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**U.S. Policy in the Middle East Faces  
the Arab Spring:  
Is U.S. Influence Waning?**

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## An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

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**Abstract**

This paper will map the U.S. administration's reaction to the unexpected Arab Spring and how it put together a policy response. The United States (U.S.) was in a quandary over how to handle the crisis unleashed by the Arab Spring, in its attempt to balance its moral obligations and ideals without undercutting its strategic interests and those of its close allies. In doing so, it aims to gauge how events of the Arab Spring may contravene U.S. traditional interests in the area and to what extent they portend a decline of U.S. influence in the region. In particular, we will analyse whether the momentous Arab Spring upheavals brought about a reassessment of American foreign policy, shifting from decades of support for pro-U.S. autocratic regimes to backing for pro-democracy movements. This article will highlight the Obama administration's difficulties in grasping with the new reality and in enunciating a policy platform that can combine American interests and values.

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## **Introduction**

The popular rebellion that started in Tunisia spread to Egypt, Libya, and then on to the Persian Gulf and the Near East. Since January 2011, popular uprisings overthrew the longtime dictators of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, marking it the greatest wave of political unrest the world has seen since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The U.S. has been faulted for its cautious and, at times, incoherent response to this foreign policy crisis. Two aspects of this response stand out: the first was American reluctance to intervene and to shape events even in arenas where it had major interests, thus allowing friendly regimes to be removed. Secondly, in spite of an early siding with the people's revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt against pro-American regimes, Obama has reportedly reverted to Washington's old double standard of shielding friendly authoritarian regimes. The administration cautious response to the popular uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa is the reflection of a realist policy driven by strategic interests, such as oil security, fighting terrorism, Iran's rise in the region and, equally important, its realization of the limits of America power and its capacity to shape events.

This paper will try to map the U.S. reaction to the unexpected events it faced and how it put together a policy response. The paper provides a summary overview of its reactions on a country by country basis: it will map the evolution of the U.S. position toward the events unfolding in some specific countries rocked by the Arab Spring. This article attempts to shed some light on the goals and methods of U.S. policymaking, namely the dilemmas it faced as it pondered its policy interests in some Arab allies. The aim is to evaluate whether the political reshuffles that occurred in some Arab countries brought about a reassessment of American foreign policy, shifting from decades of support for autocratic regimes to backing for pro-democracy movements. The case is made here that Washington now must adapt to diminished influence in a Middle East, as a result of its post-9/11 policies in the region and the rise of new regional actors.

## **U.S. Interests in the Middle East in a historical perspective**

The dominant concern of American foreign policy in the post-World War II period was finding effective ways to check Soviet expansionism. When applied to the Middle East, this meant using all means available to prevent the Russians from filling the power vacuum being created by gradual withdrawal of old colonial powers. The interrelated objectives of containing Soviet attempts to gain the upper hand in the area and preserving access to the region's strategic facilities and oil resources, required the development of effective doctrines and policies to attain the designated goals, namely the promotion of peace and stability and the recruitment of regional partners to assist the US in containing the Soviet Union. The first orientation consisted in guaranteeing the territorial status quo and keeping the established political

order in place as much as possible. Other major interests were to assure the survival and security of Israel and termination of the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>1</sup>

American steadfastness reflected a definite conception of the importance of the Middle East itself to the United States. The protection of the oil resources in the Middle East, and the respective lines of communication, would remain a vital Western interest and would determine U.S. strategy and military deployments<sup>2</sup> throughout the subsequent decades.

By the 1950s the emerging Arab nationalist movement became an additional (and most likely) danger to U.S. hold over the oil resources of the region.<sup>3</sup> Local disputes and radical processes of change were considered to provide appropriate grounds for communist/Soviet-sponsored activity. U.S. policy was thus guided by the basic conviction that radicalising political tendencies of any sort would challenge Western favoured access to cheap and reliable supplies of oil, the very key to the economic growth of the industrialised world. U.S. opposition to the nationalist movement had an early manifestation in Iran, when in 1953 the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) executed a plan to overthrow Mossadegh and to thwart the nationalisation of the oil sector. Another tangible display of this concern was U.S. policy to integrate the region in its global system of alliances and to preempt a possible shift by a regional state away from the American orbit. The U.S. support to 'moderate', pro-Western regimes in the Middle East, as it contemplated the most important oil producers, was largely successful.

In the wake of the Iranian revolution, the rising political power of Muslim fundamentalism became a new prominent threat. The development of political Islam went largely unheeded in the West. It was only after the Iranian Revolution with its follow-up of fiery, revolutionary Islamist-sponsored turmoil, that its strength was properly considered. The Iranian revolution and the wave of Shiite radicalism that marked the 1980s contributed, in another important way, to the shaping in the West of a stereotyped image of political Islam: that of an anti-democratic, anti-Western force. With the demise of communism and the end of the Cold War, a current of thought emerged saying political Islam is the new threat that confronts the West. Many saw it as aggressively anti-Semitic and anti-Western and charged Islamist movements of standing in direct competition to Western civilisation and challenging it for global supremacy.<sup>4</sup>

Growing American fears about political Islam played into the hands of US allies, such as in the case with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan. The 'political Islam menace' became a convenient way for a leader to explain away opposition based on a country's economic, social, and political inequities. It was also an argument in favour of the continuation of U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> Lenczowski, G. (1992). *American Presidents and the Middle East*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Lesser, I. O. (1992). *Oil, the Persian Gulf and Grand Strategy*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Campbell, J.C. (1969). *Defense of the Middle East*. NY: Harper & Row, 1969, 257.

<sup>4</sup> Pinto, M. C. (1999). *Political Islam and the United States*. Reading, U.K.: Ithaca.

support to regimes whose strategic value weakened with the end of the Cold War.

In the 1990s, an additional interest was added to the three core ones: reducing the threats posed by so-called rogue states, particularly those aiming to acquire weapons of mass destruction. In response to the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration adopted three major policies to advance U.S. national security interests in the region: defeating terrorism, promoting democracy, and stopping the development of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>1</sup>

### *Obama and the Arab uprisings*

In Tunisia, the act of despair of one fruit vendor unleashed a wave of revolution through the Arab world. The protests were sparked by the [self-immolation](#) of [Mohamed Bouazizi](#) on [17 December](#) 2010 and led to the ousting of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, 28 days later, on [14 January 2011](#), putting an end to 23 years of autocratic rule. The popular rebellion that started there spread to Egypt, Libya, and then on to the Persian Gulf and the Near East.

In the first months of the uprisings, the Obama administration's response to the Arab Spring was been fairly conflicted and hesitant. The one clear instance was Tunisia, where Obama clearly chose to rebalance the American stance, backing away from support for Ben Ali and allowing the popular movements to run their course.

### *The Egyptian dilemma*

In Egypt, the administration tried to perform a high-wire act between positioning itself 'on the right side of history', as one senior diplomat put it, and not unceremoniously dumping a leader who had supported American policy on key regional policies'.<sup>2</sup> The balancing act performed by the Obama administration regarding the regime, as it became increasingly contested, became excruciating to watch at times as it tried to balance conflicting orientations. Washington's inability to envisage the possible overthrow of the existing power structure had to do with the revolutionary events taking place in an area of the world with enormous strategic importance. The administration's awkward reaction reflects all too clearly the dilemma it faced between balancing its support for protesters' aspirations with its desire for an orderly political transition in a strategic ally. The mixed message reflected a policy seemingly wrong-footed by the speed with which the revolt mounted, and that, inevitably, was made up on the fly.<sup>3</sup>

Obama wanted to position the U.S. on the side of the protesters. Simultaneously, he feared that the uprising could spin out of control and unsettle the region. He was also hard pressed to assure other autocratic allies that the U.S. did not hastily abandon its friends. The Saudis and other 'moderate' pro-U.S. Arab states were dismayed at the manner in which the

<sup>1</sup> Pressman, J. (2009). 'Power without Influence.' *International Security* 33(4).

<sup>2</sup> Miller (2011), 'American Influence Rapidly Waning'.

<sup>3</sup> Sanger, 'As Mubarak Digs In'.



Americans had responded to a faithful ally. The US decision to forgo Mubarak shook their trust on the American hegemon.<sup>1</sup>

U.S. officials feared that protests rocking Egypt could change the political landscape of the entire Arab world and beyond. Possible outcomes could range all the way from democratic forces taking charge in Cairo to, in a worst case scenario, regional war and instability, involving Israel and Iran. In between, there could be a long period of instability that could breed economic chaos across the region, prolonging the economic plight in the U.S. and Europe and engrossing the flow of refugees to Europe.<sup>2</sup> Days of watching the protests spread convinced administration officials that Mubarak probably would not weather the political storm and that this was compromising the transition to a new political order.<sup>3</sup>

The strategic calculations behind the flip-flops of the administration are obvious: Egypt is a lynchpin of the American security architecture for the greater Middle East. The world's largest Arab nation, it is critically important to U.S. foreign policy and to major goals the Obama administration is pursuing in the Middle East: the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, containment of Iran's influence and nuclear ambitions, and counter-terrorism. Mubarak helped guarantee Israel's interests and the stability of its border with Gaza. Egypt's role is at the heart of normalizing Arab relations with Israel. After Washington's rapprochement with Egypt, under Anwar Sadat, every U.S. administration has invested heavily to maintain the status quo. Fear that Egypt's uprising would develop into an Islamist revolution along the lines of that of Iran in 1979, would constitute the worst possible scenario for Washington and Tel Aviv. American policymakers were also tied by the fear that Egypt's move toward democracy would be hijacked by the Muslim Brotherhood or another group that might prove unfriendly to American interests. .

#### *Other flashpoints and strategic calculus*

Speaking at the U.S.-Islamic World Forum in March, Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton finally began to clarify the U.S. approach, stating it strongly supports democratization in the region, although rejecting a 'one-size fits all approach'<sup>4</sup> to the uprisings. She said the response to the democracy movements would vary from country to country. Indeed, U.S. policy looks different in Bahrain and Syria than it does in Libya or Tunisia, because U.S. interests are very different in each arena.<sup>5</sup>

In reality, in response to the events of the Arab Spring, the Obama administration has assumed different policy approaches: favouring drastic

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<sup>1</sup>Teitelbaum (2011). 'Saudi Arabia, Iran and America in the Wake of the Arab Spring'; Obaid (2011). 'Amid the Arab Spring, A U.S.-Saudi Split'.

<sup>2</sup> Lizza, 'The Consequentialist'.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, 'American Influence Rapidly Waning in Egypt'.

<sup>4</sup> 'Secretary Clinton Delivers Remarks'.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

regime change (Tunisia, Egypt and Libya) or nudging other regimes towards gradual democratic transformation (Yemen and Syria).

The decision to intervene militarily against the Libyan regime came when Col. Muammar Gadhafi's forces were closing in on Benghazi, declaring his intention to exterminate the rebel strongholds in the East. On 17 March, the Security Council approved resolution 1973 demanding an immediate ceasefire in Libya and imposing a no-fly zone.

The rationale for the military intervention was provided by the president's statement: 'This is the greatest opportunity to realign our interests and our values'.<sup>1</sup> The president was referring to the broader change going on in the Middle East and the need to rebalance U.S. foreign policy in order to accommodate a greater focus on democracy and human rights. He felt that, had the international community not acted when it did, thousands of Libyans would have been slaughtered as the world watched idly. It would have haunted America's standing in the region for a decade.<sup>2</sup>

Other factors concurred to make the intervention possible. Obama emphasized that his decision on Libya was based on what has become his foreign-policy doctrine: relying on international consensus and multilateral action to bring about military intervention, but with a limited American role.<sup>3</sup> In a short time-frame, Obama and Secretary Clinton managed to accomplish the following: a resolution of support for the intervention from the United Nations Security Council; a statement from the African Union supporting democracy in Libya; turning over the leadership of the coalition air campaign to the NATO command in Europe so as to share the costs and dangers of the operation with allies.<sup>4</sup> Equally important, the administration garnered the support from the Arab League for a no-fly zone. Among Arabs, the decision enjoyed a broad consensus, both among both leaders and the street, backing international intervention to protect the Libyan civilians.

In Syria and Yemen, the Obama administration took a cautious, incremental approach refraining initially from calling for a regime change. In the case of Damascus, the administration vainly held out hope for a 'managed transition' in Syria, before coming out and declaring Assad's rule illegitimate. Initially, Washington was sceptical that the uprising would overthrow the regime. It also believed it lacked the leverage to affect the situation in the country. There were other strategic calculations, as well, affecting the administration's appraisal: Syria is critical to Obama's attempt to end Iran's nuclear programme and to promote Arab-Israeli peace. In the previous years, Obama had been trying to engage Syria, which is Tehran's greatest ally in the region, to persuade Iran's leaders to end its nuclear programme and its support of anti-Israeli terrorism and if not, sever its alliance with Iran.<sup>5</sup> Finally, there

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<sup>1</sup> Hamid (2011). 'To Win Over Arabs, U.S. Must Go Beyond Libya', 19A.

<sup>2</sup> Lynch (2011). 'Why Obama Had to Act in Libya'.

<sup>3</sup> Cooper (2011). 'Obama Cites Limits of U.S. Role In Libya'.

<sup>4</sup> Davis (2011). 'Obama-Clinton Team on Libya'.

<sup>5</sup> LANDIS (2011). 'SYRIA LOOKING FOR IMPROVED RELATIONS'.

was little support in the United States for another military adventure in the Middle East.

As for Yemen, President Ali Abdullah Saleh's ouster posed questions about stability in a nation seen by the Obama administration as a key ally in its fight against al-Qaeda. The administration also limited White House critiques of the regime, even after that government opened fire on demonstrators for months in a row. Because of Saleh's cooperation, the Obama administration had been reluctant to be too critical in its comments or to consider publicly scenarios for his ouster.

As with uprisings in Egypt and Syria, Obama here also initially failed to side with pro-democracy forces, wishfully choosing instead to hope for reformers among the very forces of the regime. Only much later did the tone change: Obama withdrew his support two months into the uprising, after concluding that Saleh's government could not survive the revolts and that U.S. interests were better served getting a new government in place that might pursue the fight against al-Qaeda. That issue became more urgent as al-Qaeda has been able to exploit the turmoil that has resulted from Saleh's demurring by taking control of the country's lawless southern region. The militants got control of two cities and are close to Aden, the strategically important port on the Arabian Sea.

Saleh's departure would likely undermine, at least temporarily, U.S. counterterrorism efforts. He was an important ally in the fight against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the Yemen-based group responsible for sending two parcel bombs to U.S. synagogues in October 2010, the attempted bombing of a Detroit-bound plane on Christmas Day 2009<sup>1</sup> and the May 2012 plane bomb plot.<sup>2</sup>

In Bahrain, where the uprisings turned violent, Obama did not even utter a word in support of armed intervention, instead pressing those regimes to embrace reform on their own. Washington pulled back from blanket support for democracy efforts for fears of Iranian meddling in Bahrain and that protracted political turmoil could provide an opening for additional influence by Tehran in Saudi Arabia. The intensified wrangling across the Persian Gulf between the Sunni and Shia powers has reinforced Washington's wariness about Iran's regional ambitions, strained relations between the U.S. and important Arab allies, and tempered the former's support for the democracy movements in the Arab world.

The upheaval in Bahrain, which hosts the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet and borders the world's primary oil producer, Saudi Arabia, is rooted in discontent among the Shia Muslim community towards the Sunni minority that rules the country. U.S. officials are wary Bahraini Shia are susceptible to outside influences, such as attempted subversion from neighbouring Iran.<sup>3</sup> At the invitation of the Bahraini royal family, in March, Saudi Arabia sent troops into Bahrain to quell the protests, a move that has driven a wedge between Riyadh

<sup>1</sup> CNN (2011). 'U.S. Says al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula behind Cargo Terror Plot'.

<sup>2</sup> BBC online (2012). 'US foils new underwear bomb plot' by al-Qaeda in Yemen.

<sup>3</sup> Hodge (2011). 'U.S. Says Iran Is Meddling In Bahrain'.

and Washington.<sup>1</sup> Saudi Arabia fears that, if the protesters prevail, Iran, its regional rival, could expand its influence and inspire unrest elsewhere.

As far as Syria is concerned, strangely enough, only by mid-August did Obama call on Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, to resign due to the deadly crackdown on protesters. The Obama administration's cautious stance on the Syrian revolution, put the credibility of the United States on the line, especially when it became clear, five months after the start of the uprising, that Assad's opportunity to institute real reform was gone. The other reason for procrastinating was that Obama and Clinton had been relying on their counterparts in Turkey for advice and mediation with the Syrian regime.

After months of stepping gingerly around urgings that Assad declaredly renounce the rule, Obama demanded that Assad step down.<sup>2</sup> The president's ultimatum marked a significant ratcheting up of pressure. He was accompanied by the EU (European Union) and the leaders of Britain, France and Germany also calling on Assad to leave.<sup>3</sup> It was a dramatic sharpening of international rhetoric since Obama, as well as major states had urged Assad to reform rather than resign.<sup>4</sup>

The Obama administration misread and underestimated the severity of the situation in both Tunisia and, especially, in Egypt. It failed to foresee how the situation spiralled out of control to become the most serious foreign policy crisis for the Obama administration to date leading to the collapse of the fragile balance of power the U.S. helped build over decades. Add to that the failure of the U.S. to use its leverage to safeguard the stability of the region and its allies and interests and the incongruous response to traditional, staunch allies, like Egypt.

What emerges from the global picture is that, apart from the initial show of support towards pro-democracy movements, Obama has adopted a policy of caution and restraint. It eventually concluded that it must shape its response country by country, recognizing a stark reality that American national security interests in the Middle East weigh as heavily as idealistic impulses. That explains why Obama has dialled down the vocal support he gave to demonstrators in Cairo to a more modulated call for peaceful protest and respect for universal rights elsewhere. Instead of pushing for immediate regime change, as it did to varying degrees in Egypt and Libya, the U.S. urged protesters from Bahrain to Morocco to work with existing rulers toward what some officials and diplomats call 'regime alteration' or 'Bahrain model'.<sup>5</sup>

As part of this approach, the Obama administration has encouraged Arab leaders to take the first steps toward internal political changes to avoid more violent protests. This emphasis reveals the triumph of pragmatism over idealism. The strategy also comes in the face of domestic U.S. criticism that the administration sent mixed messages at first in Egypt, tentatively backing

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> Lee (2011). 'US, Allies Declare That Syria's Assad Must Leave'.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Oweis (2011). 'Obama Accuses Assad of "Slaughtering" Syrian People'.

<sup>5</sup> Entous and Barnes (2011). 'U.S. Wavers on 'Regime Change''.

Mubarak, before deciding to throw its full support behind the protesters. The approach emerged amid frantic lobbying by Arab governments, who were alarmed Obama had abandoned a long-standing ally.<sup>1</sup>

### *US influence against a new regional setting*

The outcome of the current confused struggle unfolding in the Arab countries swept by the Arab Spring, matters greatly to American interests. The emergence of an Islamist regime in Egypt is a major blow to U.S. interests. Egypt has been a faithful American ally generally and its loss to an anti-American government would be a tremendous defeat for the U.S. A populist and radical nationalist - much less an Islamist - government could reignite the Arab-Israel conflict, complicating Israel's position in the region. The emergence of Islamist governments would, of course, be the more detrimental scenario to U.S. influence, due to their anti-American stance, but even if one assumes that democratic regimes would emerge, there is no reason to believe they will become close allies of the U.S. The central problem, as Friedman has put it, is that the widespread unrest of the Arab Spring might not turn out to be popular revolutions or that the revolutionaries necessarily want to create a liberal democracy.<sup>2</sup>

The events reflect a fading Western influence in general, especially U.S. influence. The United States is no longer able to systematically influence the choices made in the Middle East. Aliboni asserts: '[T]he Arab spring is a transition away from the long alliance between the West and the moderate Arab states, as well as a transition of these states from being more or less passive clients of the U.S. and the West to more or less vibrant democracies with an assertive agenda in the region.'<sup>3</sup> The administration realised that Washington's ability to steer political change in the region appears largely reduced. In Yemen and Bahrain, the leaders systematically ignored Obama administration calls to respect human rights and negotiate with the protesters. Saudi Arabia has signalled its intent to pursue foreign policy goals that, at times, might differ from U.S. interests in the region.<sup>4</sup> Defying U.S. warnings, Palestinian Authority President, Mahmoud Abbas, decided to pursue a United Nations vote in September 2011 to recognize a Palestinian state.

Already, the U.S. is facing a number of setbacks in the Middle East. In the post-9/11 era, the U.S. facilitated Iran's growing influence by toppling Saddam Hussein's regime and that of the Taliban in Afghanistan, thus removing two factors that had kept the Iranian regime isolated in the Arab world for the last two decades. The 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war was probably the first significant confrontation between the forces of Islamo-Arab

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<sup>1</sup> Hodge (2011). 'U.S. Says Iran Is Meddling In Bahrain'.

<sup>2</sup> Friedman (2011). 'Re-Examining the Arab Spring'.

<sup>3</sup> Aliboni, R. (2011). 'The International Dimension of the Arab Spring.' *The International Spectator* 46 (4), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Gause, G. G., III (2011). 'Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East', Council Special Report no. 63, CFR, December, 22.

‘resistance’, supported by Iran, against the American-Israeli alliance, supported by some pro-American Arab regimes. It also signaled the emergence of a clear divide in many Arab countries between the state and the ‘street’, especially against U.S.-supported states.

Obama has failed in engaging Iran over its nuclear ambitions, one of his declared major foreign policy goals in the Middle East. Over the past decade, Iran’s regional power grew significantly because of its financial aid and alliances with political and militant groups in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Afghanistan and the Palestinian territories. Its allies supported Iran’s growing influence, while rival Sunni Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, viewed it as a threat.

Though Washington remains the world’s only superpower, the quagmires of Iraq and Afghanistan have exposed the limits of its ambitions, while the economic crisis has forced it to focus its energies elsewhere. One lesson of the Libya intervention is the reluctance of war-weary America to take a lead role, at least a visible one. The model of the Libya intervention – on a collaborative and strictly limited scale – is probably the template for future military U.S. interventions.

### *New actors*

The relative political clout of the U.S. in the region has also waned as result of global developments. That decline has to do with the dynamics of the end of the Cold war, namely a greater gap in interests of great powers and their regional allies. It also has to do with the improvements in the leverage of regional powers and the emergence of new actors on the international scene. The erosion of Washington’s influence has enabled important U.S. regional allies to pursue its own interests, even against U.S. concerns, because of an increase in their economic and military power. Such is the case of Turkey, which is becoming more self-centred and capable of acting on its own interests.<sup>1</sup>

Besides, new actors, especially China and India, have entered the region due to the drive for energy security. The political influence of the U.S. in the region has diminished as markets like China and other rapidly growing economies have become more important clients in terms of energy consumption. Emerging powers are playing an ever bigger role and are easier, less intervening partners in the Arab countries internal affairs and regional disputes.

Chinese policy in the Middle East has grown more active over the past decade. With its overriding goal of securing oil and gas to fuel its economic growth, the Chinese government has actively cultivated its relations with the oil-rich Middle East, especially Iran and Saudi Arabia. In its pursuit of this goal, Chinese policymakers have been more than willing not only to undercut U.S. non-proliferation efforts with Iran, but also to work closely with

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<sup>1</sup> Hunter, S. T (2011). ‘Middle East Uprisings.’ *Journal for Peace and Security Studies* (5).

governments and movements that share the radical Islamism brand. There have been several recent signs, some of them public, that China may be planning to become more assertive in its treatment of the region.<sup>1</sup> Beijing may be even moving away from some of its traditional position to extend its leverage further.<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Putin's Russia is also challenging America's monopoly of the peace process, while seeking to regain the influence it once had in a vital region close to its southern borders.

### *Conclusion*

Since World War II, the U.S. has enjoyed an unparalleled degree of hegemony. It has influenced this region of the world in a very incisive way to its own interest. Washington remains a regional superpower and can still effect serious change in the region, should it desire. However, the recent actions highlight how a number of external actors, like Russia and Turkey, do show a new assertiveness to pursue their own path in defiance of U.S. will, whether through arms deals, trade agreements or independent diplomacy. A new Cold War is unlikely, but the age of unchallenged U.S. hegemony in the Middle East could be ending. On the other hand, the Middle East reshaping will not lead to the emergence of a solid anti-U.S. bloc in the region, largely because of sharply different outlooks and interests of key regional players, some of which will still have enough inducements to remain on the U.S. camp. Even an Islamist government in Egypt can hardly give away U.S. billions in financial and military support. Certainly the U.S. will remain a key player in the region even if no longer the sole hegemon.<sup>3</sup> As far as the Arab Spring's outcome is concerned, much will depend on the character of governments which emerge following parliamentary and presidential elections in key countries, such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

A new regional order may be emerging one in which the leverage enjoyed by the U.S. is shrinking and more autonomy is granted to regional actors. Already, as Aliboni points out, 'regional powers are already protagonists of a regional balance in which the West is unusually absent'.<sup>4</sup> Some new regimes, notably Egypt, may become less pro-Western than as in the past and might want to reassert its role as regional leading player. The new regime might combine Islam, democracy and allegiance to Arabism, making it a more palatable model than that of its Arab pro-Western neighbours.

The course of events in Egypt and Tunisia will be determined by an internal balance of nationalism and religion that Washington can only influence on the margins. Washington has been sidelined by events in the region. It was not an actor, not even the traditional object of the rage of the Arab masses, as it

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<sup>1</sup> The AP/Reuters (2011). 'China Announces Support for Palestinian UN Statehood Bid'.

<sup>2</sup> Shalom & Afterman (2011). 'China enters the Middle East'.

<sup>3</sup> Hunter, S. T (2011). 'Middle East Uprisings: Impact on US Regional Influence'. *Journal for Peace and Security Studies* (5).

<sup>4</sup> Aliboni, R. (2011). *Op. cit.*

used to happen in the past. This time around, all the main actors are endogenous. Most of the Arab Spring mass movements have been motivated almost entirely by domestic issues. The role of the United States in this region has not emerged as a central or even important part of the conflict between revolutionaries and the regimes they overthrew.

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