The Obama Administration and the Arab Spring

Juan Cole
University of Michigan
jricole@gmail.com

The popular uprisings in the Arab world that began with Tunisia in December, 2010, and spread throughout the region in spring of 2012 created numerous dilemmas for the Obama administration. The longstanding US dependence on the Egyptian regime of Hosni Mubarak made Washington initially unwilling to see him step down. Security concerns such as the Suez Canal, the position of the Egyptian army as the Arab world’s largest and most professional, and Egypt’s close cooperation with Israel, produced this caution. A similar but less pressing challenge for the Obama administration was the unrest in Yemen, which was of interest to Washington because of Red Sea security and the presence of a small al-Qaeda cell in the south. On another front, Washington was unhappy with the strident and uncompromising crackdown launched by the Sunni monarchy in Bahrain against the largely Shiite protesters in that country, but Obama had little choice but to acquiesce in the repression and in the placing of Saudi troops in Manama because the Pentagon depends on Manama to continue to lease it a naval base that serves as the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet. Obama might well also have acquiesced in the repression of the protesters in Libya had it not been for strong feelings against it in London and Paris, such that he was induced to support a NATO intervention, obviously quite against his own instincts. The thesis of this paper is that the Obama administration took a cautious, reactive approach to managing this regional set of crises, rather than intervening forcefully, as its predecessor might have done, in hopes that understated engagement with the changes would produce a new Middle East still favorable to US geopolitical goals. Concern that relatively secular regimes might be replaced by Muslim fundamentalist ones helped dictate this caution.