

A REPORT OF THE CSIS  
RUSSIA AND EURASIA  
PROGRAM

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# WHAT DOES THE ARAB SPRING MEAN FOR RUSSIA, CENTRAL ASIA, AND THE CAUCASUS?

## Introduction

The demonstrations that were sparked by Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in protest of police corruption in Tunisia in December 2010 spread a contagion of revolutions across North Africa and the Middle East. The revolutionary spirit that spread to the neighboring countries of Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, Morocco, and Jordan, has raised the question of a possible spillover in other regions of the world. The long-term instability in Eurasia as a whole, in Central Asia and the Caucasus in particular, has caused serious concerns about the possibility of rising radical Islamic threats in these regions, as well as the possibility of similar revolutions against the existing regimes. Perceptions and responses to these events in Russia and the United States also bear impact on the "reset" policy between the two nations.

While the turbulent Arab world has stirred a debate about possible similar disruptions in Central Asia and the Caucasus, there are a number of key differences between the regions, such as popular media, cultural backdrops, and a different historical context that make these events unlikely to be replicated. Instability in countries like Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, and Georgia has previously presented similar threats to their neighboring countries, but the domestic governments took preventive measures to suppress them. Russia, having faced threats from the regions before, has also managed to secure itself from a domino effect of uprisings by employing coercion or diplomatic tactics. These lessons would perhaps enable the regimes to suppress an uprising inspired by the Arab Spring, though the disruptions would in no way be trivial. From the point of view of the Arab regimes most affected by the revolutionary uprisings, Central Asia and the Caucasus are not strategically important regions. Their interests are limited to concerns with U.S. foreign policy in the region, Israel's sphere of influence, and regional economic cooperation around the Caspian Sea. There is also the lack of a unified North African and Middle Eastern agenda in the region, which weakens the case for a possible direct threat.

The combination of these factors reduces the possibility of an immediate security threat in Central Asia and the Caucasus emanating from revolutions in the Middle East. However, the possibility of disruptions in the future should not be discounted. Amid the international response to the Arab Spring, the United States and Russia may also be altering their relationships and affecting the reset policy due to their divergent views on the Middle East. The United States is trying to play a strategic

role in the region with respect to its Middle Eastern allies, uncertainty in oil prices, and the role of NATO in the process of stabilization. Russia on the other hand, has been strongly opposed to NATO operations and UN sanctions. The United States and Russia were, however, more aligned on their perceptions of new regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and not too different in their approach toward Bahrain and Yemen. Despite some points of agreement, the two nations seem divided in their perceptions of the future of the new regimes in the Middle East.

## How and Why the Arab Spring Happened

Jon Alterman, director of the Middle East Program at CSIS, made the opening remarks for the panel on the Arab spring and alluded to the revolutions as having been completely unpredictable since the region was generally “stable” for around 40 years. It was even more surprising since the countries were not experiencing particularly acute economic crises. For example, he pointed out that Egypt’s GDP growth was more than 5 percent in the year prior to Hosni Mubarak’s overthrow.

Looking at the events across the Middle East, we can see that the media, in particular the independent broadcaster Al Jazeera, played a major role in the unfolding of the crisis. Alterman believes that the “story-telling” power of the media escalated the support for the protests that initially started off with relatively little support from the activities of Facebook and Twitter. The presence of a regional television such as Al Jazeera was crucial in gathering momentum for the revolution, and even though Al Jazeera is wholly owned by the government of Qatar, in country after country it played a role similar to that played by independent media in authoritarian countries. Having a common regional language meant that changes in one country had an immediate impact on its neighbors. Once the media had triggered the beginning of the protests, the events spread from Egypt to other neighboring countries. Alterman predicted that despite the momentum in the events, it might take a decade of change before things start taking definitive shape in the Middle East.

Response to the revolution that started in Egypt is also changing relationships in the region. For instance, the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia is changing because of the Saudi perception of U.S. inability to ensure stability in the region.

Finally, Alterman commented that it is difficult to compare the Arab world to the Soviet Union since the revolutions in the two regions were set against the backdrop of different contexts. Unlike the states of the USSR, Middle Eastern countries, like Egypt, were following the Washington consensus and in general the region was not plunged in economic turmoil. The nature of media in the two instances is also very different—in the case of Middle East, media was what really amplified the movement’s effects.

Andranik Migranyan, director of the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation, observed that although the countries across the Middle East had their own logic of revolution, these movements were characterized by a conflict within the elite group. Concurring with Alterman, he noted that countries like Libya and Egypt were both doing economically well, but the resulting revolution in the two countries was a consequence of the dangerous transition of power that led to the present

situation: in Egypt, the conflict was between the army and Mubarak; in Libya, the conflict was at the tribal level with the transition of power; in Bahrain and Syria the clash is between the Shi'a and Sunni groups; in Tunisia, the revolution was a result of the young generation's demand for "dignity" in the society.

Migranyan speculated that these revolutions would conclude in setting up new authoritarian regimes and a situation that would create impediments for development of society.

Turning to the question of these revolutions having an impact on the Russian society, Migranyan first showed some similarities in Arab and Russian societies but then presented an argument to dismiss the probability of an Arab Spring in Russia. Similar to the Arab countries that faced revolutions, widespread corruption, lack of a competitive political sphere, and polarization between rich and poor mark the nature of Russian society. However, the reason why, despite these striking similarities, Russia will not face a threat of revolution is because of a unified elite. We can see that this held true when Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's Popular Front gathered support from several political parties for a coalition. President Dmitry Medvedev has also shown his support for Putin as a loyal ally. Second, Russia lacks excessive numbers of well-educated youth that suffer from unemployment or a lack of place in society. Third, Russia has already demonstrated its resilience in times of threat from disruptions in neighboring countries.

Despite the unrest in recent years in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan, Russia has managed to keep itself shielded from the possibility of spillover of unrest. Learning from past experiences, Putin has demonstrated tact in initiating a coalition that creates a sense of inclusion in society. The unanimity in Russian policy circles can also be seen in the case of recent events—for instance, policymakers within Russia have collectively opposed UN sanctions on Libya.

While neither of the speakers alluded to the role of Islam in their opening statements, Alterman argued that Islam did not have a significant role to play in the protests. The Muslim Brotherhood also did not engage in the events and consciously limited their activities. He did, however, speculate that Islam could have a larger role to play in the long term although this was not an Islamic revolution. Migranyan added that, in his view, the Muslim Brotherhood was being "sophisticated and smart" in calculating the right time to enter the political arena if and when the army would lose its power.

With respect to the effect of these revolutions on Iran, Alterman said that a drop in oil prices, leadership struggles, and subsidies have caused the Iranians to enter a period of greater instability. Iranians have seen revolutions in their own land, but they are watching the events in the Arab world very carefully. While Iranian politics are harder to predict, there might be a non-trivial development in the future due to the split in the elite class.

## Implications of the Arab Spring for Central Asia

Aleksey Malashenko, scholar-in-residence at the Carnegie Moscow Center, believes that events similar to the Arab Spring will not happen in Central Asia. On the surface, the Central Asian

“regimes” could be compared to the ones that existed or still exist in the Middle East and North Africa. However, the peoples of Central Asia achieved a habit of living in their current conditions, thus not yearning for fundamental changes in their system. In all Central Asian republics, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, the governments established a political routine, and even in Kyrgyzstan the political leaders have spoken pessimistically about the future. Furthermore, the main difference between the Arab world and Central Asia is that the Arab regimes did experience democracy and fair elections in the past, while the Central Asian republics established their authoritarian regimes based on their Soviet heritage. Other reasons why the Arab Spring will not affect Central Asia significantly is the lack of unity and organization among Central Asian youth; television programs similar to Al Jazeera are not widespread among the masses; and unemployment rates, which are comparable to the Arab world, are diluted due to work immigration to Russia and Kazakhstan. On the contrary, Malashenko argues that the Arab Spring helped Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan further consolidate and solidify power around their presidents. Similar to the Civil War in Tajikistan in 1990s, the Arab Spring is being used by these two states to point to turmoil and legitimize their regimes as safe and stable.

Malashenko warns that Central Asia is plagued by ethnic nationalism, which is a large, looming, predictable danger that gains momentum with each minor protest in every republic. He also noted that in the coming years Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan could experience events similar to revolutions due to the transition of power from current aging presidents. Malashenko predicts that the disunity among the elites and clans, some of which use Islam as a tool to gain power and rally the masses, will hinder a calm transition of power. In Kazakhstan, says Malashenko, the political landscape lacks bright personalities who can continue Nazarbayev’s presidency. However, all these events will follow their own logic, independent of what happened in the Middle East and North Africa.

Zhao Huasheng, visiting fellow with the Russia and Eurasia Program at CSIS, also argued that events witnessed during the Arab Spring are unlikely to happen in Central Asia. However, Central Asia is a highly unpredictable region, thus the Arab Spring has a stimulating effect on the region. Yet, the Arab Spring model is unsuitable for Central Asia due to its own political culture and conditions. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union up until 2005, all Central Asian republics, except for Tajikistan with its civil war, have enjoyed relatively stable conditions. However, in 2005, the region began to suffer from frequent instable situations, such as the Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, Andijan riots in Uzbekistan in 2005, and the upheaval and ethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan in 2010. It seems the Central Asian region is entering into a more unstable period. Combinations of factors have served as causes of these events, including social, political, and ethnic problems.

Overall, the Central Asian regimes follow their own logic, the core of which is focused on maintaining political power. Even prior to the Arab Spring, the Color Revolutions triggered the Central Asian republics to adopt preventive measures by intensifying the control of political abilities, including tightening control over opposition, strengthening control over media, and restricting the expansion of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The power of the Internet is considered especially important for triggering unexpected events and initiating organized activities. Therefore, cyber security was proclaimed as the fifth most dangerous security threat to the region,

following separatism, terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking. Meanwhile, the governments of these republics also promised certain political reforms: commitment to fight corruption to alleviate social tensions and improved relations with the West. There are also external factors that make revolutions unlikely in Central Asia: Western powers have strategic interests in the region vis-à-vis Afghanistan; China and Russia would never allow a military UN resolution to pass in case Central Asia falls into political conflict. The great powers and international society would more likely jointly manage the crisis and prevent it from growing into regional chaos, as demonstrated in the Osh event of 2010. Thus, the Arab Spring model does not apply to Central Asia.

Similar to Malashenko, Zhao agrees that instability is a long-term threat for Central Asia but that it will not necessarily turn into revolutions, rather disturbances and riots. The instability is based on many factors: domestic conflicts, ethnic clashes, disputes over territories and water resources, regime change, and regional uncertainty stemming from Afghanistan after 2014. Zhao concluded that the path of evolution is better than revolution for Central Asia; that government is better than anarchy. Revolution is more often than not accompanied by huge humanitarian losses and social damage; and its outcome so often is unexpected and unpredictable. Anarchy almost inevitably leads to chaos and conflicts. The ethnic clash of Osh occurred under an anarchic situation. Anarchy could also result in the rise of extreme religious forces, which would be especially dangerous for the region.

## Implications of the Arab Spring for the “Big Caucasus”

In his remarks, Sergey Markedonov, visiting fellow with the Russia and Eurasia Program at CSIS, asserted that prerevolutionary conditions in the Middle East were very different from conditions in the Caucasus, and therefore turmoil was highly unlikely to occur in the Caucasus. However, the two factors that could affect the South and North Caucasus the most are chaos in the Middle East and radical Islamists gaining power in the Middle East, which would bolster the cause of Islamic radicals in the Caucasus region. Markedonov pointed out two reasons for the increasing interest in the Middle East. First, countries like Russia, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan are watchful of what the Arab scenario can do within their own territories. This was evidenced by President Dmitry Medvedev expressing concerns during the session of the Russian National Anti-Terrorism Committee. Second, there is great concern about the possibility of geopolitical changes in the Middle East and its implications for the rest of the world.

It is also important to note what the Middle Eastern interests are in the Caucasus. Markedonov highlighted that the role of Israel in the region is an area of concern, such as Israeli involvement during the war in Georgia. With regard to conflicts in the North Caucasus, such as Chechnya, countries like Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Libya have favored Russia. On the other hand, countries such as United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have been more sympathetic with the peoples of the North Caucasus. In this way, Markedonov concluded that there is no unified approach of the Middle East toward the Caucasus. The Middle East is engaged only in broader

issues in the area, such as U.S. policies in the region, bilateral relationships of Middle Eastern countries with Russia, and conflict with Israel. There is also an economic interest in the Caucasus to create a zone of transportation and economic engagement in the Caspian Sea region.

Markedonov also analyzed the role of other countries in the region. He pointed out that external players like Iran are increasingly wary of the involvement of nonregional players like Britain, China, and Israel in the region. Israel-Azerbaijan relations have become problematic in Iran's eyes, and Islamic tendencies are intensifying in the region. Azerbaijan remains the most vulnerable to a threat from rising radical Islamism. Thus, officially Baku tries to play on the "Islamist field." An example of this is increasing Azerbaijan-Palestine diplomatic contacts; Allahshukur Pashazadeh, official leader of Azeri Muslims, even called for jihad against Armenia a few years ago. Markedonov believes that Armenia and Georgia should also be cautious because of the negative effects of radicalism in Azerbaijan and the unfreezing of the "foreign conflict" in Nagorno-Karabakh.

In conclusion, Markedonov pointed out that there is still a negative attitude of Egyptian Islamists toward Russia, which may impact the North Caucasus activists, especially if they come to power. This could cause a stir in the future, although the recent events in the Middle East will probably have little effect in the Caucasus.

Sufian Zhemukhov, visiting fellow at the George Washington University, began by describing the role of change in the legitimacy of political leaders. Toward the collapse of the Soviet Union, Soviet leaders had legitimacy, but the populace was tired of them. Modern Russian politicians learned the lessons from their Soviet predecessors, thus implementing political reforms and avoiding long-term presidential terms (e.g., Medvedev replacing Putin in 2008).

Zhemukhov also concurred with Markedonov that Arab revolutions are not as important to Russia as the Color Revolutions. The fact that Russia is not threatened by the events in the Middle East is reflected in the Russian mass media's intensive coverage of the Arab Spring. This might be a result of changes in Russia's perceptions of the Arab governments—that is, changing their stances from pro-American to pre-European.

Russia has learned from the Color Revolutions and knows how to protect its own borders. While the international community is engaged in the conflict, Russia has decided to stay away from direct military operations, as evidenced by its opposition to NATO operations.

According to Zhemukhov, Russia has managed to develop its own rhetoric of the revolution. Threatening events in the past, like Kosovo's separatism, showed that Russia has a unique way of shaping its reaction to revolutionary events. Zhemukhov pointed out that Russia used the case of Kosovo to work in her favor when recognizing the independence of Abkhazia.

Zhemukhov said that if one region were to react with upheaval it would be the Caucasus. There are three effects of the Arab Spring on the Caucasus: the ideological impact, the social impact through Chechen and Circassian diasporas, and the way the mass media covers the involvement of those diasporas in the revolutions. For example there may be some social impact due to the involvement

of the Circassian minority communities in the Middle East, especially in Syria and Jordan, and the possibility of those revolutionary sentiments being brought back home.

An upheaval in the Caucasus would be a challenge to the West, as well as Russia, and would bring up questions of which groups should control which borders and result in a difficult and potentially violent situation. However, if an Arab Spring were to happen in the Caucasus, it would be quickly resolved by making systematic changes in the local governments from the national level. Similar to Markedonov, Zhemukhov concludes that an increase in turbulence in the Caucasus is the only likely result of the Arab Spring.

## U.S.-Russia Relations and the Arab Spring

Thomas Graham, senior director at Kissinger Associates, believes that the Arab Spring has further irritated U.S.-Russia relations. Those relations have been losing significant steam in 2011, since the “reset” policy was implemented two and a half years ago. The United States and Russia looked at the events unfolding in the Arab world with a combination of hope and anxiety. However, where the United States felt mostly hope, Russia felt mostly anxiety, and vice versa. The effect of the Arab Spring on oil prices and how the two states reacted to the changes clearly reflects this difference. The spike in oil prices created concerns in the United States about the economic recovery, while in Russia, the change in oil prices had a positive impact on Russian GDP figures. Russians were optimistic about the increased revenue to allow them to spend more on their social programs, which are particularly important as Russia moves into an electoral cycle at the end of this year.

The domestic reactions in the United States and Russia also reflect a breach between the two countries. The United States has urged political reforms in the Arab world for decades and regards the dramatic events as movements stemming from legitimate grievances with authoritarian regimes. Initially, the United States was concerned with the roles that Islamists would play in the revolutions; however, it is less of a concern in the immediate future. Although the situation is much more complicated on the ground, U.S. media and government rhetoric has described the movements as “democratic openings,” and the United States sees it as its role to support these democratic waves. Meanwhile, in Russia, the reaction did not focus so much on the content of the events but rather on the fact that large-scale, spontaneous, leaderless demonstrations driven by mass media are dangerous and that they could have implications for the situation within Russia itself. Especially in contrast to the Color Revolutions, which were supported by the West, the Arab uprisings forced the Russian authorities to question whether spontaneous events could happen in Russia and how to best avoid such a scenario.

The different strategic interests of the United States and Russia in the Arab world further add to the strained relations between the two countries. The United States is anxious about maintaining its position in the Middle East: the problem of maintaining a relationship with “allies” that have been undermined by their own people; the uncertainty of Palestine-Israel relations; oil prices; and NATO’s role in the region. On the other hand, Russia has not been as clear about its strategic interests in the Middle East. After initially abstaining from a UN Security Council vote, which led

to the NATO combat operations in Libya, Russia took a robust stance on the United States and NATO using military force in the region. With the situation worsening in Syria, one of the pillars of Russian strategy in the region is absolute opposition to the use of military force and imposition of sanctions against the regime. The lack of overlapping U.S. and Russian strategic interests in the Middle East is contributing to the “reset” running out of steam.

The future of cooperation between the United States and Russia is unclear: the discussions on missile defense are at a standstill, and a parallel-coordinated system is all the two countries may achieve, which will disappoint Russia; WTO negotiations, which were progressing steadily six months ago, are now hindered by prickly issues that are slowing down the process. The differences over the Arab Spring only pile on to these issues. It is a fact that the United States and Russia, even under the reset policy, have not spent quality time discussing conditions in the Middle East over the past couple of years—their respective interests and grounds for cooperation. U.S. policy toward the region over the past 20 years was to eliminate any direct and active Russian involvement in order to achieve a productive peace process in the Middle East. In the future, the challenge for both countries will be attempting to limit the damage of their differences and to establish a cooperative relationship between Washington and Moscow.

Mark N. Katz, professor of government and politics at George Mason University, argues that the U.S. and Russian stances on the Arab Spring are not so different. Furthermore, where there have been differences, those differences have been mitigated with time, and in fact the two countries do not really oppose each other. The Arab Spring came as a surprise for both Russia and the United States, and it is important to analyze how the Russians have reacted to different situations arising in North Africa and the Middle East and how different or similar those were to U.S. reactions to the same events.

In regard to the events in Tunisia and Egypt, the Russian government’s reactions were aligned with the West’s in accepting political change brought about by the uprisings. For example, President Medvedev, in his speech in Davos, noted that what happened in Tunisia should serve as a lesson to any government and, more importantly, that the authorities need to develop along with their societies. Upon Mubarak’s downfall in Egypt, the Russian government reacted circumspectly; President Medvedev, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich all emphasized the need for a peaceful resolution to the situation in Cairo. Although more supportive of Mubarak before his downfall, Moscow later emphasized the importance of a strong, democratic Egypt, and Medvedev showed his willingness to work with Egypt’s new government.

In the case of Libya, Russia reacted differently than the United States. While the West discussed military intervention against Muammar el-Qaddafi, Medvedev warned of the rise of fanatics in the Middle East, of wars for decades, and of extremism in the region. He even suggested that the West was fomenting the uprisings and that its ultimate goal was to bring political change to Russia. Prime Minister Putin warned that Western attempts to impose democracy could lead to a rise of Islamists and that their rise in North Africa could negatively affect other regions, such as Russia’s

North Caucasus. However, when the Arab League called for the imposition of a no-fly zone over Libya to protect civilians from Qaddafi's forces, Russia and China abstained from voting on UN Security Council Resolution 1973. This Russian move showed that despite its extreme discomfort with U.S.-led military interventions aimed at promoting democracy, Moscow valued maintaining good relations with the United States and the West even more. Almost immediately, however, Russia and the Arab League began to criticize how the United States and NATO were conducting the intervention in Libya.

Katz also described the bizarre episode between Putin and Medvedev, when first Putin criticized Western military action against Libya as a "crusade," and Medvedev followed two hours later with a statement saying that it was unacceptable to use words like "crusade" to describe the U.S./NATO action and indicated that he did not oppose the UN Security Council Resolution against Libya. While some observers saw this as a significant breach between Putin and Medvedev, others (especially Russian observers) saw it as a contrived disagreement with Putin's statement aimed at pleasing domestic audiences, with Medvedev's aimed at currying favor with the West. Since then, the Russian position toward Libya has moved closer to that of the West. At the G-8 Summit in Deauville, Medvedev declared that Qaddafi should leave and offered Russian mediation in order to bring about this change. In early June, Medvedev sent Mikhail Margelov, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Federation Council, as his personal representative to Libya for talks not just with the Qaddafi government but also with the rebels. So after initially resisting, then not opposing Western intervention in Libya, Moscow seems to have aligned itself with the Western approach toward Libya. This may have resulted from a judgment made in Moscow that Qaddafi may not last, and that when he is finally overthrown, the Russians need to have good relations with whomever comes into power.

When the Arab Spring reached the Persian Gulf, Russia kept a low profile in reacting to the events in Bahrain and Yemen. In late March, the Russian foreign minister's spokesman declared that the events in Bahrain were an internal matter and that they should be solved through dialogue. However, Russia did not express opposition to the forceful suppression of the uprising. There was no significant difference in the way Russia and the West reacted to the events in Bahrain and Yemen; neither wanted to see the fall of an Arabian Peninsula government that might lead to instability in neighboring Saudi Arabia and the other monarchies of the oil-rich Persian Gulf.

Russia and the West, though, have been increasingly at odds over Syria's uprising. The violent suppression of opposition forces in Syria has led to a growing criticism of Damascus and calls for sanctions against it by the West. Moscow, by contrast, sees Assad as an ally. In late May, Medvedev declared that Moscow will not support the imposition of sanctions against Syria by the UN Security Council. In June, Lavrov bluntly warned that the international community should not assist "provocations aimed at securing a regime change" and that these provocations need to be suppressed. Yet despite their differences, Katz believes that Russia's refusal to allow passage of a UN Security Council resolution authorizing sanctions against Syria is very convenient for Washington, which does not really want to intervene there as it has in Libya.

One policy that the United States and Russia have in common is that both are striving to establish good relations with whatever power will replace the fallen and falling Arab leaders. However, Russia is nervous about Western intervention in the revolutions in the Middle East, especially since Russia is less optimistic than the West that democratic values will prevail in this region. Moscow's biggest concern is that the revolutions will lead to the radicalization of the region, which could spread to the Muslim republics of Russia and the former Soviet Union. The United States and the West also fear the rise of Islamic radical regimes, but when an uprising reaches a critical mass, there is very little that external forces can do. When this occurs, all that the United States, the West, and Russia can do is try to establish good relations with the opposition in an effort to moderate it.

Dimitri Simes, president and CEO of the Center for the National Interest, stated that one must not underestimate the differences between Russia and the United States over the Arab revolutions. There are considerable similarities between the Obama administration and the Medvedev government rhetoric, but overall the Arab revolutions will not lead to any further improvement in Russia-U.S. relations and may create further problems. One must look at the issue of the Arab Spring within the context of the U.S.-Russia "reset" policy losing steam—a policy that is becoming increasingly controversial in the United States. Also, with the start of the 2012 presidential campaign in the United States, Russian actions and statements about the Middle East and elsewhere will be viewed through the prism of electoral politics.

The Arab revolutions are not functional equivalents of the revolutions of 1989, which were organized by Eastern and Central Europeans who yearned for democracy and viewed the United States as their role model. The Arab revolutionaries are unknown, and there is even more uncertainty of where these revolutions are headed and with what ideologies they sympathize. One can assume that some of the revolutions have pro-Western sympathies, some have radical Islamic sympathies, some are motivated by tribal loyalties, and some have a legitimate disgust with corruption and excessive longevity of their rulers.

Simes said that he is impressed and distressed that representatives of the Obama administration are delighted to see the governments and policies of the United States' most loyal allies being destroyed. In Egypt, Mubarak was a typical authoritarian ruler, who was unpopular among his people for many reasons, including for being close to the United States and building peace with Israel. Therefore, the United States is not entirely innocent in tempting Mubarak into building an authoritarian regime. Yemen has experienced an imperfect government for a long time, but over the years it cooperated with the United States in fighting terrorism and al Qaeda. Thus, the replacement of President Ali Abdullah Saleh may well affect U.S. interests in the region. In the case of Libya's Qaddafi, he is one of the most despicable leaders in the Arab world, who shed much innocent American and French blood and was linked to terrorist attacks in the West. Despite this, the United States and the West have enjoyed fairly cozy relationships with the Libyan leader in recent years. Qaddafi was a reliable supplier of oil and has not recently caused any real problems for the United States. Simes expressed doubts over the possibility of the NATO intervention achieving the declared goal in Libya: creating a friendly democracy in that country. Thus, the events that

arose and are continuing to develop in North Africa and the Middle East may be exciting and have certain reasons for hope, but there are many considerable reasons for worry.

As far as Russia is concerned, it is not a major factor for the Arab Spring. This is a different time from the Cold War era, when the UN Security Council could not pass any resolutions without the consent of the Soviet Union, and the United States especially would not want to take reckless steps that could lead to a superpowers collision. At that time, very few U.S. interests were considered vital enough to risk a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union. Now, Russia doesn't affect the political situation and security implications in this region, and it has only a few loyal allies in the Arab world.

When President Medvedev abstained from voting on the UN Security Council resolution, he knew that it would lead to a NATO attack and that abstaining was de facto supporting the resolution. Furthermore, Russia's abstention from voting on the UN resolution for Libya may be Medvedev's way of differentiating himself from Putin in the domestic political arena and appealing to more pro-modern, pro-Western, and pro-foreign investment constituents at home. However, when the NATO mission proved to be more difficult than expected, Medvedev withdrew his public neutrality and voiced loud criticism of Western attempts to intervene in Syria. Medvedev's criticism could also be intended as a demonstration that his accommodations of U.S. interests are limited.

Simes concluded that Russia's actions toward the situation in Libya were of great help to the United States. The caveat being that the United States will appreciate this only as long as it perceives the intervention to be in its interest. Overall, Russia did avoid doing damage to its relations with the United States over the Arab Spring, and the two countries must achieve considerable commonalities in their positions. However, it would be unfortunate if Russia assumes that the "service" it has provided to the United States in the case of Libya will translate to lasting gratitude and that U.S. leaders will overlook Russian corruption, lawlessness, and other elements in Russian behavior that create problems for their relations and Russia's image in the United States.

## The Arab Spring in Comparative Perspective

Thomas Carothers, vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, discussed the Arab Spring as compared to other revolutionary events in modern history. The Arab uprisings have universal features of all other revolutions, but there are important differences, which make the Arab uprisings unique. The Arab Spring has often been compared to the 1989 transition of Eastern and Central Europe, but a more accurate and helpful comparison would be with the transitions in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s.

The Middle East uprisings came after periods of stagnation and were not predicted. In general, sharp political change is usually not predictable. For example, the fall of the Soviet Union and democratization periods in Latin America and Africa all came as surprises. There are three reasons these events are hard to predict. First, they are the results of a series of tipping points. It's difficult to predict when people will reach a "psychological tipping point" and "snap" and spread it to others. Second, there is professional myopia whereby regional experts sometimes get a mentality of

continuity after following a stagnating situation for many years. Third, there are structural difficulties: long-term conditions may be right for a revolution—the “wood gets drier, but you can’t predict when the fire will start.”

There have been analogies between the Arab Spring and the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989. However, generally this is an extremely unhelpful comparison based on four dimensions of comparison: nature of the regime, nature of the opposition, nature of the society, and the external context.

- In Central and Eastern Europe, the regimes were Communist Party based, held in place by security apparatuses and Soviet support. By contrast the Arab world has “individual” regimes, rooted in their militaries. They are not ideological but more based on personalities. In the Arab world, the leaders are detachable from the regimes; then the militaries become in charge of the transition (not the case for Central and Eastern Europe). Different regimes mean different transitions—how will the establishment endure in Arab countries and influence change? In Central and Eastern Europe, there were two transitions, political and economic (business elites shifted too). This is not the case in Arab states, where the military and business elite have stayed in place.
- The nature of the opposition differs too. Central and Eastern Europe had some organized groups; for example, Solidarity existed in Poland for a decade prior to the fall of communism. In the Arab world, the opposition has formed spontaneously with no overarching organization. Whether the opposition is able to transform into a lasting organization is what will determine success of the movement.
- Central and Eastern Europe had a relatively economically equal society, with a middle-income level and a high level of education. The Arab countries have significantly higher rates of illiteracy and poverty and have strong societal divisions (i.e., Muslim/Christian, Sunni/Shiite, tribal divisions, etc.) A less cohesive society exists in Middle Eastern countries.
- The external context is different as well. Central and Eastern Europe were seen as “rejoining Europe,” especially significant with the EU accession process. The Arab world has no history of democracy. The West had an interest in the completion of Central and Eastern European transition to finish the Cold War. In the Arab world, the United States is unsure about what is best and what they would like. The West has fears about oil, counterterrorism, Israel policy, migrants to Europe, etc. The U.S. view has evolved on the developments in the Middle East and has become more approving. In addition, Central and Eastern Europe wanted Western involvement. The Arabs are uncertain if Western assistance is good.

Each of the four categories shows a major contrast between Central and Eastern Europe and the Arab Spring. Then why the analogy? It’s emotional. There are some common issues; how to form unity in opposition, how to face a difficult reality once you come to power, how to deal with the

disillusionment following the wave of excitement that brings about the change. Overall though, the analogy with Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 is poor.

A case can be made for Arab uniqueness, at least with regard to the monarchies in the region, which are unusual in their intrinsic legitimacy and also in their lack of a conventional executive branch (making it difficult to liberalize, as it is not possible to gradually transition power to a president).

Perhaps there is a good comparison though, with sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s, which saw over 40 states experience either electoral transition or an authoritarian collapse. The regimes were family run or personalistic. They were reliant on the military and postcolonial regimes; the opposition groups came about spontaneously, were composed of young people; and this spilled over state borders. Like the Arab states, these states were poor, divided in many ways (by tribe, ethnicity, religion, etc.), relatively uneducated, and they had no road map (as few democracies existed in Africa before).

There are three reasons we haven't heard about this better comparison: people don't like to be compared to sub-Saharan Africans, people don't know or care about sub-Saharan Africa, and it is a less inspiring story. Only a third of these scenarios worked out successfully and turned into democracies. A third relapsed into authoritarianism, and the last third became embroiled in civil conflicts. A similar statistical outcome would not be surprising for the Arab world. Even though the results in Africa were mixed, overall it was put on a better trajectory than it was 20 years ago.

Both the transitions in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s and the Arab Spring happened in divided societies, in which it is difficult to establish elections. Both regions have states with a strong natural resource base, which hinders democratic transitions. And both have states with strong-handed leaders (with good economic policies but repressive political policies). The sub-Saharan African experience makes for a roadmap. "Comparisons are risky but inevitable," and we need to look hard at analogies.

# Appendix: Conference Agenda

## What Does the Arab Spring Mean for Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus?

Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C.

June 28, 2011

- 9:00–10:30 a.m.**      **Panel 1: How and Why the Arab Spring Happened**  
Speakers:  
Jon Alterman, *Director, Middle East Program, CSIS*  
Andranik Migranyan, *Director, Institute for Democracy and Cooperation*
- 10:45 a.m.–12:15p.m.**      **Panel 2: Implications of the Arab Spring for Central Asia**  
Speakers:  
Zhao Huasheng, *Visiting Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Program, CSIS*  
Aleksy Malashenko, *Scholar-in-Residence, Carnegie Moscow Center*
- 12:15–1:30 p.m.**      **Lunch**  
Speaker:  
Thomas Carothers, *Vice President for Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: “The Arab Spring in Comparative Perspective”*
- 1:30–3:00 p.m.**      **Panel 3: Implications of the Arab Spring for the “Big Caucasus”**  
Speakers:  
Sergey Markedonov, *Visiting Fellow, Russian and Eurasia Program, CSIS*  
Sufian Zhemukhov, *Visiting Fellow, George Washington University*
- 3:15–4:45 p.m.**      **Panel 4: U.S.-Russia Relations and the Arab Spring**  
Speakers:  
Dimitri Simes, *President and CEO, Center for the National Interest*  
Thomas Graham, *Senior Director, Kissinger Associates*  
Mark Katz, *Professor of Government and Politics, George Mason University*



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