

---

# Transformation in the Arab World and Russia's Interests

---



*Valdai Discussion Club  
Analytical report*

Moscow, June 2012  
[valdaiclub.com](http://valdaiclub.com)

eng

**The authors of the report are:**

---

*Professor Vitaly Naumkin (PhD History)*  
*Amb. Alexander Aksenyonok (PhD Law)*  
*Professor Irina Zvyagelskaya (PhD History)*  
**Vasily Kuznetsov (PhD History)**

*In the report the information from  
speeches made by the Russian and foreign  
participants at the third conference of the  
Middle East section of the Valdai Discussion  
Club that took place in Sochi on February  
16–19 was used*

# Contents

37	0. Introduction
39	1. The Arab Spring and its results
44	2. Political Islam and its prospects
51	3. The role of the external forces
56	4. Regional players and the Arab Spring
60	5. Results for Russia, forecasts and recommendations

# 0. Introduction

The revolutionary changes in the Arab world – massive protest movements, uprisings and civil wars – have transformed Arab societies as well as shifted the regional balance of power, having elevated the region's significance in the eyes of regional and global players, including Russia.

---

**But it is clear that the painful turmoil in the region has not yet ended and that the process of transformation will continue, drawing many countries both inside and outside the region into the process**

---

Russia wants a peaceful and prosperous Middle East, free of wars and foreign interference – a region where all nations are able to choose their own path. But it is clear that the painful turmoil in the region has not yet ended and that the process of transformation will

continue, drawing many countries both inside and outside the region into the process.

Much has been said about the causes and characteristics of the events that have come to be known as the Arab Spring. It swept away seemingly stable regimes and weakened others. The following causes of the mass protests can be identified:

stagnating authoritarian regimes; lack of civil liberties (which had become increasingly clear to the more modernized public in the light of globalization); growing income inequality between the elite and the rest of the people; systemic corruption; poverty; weak social policy; ineffective economic models; the poor development of society's productive forces and dependence on unstable but relatively accessible foreign sources of revenue. This foreign funding was used to pursue statist policies and maintain the inefficient public sector, impeding the growth



of the private sector and aggravating negative effects of the economic reforms conducted in the last few years.

Too little time has passed to make broad generalizations and final conclusions. But we can look at the Arab Spring through the prism of regional and global prospects, resulting in

new observations that could be of practical use to politicians.

\* It was the aim of the third conference of the Middle East section of the Valdai Discussion Club that took place in Sochi on February 16-19, 2012. The current report is not a summary of discussions. However, it embraces many of the ideas and propositions of the conference participants

# 1. The Arab Spring and its results

From a historical perspective, the Arab Spring was not an entirely new and unexpected phenomenon of mass protest in the Arab Middle East.

**The Arab world had already seen protracted and turbulent demonstrations that led to deep changes**

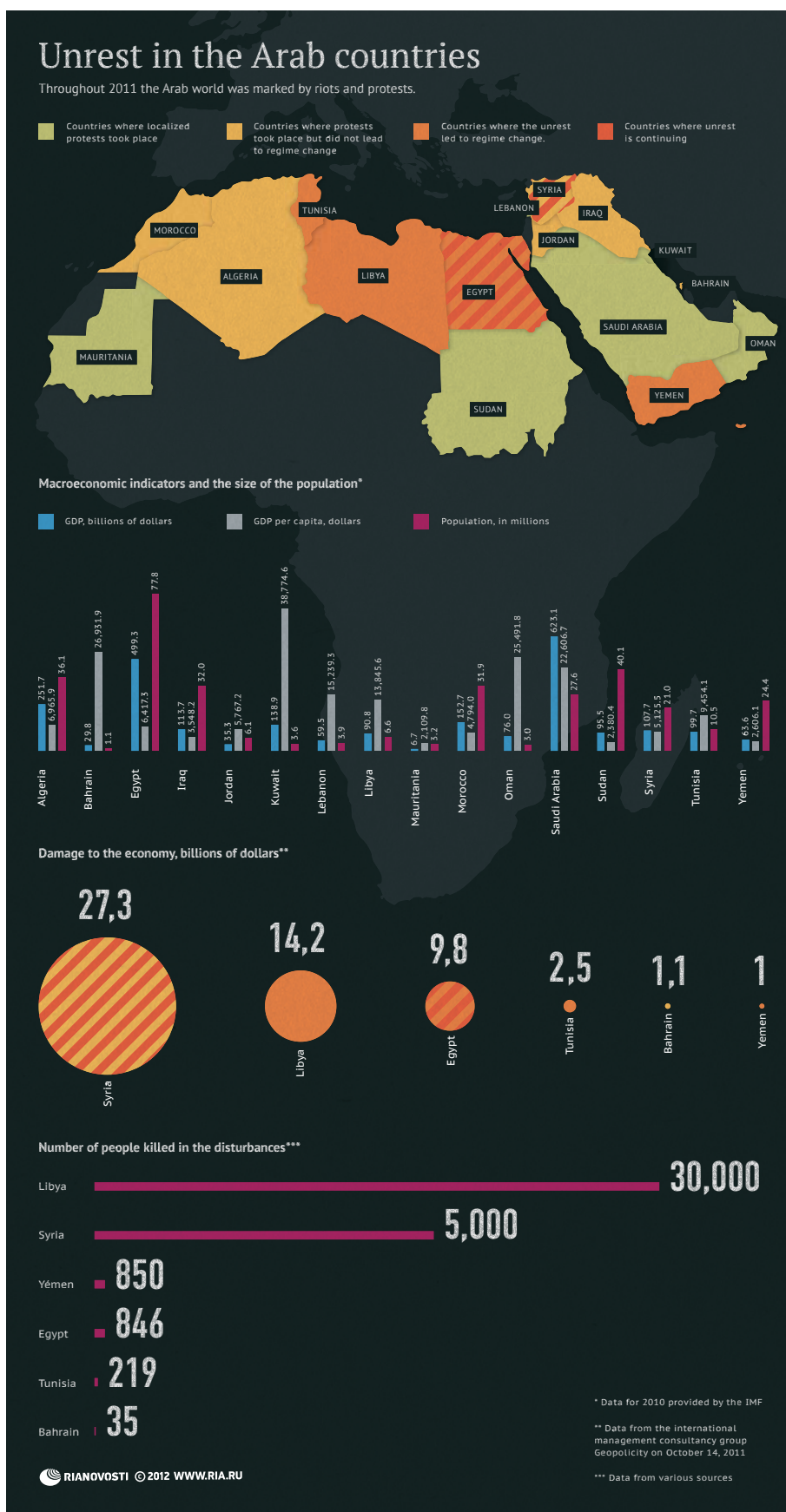
The Arab world had already seen protracted and turbulent demonstrations that led to deep changes, such as the struggle against colonial dependence and rotten monarchic and comprador regimes in the pursuit of the ideals of Arab nationalism or socialism; as well as during domestic conflicts or wars with neighbors (the Iraq-Iran war) and Israel. Some countries staged massive armed revolutions for national liberation (Algeria in 1956–1962 and South Yemen in 1963–1967).

In the 1950s–1960s the region was swept up in a wave of mass movements (this period is sometimes called the Arab Cold War). The Iraq revolution in 1958 was no less surprising than the current upheavals. At the end of the Six-Day War, one of the authors of this report attended a powerful night demonstration of Egyptian youth at Tahrir Square in support of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's continued rule.

There was a new upsurge of demonstrations in the 2000s – protest marches of tribes against the governments of Kuwait and Jordan and workers' strikes in Tunisia, Algeria and, in particular, Egypt.

Even the use of information communications to mobilize protesters is not entirely new in the Middle East. Before the Internet and television, there were mosques. The American scholar Mark Lynch compares the role of Al





Jazeera with that of the Egyptian Sawt al-Arab Radio (Voice of the Arabs) during the Nasser era, which urged people to take to the streets in many Arab cities.

Clearly, none of the causes of the Arab Spring were new. However, for decades the ruling Arab regimes were able to suppress the waves of discontent, even those motivated by major issues of pan-Arab solidarity (such as the defense of national Palestinian rights). On other occasions, mass unrest was more localized.

What changed in 2011? We believe it was the accumulation of grievances – combined with a powerful new generational factor – that proved decisive. It is widely known that dynamic and engaged young people no older than 35 years make up about two thirds of the region's population.

### None of the causes of the Arab Spring were new

The role of the Arab street grew rapidly during the uprisings and mass protests of 2011–2012, and it will likely continue to express its will to both the new and old rulers alike. The Arab world has embraced a new pan-Arabism different from the previous one in terms of values, attitudes and goals; however, this does not mean that a trans-national consensus exists. In the past, pan-Arabism was rooted in nationalist, left-wing and socialist ideas, whereas the new pan-Arabism created by the Arab Spring proceeds from traditionalist ideas of Islamic revival, which are less liberal but still nationalistic. This "street" pan-Arabism is no longer aimed against Israel's colonialism but against authoritarian regimes at home.

The profound changes in the Arab world have transformed both the balance of power in the Middle East and the domestic political development of countries swept by the Arab Spring. Political priorities are undergoing a gradual revision, giving rise to new trends, such as the further weakening of global control over international processes and the emergence of

tensions in regional alliances that had seemed stable before.

From the very start, the Arab Spring looked as a democratic challenge to entrenched presidents and prime ministers, families and clans that monopolized political power and sought to continue their dynasties, renouncing even the appearance of a republican political system, such as elections, competition among political parties, etc. In this context, it could seem like this is a universal Arab phenomenon with an emphasis on democratization. But the difficulties of transition in these countries, the emergence of Islamists as the most organized force, and the growing social rupture between religious and secular life are creating new conditions and raising serious questions. Among them are questions on the limits of democratization in the Arab world, the prospects of the new parties and organizations that emerged

from the revolution and the role that the army will play in the changing political structure.

The socio-political causes of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt can be seen in other countries.

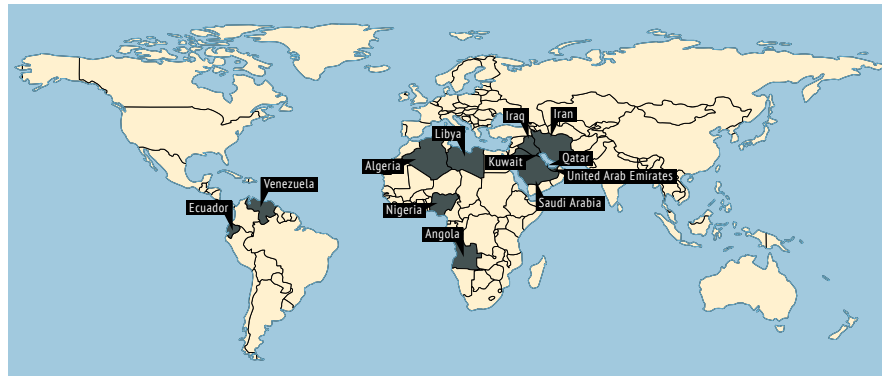
Some governments have already drawn lessons from these events and launched reforms to alleviate public discontent and ensure stability. Syria's failure to rapidly implement reforms has split society into supporters and opponents of the regime, resulting ultimately in armed confrontation. The triad of Ba'ath ideology – unity, freedom and socialism – lost its appeal for a considerable part of the public, while the Ba'ath Party's monopoly on power became an unacceptable anachronism. Moreover, the disproportionate use of force by the regime has added to the situation.

The driving forces, stated goals and results of revolutionary action in the various countries of the Arab Spring are very diverse. It is needed to avoid making any false equivalence between events in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain. Libyan events were based on a tribal uprising, in Bahrain there was an uprising of an oppressed religious group, while in the other countries one region was protesting against the concentration of power and economic resources in the hands of another, be it with or without religious context of a protest.

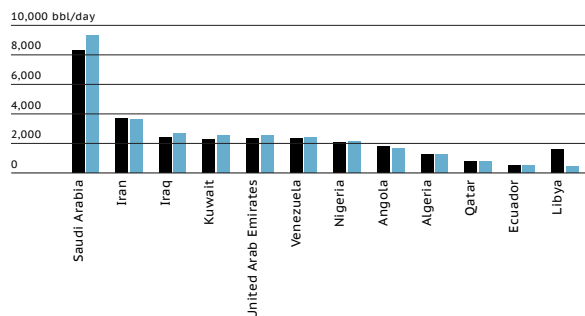


## 2010-2011 OPEC Oil Production

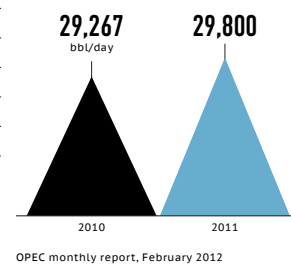
Changes in daily oil production by the cartel members



Daily crude oil production by OPEC members



Daily crude oil production (by all OPEC members)



OPEC monthly report, February 2012

RIANOVOSTI © 2012 WWW.RIA.RU

Considering the diversity of Arab countries and regimes, it would be wrong to measure them according to the same economic and social yardstick. The Arab world is represented both by capital-surplus oil-exporters and capital-poor oil importers. For example in Qatar in 2010 the average GDP per capita amounted

rot does not work everywhere. In theory, the Gaddafi regime could have also shared its huge oil-and-gas revenues with the protesters, but in this case the organized opposition was fighting not for a share of the revenues but for the power that would give its leaders access to all economic and political resources.

### The driving forces, stated goals and results of revolutionary action in the various countries of the Arab Spring are very diverse

to \$88,222 according to the IMF estimate, or \$179,000 (the highest in the world) according to the CIA estimate, whereas in Sudan it was \$2,200. The archaic regimes of the region's oil producing nations have managed to drown potential discontent in dollars. But this car-

Moreover, the social movements in the Arab world were developing against the background of the global economic crisis, which greatly impacted the living standards of the majority, despite the efforts of the authorities to subsidize the poorest of their citizens. Educated jobless young people were in the worst position. Being the most dynamic and modern segment of society, the youth became the main driving force and the main source of the ideology behind the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Rather than the traditional



poorest citizens, who got used to their status and lost their ability to formulate revolutionary goals, it was the educated class that took charge of the political scene in the most advanced Arab countries, leading divergent

social and cultural groups both at home and in the near abroad.

Almost all countries in the region that were affected by upheavals are undergoing a painful transition from traditional, authoritarian political systems to new methods of governance that are not fully elaborated. They are rethinking former secular and religious values to forge a national identity in a changing world.

---

The social movements in the Arab world were developing against the background of the global economic crisis, which greatly impacted living standards of the majority

---

## 2. Political Islam and its prospects

Islamist parties have come to power in many Arab countries as a result of the Arab Spring. They have emerged after being forced underground by the dictators that are now overthrown. Political Islam has become one of the most influential forces in the region. Consider-

---

Having won parliamentary majorities, Islamists are now taking executive power in their hands, and their rule is much more legitimate than that of the previous regimes that were installed by military coups

---

ing the outcomes, the Arab Spring could also be called the Great Islamic Uprising or even the Great Islamist Revolution. Political Islam has never scored such major victories in the Arab world (although there was the Shia Islam revolution in Iran in 1979, and the rise of the Sunni Taliban in Afghanistan). More importantly, the Islamist parties came to power after

free and fair elections that came as a result of the popular protests which the Islamists did not organize and they even were not the main participants. Having won parliamentary majorities, Islamists are now taking executive power in their hands, and their rule is much more legitimate than that of the previous regimes that were installed by military coups.

The image of the Islamist leaders who were persecuted by the widely hated regimes obviously contributed to this decisive political victory. It was only recently when the Islamists were

discussing whether they should play by the rules created by Western democracies, today now even the Salafis have started playing by them. The Salafi party in Egypt, Al-Nour (The Light), received almost a quarter of the vote in the parliamentary elections. Long-standing Islamic movements in Egypt formed political parties in line with the same standards



that are accepted practically throughout the world. The Muslim Brotherhood established the Freedom and Justice Party, while the Salafis formed Al-Nour. This showed that they were willing to accept modern political norms. Islamist parties in Tunisia (Al-Nahda or the Revival), Morocco, Algeria, Jordan and other Arab countries have been using parliamentary methods quite skillfully in their political struggle since long ago. However, the leaders of even such a moderate and enlightened party as Al-Nahda are showing signs of sympathy for establishing a caliphate.

It is still unclear how far the victors are ready to go in implementing the ideals of democracy. Is it possible to reconcile democratic values and norms with the traditionally conservative and near-extremist Islamist ideology? Mus-

representatives of women's organizations in the Arab Spring countries are already complaining about discrimination. Some women feel like they are victims of the change. Christians also worry about their future. The public is alarmed over the attempts by Salafi groups to seize control of universities and instances of physical assault against professors and students who are deemed too liberal, as happened in Tunisia. Many progressive urban residents fear that the few but active Salafis are inspired not by Turkey's progressive Justice and Development Party but by the Saudi-Wahhabi political model or even the ossified Taliban movement.

Finally, the attitude of Islamic forces to secularism, which they have always considered an "ideological enemy," remains the most complicated issue. Relations between the dominant Islamists in the government and the army, which has been a major player in Egypt since 1952, are a pressing problem for the country. Moreover, having accepted the peace treaty with Israel, the Islamists of Egypt will not find it easy to formulate a policy towards Tel Aviv.

---

### The attitude of Islamic forces to secularism, which they have always considered an "ideological enemy," remains the most complicated issue

---

lim Brotherhood General Guide Muhammad Badi said that his movement favors freedom and democracy but in an Islamic interpretation, and that "democracy cannot allow what is banned or ban what is allowed". No wonder many experts believe that the attitude of Islamists to women and religious or national minorities will illustrate the true extent of their commitment to democratic values. Rep-

The historic disagreements between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis, which are stirred up by outside players, also present a serious challenge for the Islamists in general. The Saudis, for one, do not conceal their good will towards the Salafis and may well be considered their patron, whereas Qatar favors the Muslim Brotherhood. The serious social differences between the electoral bases of the





two movements in Egypt play a key role in this issue. In the elections the Salafis were backed by the poorest segment of society, whereas the Muslim Brotherhood relied on the urban bourgeoisie, and their economic platform was more liberal than conservative. Hence, the liberal forces are bound to become a natural ally of moderate Islamists, who, in turn, will lose their image of a strictly religious party. However, a potential coalition between the two Islamic groups should not be ruled out. Some analysts even think that the Muslim Brotherhood (or affiliated groups) is even using Salafis to test public support for their ideas.

---

### Islamist Jihad, including Islamic Maghreb's Al-Qaeda, is the Islamist force that hopes to exploit the victory of moderate Islamic movements to promote its own interests

---

Islamist Jihad, including Islamic Maghreb's Al-Qaeda, is the third Islamist force – an outside player that has gained strength in North Africa. It hopes to exploit the victory of moderate Islamic movements to promote its own interests. Its representatives may try to infiltrate the Islamist political bloc that is shaping in Algeria and is likely to challenge the current regime in the near future.

Libya faces even more challenges than Tunisia and Egypt. During the civil war, the differences between Libya's various regions and tribes turned into openly hostile relations and today the Libyans have to establish a

government apparatus virtually from scratch. Political Islam is strong in Yemen, where the Al-Islah Party hopes to come to power. But any government in Yemen will have to counter Jihadist groups, including Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which is entrenched in some regions of Yemen.

During 2011 and the first four months of 2012, the Islamist organizations have been actively opposing the ruling regime in Syria, even resorting to armed force. Both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis are trying to lead the scattered groups of the Syrian opposition, including the Free Syrian Army, which does not have a unified command structure but rather brings together various independent militia units under its auspices.

There are two contradicting points of view on Islamist political organizations among the international expert community.

Some believe that moderate Islamists in Egypt and Tunisia are similar to Europe's Christian-Democratic parties and will therefore grow increasingly pragmatic and less religious. Their opponents think that these Islamist parties are increasingly hegemonic and dogmatic and that the only transformation they can undergo is through radicalization and renunciation of the Western political model and values. Both views seem extreme, but prove the wide range of opinions on the matter.

The Islamic political organizations of the Middle East are very different from each other. Their character is largely determined by



the role of Islam in each society, which in turn is defined by the following factors:

- Degree of religiosity;
- Accepted religious practices, many of which incorporate local pre-Islamic traditions;
- The character of a society's social, cultural and political development (depending, in part, on whether it has implemented secular projects);
- The share of non-Muslims, etc.

### Islamic political organizations of the Middle East are very different from each other. Their character is largely determined by the role of Islam in each society

Moreover, the synthesis of religious and ethnic factors plays a major role in the evolution of different societies beyond the Muslim world. Some analysts even predict the rise of a global conflict between religious and secular societies. Needless to say, these processes affect Russia as a multi-religious and multi-ethnic state. Religion is interfering with politics in various ways and is being used as a means of mobilization and self-identification.

### The economic damage wrought by the Arab Spring is among the most serious challenges to the victors in Egypt and Tunisia

The economic damage wrought by the Arab Spring is among the most serious challenges to the victors in Egypt and Tunisia. Economic recovery and development are complicated by the too-high expectations of people who are hoping for the rapid improvement of living standards after the overthrow of corrupt dictators. Clearly, financial aid of the Arabian Peninsula states is not enough for them. They will have to appeal to the West, which will

provide aid but on certain terms. It will be success in resolving socio-economic issues that will show how effective the new governments are.

While the Islamists have gained power, this does not mean that they have scored an absolute victory or that the revolutions in these countries have succeeded.

Only an entirely new project of political and socio-economic development can help them achieve these goals, and it is the elaboration of this project that is the key problem today.

They will have to do this while the political systems and, probably, the Islamist parties themselves are still changing. Now the Islamists have to strike a balance between two ideological and political extremes — strict adherence

to scripture without any account of socio-political realities (the Orthodox Salafi position), or the complete renunciation of scripture in favor of reality (the position of secular democrats that could potentially side with moderate Islamists).



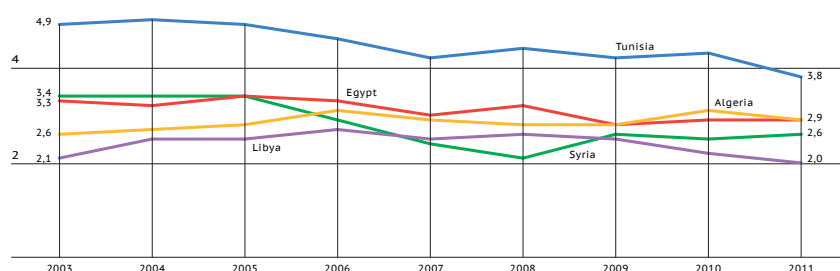
## Corruption Perceptions Index for some Arab countries

The changing indexes and ratings of the Arab Spring countries

### The dynamics of changing national indices

The index reflects the perceived level of corruption in the public sector of the country on a 10-point scale. Highest level of corruption: 0 points. No corruption: 10 points

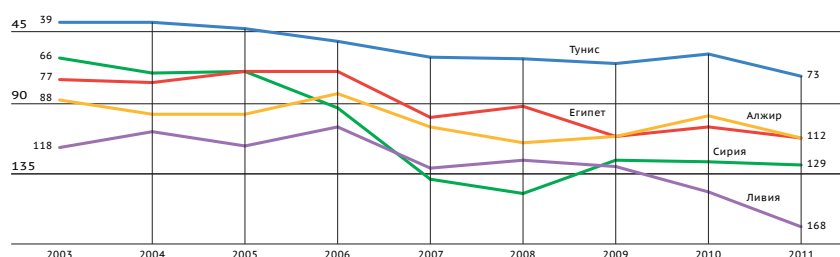
Algeria ● Egypt ● Libya ● Syria ● Tunisia  
Source: Transparency International



### The dynamics of ratings changes per country

The lower the rating, the higher the level of corruption in the country

Algeria ● Egypt ● Libya ● Syria ● Tunisia  
Source: Transparency International



RIANOVOSTI © 2012 WWW.RIA.RU

Many politicians believe the Arab Spring has discredited violence as a routine means of achieving political ends in the majority of Arab countries. The well-known Palestinian figure Ahmed Qurei argues that terrorism as a way

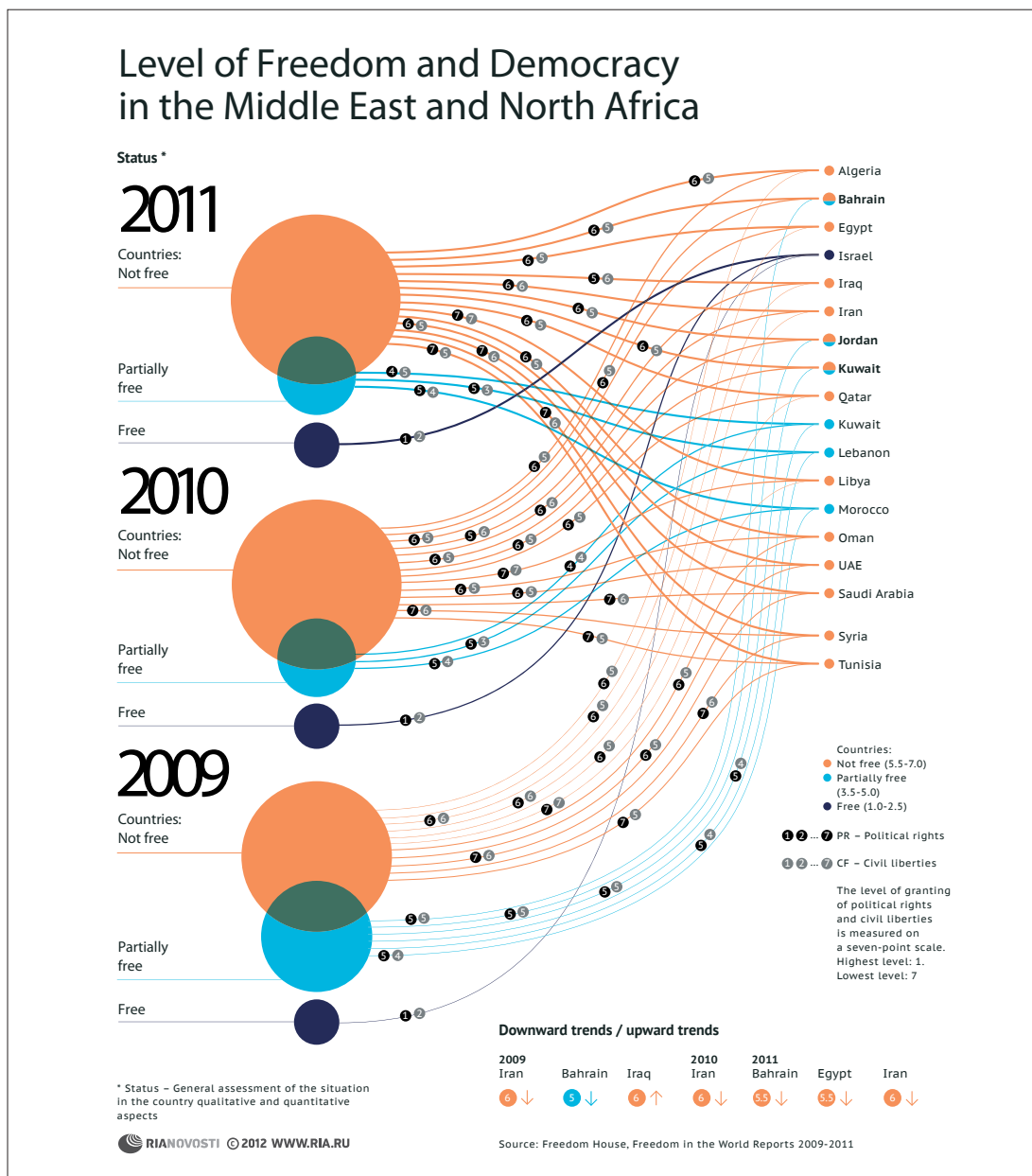
in the region, but it is significant that Qurei speaks about a new "Islamic youth alternative" to the Palestine resistance movement. This new phenomenon is "characterized by moderate and pragmatic attitudes."

The Arab Spring has discredited violence as a routine means of achieving political ends in the majority of Arab countries

to achieve political goals is becoming obsolete in a result of the Arab Spring. His statement looks very dubious given all the spilled blood

the same time, being more legitimate than their predecessors, there are also more attentive to public opinion which is making their

In the wake of the experience of Hamas in the 2000s, the moderate Islamists in Egypt and Tunisia seem to realize that a radical approach leads to severed ties with the West and a lack of funding. Thus the moderates are announcing that they intend to adhere to democratic norms. At the same time, being more legitimate than their predecessors, there are also more attentive to public opinion which is making their



Although there are still serious division between the Islamists and secular forces they seem to be ready to come to terms

position unstable and causing conflicts within their organizations. Their leaders are ready for dialogue with the West, but their members at the grassroots level want to see authentic political regimes.

The first steps of the new authorities of Tunisia and Egypt have shown their readiness for compromise, which bolsters their political positions, and their reluctance to tackle socio-economic problems entirely on their own. Such attitudes, combined with a general lack of experience in government, are creating the conditions for coalitions.

Indicatively, the Arab world is already talking about the Egyptian model that is combining





Islamic values as interpreted by their bearers as well as democratic ideas. Much in Egypt and Tunisia will depend on the nature of their new constitutions. In Egypt much will also depend on whether it becomes a parliamentary republic or the president will continue to play the dominant role.

Although there are still serious divisions between the Islamists and secular forces with respect to values like tolerance, the universal nature of science and knowledge, individual freedom and human rights, they seem to be ready to come to terms on a broad range of issues concerning the political system and democratic scenarios.

---

Now the Islamists have to strike a balance between two ideological and political extremes – strict adherence to scripture without any account of socio-political realities, or the complete renunciation of scripture in favor of reality

---

This openness may become the foundation of the cooperation between the two camps in Tunisia and Egypt. However, it would be premature to expect anything similar in Libya. As for Syria, if the opposition overthrows the regime with foreign support, and Islamists (including Salafis) come to power, it is quite possible that they may massacre their opponents out of revenge.

### 3. The role of the external forces

The rapid changes that have rocked the Arab world pose several questions. The first is what the correlation of external and internal factors in the organization and support of the protest movements was, and the second is in what direction the Arab world will move in the future? Some trends are already becoming apparent.

practically put on par with the “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet space. These assumptions were followed by conclusions about the consolidation of unilateral actions by short-term coalitions or individual nations that have usurped the right to confer legitimacy on particular regimes and use public opinion and protest control technologies.

#### The unexpected democratic bent of the mass movements in the Arab Spring – so unusual for traditional societies – compelled some analysts to emphasize the role of external forces

The unexpected democratic bent of the mass movements in the Arab Spring – so unusual for traditional societies – compelled some analysts to emphasize the role of external forces that might have an interest in seeing systemic changes in the region. The Arab Spring was

Neither Tunisia nor Egypt went down the path of a color revolution. The powerful scope of the protest movements was determined by a whole set of domestic factors, the accumulation of which demanded a transformation of ossified conservative societies and systems. But as events unfolded in the Arab countries, foreign interference began to play a larger role far from stabilizing.

The large-scale military confrontation between the opposition and the regimes in Libya and





Syria focused public attention on the potentials, limits and legitimacy of foreign interference, including its justification by the humanitarian goal of protecting civilians. Thus, a question posed by Moscow posed arises: Will the fundamental norms of international law, such as sovereignty and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries, continue to be valid after Kosovo, Iraq and Libya or are the rules of conduct among states changing de facto?

---

### The events in Libya showed Russia that the military force is moving to the fore and that the West still leans towards interventionism

---

The events in Libya showed Russia that the military force is moving to the fore and that the West still leans towards interventionism. It is important to analyze these events objectively, especially in view of subsequent developments in Syria, which could repeat the Libyan scenario. Actions to establish a no-fly zone in Libya, based on a broad interpretation of the UN Security Council resolution 1973, evolved into a NATO military operation to overthrow the government of a member of the international community. It was an open interference in a domestic conflict on behalf of one of the sides, so as to ensure the victory of the opposition forces. The events that followed Muammar Gaddafi's downfall showed that the victory of the opposition did not help stabilize Libya, much less realize its demo-

cratic slogans. To the contrary, the seizure of power by the new forces resulted in large-scale reprisals, the exacerbation of tribal tensions and the rise of separatism. Libya's territorial integrity was called into question. And, finally, the brutal murder of Gaddafi by a group of rebels with the tacit consent if not the complicity of European troops in no way corresponded to the opposition's declared ideals of democracy, freedom and justice. The overthrow of the regime with the help of out-

side powers led to the proliferation of weapons in neighboring states, increased terrorist activity in the Sahel countries, and provoked a riot among Islamists and Tuareg tribes in Mali.

The decision to enforce a no-fly zone was formally a legitimate action based on a UN Security Council's resolution and precedent, in particular with respect to Iraq. But resolution 1973 contained very loose definitions, allowing for broad interpretation. This is how a legal case for regime change by force with UN participation was made, and the UN, with its considerable peacekeeping experience, was driven into legitimizing something quite different – democracy by force.

The Libyan crisis largely determined Russia's tough stance during the discussion and voting on a resolution on Syria. Some UN members clearly wanted to essentially replicate the Libyan playbook: declare the ruling "dictatorial" regime illegal; recognize the opposition as the nation's legal government; secure a UN mandate to intervene under the



pretext of ending violence perpetrated by the state authorities; and establish military bridgeheads in the form of "buffer zones" or "humanitarian corridors."

The issue of legally depriving governments of their international legitimacy was put on a practical plane. It was enough for some states to find them objectionable. These internationally recognized governments were accused of suppressing civil freedoms, using

The GCC has turned into a military-political bloc directed against Iran, on the one hand, and designed to protect the Gulf monarchies against real and potential domestic threats, on the other. Having overcome the shock of the Arab Spring, the key countries of the bloc – Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – helped to suppress the Shia uprising in Bahrain and enthusiastically supported the Sunni opposition to the regime of Bashar Al-Assad in Syria. The Gulf countries also exerted decisive influence on the Arab League, leading the organization to support regime change in a member country for the first time in history.

### The Libyan crisis largely determined Russia's tough stance during the discussion and voting on a resolution on Syria

disproportionate force against the rebels attempting to overthrow them, and violating human rights or standards of humanitarian law. But was it legal to take such steps against them? All these important and not purely legal questions moved to the fore under the impact of the crises in Libya and Syria.

As a result of the Arab Spring, states in the region have become much more active. In the new conditions of weaker control over global processes, some countries in the Middle East and regional organizations (the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council, GCC) opted for a more independent policy to meet their own interests, which do not always coincide with those of outside actors.

The media is strongly encouraging moves to intervene by manipulating information or even distorting it in the interests of some groups of states. Reports that favor the opposition are being published almost exclusively by the Western electronic media and press, including the Internet and social networks. Unlike in the past, almost all events in the region instantly become public knowledge. Even during this initial stage of the turbulent changes, it is clear that we are witnessing not just the free embrace of democracy by the Arab countries but also attempts by Russia's Western partners to reorder the entire Arab world.

Events in Syria force us to consider all the abovementioned factors in this complicated political landscape, including the Sunni-Shia component. The objective position of Russia and China, with the focus on mediation and





national dialogue, gave the regime a chance to implement reforms, freezing out those who demanded its immediate overthrow under the threat of armed intervention. Moscow's

Regrettably, an external interference in the domestic conflict in Syria had already been taking place: commandos were sent into Syria from abroad; the opposition received help with

training militia units, primarily the Free Syrian Army; and these units were supplied with arms and ammunition. In such conditions, hostilities are bound to spread, with heavy losses and destruction on both sides. The development of situation in Syria took a very negative turn. The Ba'ath Party, which had held a monopoly on

---

The media is strongly encouraging moves to intervene by manipulating information or even distorting it in the interests of some groups of states

---

support for UN Special Envoy Kofi Annan's peace plan showed that it approached the issue without bias, proceeding from the principle of respect for sovereignty and a desire to prevent a domestic armed conflict from escalating into a full regional war with a sectarian dimension. In effect, Russia secured the adoption of a balanced new resolution on Annan's plan that did not demand Al-Assad's resignation.

power in a country where 40% of people are minorities, started losing ground. Exhausted by long-term hostilities and high tensions in cities, the army and security forces failed to restore order quickly enough. As a result, the country has reached a stalemate; the regime is not strong enough to suppress the opposition, which has fairly significant level of foreign support, but without direct foreign intervention the opposition is unable to seize power.





A number of Arab experts did not support the Russian-backed concept of a national dialogue between the Syrian authorities and the opposition, which is possible if the latter disassoci-

the minorities and the large number of government employees, the bulk of which belong to the ruling party. Moreover, the opposition is not united (even territorially), and includes

### What the Syrian opposition will do if it comes to power remains an open question

ates itself from radicals and terrorists. Some of them even believe that there is no more chance for a peaceful resolution. This negative attitude, combined with the demand of Al-Assad's resignation as a precondition for a negotiated settlement, has promoted criticism from many Russian and foreign experts. They cite numerous acts of violence carried out by the opposition, its disunity, continued support for Al-Assad among large segments of society, including minorities, and the absence of a plan of action by the opposition.

What the Syrian opposition will do if it comes to power remains an open question. None of its various groups has explained what it intends to do with all those who served the regime, with

not only moderate secular forces but also radicals from the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafis, and even Al-Qaeda, according to some experts. One of the major problems is that the Syrian opposition does not have a strategy of national reconciliation or a recovery program for their weakened country. Huge funds are needed to pay salaries and support infrastructure. Secular opposition members believe that a transitional government will have to make peace with Israel, even if it comes to negotiating over the Golan Heights, in order to focus on domestic issues. However, nobody can predict what the religious forces will do – they are hoping to come to power if the Al-Assad regime is defeated.

For the time being, the regime is still strong enough to resist the pressure. Its overthrow is fraught with even worse bloodshed and a civil war that could spill over into neighboring countries and turn into an extremely dangerous and protracted Sunni-Shia conflict.

## 4. Regional players and the Arab Spring

How have three of the region's main powers – Turkey, Israel and Iran – fared in the Arab Spring?

Israeli analysts believe that initially the Arab Spring seemed like the latest episode in the ongoing conflict between moderate pro-Western forces and radicals in the Middle East, even though the protesters in Egypt and Tunisia demanded political change and democratization. The downfall of Hosni Mubarak was seen

with Israel. The growing strength of the Arab street, which can be easily pitted against Israel and the United States, may have complicated Israel's relations with both Egypt and Jordan. Israel had apprehensions that after the revolutions the Arab states might eventually follow in Iran's footsteps. The reality turned out to be more ambiguous. Instability caused a vacuum and the inability of governments to control events – be it on the Sinai, in Syrian cities or elsewhere – did not bode well for Israel.

---

While the Arab world may become more democratic and modernized, it could also become much more conservative

---

as a boon to the Islamists, both moderate and radical, and it threatened to destabilize other regimes (such as Jordan) that were within the U.S. sphere of influence and were at peace

The incomplete transformation in the Middle East suggests that Tunisia, for one, may be pulled out of the usual Western environment and pressed into accepting values that are not shared by the majority of its people. Israeli experts believe that modernization has been reversed in many respects. While the Arab world may become more democratic and modernized, it could also become much more conservative. The





Israeli experts maintain that the paternalism that predominates in society in the region is at odds with democracy. Even if the revolutions are successful, they have not yet altered the traditional social relations in the region.

The weakening of the Syrian regime and its potential downfall may prove to be less painful for Israel than has been assumed before. Indeed, the Golan Heights have been calm in recent years. However, the Syrian

The interests of these two players clash in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and other regional hot spots. This long-term trend is determined not only by the political and economic decline of the Arab countries but also by the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and their future pull-out from Afghanistan, which opens additional opportunities for these two states.

Objective factors, such as economic growth and political stabilization, are feeding the foreign policy ambitions of Iran and Turkey. GDP is growing at an average rate of 5% in Iran. Differences among the ruling elite have been contained, while the constitutional redistribution of power is making the regime stronger. Domestic political instability along the lines of the Arab Spring is unlikely because,

### Another important outcome of the Arab Spring is that it has strengthened two non-Arab Mid-Eastern states – Turkey and Iran

regime, which depends on Iran, became a link between Tehran and Hezbollah, and also Hamas. Having found itself in the same boat with “problem regimes,” Hamas has to look for new patrons that will likely have to be more pragmatic and moderate. Moreover, secular elements in the Syrian opposition are already proclaiming their interest in Israeli support so that when they come to power they can settle the conflict and concentrate on building a new state. Indicatively, Israel voted together with the Arab League on Syria at the UN General Assembly session last February for the first time in history.

Another important outcome of the Arab Spring is that it has strengthened two non-Arab Mid-Eastern states – Turkey and Iran.

unlike Arab states, power in Iran is controlled not by individual clans and families but by religious leaders whose power relies on pluralistic, essentially democratic institutions. Tensions do not extend beyond disagreements among the religious leaders themselves, and therefore protest movements are not directed at creating a secular regime.

Turkey's domestic situation has been marked by positive trends. The Justice and Development Party (JDP) easily overcame the crisis by implementing successful reforms. Although the party is still pursuing populist economic policies, it has made them more targeted and substantially enhanced Turkey's appeal for foreign investors.





Today, the Turkish model looks much more acceptable to the Arab world than the Iranian one, but this does not mean that Arab countries will follow the Turkish path. Turkey has fueled unreasonable expectations throughout the region, which have become even higher in light of recent events, but its model is interpreted in various ways. On the one hand, Turkey has a wealth of experience that Arabs lack. A multi-party political system has operated in Turkey for a long time. Moreover, as NATO's southern flank, Turkey has important relations with the European Union, the United States and Israel. It is much more integrated in the world than the Arab states where Islamists have been elected to parliament.

---

### Al-Qaeda has lost despite the rise of the Islamists; its ideology has been rejected

---

On the other hand, Turkey's claims to a special role in the region and the emergence of neo-Ottoman attitudes toward Arab states may repel Arabs from adopting the Turkish model.

Turkey may score a victory in the region but it will not be automatic. It must develop trade and economic ties with Arab states, but much will depend on how weak their economies will be after the revolutions and how quickly their governments will restore local business. The pessimistic scenario includes the possibility of a new dictatorship. In this case, democracy will drown in patriarchalism, while religious and

ethnic minorities will be harassed and flee the Arab countries, with some going to Turkey.

Iran is also trying to earn dividends in the Arab world or, at least, to neutralize any negative developments. The transformation in the Arab world has altered the balance of power in the region. Tehran believes that the new governments are free from their countries' past commitments and, therefore, nothing can prevent Iran from establishing friendly relations with them. It can only lose if Al-Assad steps down in Syria, as the Alawi regime is Iran's only Arab ally. But, all things considered, it appears his regime can hold on to power for a considerable time. Even if it does not, the new leaders will not be able to turn their backs

on Syria's commitments on the Palestinian issue and will probably even adopt a more radical approach. Tehran believes they will have to rely on Iran as the only consistent Palestinian supporter in the region.

This looks logical in theory, but in reality Iran finds itself without partners. Importantly, when the Islamic revolution took place in Iran, few in the world knew about political Islam. Now it is one of the most urgent international topics, albeit in its Sunni incarnation. However, to some extent, this is making Iran's experience more appealing, mostly to Shias.

By and large, all regional players are in a contradictory position. A tactical victory may turn into defeat in the long run and vice versa. The Saudis, for one, have earned



political dividends in the region but may face difficulties because of the competition between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis.

Importantly, Al-Qaeda has lost despite the rise of the Islamists. Its ideology has been rejected. Yet, persistent instability in the Middle East may open up new opportunities.

## 5. Results for Russia, forecasts and recommendations

Hardly anyone would dare to predict even short-term developments in the Arab world and the wider Middle East. This period of instability is likely to drag out. Protests may engulf other countries, but retreats cannot be ruled out, either – for instance, if the army is brought in.

violate human rights. They may return to past methods of rule if they feel that their power is threatened by unjustified expectations and broken promises. The Islamic governments are hardly capable of forming a union based on Caliphate principles as well as secular nationalistic regimes never could unite despite

their declared commitment to the ideals of Arab unity. Most likely, relations between them will be fraught with rivalry and competition. Under the circumstances, a clash between two development models – Turkish and Saudi-Wahhabi – may become increasingly likely as a result of the growing struggle between moderate and Salafi Islamists in the countries where political Islam has carried the day.

---

Moscow proceeded from purely pragmatic considerations rather than ideology. Achieving economic gains for the state and Russian companies, ensuring regional security and developing spiritual ties between both Muslims and Orthodox Christians of Russia and the Middle East

---

The new governments (Islamic or secular) borne of the Arab Spring may try to monopolize power, curtail democratic freedoms and

Russia has always enjoyed close political, economic and spiritual ties with Arab states. Unlike many Western countries, Russia has



never been a colonial power in the Arab world, and it won respect in the region by supporting national liberation movements. In the post-Soviet period, Muslims in Russia developed spiritual ties with Muslims in the Middle East, while the Christian shrines in the region have great significance for all Orthodox believers.

From 1990 to 2000, the Middle East was not among Russia's priorities, as the country was occupied with its own transformation. In the past decade Russia invested all of its political capital and influence in the Arab world in recovering positions that were par-

friendly Arab regimes (Egypt, Algeria, Syria and Iraq) and initiated active contacts with new partners in the Persian Gulf, eventually upgrading them to the strategic level.

The Russian and U.S. approaches to the practical aspects of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process began to align, leading to constructive cooperation within the framework of the Middle East Quartet, with Washington recognized as the leading mediator.

Russian diplomats acted in the same vein during the Libyan crisis. Russian decision to abstain during the vote for UN Security Council resolution 1973 showed that it was more important for Moscow to support global policy and preserve the UN's reputation and role in the world than to pursue benefits from bilateral cooperation. However, the abuse of the UN mandate by the West as a cover-up to achieve principally different goals and Russia's subsequent decision to

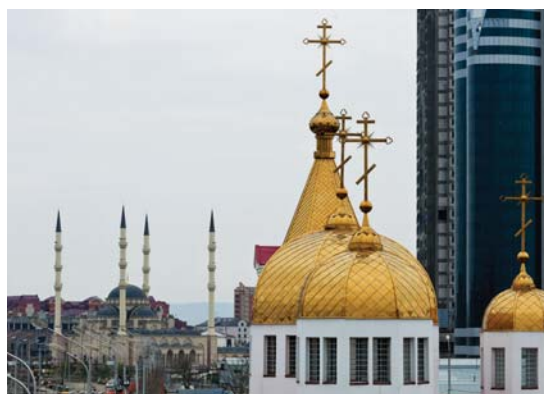
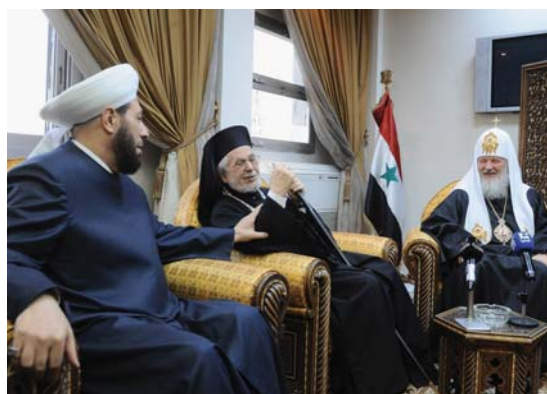
**Russia has taken a balanced approach toward the Syrian crisis despite unprecedented pressure from the West and politically motivated Arab states. This approach has made it a key player to be reckoned with**

tially lost. This time Moscow proceeded from purely pragmatic considerations rather than ideology. Its Middle East policy was aimed at achieving economic gains for the state and Russian companies, ensuring regional security and developing spiritual ties between both Muslims and Orthodox Christians of Russia and the Middle East.

The very paradigm of Russian-Arab relations has changed. They have become more equal and are developing in many directions. Russia continued to intensify ties with traditionally

block attempts realize the same scenario in Syria became serious irritants in relations between Moscow and its leading Western partners and a group of Arab states that put intervention on the international agenda. At the same time, Russia prevented backsliding toward confrontation and eventually made its motives heard by the other members of the world community.

The current difficulties are likely to pass. The experience of Iraq, with which Russia is gradually restoring political and economic relations,





shows that it is possible to make up for missed opportunities with time. Russia has taken a balanced approach toward the Syrian crisis despite unprecedented pressure from the West and such politically motivated Arab states as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This approach has made it a key player to be reckoned with. At the same time, Russia has a political contingency plan in the event of Al-Assad's downfall, although we would prefer to see power sharing via peaceful reforms. The anti-Assad coalition is also experiencing considerable difficulties because of the conflicting interests of Western states and the masterminds of international interference, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which are pursuing their narrow religious and political interests in the struggle for regional leadership and survival in the wave of the Arab Spring.

---

**In the global aspect, it is important to prevent relations with the West from being overloaded with complications over the Arab Spring**

---

Under the given circumstances it is important for Russia to stick to its approach with due regard for the de facto internationalization of domestic conflicts in the countries affected by the Arab Spring. This issue has two aspects – a global one that deals with the changing conception of international relations, and a regional one.

In the global aspect, it is important to prevent relations with the West from being overloaded

with complications over the Arab Spring. After all, there was no serious discrepancy in attitudes to democratic change before the Libyan crisis, with the exception of attempts to draw inappropriate analogies with the color revolutions in the post-Soviet space. The variety of global issues that the Arab Spring has revealed (the use of charter standards of international conduct in the event of domestic conflicts) may well be reflected in the agenda of multilateral debates in the United Nations. External interference is more of a threat to small states than to Russia.

For all the disagreements with the West, we also have points of contact that we should use both in practical diplomacy and information policy: integration of the growing number of Muslims into Europe; efforts to combat the persistent threat of international terrorism;

cooperation on the Palestinian-Israeli peace process and the protection of Christians in the Holy Land; the joint search for adequate political and diplomatic approaches to the rise of the Islamists on the Arab political scene.

For all of their emphatically negative attitudes, Russia's Arab partners remain pragmatic when it comes to opportunities for economic, financial or political gain. Therefore, Russia will be able to make up in the near future for the current decline in relations with some Arab states over the conflicts in Libya and Syria. The main thing is for Russia and its business community to have enough foreign economic interests, export and investment resources to attract the countries of this region. This is now the most





important task, considering the similarities between Russia and this group of Arab states. Their economies rely on raw materials and they are actively pursuing diversification.

### Russia will be able to make up in the near future for the current decline in relations with some Arab states over the conflicts in Libya and Syria

The Arab-Israeli peace process remains relevant in the light of new challenges and risks and the rise of tensions in some areas. It is important to note that the Palestinian issue will remain crucial for Arab identity regardless of any geopolitical changes in the Middle East. Iran is likely to formulate a strategy rooted in anti-Israeli sentiment in a bid to neutralize its losses from the abrupt changes in the Arab world. All kinds of extremist Islamic forces will try to consolidate their position in the region during the hiatus in the Quartet's mediation efforts caused by the presidential election campaign in the United States and the possibility of a change of the U.S. administration.

An important task for Russia is to build relations with Islamist organizations that have come to power in Arab countries, or are poised to do so. On the one hand, Russia should

pursue cooperation with the new Arab rulers proceeding from its positive experience of contacts with Islamist organizations and governments in the past. This task will be facilitated by Russia's less euphoric assessments of democratic changes on a Muslim-Arab foundation. These assessments

rely on the need to consider national historical traditions and religious features rather than give priority to liberal values.

On the other hand, Russia should be vigilant about stronger Islamists, particularly Salafis, attempting to spread their influence to Russia's neighbors and allies in Central Asia and its Muslim regions. If Moscow succeeds in encouraging Islamists toward moderate attitudes and modernization – either by developing mutually beneficial ties with them or helping them overcome economic difficulties – Russia will find it easier to cope with the problems in its own Muslim regions.