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Transcript

Russia's Vision for the Middle East and North Africa

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RUSSIA'S VISION FOR THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Rt Hon Sir Roderic Lyne:

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for coming in such numbers. I'm Roderic Lyne, I'm the deputy chairman here at Chatham House. This meeting, as I think you know, is being held on the record. It is being streamed to our members. After the event – this will last for one hour, in our usual way – there will be a drinks reception upstairs.

I'm delighted to introduce Senator Mikhail Vitalievich Margelov, the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the upper house of the Russian parliament, a post he's filled for, I think, exactly 13 years. When he came to London in 2004 – I think I actually persuaded him to come to London in 2004 – he got arrested by the police while walking down Whitehall towards the Houses of Parliament, while accompanied by a Foreign Office official. He was regarded as a deeply suspicious person. Despite that he's been forgiven and he's decided to come back here today. This is his first time speaking at Chatham House – or rather his second, since he's already addressed a smaller meeting of experts upstairs.

If this was the Chatham House Christmas Quiz, the question I would set you is: what does Mikhail Margelov have in common with Hillary Rodham Clinton, President Lula of Brazil, Australian former prime minister John Howard, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Andre Agassi, Stefanie Graf and Dolly Parton? The answer, you would tell me, is that like all of them, he received the award of the Woodrow Wilson Center for Public Service, which he received two years ago. He has been a very regular visitor to Washington over the years. He is very well known on Capitol Hill, was very well known in Strasbourg – where, again, for many years he represented his country at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. He is the special representative of the Russian president for Africa, in which capacity he travels assiduously, and is going on from here to Kenya.

So it's a great delight to see you here, Mikhail. Mikhail is going to speak on Russia's policies and interests – no, sorry, that was the one he's just been speaking on. He's going to speak on Russia's vision for the Middle East and North Africa. The floor is yours.

Mikhail Margelov:

Thank you. First of all, I should say that it is my real pleasure and honour to be here at Chatham House. I'm really thankful for the opportunity to speak first according to the Chatham House Rules and then to do it, let's say, in a more open manner.

When I was a kid and I was brought, in 1967, by my relatives to Tunisia, no one could imagine that the Arab Spring will start from Tunisia. It did. Today, as the consequences of the Arab Spring, we see that this process has an impact on the situation in the Middle East and North Africa. The developments in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and Libya show that the process is still ongoing. Moreover, the Arab Spring has had an adverse effect on the situation in sub-Saharan Africa. Mali's territorial integrity was put at risk and we now hear about the appearance of the great arc of extremism from the Sahel to the Horn of Africa. The regional situation became so tense as to make Russia accept the French military operation to counter the extremists in Mali. The extremism in sub-Saharan Africa is fuelled by the firearms from Libyan arsenals and the manpower of militants that fought in Libya.

I will never forget how I came to Timbuktu right before the coup d'état in Mali. I spent a day talking to tribal and religious leaders, eating seven-year-old mutton which was very difficult to chew and drinking wonderful Castel beer. One of the tribal leaders said to me: 'what happened in Libya ruined my business'. I said, 'what do you mean, ruined your business?' He said: 'today, you can buy a Soviet-made MANPAD (man-portable air-defense system) for the price of two used Kalashnikovs.' It's not a joke. If you go to that region you can see all these so-called Land Cruiser-based movements moving from one place to another. If you can count the arms in each Land Cruiser, you can really see that the problem of arms trafficking in that part of the world is a serious problem.

Initially it seemed inevitable that the dictatorial regimes in North Africa will be replaced by the Islamist ones. Experts referred to the history of the region, where free elections would result in a theocracy. This time, the trend continued, as the Islamists won the elections in Egypt and Tunisia. But the major driving force behind them was the moral-minded social groups, primarily the youth. The Islamists prioritised the creeping Islamization of their countries over the social and economic issues that sparked the Arab Spring. Moreover, with reference to democracy and legitimacy, the radical part of the Muslim Brotherhood declared a total jihad, started to pursue dissidents, blow up Christian churches and so on. This policy resulted in the overthrow of the Islamist president in Egypt and the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. In

Tunisia, we have so far seen only peaceful demonstrations of secular-minded opposition. But the social and economic environment there is unstable.

The situation can only be improved through a rational policy. Libya, as a state, remains to a certain extent chaos. The Islamists are believed to have seized control from the country's leadership. However, the former pro-Gaddafi fighters that have left Libya are now saying, with reference to internal secular forces, that the Islamists have no prospects in the country. The new opposition takes a wait and see approach. It expects the new Libyan regime to collapse on its own.

The Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, called the overthrow of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi 'the fault of what is known as political Islam'. It is obviously an overstatement, as the future of Arab renaissance in the Middle East and North Africa is still uncertain. In Egypt, for example, the number of those supporting a theocracy almost equals the number of those in favour of a secular state. Furthermore, behind moderate Islamists there is a second echelon of extremists and militants. For instance, Tunisia is witnessing a struggle of three opposing forces: the ruling moderate Islamists; the secular opposition; and the Salafists.

In addition, political conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa are reinforced by a religious one: confrontation between Shias and Sunnis. This is also reflected in the region's political landscape: Shia Iran is a staunch supporter of the Alawi Syrian president while Saudi Arabia and Turkey, competing for leadership in the Sunni world, back the Syrian opposition.

At the outset of the Arab Spring, the Russian stance on the issue – though more moderate than the position of the US and France, for example – coincided to a great extent with that of the West. Even at that time, Russia opposed foreign interference in the internal affairs of the riot-hit countries. Russia believed that the situation in each country of the region had to be resolved through political means, avoiding violence and civil war. That stance was prompted by the history of attempts to impose democracy on Islamic countries, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, through intervention. The efforts ended in failed states rather than democracy.

When hostilities in Libya broke out, Russia took a tougher stance, running counter to that of the West. I acted as a mediator in the conflict between Benghazi and Tripoli, as a special representative of the Russian president for cooperation with African countries, for a certain period of time. We were strongly supporting what President Jacob Zuma of South Africa was doing, implementing the strategy of the African Union at that time. The decision of

my first trip to Benghazi was made on the margins of the G8 summit in Deauville. I visited both Benghazi and Tripoli several times. Yet the situation was deadlocked. One of the reasons was that personal enmity toward Gaddafi in Benghazi prevailed over all rational approaches, and any negotiations were conditioned on his stepping down.

Russia's attitude toward the Arab Spring is sometimes labelled as a Cold War legacy. Allegedly, Russia lacks confidence in Arab countries' capabilities to build democracy. That is not so. Russia believes that democracy should be an internal choice of these countries rather than imposed from outside by bayonets. In addition, Arab democracy takes on specific cultural and civilizational features which Western experts tag as 'liberal democracy'. Thus, it is a matter of reasonably taking into consideration specific cultural and historical features of Arab countries rather than lacking confidence in their abilities. It should be noted that in the Arab world there is no democracy that would meet Western criteria. Does this imply that a no-fly zone should be established in all Arab countries, deposing the dictators in other parts of the world at the same time?

In general, Russia's attitude toward North Africa and the Middle East reflects the official principles of its foreign policy. They include: comprehensive efforts to strengthen peace, security and stability; democratization of the international system; collective decision-making in addressing global issues; the primacy of international law; and the central role of the United Nations. Russia's foreign policy gives special attention to safeguarding sovereignty. Therefore, the international coalition's interpretation of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 on Libya scandalized Russian diplomats. It is our firm belief that NATO had no authority to bring down political regimes. The intent of Russia's position on the Middle East and North Africa is to struggle to uphold international law. The lack of such respect will plunge the world into turmoil and make it slip into a permanent state of emergency. When addressing internal conflicts, Russia refers not only to the UN but also to relevant regional bodies such as the African Union, ECOWAS [Economic Community Of West African States] in the case of Mali, and the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] for Yemen.

Today, Russia is coming back to many regions it lost in the 1990s. I'm talking about the African continent and the Middle East. Russia was quite explicit about its interest in those regions even before the Arab Spring, when it began to strengthen military, technical, trade and economic cooperation with regional countries such as Syria, Egypt, Libya, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

The revolution in Libya has led to *de facto* lost contracts concluded with the former regime. The current government, however, has not declared *force majeure*, thus those contracts are still in force. For instance, the Russian Railways company built a railroad in Libya between Benghazi and Sirte, but suspended the construction in 2011 for reasons anyone knows now. Today the company is negotiating with the Libyan authorities the possibility to renew the project if the domestic situation allows.

In other words, Russia is ready for cooperation with new leaders in North Africa, for early and fresh contracts. In mid-November 2013, Russia and Egypt held a 2+2 ministerial meeting in Cairo. The ministers' efforts have helped the Russian-Egyptian Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation to resume its work. The Russian side made proposals on investment cooperation in energy and heavy industry. Both countries have started to develop a legal framework for military and technical cooperation, suspended under President [Anwar] Sadat. Russia will provide Egypt with military equipment valued at \$2 billion, which has been recently refused to them by the United States of America.

Although our relations have been suspended for some considerable time, Egypt continues to view Russia as a reliable partner. The 2+2 meeting reached the understanding that the peoples of North Africa and the Middle East should determine their own future without external interference. Besides, the Egyptian and Russian parties discussed the Syrian crisis on the basis of these positions as well.

I was preparing this message in the midst of debates over the Geneva II conference. The National Coalition for a Syrian Revolutionary Forces has decided to participate in this conference. With regard to Syrian events, the world community is divided into two camps: the West, and the developing countries – China, India, South Africa, Brazil and Iran – which support Russia's position on Syria. The opinion on the world that is being shaped in these countries differs from the Western one.

Russia has its interests in the Middle East as a whole and in Syria in particular. It is the biggest supplier of arms to Syria, worth about \$4 billion. As a matter of fact, this country is Russia's ally in the region. You do not abandon your allies – the Libyan scenario, according to Russia's view on the recent Libyan experience, will destroy Syria. It may lead to aggravation of the situation and direct involvement of other regional and international players in the conflict. The hotbed of terrorism that will emerge in the Syrian territory will

spread beyond the region, up to the former Soviet republics in Central Asia and some parts of the Russian Federation.

Today, the West is assisting the Syrian opposition with arms, but in the case of military intervention this assistance will acquire a direct combat character. Meanwhile the members of the terrorist groups associated with Al-Qaeda are fighting in the ranks of the Syrian opposition. It is known that the militants of the Syrian National Front are fighting on the side of the opposition in Syria, along with the Free Syrian Army. These are the groups of Ahrar al-Sham and at least more than that, six or seven other groups. They are considered as radical Islamists, while Jabhat al-Nusra is recognized as a terrorist group by the United States of America.

The reasons why the West supports its worst enemies in Syria are not clear, as well as the reasons why the United States of America supports the Muslim Brotherhood. After Mohamed Morsi's overthrow, the Americans refused to render military assistance to the new Egyptian authorities, contrary to Israel's position on this issue. Therefore, Cairo has diversified its relations with the help of Moscow, Beijing and other BRIC countries.

The Russian initiative to transfer Syrian chemical weapons and to place them under international control, as well as destroy its arsenals, backed off the red line drawn in Washington beyond which the US planned to attack the Syrian military targets. By the way, these plans were not supported in the US and in the UK parliament. Not only in these countries – particularly, nobody was ready to fight in Syria, especially without UN sanction. Thus, the Russian initiative turned out to become a good way out for all parties concerned. Today, according to observers, the grand diplomacy is emerging to solve the Syrian issue, first of all by joint efforts of the Russian Federation and the United States of America. This is an inspiring cooperation of the parties amid the conflict of interests on the European missile system, Iran, integration of the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] countries, the Magnitsky case and other cases.

Russia's position on Syria stems from the fact that the future responses of the world community to intrastate conflicts depend on the model of the Syrian crisis solution. Russia insists on diplomatic settlement of such conflicts rather than military ones, as has already been the practice. The Russian and US diplomatic experience leaves no doubt about it. If diplomacy fails to solve the Syrian conflict, the devastating civil – and at the same time, religious – war will continue in Syria. This will make a hellish mixture of the Libyan, Iraqi,

Lebanese and Afghan options, while Syria will become a terrorist camp posing a threat far beyond the region.

The terrorist threat is an important factor influencing Russia's position in the Middle East, but Russia's interests are threatened not only by the export of terrorism but also by the spread of nuclear weapons to the south of its borders. That is why Russia stands for making the Middle East a nuclear-free zone and solving the Iran nuclear dossier problems in a diplomatic way. The ideal solution would be to create a common security system in the region. However, the relations between the states and different religions are so tense here that any agreement nowadays is difficult, if not impossible.

Summing up my introductory remarks, I would like to mention again: when Russia is talking about its foreign policy in the Middle East and Africa, Russia is talking about it as a responsible member of the international community, as a P5 member country which shares responsibility for what is happening in this part of the globe with other P5 member states. We do not want to be part of a problem in any political crisis; we want to be part of a solution. I think that in the Syrian crisis we showed that. Thank you.

Rt Hon Sir Roderic Lyne:

Thank you very much, Senator Margelov. You've covered a wide span of issues with great concision, which allows us plenty of time for questions.