

Russia and the Middle East: Between Islamism and Westernism

By Andreï Tsygankov

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Abstract: Looking beyond the basic interests of power, Russia's present position in the Middle East can be explained by a rejection of Islamism and Westernism. As radicalism directly threatens the Federation, Moscow has been persuaded to reach out to regimes that fight against it. As a manifestation of the ethnocentrism of democracies which attempt to ensure their domination, Occidentalism pushes Russia to oppose interventionism in the region of Western powers, all the while affirming a civilizational mission.

The crisis in Syria has exacerbated tensions in Russian-Western relations that have developed since the 1990s. Russia has been critical of the West's pressures on Iran to comply with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and it opposed the West's use of force from Yugoslavia to Libya. Moscow's rapprochement with Washington due to then President Dmitri Medvedev's strong ties with his counter-part Barak Obama lasted until the Middle East found itself embroiled in political transformation. While the exact outcomes of this transformation remain unclear, it has revealed some fundamental differences between Russia and the West's attitudes toward the Middle East and its future.

Western observers often argue that Russia is not interested in cooperating with the West over the Middle East by citing

considerations of power, prestige, and differences between Russia and the West's values.¹ In this paper, I side with supporters of the argument about values-based disagreement between Russia and the West, but take issues with the claim that values' difference involves Russia's lack of interest in bridging the difference and cooperating with the West.

I argue that Russia's self-vision is that of a locally grounded civilization that enjoys special ties with the West and the Islamic world. These ties have had a centuries-long history of development and must be preserved if Russia is to survive as a coherent political and cultural entity. The self-identification of Russia as a civilization on the intersection of the West and the Islamic world requires that the Kremlin reaches out to both worlds and encourages their fruitful dialogue and cooperation. This worldview dictates that Russia does not support radical trends within either Islamic or Western worlds and, instead, advocates dialogue and negotiations. These Islamic and Western worlds ought to agree by not imposing their values onto each other. Peace must not be based either on Sharia law or Western-style democracy and neither of these values must be promoted by force. For the sake of survival, Russia works to undermine what it views as extreme trends within Islamic and Western political thought and practice – Islamism and Westernism – and encourages moderates from both worlds to negotiate mutually acceptable solutions. In attempting to chart a middle way between what the Kremlin sees as the Scylla of Islamism and the Charybdis of Westernism, Russia wants to work with moderate, pragmatic voices within both worlds. It rejects violence, pressures, and attempts to dictate policies from one part of the world as counter-productive and unable to bring stability and long-lasting peace to the Middle East.

Russia and its cultural phobias

The cultural composition of Russia

A borderland nation, Russia has sought to incorporate influences from both West and East. Russia has developed a strong cultural affinity with Western civilization. As a Christian power, Russians preserved their sense of cultural affiliation with the West throughout the long years of Mongol domination, which at the time reinforced the sense of threat from culturally alien or non-Christian people of the South. Europe and the West in general has played the role of the external significant Other and prominently figured in Russia's debates

¹ See, for example, A. Cohen, "Putin's New 'Fortress Russia'," *The New York Times*, October 18, 2012; J. Arquilla, "Yes, Russia Is Our Top Geopolitical Foe," www.foreignpolicy.com, September 17, 2012.

about national identity. Russian Westernizers argued that Western Europe could serve as a role model, whereas Slavophiles wanted Russia itself to become the leader of European civilization. Their disagreement notwithstanding, both schools assumed Europe and the West to be the meaningful environment in which Russia's rulers had to defend their visions of national honor and interests.² Russia has historically sought to be recognized by the Western Other and to modernize in like manner. Although Europe's recognition of Russia as one of its own was never unproblematic, all Russia's leaders identified with European ideas. The strength of identification with Western civilization explains why historically Russia has sought to achieve its objectives in cooperation with Western, especially European, nations. Russia worked to develop ties with Europe and fought multiple wars alongside of the West. The list of such war includes – most prominently – the First Northern War against Sweden (1655-1660), the Seven Years War against Prussia (1756-1763), the war against Napoleonic France, the First and Second World Wars, and, more recently, the global war on terrorism.

Albeit a Christian nation, Russia developed strong ties with Muslim communities in Eurasia. Although tensions between Russians and other nationalities were a part of the empire's existence, these tensions were not as pronounced as in overseas empires. As Geoffrey Hosking wrote, "annexed territories became full components of the empire as soon as practicable."³ The relationships were the most difficult between Christians and Muslims, yet over time Russians learned to coexist with Islam. Since Catherine the Great, the Russian empire developed special ties with Islam by supporting those Muslim authorities that were willing to submit to the empire's general directions, and even served as arbitrator in disputes between Muslims from the Volga River to Central Asia.⁴ Indeed, since the second half of the 19th century, Russian thinkers were challenged in their Eurocentric assumptions and began to turn to the East viewing it not as barbaric, backward, and unworthy of acceptance, but a source of learning. In the aftermath of Russia's humiliating defeat in the Crimean war, philosophers, such as Nikolai Danilevski and Konstantin Leontyev grew especially fearful of Europe and asserted that Russia was a "special cultural-historical type" that could not see itself as a part of Europe. In the early 20th century, some émigré

² For a development of this argument, see I.B. Neumann, *Russia and the idea of Europe* (London: Routledge, 1996); R. English, *Russia and the Idea of the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); A. P. Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

³ G. Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552-1917*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 40.

⁴ R.D. Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). The Ottoman Empire developed similar relations with its Jewish and Christian minorities (D. Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals*. [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000], p. 149).

intellectuals, building on Danilevski and Leontyev's ideas, developed the notion of Russia as a principally non-European, "Eurasian" civilization – the thinking that continues to be influential today.⁵

The currently dominant discourse in Russia is that of a culture that incorporates both Western and Eastern influences while preserving its own distinctiveness and coherence. Supporters of the so called civilizational approach are eager to advance Russia's distinct cultural values, rather than merely state interests, in the world. In response to the global economic crisis, they have insisted that a new civilizational project is required for strengthening Russia's cultural foundations and preserving the nation's complex relations with the outside powers. Some of them expressed confidence in Russia's ability to mobilize its cultural influences by taking advantage of the country's "intersection" position in the middle of Eurasia and linking its southern, western, and eastern peripheries through the development of transportation routes across Russian and ex-Soviet states' territory.⁶ As the cultural argument is finding its way to the Kremlin, the foreign policy debate is increasingly framed in cultural categories. Russian officials have identified two prominent threats to their vision of Russia as a civilization on the intersection of the West and the Islamic world.

Islamism

The first of these threats is that of a radicalized and militant Islam, or Islamism. Russian analysts and politicians often speak of special relations with Muslims but differentiate between Islamic "fundamentalism" and Islamic "extremism". For example, former Foreign Affairs minister and Orientalist Yevgeni Primakov views most Muslim Arabs as fundamentalists who observe traditional Islamic rituals but do not engage in violence and therefore are not threatening.⁷ He made a sharp distinction between the Islamic states and the Taliban's form of Islam, which he described as "Islamic Extremism". Primakov wanted Russia to engage the former and to isolate the latter. Putin expressed on numerous occasions his respect for traditional Islam as integral to Russia's religious, cultural and social fabric by separating such Islam from "all forms of religious intolerance and extremism".⁸

⁵ For details see A.P. Tsygankov, "Self and Other in International Relations Theory: Learning from Russian Civilizational Debates," *International Studies Review* 10, 4, 2008.

⁶ See, for example, K. Gadziyev, *Geopoliticheskiye gorizonty Rossii: kontury novogo mirovogo poryadka* (Moscow: Ekonomika, 2007).

⁷ Y. Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present*, trans. Paul Gould (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

⁸ "Islam is inseparable part of Russia's society and culture – Putin," www.russiatoday.com, August 30, 2012.

Russia's fear of militant Islam has strong domestic roots.⁹ A growing influence of Islamist ideologies, rising immigration from Muslim ex-Soviet republics, and insufficient state policy on the Northern Caucasus' economic and political integration created an explosive environment. Previously contained in Chechnya, Islamist terrorism spread throughout other parts of the region – Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and North Ossetia. Since the October 2002 seizure of a Moscow movie theater, Chechen jihadists have worked to stage violent actions in Russia's capital. During 2010-2012, Russia was confronted with a further increase in terrorist violence. On March 29, 2010 two female suicide bombers trained by the Caucasus-centered Doku Umarov detonated their explosives inside a Metro train, killing 40 people and injuring many more. Another major attack came in March 2011, when a bomb detonated in the largest Moscow airport, Domodedovo, killing 36 and injuring 180 people. The Kremlin responded by outlining a new anti-terrorism strategy for the region,¹⁰ but the violence was far from curtailed. In the summer 2012, the violence spread to Tatarstan where terrorists assassinated two moderate Muslim leaders. Perhaps, most significantly, on August 29, 2012 a female suicide bomber killed a leading moderate Muslim cleric in Dagestan, Sheikh Said Atsayev, who had been engaged in negotiations with radical Islamists.¹¹

Westernism

The second threat to Russia's cultural perspective comes from a radical, ethnocentric trend within the Western civilization, or Westernism. Westernism seeks to present the West's values as superior to those of the rest of the world and justify the legitimacy of hegemonic and military actions toward others. When perspectives from the other demand to be recognized, they are typically viewed with suspicion and either dismissed or suppressed by Westernists. An example of Westernism as the mirror image of the Orient developed by Europeans to justify Western imperialism in the Muslim world is documented by scholars beginning with Edward Said's classic work *Orientalism*. Similarly ethnocentric assumptions have shaped minds of Western scholars ever since Russia emerged as an independent power and remain strong today as critics of Russia frequently attack it for not embracing Western institutions and instead clinging to its own imperial and autocratic traditions.¹²

⁹ R. Dannreuther, "Russia and the Middle East: A Cold War Paradigm?," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64,3, 2012, p. 545; I. Zvyagelskaya, *Beyond the 'Arab Spring': Russia's Security Interests in the Middle East*. Ifri, 2012, p. 5.

¹⁰ "Medvedev outlines anti-terrorism strategy for North Caucasus," *RIA Novosti*, April 1, 2010.

¹¹ J. Brooke, "'Civil War' Among Muslims Shakes Russia's South," *Voice of America*, August 30, 2012.

¹² For details, see Marshall T. Poe, *"A People Born to Slavery": Russia in Early Modern European Ethnography, 1476-1748*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,

Russia has been critical of what it views as the Westernist trend since the late 1990s. After NATO launched its air strike on Yugoslavia, the Kremlin viewed the West's tendency to use force for solving international crises as a threat to the world's peace and stability. Russia supported the United States in its war with terrorism after the attacks on September 11, 2001, but advocated a measured response within the United Nations' jurisdiction. The Kremlin supported the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, but not in Iraq. Russia wanted to reduce terrorist threats, but saw the Iraq war as a deviation from the global war on terrorism. Along with many others in Russia's political circles, Putin believed that terrorism was a stateless phenomenon that could be defeated only through coordination of state efforts, and not through taking on relatively established states, such as Iraq. Related to this was a fear that violent Westernist actions will provoke an equally violent global Islamist response. In Russia's perception, what began as a counter-terrorist operation in Afghanistan with relatively broad international support turned into a "war of civilizations", or America's crusade against Muslims and their style of living. Instead of engaging moderate Muslims, US policies tended to isolate them and give the cards to radicals. Westernist and Islamist trends were therefore colliding by spreading violence and instability across the world. For Russia – a country with 20 million to 25 million Muslims – an involvement in such "war of civilizations" would mean inviting fire to its own home.

Preventing the “clash of civilizations”

Key principles

As a culturally diverse nation, Russia advocates the perspective of a global cultural dialogue as a precondition for world order and stability. To many Russian intellectuals and politicians, cultures are not doomed to a conflict. Rather, they should establish a “unity in diversity” regime, under which they would preserve their roots and also maintain an intense dialogue and cooperate by observing commonly agreed rules. In building regional orders, this perspective recommends transcending the known boundaries and dichotomies, such as either pro-Western or Islamic. Many in the official circles find the described perspective promising for Russia to follow. For example, in March 2008 President Putin sent a message to the Organization of the Islamic Conference meeting in which he said that “deeper relations of friendship and cooperation with the Islamic world

2000); M. Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1999); D.S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); A.P. Tsygankov, *Russophobia* (New York: Palgrave, 2009).

are Russia's strategic course" and that "we share concerns about the danger of the world splitting along religious and civilizational lines".¹³ Other officials presented Russia as "a natural inter-civilization bridge" and expressed desire to have closer ties with the Islamic world.¹⁴ Overall, the Kremlin values stronger relationships with Europe or the United States but not at the expense of Russia's ability to act independently and develop ties with non-Western countries.

According to this perspective, the main objective in the culturally pluralist world should be preservation of dialogue and stability at home and abroad. In the event of crisis, outside powers should facilitate internal dialogue by respecting international law and abstaining from partisan actions. They should encourage negotiations between regime and opposition, and not provide partisan support for either party. Sanctions or the use of force must serve as the last resort and may only be applied through legitimate international institutions such as the United Nations.

Curtailing Islamism in the Middle East

In attempting to curtail Islamism, Russia elites sought to strengthen those whom they perceived as moderate political forces in the Middle East. Following the United States intervention in Iraq and rise of violence in the country, the Kremlin encouraged an international conference on Iraq accompanied by American phased withdrawal from the country. In order to address growing suspicions of Iran's intent to obtain a nuclear bomb, Moscow also encouraged Tehran to send its spent nuclear fuel to Russia. Although the Kremlin failed to persuade Iranian leaders to send spent nuclear fuel to Russia, Moscow continued a dialogue with Tehran. In Afghanistan, Russia attempted to introduce its own policy by appointing a presidential special representative for the country, fostering ties with its official leadership and establishing separate lines of communication to the Taliban leadership.¹⁵ Despite Russia's traditionally strong ties with Syria, Palestine and other Arab states, the Kremlin also worked to deepen its relations with Israel and Turkey by developing ambitious energy projects and cooperating on improving security in the Black Sea area. Acting independently from the UN-US-EU-Russia Quartet, the Kremlin opened political dialogue with leaders of Hamas, who won the Palestinian elections but continued to refuse to renounce violence against Israel or recognize its right to exist as an independent state. In addition, Russia condemned the publication in Denmark and some other European nations of cartoons satirizing the Prophet Mohammed as an "inadmissible" provocation against

¹³ "Putin Wants 'Deeper Friendship' with Islamic World." *RFE/RL*, March 14, 2008.

¹⁴ "Russia ready to contribute to Alliance of Civilizations potential," *Itar-Tass*, January 16, 2008.

¹⁵ M.K. Bhadrakumar, Mullah Omar gets a Russian visitor, *Asia Times*, March 23, 2011.

Muslims. More recently, Russia strongly condemned the wave of violence against the U.S. embassies in Arab countries and killing of the U.S. ambassador to Libya provoked by the anti-Islam film *Innocent Muslims*. The film itself was banned from showing in Russia.

The Arab Spring greatly alarmed Russia for its potential to destabilize the region and bring Islamists to power. In response, the Kremlin followed its pragmatic, non-ideological orientation by making adjustments to the post-revolutionary realities in the Middle East. For example, the Kremlin sought to distance itself from the old leaders, such as Libya's Muammar Gadhafi, by not vetoing the UNSC resolution on enforcing the no fly zone. At the same time, Russia was worried about the potential strengthening of extremist forces in the Middle East following revolutions in the region. Russia's officials continued to voice concern about the possible radicalization of Middle Eastern states. Acting jointly with China, Russia vetoed the United States and Europe-sponsored UNSC resolutions regarding Syria. Fearful that such resolutions would lead to a military intervention and regime change in Syria, as it happened in Libya, the Kremlin instead pushed for negotiations between Bashar al-Assad and the military opposition. In May 2012, the Kremlin moved closer to accepting a possible removal of Assad, but not at the cost of dismantling the Syrian regime.¹⁶ In his meetings with president of the United States and president of Turkey in June and December, respectively, Putin, again, expressed concern about instability in the country and the wider region after Assad. Russia also strengthened ties with those within the Syrian opposition interested to work with the Kremlin.¹⁷

Russia's Middle East policy reflected the Kremlin's fear that the "war of civilizations" between Western nations and Islam was intensifying, as well as understanding that Russia had no business participating in that war.¹⁸ Just as it was a tragic mistake to get involved in World War I in 1914, Russia felt it would be tragic to have a fully hardened Western-Islamic front today and to see Russia joining it. Implicitly, the new Kremlin initiatives recognize that the threat of Islamic radicalism in Russia cannot be successfully confronted without reaching out to the Muslim world. Russia's willingness to engage Iran, Hamas, and Syria sought to compensate for blunders of Western policies in the region, such as calls to boycott elections in Iran or attempts to pressure Palestinian voters or support for Syrian rebels, and to find a way out of a developing inter-civilizational confrontation.

¹⁶ S. Tisdall, "Syria: why Russia changed tack," *The Guardian*, May 28, 2012.

¹⁷ J. Brooke, "As Syria Unravels, Russia Tries to Bolster Future Position," *Voice of America*, December 4, 2012.

¹⁸ Russia's media covered the listed developments in terms of accelerating clash of civilizations. See, for example, "Dve nedeli stolknoveniya tsyvilizatsiy," Editorial, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, September 24, 2012; V. Myasnikov, "Bor'ba ideologiy smenilas' bor'boi relegiy i konfessiy za pederel mira," *Nezavisimoye voennoye obozreniye*, September 28, 2012.

Restraining Westernism

Russia's approach to the West is dictated by the need to differentiate between those sympathetic to negotiations and gradual change and those favoring the policy of transformation and regime change in the Middle East. Fearful that the latter trend contributes to radicalization of global Islam, the Kremlin seeks to isolate it by reaching understanding with the former, more moderate forces within the American and European establishment. For instance, Russia sought to restrain Western leaders from military intervention or imposing additional sanctions on Iran, while welcoming negotiations. In February 2012, Putin warned that the consequences of a military strike on Iran "will be truly catastrophic."¹⁹ The Kremlin remains fearful of a new war along the civilizational lines and tends to view any kind of Western pressures on Middle Eastern nations – political or economic – as a prelude to a future military intervention. In response to the West-demonstrated tendency to rely on force from Yugoslavia to Libya, Russia acts by assuming the possibility of the worse-case scenario. This explains why the West skeptics prevail in the Kremlin over those favoring cooperation with Western nations.

A case in point is the Libya intervention which became possible due to then president Dmitri Medvedev's decision not to veto the United Nations resolution on no fly zone. Medvedev took a personal risk by instructing Russian Foreign Ministry to abstain in the vote. Immediately after the West-sponsored resolution had been passed, influential voices inside Russia expressed their criticism of the resolution. Vladimir Putin compared the resolution's language to "medieval calls for crusades". Medvedev rebuked Putin and also recalled Russia's Libya Ambassador for criticizing Moscow's decision.²⁰ However, as Putin expected, the West used the resolution for removing Gadhafi from power. Medvedev had to regroup and from that point on was critical of the Western nations for what he saw as abuse of the UN mandate and opposed Lybia-style resolution on Syria. By explaining his position in public, the president said he was "convinced that a good resolution has been turned into a piece of paper to cover a senseless military operation... If my colleagues asked me to abstain from voting so that they could bomb targets [in Libya], I would have certainly instructed [Russian] officials at the UN differently."²¹ Medvedev's mistake proved to be politically costly. According to some analysts, Putin's decision to remove him from the

¹⁹ V. Putin, "Russia and the Changing World," *Moskovskiye novosti*, February 26, 2012.

²⁰ Former Russian Ambassador to Libya Chamov on Dismissal, Situation There, UN Vote, *Zavtra*, March 30, 2011.

²¹ D. Astakhov, "Medvedev opposes Libya-style resolution on Syria," *RIA Novosti*, June 20, 2011.

position of the presidency was in part determined by the confrontation over Libya.²²

With Syria's crisis under way, the rhetoric escalated further. Russia concluded that the West, emboldened by success in changing regime in Libya, was moving toward military intervention in Syria. In response, Moscow insisted on continuing pressures on Syria's government and opposition to negotiate over transitional governing body, as it was agreed by Geneva communiqué by Consensus on June 30, 2012.²³ The document proposed that once established such transitional government would be in a position to prepare elections and the new Constitution. The communiqué was initiated by Kofi Annan and signed in presence of five permanent members of the UN Security Council, secretary-general of the Arab league, Prime Minister of Qatar, Minister of Kuwait, as well as Foreign Minister of Turkey, the European Union and the person of Cathy Ashton and the United Nations Secretary-General. As Western nations and several Syrian neighbors moved to support Syrian military opposition, Russia held them responsible for renegeing on the earlier deal²⁴ and instigating instability in the world. As Putin said commenting on the Middle Eastern changes, "Our partners just can't stop. They have already created chaos in many territories, and now they are continuing the same policy in other countries, including Syria [...] We did warn that prudent action was needed and that it would be wrong to try to achieve anything by force, otherwise chaos would ensue. And what do we see today? Chaos prevails."²⁵

The Kremlin noted the particular irony of the Western political support of peaceful protests in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen turning into a military assistance of civil war in Libya and Syria, in which the West acted in concert with its mortal enemy, Al Quida. In Putin's sarcastic remarks, "They might as well open the gates of Guantanamo and unleash all its prisoners against Syria. At the end of the day, this is the same thing."²⁶ With the West's support, countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar provided Syria's opposition with money and small arms, while denying heavier weapons such as shoulder-fired missiles.²⁷ As some Western and Middle Eastern supporters argued for supplying the opposition with heavy weapons, media reported that

²² G. Bryanski, "Russia says action on Syria, Iran may go nuclear," *Reuters*, May 17, 2012.

²³ Transcript of the interview of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia S. Lavrov in the "Charlie Rose Show, September 25, 2012, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, www.mid.ru

²⁴ V. Kostin, "Russia says West renegeing on Syria deal," *Reuters*, August 15, 2012.

²⁵ "Putin blames West for global chaos," *Russia Today*, 27 September, 2012.

²⁶ F. Lukyanov, "Preventing chaos in the Middle East," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, www.rbth.ru, September 26, 2012.

²⁷ R.E. Worth, "Citing U.S. Fears, Arab Allies Limit Syrian Rebel Aid," *The New York Times*, October 6, 2012.

rebel arms flow benefit radical Islamists and al Qaida fighters in Syria.²⁸

Domestic support

The Kremlin's critique of regime change strategy in the Middle East and insistence on negotiations found a strong support inside Russia. Even Putin's pro-Western critics were frightened by the West's endorsement for what they saw as militant Islamist developments in the region. They fear not only loss of Russia's influence, but escalation leading up to a war with Iran with possible involvement of Israel and the United States and the consequences of further instability in the Russia's periphery.²⁹ In words of Maxim Yusin, the deputy editor of the foreign affairs section of the liberal newspaper *Kommersant*, "The West, in painting [the Syrian opposition] as freedom fighters, doesn't understand that these guys are blood-sucking vampires and if they come to power there will be hell to pay, and for the Americans, too. [...] Russians understand it better. They understand that this is a conflict between the civilized world and the suicide bombers who cry 'Allahu akbar!'"³⁰

If anything, the Middle Eastern developments prompted Russian political and intellectual elites to push the Kremlin further away from the West. Conspiracy theories about the United States' intentional support for Al Qaida have been in circulation since 9/11 and continued to proliferate.³¹ In particular, the Western support for Islamists and regime changes in the Middle East emboldened hard-liners within Russian Eurasianism who view Western interventionism as reflecting the West's civilizational aspirations. Eurasianists anticipate a greater instability in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Central Asia as resulting from the Western international involvements and advocate a close alliance with Iran, Syria, and China in order for Russia to defend itself against influences from the West and develop a "civilizational mission".³²

²⁸ D.E. Sanger, "Rebel Arms Flow Is Said to Benefit Jihadists in Syria," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2012.

²⁹ G. Mirsky, "Tugoi uzel Blizhnego Vostoka," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, February 17, 2012; Sergey Markedonov, "Russia in the Islamic World," *The National Interest*, <http://nationalinterest.org>, June 27, 2012

³⁰ J. Ioffe, "In Russia, Even Putin's Critics Are OK With His Syria Policy," *The New Republic*, www.tnr.com, July 23, 2012.

³¹ For 9/11 conspiracies, see, for example, Leonid Ivashev, "Global'naya provokatsiya," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, October 10, 2001; *Geopolitika terrora*, edited by Alexander Dugin (Moscow: "Arktogeya tsentr", 2002).

³² G. Dzhemal, "Impact of U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Svobodnaya Pressa*, January 8, 2011; "Aleksei Kharin, "K voprovu o formirovaniyi tsyvilizatsionnogo prostranstava Rossiya," *Vlast'*, No. 12, 2011; V. Khamrayev, A. Savenko, and I. Nagornykh, "Izborski klub predlozhit al'ternativu liberalizmu," *Kommersant*, September 10, 2012.

Will the Russian approach change?

The robust domestic support for Russia's Middle East approach indicates that this approach is unlikely to change in a principal way. Liberal and nationalists alike are convinced that by seeking regime change, rather than ceasefire and negotiations, the West is mishandling the crisis in the region. A number of prominent outside powers such as China, Brazil, and India were also supportive of the Kremlin's position.

The internal consensus and the outside support for the Russian approach do not mean that it will necessarily work. The emphasis on negotiations did not deliver a peaceful settlement in Yugoslavia in the 1990s or, more recently, in Middle Eastern countries such as Libya. Russia's opposition to the war in Iraq made no impact on the United States' decision. The civil war in Syria, too, may have gone too far to find an effective peaceful solution. In addition, Moscow is not always consistent in its approach, and there remain questions about its own weapons supplies for the Syrian regime.³³

Russians are aware that their approach has not delivered the result they want but they remain convinced that in a longer run the approach is morally justified. As Primakov wrote on the Syrian crisis, "Russia is occupying what can be called the only correct position in this situation. If I was head of government now or if I was foreign minister, I would support precisely the line that is currently being implemented. True, this is not necessarily a winning position. I am greatly struck by the fact that we are not attaching paramount importance to extracting benefit from the conflict by every possible means. But we have a moral approach that is based on concern for the lives and safety of millions of people, concern for the future stability of a huge and important region. And that is the only possible approach in this situation. What the outcome will be is, I repeat, unknown. Nobody knows whether we will succeed in achieving justice."³⁴

Whether or not Primakov is justified in his fatalism, it seems clear that regime change, by itself, will not bring peace and stability. Indeed, as Iraq and Libya teach us, change of regime may intensify violence and instability. Assad's eventual departure from power will bring the same problems of establishing a functional political order in the country and the region, and dialogue and negotiations remain prerequisites for such order.

³³ A. Kramer, "Russia Sending Missile Systems to Shield Syria," *The New York Times*, June 15, 2012.

³⁴ Y. Primakov, "Iskhod protivoborstva mezhdru umerennymi islamistami i radikalami povliyyet na budushcheye ne tol'ko Blizhnego Vostoka, no i vsego ostal'nogo mira," *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, August 8, 2012.

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