

# Why Russia Supports Repressive Regimes in Syria and the Middle East

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Dmitry Gorenburg  
*Harvard University*

In recent months, Russia (with Chinese support) has increasingly staked out a strong position in support of the Assad regime in Syria. As Syria's allies dwindle, Russia has become its foremost protector in the international arena. In doing so, it has followed a policy consistent with previous statements in support of regimes facing popular uprisings throughout the Middle East. This is not a new policy, as similar statements were made by Russian leaders during the Green revolution in Iran in 2009. To explain this policy, many analysts have focused on the importance of Russian economic investments in countries such as Libya and Syria or on political connections dating back from the Soviet days.

Undoubtedly, economic factors play a role in determining Russian policy. But the threat of spreading political instability and concern about setting precedents are at least as important for Russian leaders, who see the potential for the spread of unrest to other states in the region and fear the demonstration effects of successful revolts on vulnerable regimes in Central Asia. This memo will discuss the balance between interest-based and ideological factors in determining Russia's response to the Arab Spring.

I argue that although Russia's economic and strategic interests in the Middle East have played a role in shaping its response to the Arab Spring, fear of demonstration effects and positioning in the international arena have arguably had a larger effect on Russia's support for Middle Eastern dictators over the last year. Russian leaders' primary goal has been to prevent the establishment of a norm that allows for international intervention in response to government repression of domestic protests or violent uprisings. Second, the Russian government has sought to counter what it perceives as U.S. strategic gains in the Middle East. Economic factors, including arms sales, are thus only the third most important reason for Russian support for Bashar al-

Assad and other Middle Eastern authoritarian leaders facing popular revolts over the past year.

### **Russian Economic Interests in Syria**

Russia does have extensive economic interests in the Middle East, and especially in Syria. The most important spheres are sales of military equipment and energy. The Middle East is the second largest market for Russian arms exports, exceeded only by South and Southeast Asia. Prior to the Arab Spring, Algeria, Syria, and Libya regularly featured in lists of top five customers for Russian military equipment, while Yemen, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco have also signed contracts for Russian arms in recent years. The total value of unfulfilled arms contracts with Syria is estimated at \$4 billion.

Russia's economic interests in Syria extend far beyond the military sphere, with a total value of approximately \$20 billion. Russian companies have made extensive investments in oil and gas exploration and production in Syria. *Tatneft* and *Soiuzneftegaz* are currently extracting oil in Syria. *Tatneft's* contract was concluded in 2003 and its first well was drilled in 2010 in the South Kishma field. *Stroitransgaz* has built a natural gas pipeline and processing plant and is now building a second plant near Rakka that will process 1.3 billion cubic meters of gas. The North-Western oil group won a tender in 2008 to build a petroleum processing plant near Deir-es-Zor. Finally, a *Gazprom* subsidiary named *Georesurs* was planning to participate in tenders for oil exploration. Russian companies are also involved in nuclear energy projects in Syria, including plans announced by *Rosatom* in 2010 to build Syria's first nuclear power plant and continuing service by *Tekhnopromeksport* of energy producing facilities it has built in the country.

Russian manufacturing companies also play a role in the Syrian economy. *Uralmash* signed a contract in 2010 to provide drilling equipment for a Syrian petroleum company. In September 2011, *Tupolev* and *Aviastar-SP* signed a memorandum to provide three Tu-204SM passenger airplanes and a service center for these planes to Syrian Air. *Traktornye Zavody* has announced plans for a joint venture with a Syrian company to build agricultural equipment. The *Sinara* group is building a hotel complex in Latakia. *Sitroniks* signed a contract in 2008 to build a wireless network for Syria. Finally, *Russkie Navigatsionnye Tekhnologii* has plans to install GLONASS-based navigation equipment on Syrian vehicles.

Russian exporters fear that regime change in Syria or elsewhere in the Middle East would lead to the loss of contracts, as new rulers pursue economic ties with their patrons in Turkey, Europe, or the United States. This is especially a concern for weapons sales, where Russia can point to Libya as an example of the economic impact of a government overthrow on Russian arms sales. Libya had purchased over \$2 billion worth of Russian weapons between 2005 and 2010 and was in advanced negotiations for an additional \$2 billion worth of contracts for a full range of weapons, including fighter jets, helicopters, submarines, tanks, and missiles. The new Libyan government, on the other hand, recently concluded a long-term defense cooperation agreement with France that may lead to the purchase of French fighter jets. From this perspective, Russian

leaders firmly believe that it is too late for them to abandon Assad at this point. Even if they come out in support of the opposition, they assume that the latter would not forgive their earlier strong support for his regime and would dismantle the strong economic ties between Syria and Russia. Therefore, Russia's economic interests in Syria can be maintained only if Assad defeats the opposition or there is a negotiated settlement.

### **Russian Political Interests in the Middle East**

Although Russian leaders are concerned about the potential impact of the Arab Spring on Russian economic interests, this is not the primary cause of their opposition to regime change in the Middle East. Political factors, of both a regional and international nature, play a much more important role in Russian calculations.

At the regional level, since Russia does not need to import energy, its main interest is strategic access to the region. In the years after the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russia gave up all but one of its military facilities outside the territory of the former Soviet Union. The one remaining is the naval logistics facility in Tartus, Syria. This is not a true military base, since it does not permanently host any Russian military personnel other than the 50 sailors who staff it. It consists of two floating piers, a floating repair facility, and a supply depot. Its primary purpose is to repair and resupply Russian navy ships transiting the Mediterranean. Russian leaders are concerned that the fall of the Assad regime may lead to the closure of this facility. While the Syrian opposition has not made any statements regarding the future of Tartus, Russia has long depended entirely on Assad. Given their outspoken support for his actions against opponents in recent months, Russian leaders cannot expect to have good relations with his successors, especially if they come to power by force.

The January 2012 visit to Syria by a Russian naval group that included the Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier was designed to demonstrate the importance that Russia attaches to its relationship with Syria and its current leadership. While official Russian sources repeatedly stated that this was a routine resupply visit scheduled long ago and had no political connotations, it was almost certainly intended as a political signal. The arrival of the ships was interpreted at home and abroad as a sign that Russia would not tolerate a "Libya scenario" – and was perceived as such by the Syrian government and official media, which trumpeted the arrival of the ships as an indication of Russian support for the Assad regime.

However, Russian leaders may have actually meant to signal something slightly different – that Russia remains a player in the Middle East and its positions have to be taken into account. They believe that Assad's departure will result in Syria either becoming a Turkish ally or descending into long-term chaos and civil war. In either situation, Russia will lose a dependable ally. Furthermore, they are concerned about the collapse of what was once an axis of Russia-friendly regimes across the center of the Middle East. Since becoming president, Vladimir Putin worked to rebuild Russia's relations with its Middle Eastern allies from the Cold War period. Syria, Libya, and Iraq were at the center of an effort that sought to counterbalance U.S. dominance in the

region. Iran, a vehement opponent of the United States and a close ally of Syria, was also part of this axis. Russia's leaders conceived of the Iraq war largely as an effort to weaken the anti-American coalition in the region and viewed strong support for the war from Saudi Arabia and the GCC states as evidence to support their view.

At the start of the Arab Spring, Russia was willing to accept Western intervention in Libya. Russian leaders decided not to veto Resolution 1973 for two reasons. First, they did not want to alienate Western leaders who were pushing for the intervention. While the rapprochement with the United States was important to them and certainly played a role, Russian political and economic ties with European states were of greater significance. The positions of France and Italy, both of which were strongly in favor of a no-fly zone because of the potential for a humanitarian and refugee disaster in the event of an attack by Gaddhafi's forces on Benghazi, were especially important for Russian calculations. Second, Russian leaders did not want to be blamed for blocking the intervention if the result was a large scale massacre of civilians.

However, Russian leaders quickly became disenchanted with the coalition's rather expansive interpretation of Resolution 1973. They were willing to allow for the establishment of a no-fly zone in order to avert a likely massacre of civilians and to help their European partners avoid a flood of refugees on their soil. They were much less willing to see NATO forces provide military assistance to a popular uprising against an authoritarian ruler with whom it had reasonably close ties. Russian criticism escalated as it became clear that NATO air strikes were targeting Gaddhafi's ground forces rather than just preventing Libyan air forces from targeting civilian areas. Furthermore, Russian leaders' response to violent uprising in Syria was conditioned by the Libya experience. The Libyan outcome, combined with domestic political factors, shifted the balance in Russian Middle East policy against the West. This led to the Russian veto of a UN resolution that they worried would provide a pretext for another Western military intervention in the Middle East.

### **Avoiding Demonstration Effects**

Russian leaders did not want to create a new norm of international intervention in internal conflicts, particularly when these conflicts were the result of a popular uprising against an authoritarian ruler. They genuinely dislike what they see as a Western predilection for imposing their values and forms of government on other parts of the world. They remember the color revolutions in Serbia, Ukraine, and Georgia, in which friendly regimes were replaced by ones that were to a greater or lesser extent anti-Russian.

The authorities in Moscow are concerned that further successful popular uprisings in the Middle East may lead to demonstration effects in its own neighborhood – and perhaps even in Russia itself. Initially, the greatest fear was about the possibility of popular uprisings bringing down “friendly” autocrats in Central Asia. However, the recent large demonstrations against the falsification of elections in Russia

itself have only increased its leaders' determination to ensure that no additional "dominoes" fall under popular pressure.

While the "Arab awakenings" have little direct connection to the emergence of protests against Vladimir Putin's political order, Russian leaders feel that they are surrounded by a tide of anti-incumbent protests – and see each government toppled as potentially feeding the mood throughout the world. A related fear is that the overthrow of the Assad regime may feed a resurgence of anti-government protests in Iran, bringing the region's political instability even closer to Russia's borders.

Furthermore, Russian leaders are concerned about the gains made by Islamist forces in the region, and particularly in Egypt. The twin dangers of popular overthrow of local autocrats and the subsequent victory of Islamic parties in elections raise the danger of an Islamist takeover of parts of Central Asia. Such a scenario would likely lead to a significant increase in migration flows from the region to Russia and the prospect of an increase in terrorist attacks from the region, further destabilizing the domestic political situation.

The combination of fear of instability near its borders and concern about the example set by popular protests in the Middle East play an additional role in pushing Russian leaders toward their policy of supporting authoritarian regimes.