



Luxembourg Institute for European
and International Studies

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Conference on

Russia, the West and the future of the Middle East

27 April 2012

Maison de l'Europe, Luxembourg



Introduction

In cooperation with the Russian State Agency for International Cultural and Humanitarian Cooperation (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and the Moscow-based Association for Euro-Atlantic Cooperation, the Luxembourg Institute for European and International Studies (LIEIS) convened a one-day roundtable on 'Russia, the West and the Future of the Middle East' on 27 April 2012 in Luxembourg. This event, which brought together around 15 participants from Russia and various other European countries, was supported by LCMA company, Luxembourg.

Since 2006, this conference was the seventh in a series of events on Russia organised by the LIEIS in cooperation with the Russian State Agency for International Cultural and Humanitarian Cooperation (formerly the Russian Center for International Scientific and Cultural Cooperation). The earlier seminars focused either on Russia's internal political and socio-economic development or on relations with countries in its 'near-abroad' and in the shared neighbourhood with the EU. The 2010 roundtable discussed the nature and extent of links with China and the EU at the level of bilateral and multilateral ties, and the 2011 seminar addressed Russia's place in the global geo-economic and geo-political balance.

The latest roundtable focused on the role of Russia and the West in the Middle East, in particular the events of the so-called 'Arab Spring' and the strategic issues for the longer-term future of this region. The participants raised a wide range of issues and had a robust exchange of views on Russian and Western approaches to current developments and challenges. The discussions were structured by four themes: first of all, a critical assessment of Russian and Western strategic and economic policies in the Middle East. Second, an account of Middle Eastern policies, notably Western European, Russian and other interests at stake. Third, reflections on whether a rapprochement between Russian and Western positions is desirable, conceivable and indeed feasible. Finally, an outline of elements for a sound and viable policy perspective for the Middle East (cf. programme and list of participants in Appendix I). The discussions were chaired and steered by Armand Clesse, Director of the LIEIS.

I. Setting the stage

Alexander Shulgin, the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg, began his opening address by expressing his gratitude to the organisers – especially Armand Clesse and Anatoly Blinov – for bringing together a group of distinguished experts.

He said that the Russian Federation has vital geopolitical and geo-economic interests in the Middle East, not least because of the geographic proximity to Russia's borders. Moscow welcomes the region's important changes that command the support of the people but it follows with great concern the growing levels of violence that can be observed in a number of countries. Like the whole of its foreign policy, Russia's approach to the Middle East is governed by the norms of international law, the UN charter, the inviolability of territorial borders, the inadmissibility of foreign interference and the unlawfulness of military intervention against these and cognate principles.

Likewise, Moscow insists that all change must be peaceful and democratic, in accordance with universal human rights and mandates approved by the UN Security Council. In the case of Libya, the Security Council agreed on a no-fly zone but the vast bombings by NATO had nothing to do with the UN Resolution 1973. As for Syria, the Annan peace plan has all the chances to succeed, given that

the parameters of his mission have the support of all the Security Council members. In fact, the UN monitoring mission in Syria was approved on the basis of the latest draft Russian resolution. Moscow is gravely concerned that there are still efforts by certain groups to overthrow the regime and that these efforts are supported by foreign powers. However, only the Syrians themselves should decide who rules their country.

Israel's policy towards Gaza is deeply worrying, and the International Quartet must step in to secure better relations, promote the creation of an independent Palestinian state and guarantee Israel's security. The role of Iran has been commented upon extensively over the past few years and the impasse over its alleged nuclear weapons programme remains unresolved. The Russian position is that Iran should not acquire a nuclear weapons capability and that only a peaceful, diplomatic approach can provide a lasting solution.

Finally, Moscow views the resurgence of traditional and Islamic values that characterise many indigenous communities across the Middle East as normal. Unlike other countries across the West, Russia has a long-standing experience of Muslim communities that co-exist peacefully with the Russian Orthodox majority and also with other religious minorities. Key to the Russian model is mutual respect and the public recognition that faith is central to many communities. Perhaps this experience offers some insights for future constitutional and political settlements as well as international action, said [Ambassador Shulgin](#) in conclusion of his address.

In his brief remarks, [A. Blinov](#) suggested that there have been widespread fears in Russia that the 'Arab Spring' could spread to the Russian Caucasus and perhaps other parts of the country and that this could exacerbate the radicalisation of certain extremists. For this and for other reasons, the overriding aim of international policy to the Middle East has to be to avoid civilian casualties while not resorting to foreign military intervention. The only real solutions are those that are in accordance with international law and on the basis of diplomacy.

II. Russian and Western strategic and economic policies in the Middle East: a critical assessment

[A. Clesse](#) opened the first session by arguing that there is growing Western pressure on Russia to change its stance on Syria and allow some kind of Western-led intervention. Libya was a military success in some sense, but it could not be otherwise given that there was no real chance of proper resistance on the part of Col. Gaddafi's army or his regime. The troubling prospect is that NATO's Libyan expedition is in danger of lurching from a military success to a political disaster. The West seems to be self-intoxicated with its own rhetoric about democracy and human rights while at the same being blind – or turning a blind eye – to the reality on the ground, including the immediate impact and long-term consequence of Western military action. One key question is whether there will be a lasting estrangement between the West and Russia on the Middle East, especially after a sense of betrayal following Libya?

[Lothar Rühl](#) introduced the debates by providing an overarching account of recent events and long-term strategic issues. The international community has fallen into the Middle Eastern trap ever since the end of the Ottoman Empire after the Second World War. The sage words of the Russian Ambassador about the self-determination of the Syrians are sadly not matched by conditions on the ground. The ongoing conflict is nothing short of a civil war scenario that must burn out or else be stopped by foreign intervention.

It is true that Libya was a military success but the political outcome remains uncertain. One key problem is that any definition of interests based on security and identity remains beholden to a fundamental uncertainty about the evolving situation in the region. All policy options that seem available are theoretical or even hypothetical, as the Russian Ambassador has suggested. Refraining from intervention seems the least risky option at this juncture, but this will not resolve the situation. The triple danger is that Syria will suffer further Iranian involvement; Hezbollah could resume hostilities with Israel or attempt to take over the Lebanon.

At the heart of the 'Syrian problem' lies the post-Ottoman condition. The borders of Syria and other countries have been wholly artificial since 1916. The documents of the time indicate a certain distribution of cities, ports and other strategic places but pay little, if any, attention to the ethnic and religious composition of populations that find themselves part of new national states. This toxic legacy has structured the Middle East for nearly a century, and no one has provided a comprehensive settlement of the main outstanding issues (Golan, water distribution, etc.). Moreover, the notion of an 'Arab Spring' is a euphemism. What we are dealing with is much more like a rebellion, a revolt, an uprising or at best an 'Arab awakening'. Such and similar characterisations are closer to the actual situation but the overall outcome remains uncertain. In fact, the situation in Egypt, Iraq and elsewhere is close to anarchy.

As a result, there are few, if any, realistic policy options. First, Turkey's idea of creating a buffer zone (under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter) would not solve the problem. Only a Turkish intervention could change this but that would have the potential of triggering an Arab backlash, so Ankara has in fact little room for manoeuvre. Second, the (now former) French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé has also proposed action under Chapter 7 but it is unclear how this would help the Syrian Christians, the Alawites, other Shia or the Sunnis who will all be at each other's throat. Inside Syria a general may step forward or a tribal leader but the outcome will probably be another dictatorship of some kind. All this is the result of the demise of the Ottoman Empire, and it may take another 50 years until this changes.

In his remarks, Andrey Grachev likened the current condition of the Middle East to multiple aftershocks following the end of the Cold War. As such, there is considerable uncertainty about destruction and further threats to an already volatile situation. Russia's role cannot be dissociated from that of the former Soviet Union, which was a very active actor in the region. In terms of internal developments and as a result of the collapse of the USSR, Moscow was initially forced to withdraw from the Middle East. Now that Russia is reasserting her role in the world, the Kremlin is trying to reclaim the country's former status as a great power under the ruling tandem of Mr Putin and Mr Medvedev. More specifically, Russian credits and armaments, as well as Russia's naval bases in Syria, constitute particular interests that also represent a bigger card in the geo-political game with the West. Moscow seeks to defend its status as an equal partner in the wider Middle East and beyond.

Interestingly, the NATO-led intervention in Libya against Col. Gaddafi underscored a certain pluralism within the Russian regime, with (the then) Prime Minister Putin comparing it to a 'medieval crusade' while (the now former) President Medvedev condemned these remarks publicly and refused to veto the UN Resolution 1973. As such, the Middle East is also a question of Russian domestic politics. Mr Medvedev's abstention in the Security Council led to the resolution 1973, which has already been described as a military success but also a political disaster. Ultimately, Mr Putin's view has prevailed and Russia has thwarted any Western attempt to approve a tougher resolution on Syria.

However, on one question Russia is fully part of the West in the sense of the Christian world and coexistence with Islam. Moscow has repeatedly highlighted the plight of oriental Christians and the need for a proper *modus vivendi* of historical Christian communities with resurgent political Islam. In fact, not all Western governments have been so concerned with defending the freedom of minorities which the West otherwise champions as part of its democracy promotion.

In relation to policy options, A. Grachev argued that letting the Syrian civil war burn itself out, as Lothar Rühl has suggested, has not always been the German position, e.g. in the early 1990s in the former Yugoslavia. However, is this stance possible in the 21st century, with internet, social media and other intense pressure to do something about the fate of civilian populations? What kind of intervention is available? There are two options: either under the UN Charter, but Moscow and Beijing look set to veto any such attempt, or else if Chapter 5 of NATO were to be invoked by Turkey.

L. Rühl contended that Germany never intervened on the Balkans in the 1990s. All that the German government did was to bring forward the official recognition of Croatian and Slovenian independence three months ahead of the European Community. As for intervention in Syria, Turkey has not invoked any form of NATO assistance or collective defence. Ankara would only take action for purely defensive purposes to protect Turkey's border in case the Syrian conflict escalated. Neither is an example of military intervention. On the contrary, what is being proposed is a whole gambit of measures to protect the civilian population, including temporary ceasefires as requested by the Red Cross and unarmed observers. By contrast, armed observers, like in Cyprus in the 1960s, would ultimately lead to foreign intervention, as countries would be dragged into the hostilities of Syria's civil war. The best word to describe this situation is *engrenage* or downward spiral.

For his part, Mario Hirsch suggested that some describe Libya as having created a dangerous precedent while others say that Europe finally acted, showing its muscle – no longer a payer but finally also a player. However, one article of faith of European foreign policy is that Europe is not in the business of regime change but rather system change, promoting democracy and human rights based on institutional reform. This is reflected in the discrepancy between military and civilian capabilities. At various points of the intervention, Europe struggled to continue its military effort in Libya, running out of ammunition after three months and requiring US assistance. Moreover, Islamic fundamentalism poses a particular challenge to Europe, especially given the situation in French, Belgian and Dutch suburbs. Europe is not able to deal with the problem of Muslim migrant communities. Tunisia received 300,000 refugees from Libya, whereas the EU was not able to handle 30,000 refugees. Here L. Rühl remarked that Tunisia is now host not only to Libyan refugees but also wealthy investors, which could change the situation on the ground.

Evgeny Satanovsky prefaced his intervention with the adage that “winners play and losers pay – if they have the money”. He argued that NATO's Libyan military intervention was a tragedy because it demonstrated its very limited impact – not exactly a show of force. Only the USA, the UK and Oceania have a real army, no one else in the West does – Germany's Bundeswehr isn't one, whereas the Wehrmacht was. Italy had an army during the times of the Roman Empire, but not now. What is more troubling is that democracies license the killing of minorities in the name of majorities. In any case, Islamic fundamentalism is on the rise, with many more 9/11s to follow in future, probably in Paris, Berlin and elsewhere across Europe. In the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are doing their level best to create a caliphate. Turkey's Prime Minister Erdogan's Neo-Ottoman policy means that there will be no attack on Syria (because of the threat of Kurdish unrest) but in the medium- to long-run there is a growing risk of a naval battle with Israel and Cyprus over off-shore natural resources (especially oil and gas reserves). Meanwhile, Iran will have a bomb

within a year. The only question is whether it will use it or not. Saudi Arabia will acquire one, probably with the help of Pakistan, which is far more dangerous than Iran. As such, the Libyan intervention has only made dictatorships realise that they need to have the nuclear bomb to ensure their survival. Ultimately, there are neither good nor bad interventions – only very bad, terrible and apocalyptic ones.

Anoush Ehteshami disagreed entirely with this account, contending that caricatures and stereotypes obscure rather than shed light on the contemporary situation in the Middle East. Notions such as the mind of the Arab just don't cut it any longer in the 21st century. The current condition calls neither for optimism nor for pessimism but instead for realism. You cannot intervene in the name of civilians in Libya but not in Syria. Muslim resurgence is normal, as Muslim culture and populations have been repressed for a very long time. However, the positions of Muslim movements and parties are not pre-modern but very modern – especially in Egypt and Tunisia where Muslims form political parties, contest elections and have to compromise. More fundamentally, Tunisia, Egypt and even Libya are all transition states where the process of democratisation has only just begun. Turkey is not trying to rebuild the Ottoman Empire, but rather attempting to play a creative role as a country that fuses democracy with Islam within the framework of a secular constitution and a modern state.

E. Satanovsky retorted that both the Turkish Prime Minister and his Foreign Minister have said that they are the new Ottomans. While it is true that there are democratic processes in the Middle East, these can mutate into fascism. Generally speaking, in post-imperial, post-totalitarian situations the danger is one of instability, chaos and war.

In conclusion of this session, Georges Friden offered his reflections on the current situation, notably the role of Europe. He stressed the importance of the historical background, national interests and contemporary developments. A strengthened dialogue between the EU, the USA, Russia and China is much needed precisely because the aim has to be to save lives and create conditions of stability. At the same time, it is also true that some of the worst policies can spring from the best intentions. For this reason, the EU realises that Syria is not and should not be Libya mark 2. Unfortunately, the ongoing economic crisis in the EU and the long cycle of US elections will halt efforts to make progress and bring about a lasting solution to some of the conflicts, in particular an independent Palestinian state and Israeli security.

III. Explaining Middle Eastern policies: West European, Russian and other interests at stake

The theme of this session was introduced by Marek Menkiszak who argued that Russian foreign policy in the Middle East is multi-dimensional and multifaceted. The major conditionalities are as follows: on the global level: Russia's relations with the US; on the multiregional level: its relations with the EU and the internal policies. The Soviet legacy still matters significantly, but Washington's course of action is the driving force for Moscow's stance in the Middle East. Indeed, the major factor influencing Russian foreign policy is the USA and its involvement in this region. Broadly speaking, the Russian leadership's default position is to oppose perceived US global hegemony, even if President Putin has publicly suggested that America will suffer a similar fate as the Roman Empire.

On the question of energy, Moscow is determined to control, or at least influence, the main sources of supply to Europe and to promote Russian oil and gas. Other sources of energy, whether Caspian or North African, are in direct competition with Russia's and, as such, seen as a direct challenge to

the country's predominance in the wider European energy sector. That is why the Kremlin is pursuing closer links with Iran and Azerbaijan to oppose the development of the southern corridor of energy transport to Europe. Blocking the possible construction of the trans-Caspian pipeline is one of its goals. Simultaneously, Moscow seeks to consolidate and extend cooperation with Qatar on liquefied natural gas (LNG), a game-changer in the world market, and to swap assets with Italian ENI in Libyan gas deposits. Further Russian economic interests in the Middle East include oilfields (in which the Russian corporation Lukoil has stakes), the development of nuclear energy and arms' sales (especially to Egypt and Jordan).

Moreover, Russia's vital interests in the Middle East have a strong domestic dimension, namely the dynamics in the North Caucasus that have shaped Russian foreign policy. The ruling regime in Moscow is worried by the revolutionary movements against corrupted authoritarian regimes since it perceives Western-assisted 'colour revolutions' as a major challenge to its own rule.

Finally, on Libya there were real tensions between the Medvedev and Putin teams, even their differences were instrumentalised and over-hyped by the sections of the press. Mr Medvedev's approach sought to portray Russia as a constructive, engaged and responsible player in Libya and to invest politically in the relations with France. Mr Putin's approach was in fact to claim that the Libyan uprising is a CIA-sponsored special operation that must be thwarted. Linked to this is a belief that the Assad regime must be preserved as a bulwark against US hegemony. Thus the re-elected President Putin and his team are convinced that the Arab Spring is part of a US-provoked chain of events, from Syria via the Caspian to Russia, with the ultimate aim of overthrowing the Russian regime. On this point A. Grachev intervened to say that the Kremlin is not trying to defend the regime of President Assad *per se* but rather to preserve Russia's role in the region in an attempt not to be humiliated.

In his presentation, Alexander Kononov declared that the Libyan intervention was a failure. First of all, the European members of NATO showed too little political will and insufficient military capacity to bring this mission to a prompt, successful end. Second, democratic countries supported radicals and brought them to power. In the process, they exhibited Col. Gaddafi's tortured body in public. Third, the common cause of the Libya rebels was not so much democracy as political Islam – "Allah is great" trumps the will of the people. Fourth, the intervention did nothing to change the legacy of Western colonialism, namely the fact that most countries across the Middle East and North Africa are artificial bodies, not natural entities.

Moreover, Russian arms' sales to Syria or other states are not decisive at all. Moscow has shifted its arms sales away from the Middle East towards China, India and Latin America. It is also true that extremism is spreading to Central Eurasia, where Russia will have to intervene probably sooner rather than later. In fact, Moscow's support for the US mission in Afghanistan is a way for US marines, financed by US tax-payers' money, to do Russia's business on her Southern border, but this does not change the fundamental relationship of distrust and divergent interests that characterises US-Russian ties. The disagreement between Mr Medvedev and Mr Putin on Libya said more about the Russian political system but ultimately weakened the former while emboldening the latter.

Finally, the main changes that emerge out of the events commonly called the Arab Spring are as follows: first, with Egypt in decline, Turkey or Iran will take over leadership; second, new states will appear that will complicate the geo-political picture. Third, with few, if any, options left, the only rational option is to minimise losses. Thus, both Russian and Western policy towards the Middle East is likely to be a variant of a damage-limitation exercise.

L. Rühl disagreed with much of the previous account, explaining that NATO's mission in Libya took longer because it did not go in exactly like Russia went in on Chechnya. On the contrary, NATO did everything possible to avoid civilian casualties and minimise the destruction of non-military targets. To this effect, NATO destroyed Libyan heavy armour and aerial defence installations. In total there were about 30,000 sorties, of which only 8,000 were air-to-ground attacks because Libyan armours were too close to houses and mosques. Only eight out of the 28 NATO countries were involved, so the logistics were more complicated. In fact, Germany's 90 Tornados would have made a big difference, as they had in Serbia (where six of them destroyed Serbia's air defence by taking out the radar installations). That is also why NATO had to engage in a long search for reconnaissance of Gaddafi's troops (as opposed to rebel troops). Russia, by contrast, never managed to eliminate the enemy in Chechnya. Its intervention cost the lives of thousands of soldiers and many more civilians, and it destroyed much of Grozny and the rest of the region.

Of course the UN Security Council Resolution 1973 was ambiguous. The West's intention was to get Russia and China to agree to disagree but not to veto the intervention to stop the killing of civilians in Benghazi and beyond. The question that all those who oppose this or any other intervention must ask themselves is what might be the meaning and worth of any rationale without taking action? For example, a Turkish military intervention in Syria would require occupation followed by retreat, leaving behind what the USA left behind in Iraq. Right now, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) could act as inter-positioning force but it is far from clear whether the Syrian regime would acquiesce.

More generally, L. Rühl wondered whether there is anything constructive Russia can and will propose? The Kremlin is obsessed by US hegemony but does nothing to propose an alternative that addresses real problems. Worse, with Iranian nuclear capability on the horizon, Moscow's opposition to any kind of missile shields will end any meaningful cooperation between Russia and the West.

A. Konovalov's and L. Rühl's remarks triggered a lively exchange of views. A. Clesse interjected that Russia was at the very least outwitted by the West over Libya and that Moscow will do its utmost to avoid such a humiliation over Syria or other contentious issues such as Iran and missile defence. In fact, NATO's proposed ballistic missile defence (BMD) against nuclear missiles, whether from Iran or any other country, won't work in the present state of technology. NATO knows this and so does Russia. So why persist with this profoundly problematic project? However, L. Rühl contended that the West now has different technology to cope with the challenge of intercepting missiles.

For his part, A. Grachev asked what the political justification for military intervention was. There was no separate NATO objective in Libya, only a UN objective backed up by the mandate given in the UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which allowed NATO to police the non-fly zone but not to engage in a bombing campaign against Libyan ground forces.

L. Rühl retorted that Col. Gaddafi's forces had to be destroyed on the ground because that's where the attacks on the civilian population happened from, not from the air. NATO had to discriminate between regime troops and rebel forces in order to avoid 'collateral damage'. Of course, efficiency is subordinated to damage-limitation, and the co-ordinates for bombings were used accordingly. What is true is that NATO has drawn down its ammunitions' supply and that it needs to fill up its ammunition depots for the next intervention. But that should not be in Syria. NATO would destroy the Syrian tanks but also the houses in Homs and Hama. As a result, the military and political costs of intervention are disproportionate. With a looming Russian and Chinese veto on Syria at the UN,

what can be done? Even the action of the ICRC is difficult to support because it requires military cover.

The session concluded with two interventions. First, Irina Zvyagelskaya said that relations with the post-Soviet space, the USA and Europe are a priority for Russia, not the Middle East. As such, Moscow's policy towards the region is sometimes a means to other ends. However, the Russian position commands much wider support than is perhaps recognised: opposition to foreign military intervention and support for political dialogue is shared by many countries and actors in the Middle East and beyond. In the case of Syria, one option is to have a negotiated or even imposed solution based on immediate discussions among the main factions and a power-sharing agreement (e.g. as in Tajikistan).

What's so particular about Syria? That violence will spill over? The Syrian opposition is young, modern but lacks any plans for national reconciliation. Like in Libya, there is no information about the opposition's political programme. Many conspiracy theories that circulated in Russia about outside interference in the Middle East and North Africa were part of the electoral campaign. So Syria at the time was above all an issue of domestic politics, not a foreign policy priority. Nevertheless, it is correct to assume that Russia perceived the implementation of the UN Resolution 1973 in Libya as a failure. It felt that it had been indeed outwitted and did not want to repeat the same scenario in Syria. More generally, it is more accurate to speak not of the Arab Spring but instead of an Islamic revolution. Islamic movements want legitimacy, internally and externally, which suggests some evolution towards moderation; e.g. Hamas is stressing links with the more moderate Muslim Brotherhood. The treatment of minorities and women will be a test case. But the international community has by no means passed the 'values' test itself: neither Col. Gaddafi nor his son have been brought to justice. Rather, the West and others have condoned torture and killings.

The second intervention was by Jean-Marie Frenzt who reminded the participants just how extraordinary developments over the past two years have been. In 2010, Col. Gaddafi had called for jihad against Switzerland, and the USA had just appointed a new ambassador to Damascus for the first time since 2005. Today, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak, Muammar Gaddafi and Ali Abdallah Saleh, ruthless dictators who ruled their countries with an iron fist for decades, have been forced out of power. There is mass mobilisation against the Assad regime, in place since 1970. These revolutions were not started by foreign powers, but instead by the people. The peaceful protesters at the origin of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt have been mostly middle-class and liberal in outlook. All protesters claim freedom, dignity and opportunities. However, this does not mean that the emerging democracies in the Middle East will necessarily have to be liberal. If anything, indigenous movements will resist such a Western model. After all, the 2006 victory of Hamas in free and fair elections was followed by Western sanctions, an episode that weakened the credibility of Western democracy promotion in the region.

Today, the key challenge for Russia, Europe and the US is a policy of engagement with the forces of political Islam, which are undeniably major political players, benefiting from the failures of secular nationalists and the success of secular revolutions in toppling authoritarian regimes. Even if they were not the ones starting the protests, Islamists were nevertheless the only ones able to organise themselves clandestinely as opposition groups under dictatorship through mosques. These networks and structures give them an advantage in a post-authoritarian era. However, they are not liberal democrats.

In Syria, the state and the regime are the same. So if the latter collapses, so does the former, with devastating consequences that could lead in the worst case to a war of all against all. There has not

been any genuine state-building while nation-building has been weak with a population that has little sense of national unity. The Assad regime will do everything to try to avoid its collapse by claiming to be the defender of minorities, by considering all opposition as terrorists supported by hostile foreign powers and even by pretending to carry out reforms. The fate that haunts Bashar al-Assad is that of Saddam Hussein and the collapse of the Iraqi Baath regime. Unlike Egypt and Tunisia, the army and police leadership will not abandon the political leader – not least because most high-ranking officers come from the same religious sect as Assad – the Alawi and remain loyal to the regime, knowing very well that they have too much to lose. But, as the last minority regime in the region, it is bound to collapse. The process is likely to be very messy and the transition will not be peaceful. The fall of the regime in Syria will not be confined to one country, as was the case in Libya. It will be felt throughout the Middle East. An outside intervention, even though it is already indirectly taking place with weapons provided to opposition forces by Arab Gulf states, would only make the killing worse. There are certainly countries that want chaos in Syria, so as to weaken Iran and Hezbollah. In the long run a political process is the only way to stop a civil war.

IV. Is a rapprochement between Russian and Western positions desirable? Conceivable? Feasible?

At the start of the session on a possible rapprochement between Russian and Western positions on the Middle East, M. Hirsch raised the question of other conflicts that characterise the region and have an effect on the ongoing developments in Syria and elsewhere. Chief among them is the Israeli-Palestinian stand-off that remains unresolved to this day and continues to poison the political atmosphere in the region. On Iran, there are conflicting reports about secret diplomatic initiatives and military preparations coming out of Israel. However, amid political uncertainty and pressure from the Obama administration, the risk of pre-emptive Israeli strikes against Iranian nuclear installations seems to have subsided for the moment. At the same time, the events in Syria preclude the possibility of a grand bargain over the Golan Heights.

In his remarks, E. Satanovsky said that Moscow's main priority in the Middle East is to stop any problems from spreading to Russia. Unlike the West, the Kremlin does not think that the situation can be improved. This is not cynical but rather a realistic position. For example, on the fate of oriental Christianity, Russia knows that Christians have either left or are being pushed out of Palestine and Iraq. Now it is in Syria and the Lebanon where the substantial minorities of Christians are under growing threat. On Libya, the Russian leadership agreed to disagree. With its Western partners, the main disagreement is over the question of regime change. Put bluntly, Moscow thinks that one crazy tiger (e.g. Col. Gaddafi) is better than 10,000 crazy rats. When John McCain threatens via Twitter that "Vlad, you'll be next", Russians believe that the USA are serious in trying to undermine the Russian regime. Moscow and the West can work together on Iran, but after Libya there is little faith in Western promises.

However, the Kremlin's involvement in the Middle East has little to do with economic interests in the Arab world: Russian trade is no more than US\$10 billion and the approximate value of Russian tourism in the region is about US\$4 billion, so in total it's peanuts. With Iran, Russia has a major disagreement on the ownership of energy resources in the Caspian Sea. Moscow works much more closely with President Nazarbayev in Astana than with the mullahs in Teheran. By contrast, Russia has an important alliance with Israel: both face the common enemy of terrorism and there are close links at the level of the two populations. Indeed, the Kremlin fears a growing radicalisation of Muslim communities living in Russia, which is traditionally indigenous.

As for Chechnya, Vladimir Putin found the biggest terrorist, and Kadyrov kissed the ring of the emperor, took the money and delivered stability (or 'normalisation'). Elsewhere, this strategy of co-opting (former?) terrorists produced rather different results. Yassir Arafat took the money, and we have the situation we all know. The Israeli and Western left banked on Arafat who could be bought. By contrast, the Israelis have done much more for the Palestinians than the PLO or Hamas.

For A. Ehteshami, E. Satanovsky's claim that the Palestinians survive because they depend on the Israeli settlement is bizarre, if not perverse. In the 21st century, the occupation of Palestine by Israel is totally unacceptable, and there can be no justification for the brutal behaviour of the occupying troops. More generally, the Middle East is a penetrated regional system: while it does shape its own fate, it is affected by multiple foreign interventions. As such, the region is a highly interdependent system: no single conflict is autonomous, and local conflicts affect other local situations elsewhere.

In terms of security, all countries have to confront the triple threat of terrorism, fragile states and ethno-religious sectarianism. Concerning WMD proliferation, the end is the same but the means differ considerably – military intervention or political dialogue. But neither Russia nor the West wants a nuclear Iran. However, the dynamics inside Iran and within the ruling regime are not fully grasped by foreign powers. First of all, there are different understandings about the shift in the balance of power from West to East and North to South. Second, there are two emerging dichotomies: more pluralistic states *versus* more autocratic states, and also a Sunni bloc *versus* a Shia alliance (or crescent).

On this and other security issues, the OSCE is much more important than has been acknowledged. Based on shared interest and values, its members could help address the key challenges and agree on common action. However, neither side fully understands that political Islam is fundamentally different from Muslim communities living in Russia or Europe. That explains in large part why engagement with the forces of political Islam has either failed or not produced any significant results.

Finally, Middle Eastern sovereign wealth funds have the potential to help resolve the current crisis. States and countries such as Qatar, Abu Dhabi and Dubai can assist the global recovery, and all sides should work together to make that happen at the forthcoming G20 summit.

In his remarks, M. Menkiszak said that the Iranian gas deposits are of huge significance to the EU, but are potentially devastating to Gazprom's strategic position. There are two convergent developments that affect the strategic interests of Tehran and Moscow: first, the trans-Caspian pipeline involving Azerbaijan, Turkey, the EU and the US. Second, US presence and support for other countries bordering the Caspian Sea (especially Kazakhstan). Taken together, they are perceived both in Moscow and Tehran as a direct geo-political and geo-economic threat to the vital interests of Iran and Russia. Against this backdrop, Iran is not considered a 'hooligan' from Russia's vantage point as Mr. Satanovsky put it. On the contrary, the Kremlin has provided Iran with substantial arms deliveries, has built Iran's first nuclear plant, launched its first satellite and is cooperating on other nuclear capabilities and allegedly also on missile technology.

A nuclear Iran is not perceived in Moscow as a direct threat to Russia. Crucially, US hegemony is worse from the perspective of the Kremlin. Thus, there are two common interests between Russia and the West. First, both are committed to preventing another major war in the Middle East. Second, both seek to control the threat of radical Islam, so as not to import it into the Russian Northern Caucasus and parts of Western Europe.

V. Where to go from here: Developing a sound and viable policy perspective for the Middle East

In conclusion of the workshop, the final session focused on a number of concrete policy ideas. L. Rühl argued that the Middle East is seeing a systemic shift of balance. Traditionally, the West could rely on three pillars of stability: first of all, Egypt's control over the Suez canal and access to the Horn of Africa; second, Turkey's power over strategically important straits and its function as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East; third, Saudi Arabia's authority over Islam's most holy sites and its close cooperation in the fight against terrorism and Iran.

However, the strategic environment has changed fundamentally. Egypt is no longer a safe bet and a change in its foreign and security policy is in the offing. Turkey has estranged itself from both Israel and the EU. The political and religious situation of Saudi Arabia is uncertain, where besides the government new forces are emerging from under the surface, especially the Shia population in the country that sits on the oil reserves. Therefore the shift of balance is geopolitical: radical Islam in Egypt and Saudi Arabia has replaced the pan-Arab secular nationalism of the post-1945 world. Iran has no suicidal strategy but certainly aspirations towards regional predominance. As such, it is more accurate to speak of an 'Arab awakening' (Al Jazeera) rather than the 'Arab Spring'. In relation to radical Islam, it is true that the Sunni strand threatens certain freedoms, but the key question is what the geo-political synthesis might look like.

According to I. Zvyagelskaya, it seems that the stakes concerning Islamic radicalism are different. Russia's problems with radical Islam is not limited to the North Caucasus but extends to Tatarstan and the Volga region. As such, the threat of terrorism, extremism and separatism entails asymmetric interest because Russia's Muslim population is indigenous and extremism can be home-grown, not only external and foreign-sponsored. At the same time with a collapse of secular regimes in the Middle East, Russia's Islamic radicals can enjoy a wider support from the Arab countries.

A. Konovalov argued that M. Menkiszak's point about Russian unwillingness to stop Iran's nuclear capability rests on a partial analysis that leads to incorrect conclusions. First of all, Tehran has largely obsolete military equipment. Second, Moscow has stopped the delivery of S300 surface-to-air missile systems to Iran. Third, the Bushehr nuclear facility was first built by the Europeans, and Russia joined belatedly. Fourth, Israel is a one-bomb state: one hit will eliminate it, so it cannot risk any attack. Fifth, a nuclear Iran is totally unacceptable for Russia. Sixth, the official foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation talks about the idea of a security community from Vancouver to Vladivostok. As such, a clash of civilisations is not inevitable, just like civilisations are not predefined.

In his intervention, Alexander Tkachenko insisted that Russia was, is, and will be, a partner in the efforts on the part of the international community to address the challenges of the Middle East. Far from being empty words, it is the case that Russia participated in the efforts of the G8 in 2004 to boost development aid in the region. As a member of the Quartet, it has tried to play a constructive role. Unfortunately, Russian attempts to organise an international conference with the participation of Hamas were unsuccessful. Moreover, peace-keeping operations in the Middle East with Russian support and participation have a greater chance to succeed. By contrast, NATO's Libyan military intervention created large-scale destruction, a political vacuum (with the former opposition lacking power and programmes) and has failed to reverse socio-economic under-development (rampant unemployment, lack of housing, etc.).

Adrian Pabst argued that in Syria and elsewhere across the Middle East, the choice is between Western-orchestrated regime change and Russian-Chinese regime tutelage. The West appeals to universal human rights and legitimate intervention under the 2005 UN doctrine Responsibility to Protect (R2P), whereas Russia and China invoke the twin principle of national sovereignty and territorial integrity to veto what they view as illegal foreign interference. There is no moral equivalence between these two positions: the NATO-led intervention in Libya prevented the mass killings of civilians in Benghazi and elsewhere, but the country remains mired in tribal, sectarian conflict and risks breaking apart. Meanwhile Syria is descending into a bloody civil war that makes reconciliation between the ruling minority and the mass majority a distant prospect.

However, both the West and Russia talk about the people while focusing on the regime. Beyond the equally unpalatable choice between regime change and regime tutelage, foreign powers should consider much longer-term forms of involvement and assistance at the civilian level. Notions such as trustee- and guardianship need not be synonymous with neo-colonialist rule. Instead, they represent more mutualist and reciprocal kinds of engagement and support for countries that either face civil wars or are at the risk of systemic instability. Rather than focusing almost exclusively on the formal institutions of states and markets, what is required is a shift in emphasis towards strong intermediary institutions that can help individuals and groups to form associative bonds, such as professional associations, trade unions, manufacturing and trading guilds as well as community-based welfare, education and housing with the support of local and regional government.

In this context, there was a brief exchange on the fate of foreign NGOs and foundations that have faced trouble across the Middle East, most recently in Egypt (M. Hirsch). Apparently this is also true in Turkey where German and other foundations have been harassed, both the personnel and also the 'political' activities of the organisations themselves (L. Rühl). The same applies to parts of Africa, e.g. Addis Ababa where the Heinrich-Böll and the Friedrich-Ebert foundations are fed up with local intimidation and the lack of support from national governments for the autonomy of associations (A. Clesse).

A. Grachev said that all the actors in the Middle East need first to clean in front of their own door: just as the West has a troubled history across the whole region, so too Russia has to confront the legacy of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and other forms of interference. Moreover, all sides must engage in a shared search for dignity, equality and partnership, and post-totalitarian, post-authoritarian countries must catch up with their history and the process of modernity – comparable to China's transformation after 1979. Finally, Islamic terrorism is a real threat to European civilisation: Anders Breivig, the Toulouse assassin and other cases suggest mass immigration and radicalisation represent profound problems.

A. Clesse interjected that Breivig seems to act as a crusader, in self-defence against what he sees as a long-term threat to society. However despicable his actions, it is intellectually disingenuous to dismiss him as either insane or a rogue (a lone killer or a rotten apple). Instead, isn't his act the logic extreme of a certain mentality that is far more widespread than most people would admit? In relation to this and other aspects raised by the discussions, two different mind sets still seem to be dominant – Orientalism (Edward Said) vs. Occidentalism (Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit). Regarding intervention, the question that arises is whether there can ever be anything like a democratic or even a moral war.

According to Andrew Hallan, the tone of the debate in the first session was patronising, and young people on the Tunisian-Libyan border would be appalled by the comments by some of the

participants. Where are the voices of the region to provide a more objective picture of the views and sentiments of the people who are directly concerned by the events?

E. Satanovsky responded to a number of points that arose from earlier discussions. First, the Chechen crisis is over. There are corrupt elites, especially wealthy Chechens in Moscow, but that's about it. Second, on Russia's role in the Middle East, he said that there is constant information exchange among Russian, Israeli and US officials at the highest level. At the same time, US influence in the wider Middle East and Eurasia is waning, especially in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, after Washington dropped Mubarak, raising fears among autocratic, lifelong leaders. Third, the West must wake up to the danger of Islamic fundamentalism, with radical Islamists being all over Western capitals. By contrast, the real Russian problem is drugs from Afghanistan, but Iranian generals have helped limit the spread of narcotics. Fourth, creating more independent states is not a solution. There are 7,000-8,000 languages and many more dialects, but only 193 states – it just doesn't include Palestine (or Nagorno-Karabakh, Chechnya, Quebec, the Basque country, etc.). Finally, the war of civilisations is ongoing. People in the West may not like it, but it's true. The religious-civil war in Judaism was over in the second century AD. In Christianity, it raged in the 16th and the 17th century. For Islam it's now and it's ugly. Demography and other trends are against the West and Russia but the question is whether societies can practice peaceful coexistence. The next conflict is between Egypt and Israel, not with Iran.

This sparked a final debate. On Iran, the EU has for once made a difference. Even the much-maligned Lady Ashton has successfully sought to fill the political vacuum on Iran left by the US elections to have meaningful meetings in order to ease tensions and act constructively (M. Hirsch). Western appeals to democracy and human rights ring increasingly hollow, particularly so in light of its alliance with Saudi Arabia that has been the biggest strategic mistake since Suez. Russia and the West also need to understand the nature of power structures across the Middle East, above all the patrimonial fusion of power and wealth – for example in countries as diverse as Egypt and Pakistan where the army controls about 30% of the economy (A. Pabst). The rise of political Islam is indeed the main geopolitical shift in the Middle East, but radicals in the region and in European capitals have no case against the West, Russia or anyone else. The West's re-encounter with Islam in history is a tragic event with as yet unforeseeable consequences (L. Rühl).

In conclusion, G. Friden said that Russian and Western views on the Middle East exhibit a commonality of interests on security and extremism but that this convergence does not translate into shared action and coordination. This failure to act could yet lead to a catastrophe, as the Egyptian economy is in meltdown and a lack of political stability threatens the transition from authoritarian regimes. Moreover, long-term civilian assistance extends beyond civil society to the rule of law and democracy, but Egypt and other countries also require short-term economic help.

A. Pabst
LIEIS
May 2012

Roundtable on

Russia, the West and the future of the Middle East

27 April 2012

Maison de l'Europe, Luxembourg

The Luxembourg Institute for European and International Studies (LIEIS),
the Russian State Agency for International Cultural and Humanitarian Cooperation
at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and
the Association for Euro-Atlantic Cooperation, Moscow
with the support of LCMA company, Luxembourg

Programme

- 09.00 Welcome by Alexander Shulgin, Ambassador, Russian Embassy in Luxembourg, Georges Bingen, Representative of the European Commission in Luxembourg and Armand Clesse, Director of the Luxembourg Institute for European and International Studies
- 09.15-10.45 **Session 1:** Russian and Western strategic and economic policies in the Middle East: a critical assessment
- 10.45-11.00 Coffee break
- 11.00-12.30 **Session 2:** Explaining Middle Eastern policies: West European, Russian, and other interests at stake
- 12.30-14.00 Lunch
- 14.00-15.15 **Session 3:** Is a rapprochement between Russian and Western positions desirable? Conceivable? Feasible?
- 15.15-15.30 Coffee break
- 15.30-17.00 **Session 4:** Where to go from here: Developing a sound and viable policy perspective for the Middle East

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