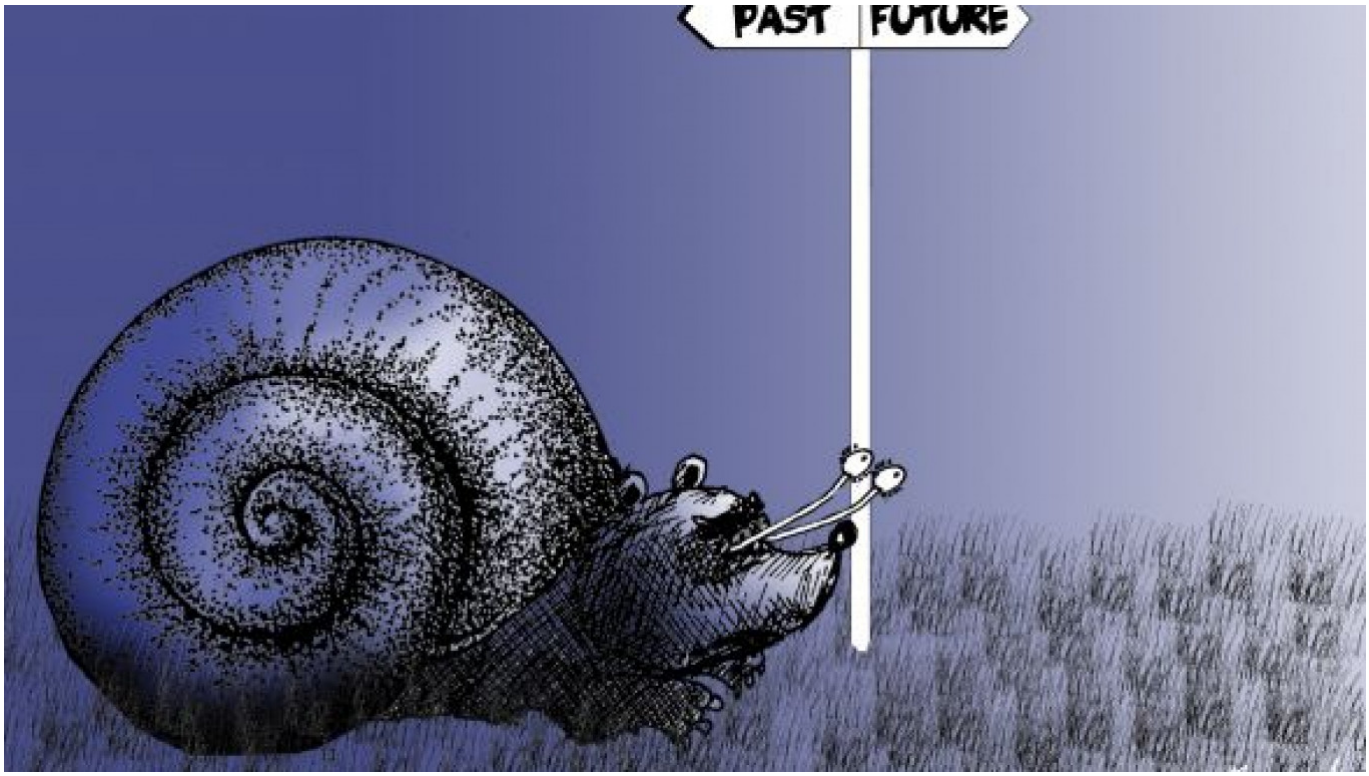
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# Islamic Fundamentalists in the Kremlin

By Michael Bohm

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The wave of anger in North Africa and the Middle East over the anti-Islam video "Innocence of Muslims" underscores several troubling similarities between anti-Americanism in Russia and the Muslim world. Injured pride is at the top of the list.

Prominent journalist Maxim Shevchenko has suggested that the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama may have stood behind the production of "Innocence of Muslims." Shevchenko, who made his remarks on Sept. 13 on Ekho Moskvy radio, isn't alone in embracing this conspiracy theory, which has been circulated in the Russian blogosphere. The motive behind provoking the Muslim world with the video, Shevchenko reasoned, was to boost Obama's popularity two months away from the U.S. presidential election by creating a major crisis, much like the 9/11 attacks initially consolidated Americans around President George W. Bush and increased his ratings. This, Shevchenko said, may explain why there was so little security protecting the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya, and why the ambassador and three other Americans ended up dead.

Russians' fondness for conspiracy theories is exceeded perhaps only by Muslims'. In Egypt, for example, 75 percent of Muslims believe U.S. authorities carried out the 9/11 attacks,

according to a 2011 Pew poll. In Russia, the figure is 16 percent, according to a 2008 Levada poll, with 20 percent having difficulty answering.

Yet if there were any government forces that used the anti-Islam video to provoke a crisis, they were located in North Africa, not in Washington. This crude, amateurish video had gone unnoticed since June, when it was first released by U.S.-based producers in English, and it would have remained unnoticed if Salafi forces in Egypt hadn't translated the video into Arabic.

Al-Nas, a Salafist pan-Arab television station based in Cairo, translated the video several days before the 9/11 anniversary and distributed it in Egypt and other Muslim countries. The Arabic version then went viral in days, with 10 million Muslims watching it, which led to violent protests at U.S. embassies and consulates in more than a dozen cities around the globe.

The political goal of the Salafist fundamentalists — presumably with a silent nod, or even the active participation, of Egypt's ruling Muslim Brotherhood — was clear: to mobilize angry, poor Muslims against a time-honored foreign enemy, the United States, to deflect attention from the region's domestic problems.

Clearly, flawed U.S. policies in the Middle East, including the Iraq invasion and decades of support for secular autocrats, have fueled anti-Americanism in the region. But Husain Haqqani, formerly Pakistan's ambassador to the United States, believes that anti-Americanism among Muslims has other important roots as well. In a Sept. 13 comment in The Wall Street Journal, he wrote: "At the heart of Muslim street violence is the frustration of the world's Muslims over their steady decline for three centuries, a decline that has coincided with the rise and spread of the West's military, economic and intellectual prowess. ... The image of an ascendant West belittling Islam with the view to eliminate it serves as a convenient explanation for Muslim weakness."

For Russia watchers, this should sound familiar. This phenomenon also underlies the anti--Americanism stoked by the Kremlin. The only difference is that the Kremlin's propaganda hasn't led to angry mobs storming the U.S. Embassy or consulates. Rather, it is limited to anti-American comments by the nation's leaders and crude propaganda programs on state-run television. The latest example was "Provocateurs: Part Two," shown on Rossia 1 last week, and suggested that the West, along with self-exiled tycoon Boris Berezovksy, organized Pussy Riot's purported attempt to undermine the country's cultural foundation and values.

In addition, for months the Kremlin has carried out attacks against U.S.-funded nongovernmental organizations, which have been labeled as fifth columns whose mission is to weaken the state and organize an Orange-style revolution. The Kremlin's campaign reached a climax this month when the Foreign Ministry gave notice to the U.S. government that the Russia office of USAID, a major sponsor of Russian NGOs such as Golos, must be closed by Oct. 1 because of USAID's "meddling in Russia's domestic politics." Notably, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood government has also increased its crackdown on U.S.-funded NGOs operating in the country, claiming that they, too, carry out subversive activities.

Like in many Muslim countries, Russia's state-sponsored anti-U.S. propaganda helps boost ratings for the country's leaders and deflect attention from domestic problems. In both cases,

the Kremlin and Islamic fundamentalists in the Middle East and North Africa use anti-Americanism to manipulate public opinion among the masses.

The irony, however, is that against the backdrop of the attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libyans stand in long lines every day at the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli to get visas to study or work in the United States. The lines are much longer for U.S. visas in Moscow.

There is another similarity between anti-Americanism in Russia and the Muslim world: the need for Potemkin victories. Both Muslims and Russians want to look like they are successful in the absence of real international victories and development at home.

Thankfully, Russia's Potemkin victories against the United States are not violent like in North Africa and the Middle East. But they do take the form of playing the spoiler role on the United Nations Security Council — Syria being the latest example — largely to spite the United States and to force Washington to acknowledge that key international issues cannot be solved without Moscow.

The Muslim world's steady 300-year decline has arguably played an important role in shaping its worldview and, specifically, anti-Americanism. Of course, Russia's decline from its superpower status is more recent and less severe but hardly less painful.

Still, Russia should take a lesson from Britain on how to recover gracefully from lost-superpower status. Much of Russia is, indeed, stuck in the nostalgia of the past — in an overglorified version of Soviet power and influence. The past is a bad place to be. There is no future in it.

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