

## **The role of the North Caucasus in the Russian Middle East strategy and Russian – Arab world relations**

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**Abstract:** The North Caucasus Federal District plays a double role as a buffer zone which protects Russia from external attacks in the southern borders and as an economic ‘bridge’ between Europe and Asia directly linked to the Middle East and the Gulf countries. Always described as a volatile, unstable, underdeveloped, and dangerous region, the North Caucasus has attracted political, military, and economic interests of the Arab countries which have tried to influence the local dynamics through a religious and ideological campaign, Muslim and charity NGOs, and financial investments. In this paper, the author would like to underline the importance of the North Caucasus for the Russian Middle East policy and the Russian - Arab World relations dealing with the Arab interests perpetrated in the region to influence the socio-cultural and political environment mainly through religion and business cooperation. Also, this study considers the fact that Russia has several times described the Arab countries’ strategy as a threat for the stability of the North Caucasus where the Kremlin has been fighting for decades the rise of insurgency and militant groups linked to the global terrorist network.

**Keywords:** North Caucasus, Russia, Middle East, Arab world, Islam, international relations

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Date of Submission: 01-06-2018

Date of acceptance: 18-06-2018

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### **I. Introduction**

Media agencies and political analysts often describe the Northern Caucasus Federal District as a volatile, unstable, underdeveloped region under the strict control of the Russian authority. Indeed, several journalists and Western scholars have covered the area mainly focusing their attention on security problems, terrorist attacks, local conflicts (especially the Russian – Chechen Wars), ethnic clashes and human rights abuses. According to the majority of articles and reports published in the last decade, it seems that the North Caucasus Federal District might only have a negative role in the Russian national policy and it represents the primary domestic problem of the Kremlin.

This cynical and superficial description of the district does not reflect the reality entirely and does not take into consideration all the features that characterise the region. Undeniably, the North Caucasus has a strategic position which remains as relevant today in the geopolitics as it was in the past and attracts the interests of the Russian Federation, the Western countries, and the Arab World.

This paper intends to answer the following questions: could the North Caucasus play an essential role in the Russian Middle East policy and the Russian – Arab World relations? What are the challenges and the threats which Russia could face in the North Caucasus regarding its direct link to the Middle East and Arab World?

In fact, on the one hand, the North Caucasus is a buffer zone fundamental for the Kremlin’s national and foreign policy, necessary to prevent an external attack at the Southern Russian border.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it is an economic and strategic bridge which links Europe and Asia and allows the Russian Federation to expand its interests and influence in the Middle East, the Anatolian Peninsula, the Caspian Sea region, the Black Sea region, and Central Asia. On the other hand, the North Caucasus has stood guard and protected the Muslim world, Turkey and Iran from Russian expansion projects for 200 years. During the XIX century, the Russian Empire got stuck in the region fighting against the local insurgency in the so-called Caucasian War (1817 – 1864). In the XX century, during the Soviet period, the uprising and wars in Dagestan and Chechnya forced Russia to abandon its plans of expansion in Iran. Nowadays the North Caucasian republics play a decisive role for the independence and autonomy of the Southern Caucasian states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) because they can be seen as a “neutral” zone which separates Russia and Transcaucasia, and hence the Middle East.<sup>2</sup>

## II. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

This research is a qualitative study that attempts to explain the importance of the North Caucasus in the Russian Middle East strategy and the Russian – Arab World diplomatic, economic and strategic relations. The methodology used in this paper is based on a literature review about geopolitics, history, security, ethnography, and books, journal articles, and NGO reports concerning the North Caucasus's ties with the Muslim Arab world. Within this context this research consists of three parts:

1. Introduction to the Russian strategy in the Middle East and the Arab Muslim world which has evolved since the collapse of the Soviet Union and changed significantly after the “Arab Spring”.
2. Description of the historical, cultural, social, religious and political connection between the North Caucasus and the Arab Muslim world focusing the attention on the role of some North Caucasian countries and diaspora communities in the field of international relations, finance and diplomacy.
3. Overview and underline the potential threats represented by the Arab countries’ strategies and propaganda in the North Caucasus for the Russian Federation and possible future development in the regional dynamics.

## III. RUSSIAN MIDDLE EAST POLICY AND NORTH CAUCASUS

The Kremlin’s involvement in the Middle East cannot be interpreted only as a legacy of the Cold War or the Russian desire to conquer or control the world but can be explained by the fact that the region links the Mediterranean Sea and North Africa with the Russian Federation, specifically the North Caucasus. Hereafter, any political destabilisation, economic crisis, and military conflict in the Middle East have a significant impact on Russia and represents a threat to the national security and stability.<sup>3</sup>

For this reason, Russia has always been interested in the Middle East; its policy followed the footprint of the Soviet Union – Arab World relations, has evolved distinctively since 1991, and changed particularly after the so-called “Arab Spring”. Before 2011, the Kremlin built harmonious relations with both states and non-state actors in the Muslim-Arab World avoiding its involvement in the Sunni-Shia religious contrast and the military intervention and presence in the region. The “colour revolutions” in the post-Soviet space and the collapse of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Qaddafi’s regimes urged Russia to become more involved in the Middle East’s dynamics with the aims at preventing any destabilisation that could approach Russian frontiers.<sup>45</sup>

In the first decade of the XXI century, Russia was threatened by the “colour revolutions” in the post-Soviet space (Ukraine, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan) which Moscow interpreted as a US attempt to destabilise the Russian borders and decrease the Kremlin’s influence in those states considered part of the vital Russian space. The Arab Spring in 2011 revitalised the Russian concerns of the “colour revolutions” seen not only as ordinary civil conflicts but as a Western geopolitical strategy to challenge the Russian interests in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>6</sup>

After Qaddafi’s regime collapse, Russia renewed its interest in the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea perpetrating the policy of opening the access to the warm seas. The military intervention in the Syrian Civil War in favour of Bashar al-Assad could be justified by the Russian will to promote its idea of great power by opening commercial markets in the Mediterranean Sea, supporting its credibility as an ally for the Arab countries and facing the potential role of political Islam in Russia.<sup>7</sup>

Also, the Russian presence in the Middle East, expressly in Syria, relates to the situation in the North Caucasus, a region which faces the problem of the domestic legitimacy and the local terrorism often exploited by Arab countries and the Muslim world to support their interests and influence.<sup>8</sup>

The war on terrorism can be another reason which motivates the Russian intervention in the Middle East. More than 2400 Russians and nearly 4000 nationals of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia have joined the ranks of jihadists in Syria.<sup>9</sup> Central Asian citizens from former Soviet space organised the latest terrorist attacks in Istanbul, Saint Petersburg, and Stockholm, up to 8 percent of IS fighters hold a Russian passport and the North Caucasians represent a robust contingent of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. The Russian intervention in the Middle East and the promotion of its interests are part of the “war on terrorism” whose goal is to avoid the affirmation of the Islamic State inside the Russian Federation, particularly in the North Caucasus Federal District where the Russian authorities have fought against extremist religious groups and jihadi militants in a predominantly Muslim region.

Islam is the religion of many ethnic minorities in Russia and Muslims are now the most significant minority in the Russian Federation (nearly 15 percent of the Russian population is Muslim). The North Caucasus, together with the Urals and Volga regions, is one of the areas where Islam is the first religion practised by the local population which backed its roots 1300 years ago at the time of the Arab Conquest.<sup>10</sup>

Since the beginning of the XXI century Russia has tried to improve its image among Muslims. The Russian Federation became an observer in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Putin in his speeches also described Russia as a Muslim country, and on the Russian territory under Putin’s Administration more than 7500 mosques have been built.<sup>1112</sup> With the purpose of promoting its image and role in the Muslim world the Russian Federation can use the North Caucasus as an example of success of its religious policy because Islam in

the North Caucasus Federal District is the main religion, and it is protected by “The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations” adopted in 1997. It should be noted that the Chechen Republic of Ramzan Kadyrov could help the Kremlin in this process.

Kadyrov’s behaviour regarding Islam and the Islamisation of Chechen society could be part of the project of the Head of Chechnya to become the prominent figure of the Muslim *ummah* (community) in Russia. To achieve this goal, Kadyrov has not only promoted his figure in Chechnya and the North Caucasus but has also established international contacts with the countries of the Middle East thanks to meeting with local politicians, businessmen, religious activists, and official visits to Middle Eastern nations.<sup>13</sup>

It is possible to claim that Kadyrov has become one of the primary points of contact between the Russian Federation and the Middle East and has increased his popularity among the Muslims. Not only Kadyrov but the entire Chechnya has a particular link with the Middle East because of historical reasons: in the XIX-XX centuries the Chechens migrated to the Levant, including Syria, becoming part of the Middle Eastern society, and some of their descendants served in the highest levels of military, security, and administrative organs.<sup>14,15</sup> These Chechens, exploiting their roles and position inside the Levantine societies, could encourage the cooperation with the Russian Federation and promote the Russian policy and interests in the region.

In 2004 Akhmat Kadyrov pledged an official visit to Riyadh delivering the Russian President’s message to the Crown Prince Abdullah asking Saudi Arabia’s help to rebuild Chechnya.<sup>16</sup> This request could be considered the starting point of the new Russian – Saudi relations and endorsed the Chechen Republic with the role of mediator between the parties. In the last decade, Ramzan Kadyrov has become an honorary and welcomed guest at the royal household in Saudi Arabia.

In general, Chechnya has increased the number of its political, economic, and cultural contacts in the Middle East; Kadyrov has met several times the representatives of Jordan, Palestine, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Turkey, looking to attract capital for new investment projects.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding the Muslim world, Chechnya offers a different image of the Russian Federation, a country where the government respects Muslims’ rights, protects the *ummah*, and contrasts the religious extremist groups. The decision to support Iran, Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon has damaged the relations between Russia and the Sunni Muslims. Therefore, the Chechen Republic of Ramzan Kadyrov could become a junction among the Kremlin, Riyadh, Doha and Abu Dhabi and a tool to restore the Russian popularity in the Sunni Muslim world.<sup>18</sup>

On the one hand, the Chechen diplomacy in the Middle East could help the Russian – Arab World relations, but on the other side, Kadyrov has been improving his role and importance in the North Caucasus and the Russian Muslim community. In the future, the Chechen leader could claim a more important role in the region trying to shift his power from the only Chechen Republic to the entire area becoming the North Caucasus’ leader and challenging the Kremlin’s authority.

Not only the Chechens, but in general the North Caucasian diaspora is present in Syria, Iraq, and Jordan. Recently the Circassians, Chechens and Dagestanis residents in Iraq tried to unify their communities under one national name “Caucasus” with the goal of seeking recognition under the Iraqi Constitution and being protected by the Government as Iraqi minorities. These communities are the heirs of the tribes which were forced to abandon their homeland in 1864 after the Caucasian War and emigrated to the Ottoman Empire. The Turkish authorities forced them to move from Turkey to Syria, Jordan, and Iraq where they have been assimilated by the local society. If this goal of recognition under the Iraqi Constitution will be accomplished, the Northern Caucasian communities could have their representatives inside the Iraqi Parliament and could help or block the Russian policy in the country.<sup>19</sup>

Russia has always tried to attract foreign direct investment in the North Caucasus and the national development projects. The North Caucasus possibly will become the economic and banking hub for the Arab investments and financial funds: on February 16th, 2017, the International Islamic Business Association (IAIB) publicised its plans to promote Islamic Banking throughout the North Caucasus Federal District, an opportunity to draw attention of the Arab and Muslim investors in the region and the Russian Federation. IAIB stated that four offices of Islamic Banking could be respectively open in Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachaevo-Circassia in a presentation organised in Moscow during the official visit from Islamic Development Bank representative Alabodi Khaled Mohammed from the United Arab Emirates with whom the association would like to cooperate in developing Islamic finance in Russia.<sup>20</sup>

The Russian opening to the world of Islamic finance may perhaps be a benefit for the entire nation because can create investment opportunities for Islamic business not only in the oil sector but also in tourism and agriculture. By contrast, the Russian legislation does not encourage Islamic banking, and currently, Islamic banks do not exist in Russia.<sup>21</sup>

#### **IV. ARAB COUNTRIES’ INTERESTS AS A THREAT FOR RUSSIA**

Since the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the North Caucasus experienced a lack of religious figures after decades of religious repression. Consequently, foreign imams from the Arab world, mainly from the Gulf countries, arrived in the region to fill this vacuum of spiritual guides and promote their religious ideologies (Wahhabism, Salafism, the Muslim Brotherhood) and political Islam challenging the Russian central authority.

Hence, political Islam has become a threat as it might influence Muslims in Russia, particularly those who live in the North Caucasus, Tatarstan, and Bashkortostan. The affirmation of different Muslim ideologies might result in loss of control over the region and spread of religious extremist groups in those areas strategically fundamental for their geographical position, natural resources, critical infrastructure, and communications connecting the European Russian with the Asian Russian sides.<sup>22</sup>

Various Arab countries have shown their interests in the North Caucasus perpetrating their policies avoiding a common strategy and response. Many Arab states have supported Russia for its territorial integrity during the two Russian – Chechen wars and the region has not been transformed in “the second Afghanistan” with thousands of Arab volunteers supporting the local militants and fighting against the Russian forces. Nevertheless, countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Qatar have carried out their political and economic strategies trying to destabilise or use the North Caucasus for their personal and national goals.<sup>23</sup>

Saudi Arabia was one of the Arab countries more involved in this process financially and economically supporting local religious organisations and jihadist terrorist groups with the purpose of spreading the Wahhabi ideology and contrasting the Shia Muslims.

In the past, the Saudis supported Afghanistan’s mujahideen during the Russian – Afghan War (1979 – 1989), sided with the Chechens during the Russian – Chechen wars, and created a network of contacts in Dagestan and Ingushetia. At that time, the Kremlin accused Saudi nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) operating in Russia of being involved in “espionage operations” with the purpose of destabilising the Russian Federation and weakening its influence in the former Soviet Space and the Middle East.<sup>24</sup>

Nowadays Saudi Arabia is considered the leading Russian rival in the Middle East after the United States; the Russian support of Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian Civil War and the close alliance with Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon are reasons of contrast between Moscow and Riyadh. Even if Russia has always tried to establish good relations with Saudi Arabia and cooperation in the Middle East, the two parties have different goals and strategies in the region and could be considered antagonists.

Turkey has shown particular interest in the Russian North Caucasus, a region targeted by the pan-Turkic project whose goal is to unite all States whose population speaks Turkic languages under Ankara’s leadership.<sup>25</sup>

Besides, the Northern Caucasian diaspora is significantly active in Turkey, has a connection with businessmen and authorities in Adygea, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and has affected the Turkish foreign policy and its attitude towards the Russian Federation.<sup>26</sup> Turkey has several times hosted forums, workshops, and conferences held by NGOs and think tanks supporting the North Caucasus autonomy and independence from the Russian central authority. One of the most active communities is the Circassians who protested against the 2014 Winter Olympic Games of Sochi and tried to attract the international community attention with the aim of boycotting the event, promoting the so-called “Circassian Genocide” and contrasting the Russian authority and economic strategy in the region.

The Circassian community, around thirty thousand to one hundred thousand of people (according to different sources) who lives in the Middle East, especially in Syria, Turkey, and Jordan, might represent a threat because of its activity of opposition to the Russian presence in the North Caucasus. The Circassians are loyal to their respective governments and can act as agents who promoted their interests in Russia and those of the foreign countries thanks to their ties with their homeland.<sup>27</sup>

The Syrian Civil War has menaced the North Caucasian diaspora in the Middle East and has convinced many people to repatriate to their homeland. Resettlement of Circassian, Chechens, Dagestanis may create tension in a region which has faced economic and social problems for years. Furthermore, some of these people could take part in the local fight supporting the militants or influence the religious background promoting Salafi ideology, political Islam, and the interest of Arab countries.

The North Caucasus is also of particular interest for Iran which remains the primary exporter to the republics of the North Caucasus Federal District along with Azerbaijan, China, and Germany. The need to increase its export might push Iran to get more economically involved in the district financially supporting local projects, especially those related to the field of transport communication. The Iranian interests in the North Caucasus market and Teheran’s involvement in economic projects should strengthen the Russian – Iranian ties and promote the image of the Kremlin inside the Shia Muslim community, an opportunity which could further deteriorate the Russian – Sunni Muslim relations.

## V. CONCLUSION

The Russian's Muslim community has never been separated by the Muslim world and the Volga region, Crimea and the North Caucasus have never cut their ties with the Middle East. Therefore, any event in the Middle East has an impact among Russian Muslims and the recent political and economic development in the Arab world can influence the Muslims community in the Russian Federation.<sup>28</sup>

After the Arab Spring in 2011 several negative trends, such as the rising of the Islamic State or the affirmation of political Islam, have influenced the Russian Muslim *ummah* which is nowadays more involved in the regional dynamics than before at the time of the Soviet Union. In this picture, the North Caucasus and the North Caucasian diaspora play a fundamental and strategic role in the Russian Middle East policy and the Russian – Arab World relations as a barrier and a bridge between the Russian Federation and the Arab Muslim world. Overcoming the economic and social problems in the North Caucasus is not only a primary goal in the Russian domestic policy but represents an asset in the Russian foreign policy which the Kremlin might use to face Middle Eastern problems and destabilisation process as well as strengthen its ties with Arab countries. Indeed, the Kremlin could exploit the link between the region and the Middle East to spread its strategy and foreign policy and to promote its image. To achieve this goal, Russia needs to control and stabilise the North Caucasus Federal District because this region has become a target of the Arab countries' geopolitical and religious interests focused on limiting the Russian influence in the Middle East and the Arab Muslim world.

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Giuliano Bifulchi "The role of the North Caucasus in the Russian Middle East strategy and Russian – Arab world relations." IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). vol. 23 no. 06, 2018, pp. 21-26.