

## **Russia warns the West against interference in Arab unrest**

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### **Medvedev suggests unrest instigated by outside forces**

Moscow is concerned that the turmoil in the Arab world, aggravated by western interference, may destabilise Russia's restive North Caucasus and former Soviet Central Asia. Although Russian leaders have not named any country, experts and politicians have pointed a finger at the United States.

The Arab revolt may have begun as spontaneous protests, but the West has now moved to take the endgame under its control," says Konstantin Kosachyov, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the State Duma. Analysts say the U.S. is using the same techniques in the Arab East it earlier used in staging "coloured revolutions" in the former Soviet Union — in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. They noted the role of CIA-linked foundations such as the Freedom House and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), in supporting and training civil activists and Twitter and Facebook organisers of the protests in Egypt and Tunisia.

The events [in the Arab world] bear all the traits of a total 'network war' (netwar) as formulated by John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt of the RAND Corporation back in 1996," says Alexander Knyazev of the Moscow-based Institute of Oriental Studies.

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Russian experts have warned that the U.S. could now push ahead with its plan of creating a Greater Central Asia, which is part of the larger project, the Greater Middle East.

Russia believes that the ongoing revolt in West Asia and North Africa, while having internal roots, also betrays a foreign hand. Warnings against foreign interference have dominated Moscow's reaction to the crisis since the first demonstrations in Egypt against Hosni Mubarak.

"We do not think that foisting any recipes or giving ultimatums will serve any useful purpose," said Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in the first official comment in Moscow on the unfolding popular revolt in Egypt on February 2. The Foreign Ministry followed up this statement with repeated warnings against foreign meddling. In a phone call to Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa on February 23, Mr. Lavrov "rejected attempts to bring outside pressure on the events in the region."

Russia has also opposed western military interference in the civil strife in Libya. "Attempts to undertake military-political intervention can only aggravate problems the Libyan people face," the Foreign Ministry said in a communiqué on a meeting between Russian and Saudi diplomats in Moscow last week.

President Dmitry Medvedev suggested that the revolts in the Arab world were instigated by outside forces that had also been scheming to subvert Russia. "I won't call any names but a whole range of countries, even those we have friendly relations with, have nevertheless been involved in terrorism

in the [Russian] Caucasus,” he said at a recent meeting with Russia's security chiefs. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin also urged western nations to refrain from interfering in the rebellions in the Arab world. “People should have the chance to choose their own fates and their own futures without any kind of outside interference,” the Kremlin supremo said on a recent visit to Brussels.

Although Russian leaders have not named any country, experts and politicians have pointed a finger at the United States. “The Arab revolt may have begun as spontaneous protests, but the West has now moved to take the endgame under its control,” says Konstantin Kosachyov, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the State Duma. Analysts say the U.S. is using the same techniques in the Arab East it earlier used in staging “coloured revolutions” in the former Soviet Union — in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. They noted the role of CIA-linked foundations such as the Freedom House and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), in supporting and training civil activists and Twitter and Facebook organisers of the protests in Egypt and Tunisia.

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At the height of the Arab crisis, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared a netwar on all “repressive governments.” In a speech at George Washington University on February 15, she vowed to promote “internet freedom” around the world by matching “our diplomacy with technology, secure distribution networks for tools, and direct support for those on the front lines.”

Ms Clinton announced that in addition to launching Twitter feeds in Arabic and Farsi, the U.S. was planning to “start similar ones in Chinese, Russian, and Hindi.”

Some Russian analysts are convinced that the U.S. is attempting to exploit the wave of popular rebellions in the Arab east to recast the world order and achieve global domination. “We are witnessing attempts to reformat the Greater Middle East according to a plan devised by the U.S. neoconservatives who are now creeping back to power,” says the former diplomat and scholar Vyacheslav Matuzov, who heads the Russia-Arab friendship society.

Whatever its aims in the current crisis, Washington's interventionism may have unintended results, as Mr. Putin reminded the West recently citing its previous attempts to “impose democracy” in Iran and Palestine.

Speaking in Brussels last month, he recalled that the Iranian revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, had enjoyed the support of the West while living in France before he returned to the country in 1979 to lead the Islamic revolution that overthrew the Shah. “And now the West is grappling with the Iranian nuclear programme,” Mr. Putin said.

“I remember our partners calling for fair democratic elections in the Palestinian territories,” he went on. “Excellent! Those elections were won by Hamas. They declared it a terrorist organisation and confronted it shortly thereafter.”

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Mr. Medvedev said the Arab rebellion would have a “direct impact” on Russia, which has fought two wars against Islamist separatists in Chechnya in the past 15 years and is still battling terrorism in the neighbouring territories. “They [extremists] prepared a similar scenario for us in the past, and

will try and realise it again — now with renewed force,” the Russian leader said, adding: “Come what may, they won't succeed.”

Islamist militants in the North Caucasus have indeed declared that their insurgency and the Arab revolt shared the same goal of spreading Islamic rule across the globe. “We pray that your struggle will help put the laws of Allah in place in the entire world,” Doku Umarov, self-proclaimed “Emir of Caucasian Mujahidin,” who claimed responsibility for the bloody suicide bombings on the Moscow metro in 2010 and the Domodedovo airport last month, said in a video address to Arab Muslims, posted on a militant website last week.

Russia is also bracing itself for a possible fallout of the Arab turmoil in Central Asia. “In the last 20 years, Moscow has had to deal with a bloody civil war in Tajikistan, two ‘tulip revolutions’ in Kyrgyzstan, and an abrupt change of a despot in Turkmenistan, but those were all local developments with limited implications for the wider region or for Russia.

What is looming on the horizon could be much bigger and more important,” writes political scientist Dmitry Trenin. He points out that the authoritarian leaders of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Islam Karimov and Nursultan Nazarbayev, both in their 70s, have been in power for two decades but “are neither able nor willing to arrange an orderly transfer of power” and their departure could “open the floodgates for serious trouble.”

Russian experts have warned that the U.S. could now push ahead with its plan of creating a Greater Central Asia, which is part of the larger project, the Greater Middle East.

“The concept of Greater Central Asia calls for the dilution of borders between the five post-Soviet states [Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan], and their merger with Afghanistan and Pakistan,” Dr. Knyazev explained in a recent interview. “Four years ago, I called the project ‘geopolitical marasmus’. However today it is shaping up as a hands-on plan for sowing chaos across entire Central Eurasia.”

Moscow has signalled its resolve to tighten its grip on Central Asia to forestall any possible spillover of instability from the Arab crisis. An unnamed official in the Russian “military-diplomatic quarters” told the government news agency Itar-Tass last week that the Moscow-led defence bloc of former Soviet states, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), was planning to hold consultations on the situation in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, considered the likely focal points of turmoil in Central Asia. The CSTO unites Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Belarus and Armenia.

“The CSTO is concerned about renewed attempts of extremist groups to set up bases for expanding their subversive activities in Central Asian states,” the Russian official said. He pointed to last summer's ethnic clashes in Kyrgyzstan and more recent fighting between security forces and Islamists in Tajikistan, which borders Afghanistan, as evidence of a “credible extremist threat” in the region.

Even before the unrest broke out in West Asia, Russia took steps to bolster security arrangements in Central Asia. A raft of documents signed in the framework of the CSTO security pact at the end of last year called for creating a concrete mechanism for deploying peacekeeping forces on a request from a member-state. Moscow cited the absence of such a mechanism for failing to send troops to Kyrgyzstan during last year's violence in the Fergana Valley. Next time it will be different. On March 4, the CSTO announced plans to hold the first drills of its peacekeeping forces later this year.

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