moscow. Thus, as reported, they allegedly guaranteed that the GCC countries will not create obstacles for Russian gas exports to the EU in exchange for the refusal of Kremlin from the support of Assad. Apart from that, Riyadh promised to start the full-scale imports of Russian arms. However, this information has never been officially confirmed.<sup>38</sup> The visit of Mohammad Nahyan to Mos-

<sup>36</sup> Naser al-Tamimi, "Saudi-Russian Relations: Between Assad and Sisi", *Al-Arabiya*, 18 August 2013. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2013/08/18/Saudi-Russian-relations-between-Assad-and-Sisi.html> Last accessed on 5 October 2013

<sup>37</sup> Ludmila Shkvarya, "Rossiya i Strany Zaliva: Investitsionnoye Sotrudnichestvo", *Aziya i Afrika Segodnya* №5, 2011, pp. 18 – 23.

<sup>38</sup> "Saudovskaya Araviya Obeshchayet i Ugrozhayet Rossii po Sirii", *Vesti*, 27 August 2013. <http://www.vestifinance.ru/articles/31671> Last accessed on 5 October 2013

cow was more transparent. The sides openly confirmed their interest in the development of bilateral economic relations. Being an often visitor to Moscow (the previous visit of Mohammad Nahyan to Russia took place in October 2012), the sheikh declared the intention of the UAE to invest up to USD 5 billion in Russian transport infrastructure. Putin and Nahyan were satisfied with the growth of the trade volume between the two countries which hit the level of USD 2 billion. Subsequently, they expressed hopes that the positive trend in the bilateral trade will continue.<sup>39</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The events of the Arab Spring and their aftermath were a serious stress-test for the Russian foreign policy on the Middle East. The fall of old dictatorial regimes compelled Moscow to adjust its approaches to a brand new political vista which was not always friendly to the Kremlin. If before 2011 the Russian authorities considered the region to be of secondary importance within the framework of their global diplomatic doctrine, the Arab Spring lucidly demonstrated that in order to secure Russian national interests Moscow needs to be more active in developing its relations with the regional countries. In other words, it was high time to restore, at least, part of Russian influence in the Middle East lost after the fall of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the revolutionary events changed the general Russian perception of the Middle Eastern countries. By 2013, they were not seen as just another trading item in the relations of Moscow with the U.S. and E.U. or a chessboard where Russia and the West were playing their games: the Arab Spring made Kremlin to regard them as independent players on the international arena with their own task and priorities and to deal with them as equals.

On the other hand, the Arab Spring gave the answer to the countries of the region concerning the place of modern Russia within the system of the international relations of the Middle East. Moscow's stubbornness in defending its interests in Syria as well as its readiness to continue the dialogue with new regimes proved that the RF is an important player in the region which should not be either neglected or underestimated. Although the Russian authorities are still periodically making short-sighted and hasty steps (such as the demonstrative evacuation of the Russian embassy from Tripoli on 3 October 2013 in response to the provocation of unknown militias), there are hopes that the diplomacy of Moscow would become more coherent and subtle.

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<sup>39</sup> Aleksey Chesnokov, 'OAE Vlozhat Milliardy Dollarov v Infrastrukturu Rossii' in VestiFM, 12 September 2013. [http://radiovesti.ru/article/show/article\\_id/105871](http://radiovesti.ru/article/show/article_id/105871) Last accessed on 5 October 2013

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