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Russian Foreign Policy in the Arab Spring Period

Arap Baharı Döneminde Rus Dış Politikası

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ABSTRACT

Russian Federation, under the leadership of Vladimir Putin reoriented its foreign policy, and it has been conducting assertive foreign policy since the Munich Security Conference in 2007. Arab Spring became the opportunity for Russian Federation to implement this assertive foreign policy. Although Russian Federation supported democratic demands and transition to democracy in the first phase of the Arab Spring, later on, it has reoriented its foreign policy towards the Arab Spring in the second phase, which means supporting the counter-revolution. This study explains the reason why Russia supported counter-revolutionary movements in the post-Arab Spring period.

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ÖZET

Vladimir Putin liderliğinde dış politikasını yeniden şekillendiren Rusya Federasyonu, 2007 yılında düzenlenen Münih Güvenlik Konferansından beri iddialı bir dış politika yürütmektedir. Arap Baharı, Rusya Federasyonu'na bu iddialı dış politikasını uygulama fırsatı sunmuştur. Rusya Federasyonu Arap Baharının ilk evresinde demokratik talepleri ve demokrasiye geçiş sürecini desteklemiş olmasına rağmen, Arap Baharının ikinci evresinde karşı-devrimci hareketleri desteklemiştir. Bu bağlamda, çalışma Rusya Federasyonunun Arap Baharı sonrasındaki dönemde karşı-devrimci hareketleri destekleme nedenlerini açıklamayı amaçlamaktadır.

1. Introduction

The Russian foreign policy towards the Middle East can be traced back to the Cold War era that the USSR and the Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt under the Gamal Abdul-Nasser administration, Syria from the independence to the present and Libya from the military overtake by Muammar al-Gaddafi in the first half of 2011 developed significant relations in terms of economy, military, and

energy. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US became the only remaining global power in the post-Cold War period. Although the Russian Federation did not conduct assertive foreign policy in the 1990s, Vladimir Putin who was elected as the president of the federation in 2000 re-oriented and re-constructed assertive Russian foreign policy.

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The Russian Federation under the Putin administration exerted to establish a more powerful Russia similar to the Soviet period. For this reason, Putin attempted to construct powerful ties with the former Soviet-countries, the Middle Eastern countries, and East-Asian countries for the sake of the creation of the multipolar international system. After he criticized NATO in Munich Security Conference in 2007, the degree of Russian assertiveness has been increased since 2007. Georgian case in 2008 can be given as an example to what extent the degree of the Russians determination.

Arab Spring started in Tunisia in December 2010 that long-standing Arab dictators such as Ben Ali of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Gaddafi of Libya and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen fall. Although Russia supported the democratic demands of people in the Arab street for the first time, later on, it decisively supported the counter-revolutionary movements in the region. For these reasons, this study aims to seek the answer to the reason why Russia supported counter-revolutionary movements in the region. I argue that Russia supported counter-revolutionary movements in the post-Arab Spring period due to the rise of Islamism and its possible effects over the North Caucasia and Central Asia. The study composes of two parts that it is evaluated the process of the Arab Spring and the rise of Islamism in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria respectively in the first part. In this part, I focus on how the demonstrations and protests emerge in the Arab street and how the Islamist regimes were established after the fall of the dictators. Besides, I also focus on the Russian reactions to the developments. The second part of the article is mainly dealt with Russian foreign policy towards specific cases in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria respectively. Also, I take the bilateral relations between Russia and these countries into consideration to test the level of the relations in the post-Arab Spring period.

2. The rise of Islamism and Arab Spring in the Middle East

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region was shaped after World War I that there have been four breaking points in the region since the establishment of the independent states in the Middle East and North Africa (Duran & Ardiç, 2014). While some of the breaking points brought about the war, blood and tear, others brought about the hope for the future of the region. On the other hand, others brought about the emergence of ideologies such as pan-Arabism, Arab nationalism, Islamism, etc. The first breaking point is the establishment of independent Arab states and Israel in the wake of World War II. The result of the establishment of the Israeli state at the center of the Arab states in the Middle East and failure of the Arabs in the 1948-9 Arab-Israeli War was that nationalist young military officers took the control of the countries like Gamal Abd-al Nasser in Egypt.

The second breaking point in the Middle East is undoubtedly Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt in 1978 and 1979 and Iran Islamic Revolution in 1979. After the failure of the Arab forces in the Arab-Israeli War in 1967, neither Gamal Abd-al Nasser nor pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism could be full of hope for the Arabs. As a result of the important developments in the wake of the war, a new ideology, Islamism, has replaced the Arab nationalism. Especially, Iran Islamic Revolution and its strategy to export the revolutions to the other Muslim states which live under the dictators changed the balance of the power is not only the region but also in the world when the bipolarity of the Cold War conditions is taken into consideration.

The third breaking point in the Middle East and North Africa is the End of the Cold War which was not only a regional milestone but also a global one. Following the important developments like Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the behaviors and foreign policies of Syria is quite significant to understand how the end of the Cold War made the major transformation of the politics in the Middle East. Syria as an ally of the Soviet Union and enemy of the United States during the Cold

War supported the US-led coalition which swept Saddam's forces from Kuwait (Mercan, 2016).

The fourth breaking point in the Middle East, which is also related to the First Gulf War and American existence in the Arab territories, is September 11 in 2001. As a result of the attacks towards the four significant locations of the US, Afghanistan was invaded in 2001 and the US-occupied Iraq in 2003. These two important developments and the American existence in the region caused the rise of anti-Americanism and anti-imperialism in the region. As a result of the unrest among the Arabs towards their dictators resulted in the fifth breaking point, which is called Arab Spring/Uprising/Revolt/Fall/Winter etc., in the region.

It can be said the greatest transformation emerged in the Middle East and North Africa between December 2010 and March 2011 that famous dictators had to leave from their seats as a result of the demand of the people in the streets. The Arab Spring started in Tunisia in December 2010 with one of the street-sellers setting fire him and the movements spilled-over nearly all the region from Morocco to Yemen. The people who were against their dictatorial rulers occupied the streets peacefully. As a result of the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, famous dictators such as Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia were overthrown by the people on the streets, although the Libyan case had different scenario than others (Duran & Ardıç, 2014)

It can be said that Islamic movements such as the Nahda movement under the leadership of Rached Ghannouchi in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and other Arab countries became popular as a result of the Arab Spring. Tunisia presented the only success story of the so-called Arab Spring, and another important characteristic of Tunisia was that it was also the first country that held free and fair elections after the democratic uprisings. After the Ben Ali administration, Tunisia could hold the democratic elections, as a result of the

election, the coalition government under the leadership of Al-Nahda, as an Islamic political party and movement, was established (Aljazeera English, 2011).

When it comes to Egypt which was the second country of the demonstrations, protestors convened in Tahrir Square where they wanted Mubarak to resign, and the square became the symbol of the demonstrations all around the world. Later on, due to the demands of the people and international pressure over Hosni Mubarak, he resigned that Egyptian people went to the free and fair elections. Although the Muslim Brotherhood was not at the center of the demonstrations and protests in Tahrir Square, due to its already established structure and organizations; it captured the control of the country in the first democratic elections in the history of Egypt. As a result of the elections, Mohammed Morsi became the first elected president of the Egyptian history. However, Arab Spring turned into Egyptian democratic winter when Egyptian commander in-Chief Abdel Fattah el-Sisi overthrew the Morsi regime via a military coup in July 2013 (Al-Arian, 2019)

As for Libya which had been the country ruled by Muammar Qaddafi, the protests and demonstrations towards the regime began in February 2011. However, demonstrations in Libya turned into a conflict between Qaddafi forces and protestors that the regime tried to eliminate them by using military forces. As a result of the death of civilians, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution that assumes military intervention to protect civilians in Libya. Later on, NATO began airstrikes towards Libya at the end of March 2011 that the Qaddafi regime was overthrown with the help of the external actors (Abdessadok, 2017). When the Libyan case is compared to previous cases in Tunisia and Egypt, in the context of transition, it occupies a rather different and significant to a large extent. Besides, Libyan transition to democracy was quite painful since the interim government of Libya in the post-Qaddafi period did not satisfy with the people in terms of social and economy.

On the other hand, although external intervention made a great impact on the

removal of the Qaddafi regime in Libya, Libyan Islamists played a very significant role in which the protests turned into conflict. There are several Islamist influential actors in Libya that The Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, and The Salafi Trend can be considered as such actors that played a great role. Although the role and power of the Islamist parties in the elections of 2012 were quite in-effective, it can be considered that the rise of Islamism during the Arab Spring in Libya was quite effective (Ashour, 2015).

As for Syria, which is the most destructive and devastating atmosphere of the Arab Spring, peaceful demonstrations and protests turned into civil war as a result of the brutality of the Assad regime towards the people (Tamimi, 2016). However, it should be noted that opposition in Syria was quite a secular character at the beginning of the conflict. Later on, this secular characteristic of the opposition was replaced by the ethnic and sectarian differences when the civil war escalated among the fighting groups (Topal, 2016). It can be easily said that Islamist groups have been rather effective fighters in the context of the civil war and as in the cases of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the role of Islamist groups and parties increased in the Syrian Spring and Syrian civil war.

After briefly summarizing the important developments and the rise of Islamism during and after the Arab Spring, now I will focus on how Russian foreign policy was shaped during the protests and demonstrations in the Middle East and North Africa.

3. Russian foreign policy towards the Arab Spring and beyond

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union did not only support the socialist-minded regimes in the Middle East but also supported the countries such as Syria, Iraq and Libya that had problems with the United States. It can be said in a very simple sentence that Russian Federation stands on the opposite side towards protests and demonstrations in the so-called Arab Spring. Although the Russian government did not act over the transition period in Tunisia and Libya, it felt economic

and political burden after the being overthrown of the Qaddafi regime in Libya. For this reason, Russia began to be an active player in the Middle East (Yılmaz, 2016).

Russian foreign policy towards the Arab Spring can be taken into consideration into three aspects in terms of actors that Dmitry Medvedev, Vladimir Putin, and Sergey Lavrov explained the Russian stance towards the demonstrations. Firstly, in his famous speech, Sergey Lavrov defined the Arab Spring as the “expected surprise”. In this regard it can be claimed that the so-called Arab Spring was both predictable and unpredictable in the eyes of the Russians. When it comes to the official position of Dmitry Medvedev, he positively implied wherever there is a revolution in the democratic types, Russia should strive for the development of the democracy where the revolutions took place. In this speech, it can be said that it is rather official language being used by Medvedev to describe the Russian position towards the developments. Finally, as for Vladimir Putin, he also described the Arab Spring very positively that he stressed the toppled regimes which were authoritarian and undemocratic. Although all the three discourse used by Russian’s leading statesmen is quite official language, it can be said that Russian position towards the Arab Spring can be described as not supporting outside intervention to the countries where the revolutions took place (Nikitina, 2014).

One of the most important anxieties of the Russian government during the Arab Spring is that the Russian government feared the possibility of the spillover effects of the Arab Spring towards the inside of the federations. On the other hand, Russia also considered the positions of the Chechen Mujahedeen forces that originally coming from North Caucasia; and that fought in Syria. These groups could return Russia and they could escalate the tension between Mujahedeen forces and the government forces. When the power of the ISIS forces in the North Caucasus at that time is considered, it can be said that it was quite a normal position that Russia took over the possibilities of spillover effects (Yılmaz, 2016).

The process of the Arab Spring was regarded as “the process of Islamization of the Arab World” (Yilmaz, 2016). Although the media, scholars, analysts, and journalists in the West presented the demonstrations and protests as the “spring”, the Russian media and public opinion rejected to use of this concept. On the other hand; the concepts of destabilization, turmoil, and extremism were covered rather than the spring in Russian media (Baev, 2011). After briefly explaining the Russian general stance toward the Arab Spring, now I concentrate on how Russian foreign policy decision-makers approached the events and developments in the Middle East by analyzing case by case.

3.1. Tunisia

When Ben Ali's administration was overthrown, the Russian position towards the development can be regarded as quite uninterested. It can be said that the Moscow government accepted the power transition in Tunisia. For this reason, it can be said that the Russian Federation supported the power transition in Tunisia (Dannreuther & Katz, 2011). As an example of this, the following statement done by Dmitry Medvedev is rather significant. Medvedev as a president of the Russian Federation joint the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 26, 2011, and he gave a speech that he said the governments should take lessons from the Tunisian case; and that he stressed the importance of the developments with the society (Medvedev, 2011). Although Russians officially supported the power transition and regime change in Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, the relationship between Tunisia and Russia in terms of the trade agreement, Tunisian's agricultural export to Russia and Russians gas export to Tunisia gained momentum after the fall of Al-Nahda government in Tunisia in late 2013 and early 2014 (Schumacher & Nitoiu, 2015). Although the relationship between Russia and Tunisia increased to a lesser extent, it is significant to emphasize that their relationship intensified after the fall of the Islamist government in Tunisia. For this reason, it can be argued that Russian foreign policy during and after the Arab Spring was driven from anti-Islamists

motivations although Russia supported democratic transition in Tunisia.

3.2. Egypt

The Russian reactions towards the Arab Spring can be taken into consideration into two parts in terms of commentaries. On the one hand, the Arab Spring in Tunisian and Egypt was described as the western sponsored “color revolutions” by the Russian media and analysts. On the other hand, statesmen such as the Russian president Dmitry Medvedev and the foreign minister Sergey Lavrov supported the power transition and fall of the Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt (Dannreuther & Katz, 2011).

As a result of the general Russian foreign policy towards the Arab Spring, Russia supported national sovereignty rather than external intervention to the uprisings. As an example of this, Egypt-Muslim Brotherhood relations can be taken into consideration. Although Russian Federation banned the Muslim Brotherhood and its activities in Russia in 2003, Russian statesmen made statements that Russia is ready to establish and develop relations with the Muslim Brotherhood which was an organization that took the control of the administration of Egypt in the post-revolutionary Egypt. Vladimir Putin and Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi met in Sochi in 2013 that the former one satisfied with the cooperation over the development of economic relations with Egypt (Yilmaz, 2016). However, it was clear that President Vladimir Putin, the Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and the Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu were rather dissatisfied with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to the power in Egypt in 2012. For example, Putin rejected to send over a 2bn\$ loan to Egypt (Schumacher & Nitoiu, 2015).

Although it seems there is a rapprochement between Russia and Egypt under the Morsi administration, Russia changed its foreign policy towards Egypt after the military coup which overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood administration; and which led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Pragmatically, Russia made an effort to improve relations with Egypt under

the new administration. After the military coup, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov and Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu officially visited Cairo that emphasized military and economic cooperation between Russia and Egypt by reflecting the Soviet-Egypt relations (Yilmaz, 2016). It can be said that Russia and Egypt reached a series of agreements in terms of economics, military, and counter-terrorism. First of all, although the loan request of Egypt under the Morsi administration was rejected by the Russians, after the military coup of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Russians unconditionally supported the economic development of the relations between Russia and Egypt.

Secondly, they also exerted to establish close ties with Egypt like the 1950s and 1960s under the Gamal Abdul-Nasser administration in Egypt. Russians and Egyptians additionally made a military agreement that Russians delivered fighter jets, attack helicopters, and anti-tank missile systems. Thirdly, they reached an agreement over the counter-terrorism and anti-terrorism, since Egypt under Sisi administration has considered the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist organizations as the terrorist groups. According to the agreement over counter-terrorism and anti-terrorism, they would jointly target the Islamist militants, they would organize joint military exercises and, Egyptian soldiers and officers would take education at the military academies of Russians. Finally, the most significant and strategic agreement between Russia and Egypt is related to Egyptian seek for nuclear energy. As a result of this agreement, Russia supported the nuclear energy policy of Egypt (Schumacher & Nitoiu, 2015).

To better understand the strategic partnership between the Russian Federation and Egypt, one should also look at the bilateral visits and details of the agreements that Russia and Egypt signed. Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Cairo on February 10, 2015, that it was the first visit of him to Cairo since 2005. After the reaching agreements about the finance, economy, terrorism, energy, and defense; el-Sisi made a

statement that Russia and Egypt reached an agreement over the establishment of free trade areas between the Eurasia Custom Union and Egypt. El-Sisi also stressed the importance of Putin's meaningful visit because it meant support for Egypt to fight against terrorism. To solve the crisis in Syria, two leaders also emphasized the importance of the necessity of the cooperation between Russia and Egypt in the Syrian civil war (Yilmaz, 2016). It is important to note here that one of the main foreign policy motivations of Egypt under Sisi administration is anti-Islamism. Besides, Sisi regime's position towards the popular uprisings is clear that the Sisi regime does not support the democratization of the region. Due to the Islamic factions and the Brotherhood connections to some extent in the Syrian civil war and their seeking for independent and democratic Syria, the Sisi regime supported the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war (Hanna & Benaim, 2019).

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu and his Egyptian counterpart Sidki Subhi negotiated about the development of relations in the field of military and defense on March 3, 2015. After they decided to sign the Military Cooperation Protocol, Shoygu stated that Egypt is the most important partner of Russia in the Middle East. Russians and Egyptians also agreed that they made joint military exercises in the Mediterranean Sea. Another important development about the relationships between Russia and Egypt is that Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev participated in the opening of the New Suez Canal that he expressed Russia's intentions about the construction of a new industrial zone near the canal after the opening ceremony of it (Yilmaz, 2016).

Although Russia was against the rise of Islamist groups and parties in the Middle East due to their prospective role over the Caucasian Islamists and radical Islamic organizations in the region and although it was suspicious about the construct and develop relations with Egypt after Morsi's rise to the presidency, Russia supported peaceful democratic transition in Egypt rather than external intervention. However, Russia

captured the opportunity after the military coup of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt, and it began to support the Sisi regime in Egypt. Furthermore, it can be said that thanks to its counter-revolutionary policies in the Middle East in the post-Arab Spring era, similar to Tunisia in the post-2013 period, Russia has become the dominant actor in the region

When the developments in the relations between Russian Federation and Egypt during and after the Arab Spring are taken into consideration, it can be said that although there seems implementation of contradictory foreign policy by Russia in the first place. However, it should not be forgotten that Russia suspiciously approached the Morsi administration in Egypt due to the effect of Islamism in the Caucasus. As soon as the Morsi regime was overthrown by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Russia assertively approached to Egypt, and it has become successful about the construction of strategic partnership in terms of many fields such as economy, military, and energy. To sum up, it can be argued that Russian foreign policy was mainly driven by counter-revolutionary arguments and anti-Islamism, although Russia supported democratic transition in the first place.

3.3. Libya

Demonstrations and protests and reactions from the external actors in Libya draw different lines of others than Tunisian and Egyptian Spring. For this reason, it can be said that the Libya case was the turning point of the future of the protest movements in the Middle East and North Africa. On the other hand, it was also a turning point for the external actors that most of the global and regional actors supported a peaceful transition from dictatorship to the democratic regimes of the Arab countries up until the Libya Spring. For the first time, external actors made military intervention towards the Arab Spring that changed the future and prospects of the “Arab streets”.

After briefly explaining the exceptionality of Libya, now I can focus on the Russian approach towards Libya. First of all, as in the case of the USSR and Egypt relations during

the Cold War, Libya and the USSR were the two close allies during the Cold War. In Putin's presidency in the Russian Federation, he tried to establish such contacts with Libya as in the case of the Cold War. Putin tried to get benefit from the Libyan oil and gas through making contracts with Libya in terms of the military, economy, energy, and technical issues. However, it can be said that there was a rapprochement between Libya under the Qaddafi regime and the West as soon as international sanctions over Libya was abolished in 2004. For this reason, Putin himself did not materialize the Russian interests over Libya (Schumacher & Nitoiu, 2015).

When the protests and demonstrations began in Libya as a reaction to the long-standing rule of the Qaddafi regime, it was rather different than Qaddafi used of force to eliminate his opponents. For this reason, the possible military intervention to Libya was on the agenda of the West that Russians were quite anxious and suspicious about it. For example, then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev made a statement that it could result in the rise of fanatics to the power in Libya. In his speech, Medvedev considered western sponsored democracy that he implied that the ultimate aim of the West was to bring democracy to Russia. On the other hand, as a parallel argument with Medvedev, Putin made a statement that he emphasized it resulted in the rise of Islamism not only in the region but also in the North Caucasus (Dannreuther & Katz, 2011). From the statements of Russian President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin, it can be argued that Russia, in line with its general foreign policy towards the Arab Spring, mostly considered the rise of fanatics and Islamists in the region. Their rise to power could also bring the escalation between Russia and Islamists in the North Caucasus.

To protect the civilians in the middle of the conflicts between protestors and the Qaddafi regime in Libya, the Arab League called for the no-fly zone over Libya (Aljazeera English, 2011). Since Russia and China abstained, the United Nations Security Council accepted the UN Resolution 1973 which formed the no-fly

zone over Libya. As a result of the decision, NATO-led military operations towards Libya began that it resulted in a fall of the Qaddafi regime. Although it seems that external intervention under the title of bring democracy and protect civilians are contradictory of the Russian general foreign policy towards the Arab Spring, to sustain the good relations with the West, Russia just criticized NATO's military operation towards Libya. However, there were also contradictory positions about NATO operation towards Libya inside the Russian government. On the one hand, Putin described this operation as the crusade when the conditions deteriorated in Libya. On the other hand, Medvedev emphasized the wrong use of the concept of the crusade for NATO operation, and he also stressed the fact that he was not against the UNSC Resolution 1973 (Dannreuther & Katz, 2011). As a result of the contradictory statements from the top-official statesmen of Russia, whether there was a clash between Putin and Medvedev came to the agenda (Financial Times, 2011). When Medvedev made a statement in 2012, however, he accepted that Russia made a tragic mistake due to the abstaining of the UNSC Resolution 1973 (Sudakov, 2012).

After the fall of the Qaddafi regime, the relationships between the new administration of Libya and Russia did not go well that Russia supported oppositions of the interim government of Libya. Later on, as a result of the election and government crisis, Libya was divided into two parts that civil war emerged. Due to its rising role in the region in the post Arab Spring period, its counter-revolutionary foreign policy towards the Arab Spring, and its anti-Islamist foreign policy; Russia also took sides in the conflict of Libya. Although the Russian responses to Tunisia and Egypt and Libya seem contradictory to each other in terms of military intervention, as in the case of Tunisia and Egypt; Russia also gained the opportunity to become active and assertive in Libya's case. Similar to developing relations with Tunisia after the fall of the Nahda government under Rached Ghannouchi and with Egypt after the military coup in 2013; Russia also became active and assertive in Libyan General Khalife Haftar.

3.4. Syria

Syria can be considered as the fourth wave of the Arab Spring that demonstrations and protests against the Assad regime began in March 2011. For the first time, Syrian Diaspora and secular Syrians became influential for the coordination of the demonstrations against the Assad regime. However, the ethnic and sectarian character of the movements gained momentum after the protests and demonstrations turned into civil war. Russia, thanks to its historical ties with Syria and some other factors, was not re-active in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt.

As a general Russian foreign policy motivation towards the Arab Spring, Russia also supported counter-revolutionary movements and anti-Islamism in the case of Syria. When the Syrian uprisings started, it can be said that Russia took lessons from the case of Libya and NATO intervention, for this reason, it constructed its foreign policy towards Syrian uprisings in line with the lessons she took. Since Russia considers the veto power in the United Nations Security Council as a way of achieving a multipolar international system, she vetoed all the resolutions regarding the future of the Assad regime and his continuation during the demonstrations and the civil war (Erşen, 2016). For example, then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev made a statement that he emphasized they did not support any imposition of sanctions on the Syrian regime. On the other hand, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov made a statement that Russia would not allow any provocation under the title of regime change in Syria (Dannreuther & Katz, 2011) Also, Lavrov stated that any reproduction of the Libyan scenario in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain will be rather dangerous (Allison, 2013).

When the civil war and Assad's brutality escalated in Syria, the United Nations Security Council's resolution for the impose sanctions on the Syrian regime was vetoed by Russians and Chinese. Putin harshly criticized the Western statesmen and the media due to claims over the possible military intervention towards Syria, after the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons in the civil war (Erşen, 2016). On the other hand, the

Arab League began to criticize the Assad regime and considered the impose sanctions on the Assad regime for its brutalities over the Syrians. Although Russia had the same thoughts with Arabs about the Libyan case and the future of Libya state, now she thought differently than the Arabs in the Syrian case (Allison, 2013).

Russian diplomatic activities, on the other hand, have not been limited only to the United Nations Security Council. For example, Russia directly involved in the Geneva processes, besides, Russia also tried to bring belligerent groups on the table in Moscow that she proposed a diplomatic solution for the Syrian crisis and the future of Syria in the negotiations and conversations (Erşen, 2016). As another example of Russians' diplomatic activities and seek for the solution of the Syrian civil war, Russians' support for the Annan Plan can be taken into consideration (Allison, 2013). For this reason, it can be claimed that Russia has been the most influential actor in the case of Syria politics and the civil war since the beginning of the crisis.

When it comes to the radicalization of the regions and the rise of Islamism, Russia has always considered the rise of Islamism and radical Islamists as not only threat for the region but also threat for the North Caucasus and the Central Asia. Putin made a statement in February 2011 that he emphasized the possible rise of the radical organizations and groups at the end of the process (Erşen, 2016). Another statement done by Vladimir Putin regarding the rise of Islamism and its relations with Russian foreign policy towards Syria is that Putin himself legitimized Russian foreign policy towards Syria by referencing the rise of Islamism and their holding the power at the end of the Arab Spring (Putin, 2013).

When the series of developments around Syria in the region are taken into consideration, Putin's argument over the rise of Islamism and the emergence of radical terrorist organizations legitimized Russian arguments. First of all, the emergence of ISIS/ISIL/IS/DAESH, its influential role in the region, and its immediate capture of the

territories in Iraq and Syria changed the direction and dimension of the Syrian civil war. Secondly, Caucasian Emirate which was an organization to compete with Russia pledged of allegiance to the Islamic State (DAESH) that it meant radical terrorist organizations could play a significant role over the Caucasia, and the rise of the Islamist and terror threats have been easily felt by the Russians. Another example of this threat is the bomb attack which resulted in nearly 34 casualties in Volgograd province of the Russian Federation; and which was organized by the so-called Islamic State (Erşen, 2016). All these examples legitimized the Russian foreign policy towards Syria that Russia has considered the rise of Islamism and radical terror groups as the threat for its struggle in the North Caucasus against the radicals since the beginning of the Arab Spring.

Another dimension of the Russian foreign policy towards the Syrian civil war in the context of the rise of Islamism and Islamist threat to Russia is related to the foreign fighters coming from the Caucasia, although they have Russian citizenship. Most of the foreign fighters come from Chechnya and North Caucasus. According to Vladimir Putin, there are more than 4000 foreign fighters who coming from these regions. About 1200 fighters coming from the Dagestan region and they fought in the ranks of the Islamic State (DAESH). Another significant group who fought in Syria in the ranks of the Islamic State is Chechens that Chechens compose of nearly 3000 fighters in Syria. Although nearly 600 Chechens come from the Chechnya, the remaining 2400 Chechen fighters come from the Chechen Diaspora around the world, mostly from Europe. About 100 fighters come from the Ingush region in the Russian Federation, while 175 fighters come from the Balkaria region in Russia. Finally, about 50 Kists who are originally subethnos of Chechens but live in Georgia also participated in the war in Syria as the militants of the so-called Islamic State (DAESH) (Hauer, 2018). Due to these foreign fighters who have originally Russian citizenships and who have been waging war for the establishment of their independent states, Russia constructed its foreign policy towards the Arab Spring by

taking into consideration of the rise of Islamism in the region and its spillover effects over the North Caucasia. Besides, Russia also considered when these foreign fighters end their struggle in Syria, there is a possibility that they can return to North Caucasia which means an alarming situation for the Russian Federation (Erşen, 2016).

When it comes to September 2015, Russia began to conduct air operations in Syria which means Russians directly get involved in the Syrian civil war. According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, the basic goal of the Russian operations in Syria is related to the elimination of DAESH forces (Erşen, 2016). However, it has been clear that Russia also organized air operations against the anti-Assad forces, Islamist organizations, and even the US' allies as well as DAESH terrorists. For this reason, Russia was under the criticism that Turkey, the US, Germany, England, France, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia called for Russia to stop the air operations towards the opposition groups and civilians (Aljazeera Türk, 2015).

4. Conclusion

Russia under the Putin administration began to follow an assertive foreign policy for the sake of the creation of a multipolar international system. Arab Spring was the opportunity for Russia to get the benefit and to materialize its interests with respect to the agenda of the foreign policy of the Putin Administration. For this reason, Russia supported the democratic demands of the people in the Arab streets only in the conditions of peaceful transition rather than external intervention to the countries.

Tunisia was the first country experiencing the fall of the dictator and transition to the democracy that Tunisia established the coalition government under the leadership of Rached Ghannouchi who is the leader of the Islamist Al-Nahda movement. Although Russia supported the democratic transition in Tunisia, it can be said that due to the establishment of an Islamist coalition, Russia approached suspiciously towards Tunisia due to the Islamist governments and its possible spillover effects over the North Caucasia and

the Central Asia. After the dismantling of the Islamist government in Tunisia which means Islamist threat ended for the Russians, Russia began to develop its relations with Tunisia.

Egypt was the second country that experienced the demonstrations, protests, fall of the dictatorial regime of Hosni Mubarak, and transition to democracy. After the presidential elections in the country, Mohammed Morsi as a candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood which is an Islamist organization became the first popularly elected president of the country. Although Egypt wanted to develop its relations with Russia, the latter one was rather suspicious due to the Islamism and its rise to power in Egypt. However, Russia and Egypt have become strategic partners in terms of military, economy, and energy sector in the regional affairs, after the military coup and downfall of the Islamist administration in Egypt in 2013 which means the Islamist threat and its possible spillover effects over the North Caucasia and the Central Asia ended for the Russians.

Libya's case can be taken into consideration in terms of taking lessons that Russia adopted its foreign policy towards the Syrian uprising and the civil war accordingly. Although Russia did not support the external intervention during the process of the Arab Spring, it abstained about the creation of the no-fly zone over Libya in the UNSC Resolution 1973. After the fall of Gaddafi, Libya experienced interim government and democratic elections that the newly established government became suspicious about the Russians. However, when the election results in 2014 turned into the conflict in Libya, Russia took the opposite side rather than the government which means that Russia as in the cases of Egypt conducted a counter-revolutionary foreign policy towards Libya.

Finally, Russia mostly achieved its priorities in the Syrian civil war thanks to its taking lessons from the case of Libya. Besides, Russia did not allow any military intervention sponsored and organized by the West towards Syria. At the beginning of the crisis, Putin

warned the West stating that Islamists would get control of the country in case of the collapse of the regime in Syria, which means that it is not only threat for the Russians in the North Caucasia and Central Asia but also threat for the West. Russia under the Putin administration argued that the main aim is to eliminate radical Islamist groups when it militarily intervene in Syria in September 2015.

As a result of the Russian foreign policy towards the Arab Spring and the post-Arab Spring period, it became one of the most influential actors regarding the regional affairs in the Middle East. It could establish good relations with Tunisia after the fall of Islamists; Egypt has become a strategic partner of the Russians after the fall of Morsi administration by a military takeover in 2013; it became one of the most influential actors both on the table and the field in Libya after 2014 election crisis; finally, it has become the patron of the Syria and its future.

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