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Direct Impact

THE INFLUENCE OF THE ARAB SPRING ON THE CIRCASSIAN WORLD

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The Arab Spring is an interregional and multinational event, with many ethnic minorities participating from afar and *in situ*—the Jewish community in Tunisia, Copts in Egypt, Berbers in Libya, Darfuris in Sudan, and Kurds in Iraq and Syria. Significant ideological events like the Arab Spring always impact those with similar problems in other regions of the world. The North Caucasus falls into this category as evidenced by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's February 2011 remark that the Arab revolutions might have a "direct impact" on the situation in the North Caucasus.

In this paper, we will analyze what kind of "direct impacts" the Arab events have had on the Circassians, a Russian ethnic minority in the Caucasus with diaspora communities in practically all Arab states. The Circassians make an interesting case study because they found themselves on both sides of the movement: they came to identify with protesters in Libya and they primarily sided with the establishment in Syria. Beyond these parochial examples, they experienced a ripple effect across to their homeland, located in the middle of the most volatile region of Russia.

About one million Circassians live in the North Caucasus. By all accounts, about five million Circassians live abroad: in Arab countries (less than one million), Turkey (more than three million), and in Western states (about one hundred thousand). They form what is known as the "Circassian world," and they have showed a strong sense of common purpose in response to the many challenges of our time.

Nalchik—A Town with Three Uprisings over the Past Twenty Years

Kabardino-Balkaria is the only administrative province in Russia where Circassians form a majority population. Events similar to Arab revolutions took place in Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria, several times over the last twenty years.

During perestroika, the communist regime in Nalchik did not support the changes in the Soviet Union. Valeri Kokov, the leader of Kabardino-Balkaria at the time,

was on the side of anti-democratic forces in the Politburo that tried to overthrow Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991. This undermined his legitimacy in Kabardino-Balkaria and led to a clash in Nalchik. Under pressure from popular opposition, Kokov resigned. Ideologically different, but similar in its anti-state character, another uprising took place in October 2005, when about one hundred youthful insurgents attacked the local headquarters of the federal security forces. This event had its roots in, among other things, a local change in regime as President Arsen Kanokov came to power. These two events had the "regime-change character" of the Arab revolutions.

Another type of clash took place in Nalchik in 1992. After the beginning of the Georgian-Abkhaz war, thousands of Circassians in Nalchik expressed their will to volunteer as soldiers in support of their "kin nation," the Abkhaz. At that time, Russian President Boris Yeltsin stated that Russia supports the principle of Georgia's territorial integrity and considered dangerous the actions of those who summoned volunteers to fight for Abkhazia. Due to a fear of disorder in Nalchik, military troops were deployed to Kabardino-Balkaria. In response, people blocked roads and started a permanent street protest in front of the Republican Government building that lasted over 10 days. This led to a clash with the army and police, leaving many people wounded. Another demonstration took place in Nalchik the next year. These events show how rapidly the situation in the Circassian capitals of Nalchik, Maikop, and Cherkessk can become unstable if other Circassian communities in the homeland or diaspora are threatened.

Today, the North Caucasus has again been grappling with stability. Medvedev has called for increased socio-economic development in the region, noting in February 2011 that "only the creation of new jobs can give hope to the unemployed young people." This is an indication of the Kremlin's concern for the direct impact the Arab spring may have on this Russian region. Indeed, Nalchik was one of the first places in Russia to echo the Arab events. Three days after Medvedev's statement, Larisa Dorogova, a human right activist in Nalchik, expressed a widespread local sentiment: "we look at Egypt as an example [of how to solve regional problems]." Extremism, counter-terrorist operations (CTO), and the deployment of federal military forces complicate the local and regional situation. In July 2011, about 600 young men blocked roads in Kabardino-Balkaria and demanded the cancellation of the CTO, leading to a clash with the military. One of the observers, a member of the Russian State Duma, stated in an interview on the Voice of America that "people protest against the CTO because they do not see any positive results from it."

Circassians Against Gaddafi's Regime in Libya

Today, about 35,000 Circassians live in Libya, most of them in Misrata and Benghazi. Descendents of Mamluks, their ancestors served in the armies of the Arab Caliphs from the 9th century on. In 1382, Circassian Sultan Zahir Barkuk established his own dynasty in Egypt, where it ruled until 1517, constantly receiving new solders from the Caucasus. Circassian Mamluks stayed in power after the Ottomans came to the region. The war

with Napoleon undermined their power, and in 1811 the new Arab elite overthrew the Circassians, many of whom had to flee to other Arab territories.

Libyan Circassians did not support Colonel Muammar Gaddafi when he came to power in 1969. In 1975, a group of military officers under the command of Major Omar Mehesh, a Circassian from Misrata, organized a plot against Colonel Gaddafi. It failed and Mehesh fled to Morocco but was handed back to Gaddafi in 1984 and executed. From then on, the Circassian community in Libya was under pressure from the government. When in 2009 a Circassian delegation from Jordan visited Libya, Gaddafi did not let its members meet with their local compatriots.

Circassians opposed Gaddafi's regime from the very beginning of the Arab revolution in both Misrata and Benghazi. In March 2011, Gaddafi sent an envoy to the Circassian community in Jordan asking the Jordanian Circassians to persuade their Libyan brethren not to fight against him. He received no response.

In April 2011, a group of Circassians from the Caucasus wrote an open letter to Gaddafi expressing their willingness to volunteer in the war on his side. The Russian Circassians did not know the actual situation in Libya and assumed that the Libyan Circassians were on the side of the government because of the widely spread myth that Circassian communities in Arab countries are close to ruling regimes and always support them. The news reached Libyan Circassians, who responded by describing Gaddafi as a "murderer of Circassians." Circassian activists in Russia and the diaspora also spoke out against Gaddafi. When the letter-writers grasped reality, they also changed their minds and never went to Libya. Several Circassian organizations even wrote open letters to Medvedev asking him to help the Libyan Circassians and bring them to their homeland in the North Caucasus.

Repatriation of the diaspora to the homeland is one of the strategic goals of the Circassian national movement. Ninety percent of Circassians fled across the Black Sea after the 19th century Russian-Caucasian war. Contemporary Russian laws do not allow the Circassian diaspora to come back to their homeland. But there was a precedent from the Kosovo War, when Yeltsin's government allowed 174 Kosovar Circassians to move to the Caucasus and settle in a new village, Mafakhabl, built for them. Circassian organizations now refer to this "Kosovo precedent" in their petitions. While the Russian government transported 653 Russian citizens from Libya in February 2011, it neither helped Libyan Circassians nor even responded to the open letters of the Circassian organizations. On many Internet forums, Circassian activists accuse Russia of a double standard thanks to its disregard for Libyan Circassians.

Circassians in the Events in Syria

Today, about 50,000 Circassians live in Syria, most in Damascus, but also in about 20 villages. They are descendants of exiles (*Muhajirs*) who fled to the region from Circassia after the Russian-Caucasian war. The Ottoman government regarded the Circassians as stabilizing elements and settled them in strategic regions. When Syria was a French protectorate at the beginning of the 20th century, the Circassians became the leading element of the special forces and were incorporated into the ruling regime of the

country. After the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, more than 18,000 Circassians were deported from the Golan Heights, settling in Syria and Jordan. Circassians became especially close to the regime of President Bashar Assad, who once appointed a Circassian as minister of internal affairs. At present, there are two Circassians serving in Syria's government.

At the beginning of the disturbances in Syria (January 2011), the Circassian community tried to pursue a policy of neutrality. Later they were involved in events on both sides of the conflict. A majority of Syrian Circassians, especially those living in urban areas, support the existing regime, and some of them even work in military and police departments. Being close to the existing elite, the pro-government Circassians regard it as their duty to be loyal and fear that a change of regime will worsen their position. Few Circassians joined the opposition as part of the Arab revolutionary movement. Circassians who live in rural areas do not want to be involved in the conflict, though opposition forces try to bring them on their side. Opposition activists have even gone to Circassian villages to try to persuade them to join. If they did not join, they were often told, they would be "sent back to the Caucasus" once the opposition came to power. Because of their uncertain situation, many Circassians have considered a short-term move to Turkey where a notable Circassian community resides and where visa restrictions are quite lax. Politically-oriented Syrian citizens, including Circassians, have been lobbying the Turkish state for intervention in Syria. The Circassians in Turkey made an appeal for security, which resulted in Turkey expressing its concerns about the security of the Circassians in the event of an escalation of conflict and releasing a statement that it is ready to shelter Circassian refugees from Syria alongside Kurds, Armenians, and other minorities.

As in the Libyan case, Circassian activists and organizations in Russia wrote letters to Medvedev and to the presidents of Kabardino-Balkaria, Adyghea, and Karachaevo-Cherkessia asking for assistance in organizing the repatriation of Circassians from Syria to the North Caucasus. Authorities replied that they saw no threat to Syria's Circassian community.

Conclusion

The Arab Spring had two primary impacts on the "Circassian world." First, it influenced Circassians in the North Caucasus, who have the same problems as many citizens in Arab states. Second, the Circassian diaspora became actively involved in events in Libya and Syria. Due to the disorder in these states, the Circassian nationalist movement has been making an effort to move their compatriots from these countries to the North Caucasus, thereby following through on one of their strategic goals, the repatriation of Circassians to their homeland.

Instability in the region and deployment of military forces in Nalchik during counter-terrorist operations provoke organized civil protests, a precursor to possible further complications in the region, especially in Kabardino-Balkaria. This is a highly undesirable development for the Kremlin in light of the upcoming presidential elections in 2012. Noting that the Arab events and their impact on the North Caucasus are still

dynamic, there is the possibility of a repetition of the Nalchik uprisings of 1991, 1992-3, and 2005.

More widely, events may affect the "Circassian world." On May 2011, Georgia's parliament recognized as genocide the mass killings and exodus of the Circassians during the Russian-Caucasus war, turning the Circassian question into an international issue. Nonetheless, most Circassians still regard the Circassian question as mainly a Russian problem, and they hope, first and foremost, that Russia will allow Circassians to return to their homeland (the Kosovo example proves that this is not an impossible request). The question of repatriation of Circassians from Libya and Syria is the first challenge for Russia on the Circassian question since Georgia's recognition of the Circassian genocide. If the Russian state fails to take any steps to help the Circassians, it will look like Russia is simply not willing to try and resolve the Circassian question. Russia's silence will be especially notable after Turkey has made practical steps to help the Circassians of Syria.

Significantly, the way Russia handles both historical and contemporary Circassian issues will have a vast impact on the attitude of Circassians toward the 2014 Sochi Olympics. After all, Sochi was the last capital of independent Circassia before Russia conquered it. The 2014 Olympics coincide with the 150th anniversary of the Circassian exodus. Many Circassians oppose holding the Olympics in Sochi, and their numbers only increased after Georgia recognized the Circassian genocide. Such an act by a foreign state emboldened more Russian Circassians to believe that Russia should either recognize the Circassian genocide or not hold the Olympics at all. The resolution of the situation in Kabardino-Balkaria and the repatriation of Circassians from Syria and Libya will help change the negative attitude of the "Circassian world" toward the Sochi Olympics and create a new image of Russia as a modern and progressive state, which is Russia's main goal in hosting the Olympics.