Professor Mark N. Katz
The Impact of the Arab Spring on Saudi-Russian Relations

I. Introduction

One important result of the Arab Spring – especially its eruption and persistence in Syria – has been a rapid deterioration in Saudi-Russian relations. This is largely due to Moscow and Riyadh being on opposite sides in Syria: Moscow supports the regime of Bashar al-Assad and wants it to remain in power, while Riyadh supports the regime’s Sunni opponents who are seeking the downfall of Assad’s minority Alawite regime. Since Moscow and Riyadh both have important stakes in the outcome of the ongoing conflict in Syria, their differences over this issue are quite serious. But while differences over Syria may have been the immediate cause of the deterioration in Saudi-Russian relations, this has led to the rise (or perhaps more accurately, the revival) of other, larger fears that Moscow and Riyadh have about each other.

This article will examine the various factors contributing to the recent deterioration in Saudi-Russian relations, and will explore the prospects for their relationship either improving or remaining poor. First, though, something needs to be said about the history of Saudi-Russian relations before the ‘Arab Spring’.

II. From Hostility to Rapprochement

During the Cold War era, Saudi-Soviet relations were downright antagonistic. During this period, Moscow backed several regimes that were hostile (at least initially) to the Kingdom, including Arab Nationalist ones in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and North Yemen as well as Marxist-Leninist ones in South Yemen, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan. The Saudis had no doubt that Moscow sought the downfall of the Kingdom. Further, growing Soviet oil exports combined with Moscow’s refusal to join OPEC (and thus accept the oil production limits that OPEC membership required) resulted in the Soviet Union becoming an increasingly formidable competitor in the oil export market, which Saudi Arabia was completely dependent upon for its economic well-being.

The Soviets, for their part, were frustrated that the close Saudi-American alliance served to frustrate Moscow’s efforts in the region both to promote the rise of anti-American regimes and to prevent those that did arise from gravitating back toward the American (and Saudi) sphere of influence (as most notably occurred with Egypt and Somalia in the 1970s). After the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Moscow came to see Saudi support for the mujahidin as one of the most important obstacles to their effort to pacify that country. Finally, the Saudi decision to flood the market with oil and thus bring down its price dramatically was an important contributor to the undermining of the Soviet economy in the 1980s (Katz 1986, 126-56; Nizameddin 1999, 184-90).

Despite a brief rapprochement that occurred between Moscow and Riyadh toward the end of the Mikhail Gorbachev era, Saudi-Russian relations became antagonistic once again during the 1990s – for reasons similar to why they had been hostile beforehand. Low oil prices prevailed during the 1990s. The increase in Russian oil production, as well as Moscow’s continued refusal to join OPEC, hurt the economic interests of the Kingdom (as well as of other OPEC members). While pro-Soviet Marxist regimes in South Yemen, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan all collapsed, post-Soviet Russia’s improved relations with Iran (as well as ongoing ties to Iraq and Syria) were worrisome to Riyadh. Moscow, for its part, blamed the problems it faced in Chechnya (perhaps with some degree of justification) on Saudi support for rebel forces there. The Kremlin feared that Saudi Arabia was doing again in Chechnya what it had done in Afghanistan to undermine Moscow’s influence (Katz 2001). After the 9/11 attacks against the United States, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin himself frequently pointed out that 15 of the 19 bombers were Saudi citizens, and appeared to offer Washington an alliance with Moscow against what he portrayed as the common ‘Saudi threat’ (Katz 2004).

In 2003, though, Moscow and Riyadh achieved a rapprochement that lasted until the outbreak of the Arab Spring. Several factors contributed to this, including the common Saudi-Russian opposition to the Bush administration’s intervention in Iraq, the seeming success of Putin’s efforts to pacify Chechnya, and Riyadh’s support for continued Russian
rule over the Muslim North Caucasus. In addition, the dramatic rise in the price of oil through 2008 (as well as its partial recovery after its collapsing dramatically in mid-2008) benefited both countries. Differences over oil production policies were just not as pressing when all oil producers were benefiting from a high oil price environment. Of course, some Saudi-Russian differences remained. Riyadh was dismayed about Moscow’s continuing military and nuclear ties to Tehran, while Moscow was frustrated that the arms sales and economic relationships it hoped to build with the Kingdom remained well below Russian expectations. Nevertheless, the Saudi-Russian rapprochement of 2003 led to the warmest ever period in Saudi-Russian relations, and was an important diplomatic achievement for Putin in particular (Katz 2009).

III. From Rapprochement to Renewed Hostility

In early 2011 when it first broke out, Moscow and Riyadh appeared to share similar views about the Arab Spring. Both, after all, perceived authoritarian governments that saw democratic change – especially via revolution – in countries near them as threatening. If anything, Moscow seemed to be more accepting of change in Tunisia and Egypt than Riyadh. Moscow even expressed its understanding for Saudi intervention in Bahrain to protect the Sunni minority regime there against its Shia majority population. Nor did Moscow express opposition to Saudi efforts to resolve the Arab Spring in Yemen through seeking the resignation of that country’s longtime president, Ali Abdullah Saleh (Katz 2012).

Moscow and Riyadh even appeared to cooperate on how to deal with the Arab Spring in Libya at first (“Russia, Saudi Arabia Say Intervention in Libya Will only Aggravate Problems” 2011). Moscow expressed its opposition to the growing calls in the West for external intervention to prevent the regime of Muammar Qaddafi from retaking the opposition stronghold of Benghazi. But when the Arab League – primarily at the behest of Saudi Arabia – called for the UN Security Council to impose a ‘no-fly’ zone in Libya, Moscow (as well as China) abstained on the resolution, thus allowing it to pass. At the time, commentators suggested that Moscow did this in order to preserve good relations with America in particular and the West in general, but an equal – if not more important – Russian motive may have been a desire to preserve good relations with Saudi Arabia, the Arab League, and Arab public opinion. Moscow, though, became unhappy when the Security Council-sanctioned a ‘no-fly’ zone which it had acquiesced to turned out to be active support by the U.S. and both its Western and Arab allies to the Libyan opposition’s efforts to overthrow the Qaddafi regime (which Moscow had longstanding ties with that Putin himself had done much to further). Convinced that it had been taken advantage of over Libya, Moscow was determined not to acquiesce to any UN Security Council resolution against Syria for fear that America and its allies would also exceed its terms to bring about the downfall of the Assad regime (Heath 2012).

However, as it became clear over the course of 2011 that the Assad regime could not crush the uprising and that Saudi Arabia (along with Qatar) was doing far more to aid the Syrian opposition than the U.S. and its Western allies, Moscow began to reassess Saudi Arabia’s motives and intentions. Instead of seeing the Kingdom as being, like Russia, a status quo power that sought to preserve the stability of the existing authoritarian order in the Arab World, Russian observers began to see Riyadh as taking advantage of the Arab Spring to spread its own influence through supporting Sunni Islamist forces. Saudi support for conservative Islamic parties and forces in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria were all seen as evidence that Riyadh was acting to implement this grand vision (“Noviy lider na Blizhnem Vostoke” 2012). Similarly to the type of Russian analysis of Riyadh’s policy that was prevalent before the Saudi-Russian rapprochement of 2003, the more conspiracy-minded Russian observers portrayed Riyadh as seizing upon the popularity of the Arab Spring in the wider Muslim World to support Sunni Islamists in Russia’s own Muslim regions – especially the North Caucasus (Mudallali 2012). What was especially frustrating to these Russian observers was that while they were to Russian ones, America and the West refused to understand this.

Other Russian observers saw Saudi support for the Syrian opposition as not being intended to weaken Russia, but to weaken Iran instead – specifically by bringing about the
downfall of its Alawite allies in Syria and seeing them replaced by a Sunni regime which would not be friendly (indeed, would probably be antagonistic) towards Tehran. But in pursuing this anti-Iranian aim, Riyadh’s actions would end up harming Russia too – especially if regime change in Syria resulted in the loss of Russia’s naval facilities at the Syrian port of Tartus, or of Russian arms sales to and other economic ties with Damascus, and of Russian influence in the region generally. Russian observers also fear that if Saudi Arabia floods the market to reduce the price of oil in order to hurt the Iranian economy, the Russian economy will also be hurt due to Moscow’s own dependence on oil export revenues (Glazova 2012).

For their part, Saudi commentators have been highly critical of Moscow’s continued support for the Assad regime despite its increasing brutality, the persistence and growth of the opposition against it, and the rising opprobrium in the Arab World that Moscow’s policy has resulted in (“Vetoing the Freedom” 2011). One Saudi analyst suggested that Moscow has allied with Shi’a forces – Iran, the Assad regime, and Hezbollah in Lebanon (Alhomayed 2012).

Matters came to a head in July 2012 when – after Saudi officials and commentators had repeatedly criticized the Assad regime for its human rights violations – the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) issued a statement criticizing the July 9 Saudi government crackdown against Shi’a protesters in the Kingdom’s Eastern Province. “We expect that the authorities of the Kingdom,” the Russian MFA’s commissioner for human rights, democracy and the rule of law sanctimoniously declared, “will undertake all necessary measures to settle the situation in its eastern regions, to avoid conflict, including confrontation on interconfessional basis, and to ensure the observance of conventional human rights, including the right for freedom of expression of opinion, peaceful demonstrations and freedom of associations, as it is prescribed by the law” (“Comment of K. K. Dolgov” 2012).

This led to a furious response from Riyadh. The Saudi Foreign Ministry accused Moscow of “blatant interference” in the Kingdom’s internal affairs. A Saudi MFA official noted that, “The Kingdom hopes that such strange remarks do not aim at diverting attention away from the brutal and savage massacres the Syrian regime is committing against its people with support from well-known parties that set obstacles in the face of any effort to end bloodshed in Syria” (Alhomayed 2012). A columnist for the Saudi-owned pan-Arab newspaper, Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, observed that, “Today, when Russia talks about human rights, with its notorious record in this field, this is like a prostitute giving a lecture on the glories of virtue” (Shobokshi 2012).

Although Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov insisted that his colleague’s statement was not interference with the Kingdom’s internal affairs (“Russia Not Interfering” 2012), Riyadh was not mollified. Shortly afterward, a Saudi businessman announced the cancellation of a series of contracts with Russian companies “in protest against Moscow’s support for the political regime in Syria” (Toumi 2012). Although he declared that he was not acting at the behest of the Saudi government, the campaign launched by Saudi King Abdullah himself raising millions of dollars for the Syrian people (Toumi 2012) must have been an ominous reminder to Moscow of similar Saudi fundraising campaigns to help the Afghans in the 1980s and the Chechens in the 1990s.

IV. Conclusion

Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, Saudi-Russian relations have clearly deteriorated over Syria in particular. Not only do they have diametrically opposing interests with regard to the latter, but their pursuit has aroused larger fears about the intentions of the other. But how serious is this deterioration in their relationship? Can it be overcome, or is it likely to remain?

There are several important Russian institutions which have a strong interest in building and maintaining good Saudi-Russian ties. These include Rosoboronexport (the Russian arms exporting arm, which has long sought to sell weapons to the Kingdom), Lukoil (which already has some contracts for work in Saudi Arabia, and seeks to obtain more), and Russia’s official Muslim bodies (which seek larger quotas from the Kingdom for Muslim pilgrims from Russia to make the hajj). However, none of these institutions is in a position to influence the Putin administration to alter its policy toward Syria in order to improve Saudi-Russian
relations for their sake. Similarly, there does not appear to be any Saudi institution willing or able to lobby for changes in Saudi foreign policy (such as ending support for the opposition to the Assad regime in Syria) to improve Saudi-Russian relations.

Although Syria is at the center of Saudi-Russian differences now, one contingency that might - ironically enough - change this would be the downfall of the Assad regime and the rise of one based on the majority Sunni community there. Although it is highly doubtful that Iran could have good relations with this new Syrian regime, Russia might be able to do so in time. After all, despite Moscow's opposition to the U.S.-led intervention that overthrew Saddam Hussein and its occupation of Iraq, Russia now has rather good relations with the new Iraqi government (better, perhaps, than the U.S. has). Whether initially successful or not, a pragmatic Russian attempt to normalize Moscow's relations with a Sunni majority government in Damascus could do much to defuse the current animosity in Saudi-Russian relations - unless, of course, something else occurs to antagonize them.

And that is highly likely. For if the Arab Spring ends up succeeding in Syria, it is difficult to imagine that it will stop there. If a democratic opposition movement then rises up (or more accurately, is revived) in Iran, and if Saudi Arabia supports it (or Moscow just believes that Riyadh is doing so), Russian fears about Saudi intentions to harm Moscow's interests will continue or even intensify. And if similar movements rise up in any of the Muslim republics of the former USSR or within Russia's own Muslim regions, Moscow is highly likely to blame these occurrences on Riyadh - whether or not the latter actually supports them. Even absent the Arab Spring, issues such as Iran and each other's oil production policies will continue to irritate Saudi-Russian relations. But in the highly likely event that the Arab Spring continues, and especially if it spreads beyond the Arab World to Iran and the former Soviet Union, Saudi-Russian relations will definitely remain antagonistic.

V. Bibliography


http://www.mei.edu/content/russia-and-arab-spring.


Martin’s Press.


http://www.rbth.ru/articles/2012/07/16/russia_not_interfering_in_saudi_arabias_internal_affairs_16399.html.

“Russia, Saudi Arabia Say Intervention in Libya Will Only Aggravate Problems.” 2011. Ministry of
Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 3 March (World News Connection database).

