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Russia's policy on the Syria crisis: sources and implications

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It may be hard to believe it now, but just a year ago Russia found itself enjoying a rather positive and balanced standing in the Middle East. This image could be traced despite, or thanks to, Russia's reduced involvement and limited interest in the Middle East for much of the post-Soviet period. It was contrasted with the policies of the key external actors, particularly the two flawed US-led interventions in, and ignominious retreat from, Iraq and Afghanistan, and the 2011 ouster of the US main Arab ally outside the Gulf – the Mubarak regime. Against this background, Russia's relatively low profile and its post-Soviet lack of ideological pressure, combined with historical record of support to the Arab countries and its remaining influence in the UN, until recently tended to affect its image in the Middle East in a rather positive way. It may be precisely the lack of major strategic interest or leverage that allowed Russia the luxury of relative neutrality – between Iran and the Arab Gulf states, the Sunni and the Shia, secular forces (such as Fatah) and reformist Islamists (such as Hamas), and even, to an extent, between the Arab world and Israel.



Syrian protestors brandish a placard of Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev.

This trend was not immediately reversed as one "Arab revolution" started to erupt after another since early 2011. Prior to the Libya crisis, the Russian government, caught by surprise by the unfolding events in the Arab world like anyone else, managed to retain a cool, but relatively restrained and neutral approach to the developing protests. Even Moscow's approach to Libya – a mix of reluctant support to international sanctions and opposition to "creeping intervention" may now look more reasonable in hindsight, as the post-Gaddafi internal tensions escalate, threatening disintegration of the country and possibly wider regional destabilization. Against this background, how has Russia's image in the region changed so dramatically by early spring 2012?

The year-long protests in Syria – months of initially peaceful demonstrations that provoked violent reaction by authorities that, in turn, provoked an armed insurgency – came at the later stage of the broader political transformation processes that have affected much of the region. This time, however, in the post-Libya context, as the Syrian government faced mounting internal protest and growing international discontent, Russia chose to firmly stand by Damascus at every level, including the UN.

While this policy provoked broad international criticism, primarily on humanitarian grounds, its actual effects on the course of the Syria crisis are disputable. Russia's general capacity to influence the developments in and around Syria and its leverage on the ruling regime appear to be significantly overestimated. When this is done by Russian officials and media, it is at least understandable and may reflect anything from (pre-)election considerations to foreign policy bluffing in order to build up "Syria leverage" as another "trump card" in Moscow's relations – primarily with the West. However, when otherwise well-informed Western analysts voiced exaggerated perceptions of [Russia's leverage on Syria](#), they may point to – and reflect – an interesting paradox. The US administration and the lead EU governments are under strong pressure, on humanitarian/human-rights-related grounds, to "do something" on Syria where armed violence, including one-sided violence against civilians, has taken the most intense forms in the region and led to thousands of fatalities. The West, however, can hardly afford another direct intervention in the Arab world at the moment and lacks alternative means and levers to push for a peaceful transition, increasingly "shifting the burden" to the states of the region. In this context, Russia's suddenly active meddling on Syria is useful. It both allows the West to gain some "moral ground" on the issue and provides a convenient excuse for the United States and its European partners to avoid, for the time being, taking difficult decisions on Syria – a more complex internal crisis than Libya, with a potentially more destabilizing internal and regional consequences.

While important, Russia's position on Syria is hardly decisive for the course of the internal confrontation, political transformation, or even the eventual fate of the present Syrian government. But while the effects of Russia's support for the Assad regime on Syria and the region may be a matter of speculation, the first outcomes of this policy for Russia itself are already clear, especially regarding its general standing in the Middle East and its influence at the UN.

First, as a direct result of its Syria policy, Russia has quickly turned itself into one of the major external "scapegoats" in the Middle East – a label that, overall, it hardly deserves, especially in view of its otherwise limited role and leverage in the region. This political, diplomatic and reputational setback is a fact. It is manifested by the general outcry not just in the Gulf-based international news agencies, but region-wide, in the Arab media of all types. A series of protests at the Russian embassies in several Arab countries provoked by Moscow's stance on Syria has been unprecedented (the phenomenon was unheard of

since the demonstrations that took place in Cairo in 1967 in the wake of Egypt's defeat in the six-day war, as a sign of the "Arab street" anger about "insufficient" Soviet support).

Second, Russia suffered a major setback at the United Nations. While Russia's and China's [vetoes](#) of the Western-backed Arab League peace plan at the UN Security Council on 4 February 2012 were expected, the distribution of votes on a similar [UN General Assembly resolution](#) on 16 February came as a semi-shocking development. As shown in the [European Council on Foreign Relations' analysis](#) of voting coincidence scores in the UN General Assembly, over a decade from 1997–98 to 2007–08, members' support on human rights-related issues leaped for both Russia and China, from under 50 percent to 76 and 74 percent respectively, in contrast to sharp decline in support to the United States (from 77 percent in 1997–98 down to 30 percent in 2007–08) and the EU states (from 72 to 48–55 percent). The Syria vote radically contradicted that stable voting trend. While the UN General Assembly is often downplayed as devoid of actual "strategic decision-making" role, precisely for that reason voting patterns there provide a better reflection of the members' genuine attitudes and beliefs than the UNSC-linked strategic calculations and alliances do.

For Russia, as a relative outsider with limited interests in the Middle East but an influential UN power, the two immediate (regional and international) outcomes of its Syria policy – becoming a major external "scapegoat" for the Arab world and damaging Russia's reputation at the UN – appear counterproductive. They also raise questions about the actual sources and underlying motivations of this policy.

The two dominant explanations in the expert circles, both in and outside Russia, are centered on Moscow's "strategic interests" and domestic electoral pressures. While these factors are not negligible, neither appears too convincing, nor does a combination of the two.

It is amazing to watch both Russia's own hardliners and many Western and Middle Eastern analysts join together in highlighting Russia's "indispensable" strategic interests regarding Syria. Existing military, economic, cultural/educational and other links notwithstanding, Syria's importance as a buyer of Russian arms should not be overestimated, especially in view of its Damascus's poor paying record. A small and underdeveloped Russian naval facility at Tartus has symbolic rather than real significance. The Assad regime has never been noted for any particular political affinity to Moscow (until very recently) or bothered to pose as Russia's "ally" before. President Assad repeatedly turned down several official invitations to visit Moscow over the past few years. Russia's economic interest in Syria – in energy and some other sectors – is present, but relatively modest compared, for instance, to economic cooperation with neighbouring Turkey.

Even the impact of the recent parliamentary and presidential election campaigns in Russia, when the ruling group routinely played upon anti-US sentiments to appear "tough on the West" and discredit domestic opposition, cannot fully explain an unusual attachment to the Syrian government, given the ensuing damage to Russia's image in the region and at the UN. This attachment does not simply boil down to a standard manipulative drive tailored for short-term domestic need – it is also a manifestation of more substantive, identity-based issues at play.

While keeping in mind all contributing factors, one needs to bring into the picture the political identity dimension. Indeed, the regime affinity between the present Russia and Assad's Syria is striking. While context-specific, at times it almost looks like genetic and mental kinship and is much closer than that between Russia and any other (semi-)authoritarian government outside the CIS. Similarities include the political and economic dominance of a closed, clearly defined cast in power (with a limited territorial/origin-based or sectarian bias), the unparalleled clout of the security sector, and the practically unchecked role of special intelligence services. Within the respective "smart authoritarianism" frameworks, direct and massive use of force by the government in the name of "internal stabilization" – including in densely populated urban areas – has not been a routine practice. More nuanced strategies are preferred under "normal conditions". However, this option has always been and remains open when the regime's control or survival is at stake. An issue even more disturbing than how domestic politics has affected Russia's foreign policy toward Syria is the extent to which further political change in Syria may affect the way the gradual but unavoidable political transition is managed in Russia itself.

The identity factor – as an underlying cause of Russia's reaction to the escalating internal conflict in Syria – runs deeper than any short-term election-related policy. When it comes to Russia, it is this type of identity-based affinity that is truly alarming, not the UN debates on creeping resolutions, sanctions, and potential external intervention in the post-Libya context. Such debates, after all, have a solid pre-history and involve a seminal conflict between human security-centered and sovereignty-centered legal and ethical approaches. Despite the gradual global shift towards human security concerns, this conflict is far from settled and is constantly reignited by controversial experience of multilateral external interventions in internal conflicts and flawed externally-driven state-building experiments in different parts of the world.

Overall, there is no need to overdramatize the implications of Russia's position on Syria. In the immediate aftermath of Russia's presidential elections of 4 March 2012 Moscow has already taken several small "back-off" steps to try to reverse the wave of criticism against its stance. Ironically, even for the sovereignty-obsessed Russia, the optimal way to do so has been by invoking humanitarian concerns (e.g. by joining others in demanding humanitarian access to Syria for the UN officials). Russian officials even started to [concede publicly](#) that preventing state collapse and complete destabilization in and around Syria is more important than whether Assad himself eventually stays or goes. Russia also appears to increasingly promote regional mediation in the Syrian crisis. At the UN, however, Moscow's message for the West and its regional allies in the Gulf is likely to be simple: if at some point you decide to intervene in Syria you will not receive the opportunity to manipulate the mandate of a UNSC resolution in the way that you did in Libya, and will therefore have to bear full responsibility for the action and its consequences.

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