

RUSSIA AND THE ARAB SPRING

ALEXEY MALASHENKO

Russia has spent over a decade trying to recapture the influence the Soviet Union once enjoyed in the Middle East, but President Vladimir Putin's attempts to position Moscow as a key regional player have come up short. With revolutions across the Arab world overturning old orders and ushering in Islamist governments, Russia's chances for strengthening its position in the region look increasingly slim. The Kremlin must change course and ensure that its approach to the Middle East and Islamists reflects post-Arab Spring realities.

Key Themes

- Under Putin, attempts to shore up Russian influence in the Middle East are motivated by nostalgia for Soviet influence, a desire to demonstrate to Russia's Muslim population that the Islamic world's affairs matter to the Kremlin, and strategic national interests, including having a military presence in the region.
- Putin's strategy has involved emphasizing Russia's special position as a power that can act as a bridge between the West and the Muslim world.
- Moscow has tried to act as mediator in a number of conflicts, including failed attempts to prevent the U.S. invasion of Iraq that toppled Saddam Hussein and the overthrow of Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi. Both leaders were Kremlin allies.
- Many in Moscow see mediating a solution to the Syrian crisis as crucial to the Kremlin's regional strategy. But Russia's support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has been met with international criticism and has eroded Moscow's position.
- The changes in leadership ushered in by the Arab Spring have damaged Moscow's few remaining political and economic ties to the Middle East.
- The rise of Islamism has resonated with the Russian Muslim population and encouraged the development of radical Islamist opposition movements within this community.

A New Russian Approach

Define a contemporary Middle East strategy. An effective Russian policy would reflect current realities and a pragmatic understanding of national interests. Moscow should carve out Russia's place in the new regional dynamic rather than attempt to preserve what it inherited from the Soviet Union.

Deepen cooperation with Arab countries based on shared interests. Moscow could help establish a regional security system that can preserve stability in the Middle East and stop the spread of Islamist upheaval before it destabilizes Russia and its neighbors.

Develop a more sophisticated approach to Islamism. The Kremlin would benefit from reaching out to newly elected Islamist governments in the Arab world and addressing the growing influence of Islamists in Russia.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexey Malashenko is the co-chair of the Carnegie Moscow Center's Religion, Society, and Security Program. He was head of the Islamic Department at the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

CONTACT

Svetlana Tugan-Baranovskaya
Communications Manager
stugan@carnegie.ru
+7 495 935 8904

Carnegie.ru

 [@CarnegieRussia](https://twitter.com/CarnegieRussia)

 facebook.com/CarnegieMoscow

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a unique global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. Our mission, dating back more than a century, is to advance the cause of peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decisionmakers in government, business, and civil society. Working together, our centers bring the inestimable benefit of multiple national viewpoints to bilateral, regional, and global issues.

© 2013 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

The Carnegie Moscow Center and the Carnegie Endowment do not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented here are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.