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Clashing perceptions, diverging policies?

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The EU, Israel and the Arab Awakening

Clashing perceptions, diverging policies?

European and Israeli narratives: democracy "versus" security?

Clashing perspectives on democracy in the MENA region

1 While both Israel and the EU Member States share a formal commitment to democracy and to upholding liberal values, still their reactions to the Arab Awakening varied substantially. Specifically their respective assessments on both the democratic potential of the revolutions and the importance of promoting democracy in the Middle East strongly differed.

2 At the core, both the EU and Israel share 'liberal democracies' values and their bilateral relations benefit from this. Yet Israel is not a 'secular democracy,' contrary to most of the EU Member States. In Israel, religious political parties are structurally part of the democratic system,[1] and there is no clear-cut separation between State and religion. From this point of view, Israel would seem to be better equipped than the EU to understand some of the challenges that need to be tackled by Tunisia, Libya and Egypt when it comes to finding a balance between politics and religion and to determining the role Islam should play in the new societies. The Israeli case could even be used to argue that democracy does not necessarily presuppose secularization. This is the case, although one of the domestic 'acid tests' of Israel's democracy is its commitment to ensuring de facto civil and political rights to its minorities. What is more, it can also be argued that often democracy comes after security in the Israeli government's hierarchy of values.

3 Concerning their respective narrative of the Arab Awakening, EU Member States generally adopted a long term approach to democratization in the MENA region. Perceptions in Europe may be summarized in the following quote from Olivier Roy:

> "Whatever ups and down may follow, we are witnessing the beginning of a process by which democratization is becoming rooted in Arab societies. (…) The Islamists parties may have more power and freedom to maneuver, but they too will find themselves being pushed to adjust to the democratization process."[2]

4 In other words, Europeans initially displayed both optimism and empathy towards the revolutions. For instance, Ralf Hexel, the former head of the German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in Israel, pointed out that in Germany there was a real feeling of empathy and identification with the youth in Tahrir square. Parallels were drawn between the 2011 events in the Arab world and recent European history. French historian Benjamin Stora, for example, compared the Arab Awakening with the 1989 fall of the Berlin wall in Europe as well as with the 1974 revolution in Portugal.[3] Professor Fréderic Charillon underlined that it is no longer possible to provide to the regimes in power the monopoly on the political representation of their states. In other words, the recent events demonstrated that the centrality of the political power did not annihilate the social dynamic.[4]

5 Yet, by late 2011 the mood in Europe had somewhat darkened. The aftermath of the elections in Tunisia and in Egypt and the Islamists' rise to power, together with the state of relative chaos in Libya and Syria did lead a number of European politicians to make more cautious statements. Henri Guaino, former special advisor to Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, declared that: "we may have made an error in judgment. (…) The rest of the story has not been as beautiful as we may have thought at the beginning."[5]

6 It is worth noting that the uprisings were mainly secular and that Islamist parties such as Ennahda in Tunisia or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt made their entry only at a later stage. Moreover these parties benefited from their established political structure and network, in stark contrast with the lack of unity and political experiences of the emerging political movements.

This assessment made Štefan Füle, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and ENP, declare in 2012:

> "We are in this for the long haul (…). When I was last in the region I was told that successful transition would not be measured by the first rounds of democratic elections but by the second third and fourth rounds. We must engage with the new leaderships and work together on building solid foundations for democracy and inclusive growth."[6]

7 Yet, despite this new European empathy towards the Arab people's fate, it still remained unclear whether the EU and the Arab protestors spoke the same language. The EU discourse conveyed, at least at the beginning, a procedural understanding of democracy, calling for new elections, whereas the protestors' demands were initially more of a substantial nature, demanding freedom, dignity and justice.[7] Furthermore, in order to better understand the protestors' demands, the EU should come to terms with certain preconceived notions, such as the idea that a democrat must be a liberal or that democracy necessarily presupposes secularization.[8]

8 Conversely, in Israel, it seemed clear from the beginning that "things will get worse before they get better."[9] This perception was especially strong when looking at political transformations taking place in Egypt, which were seen as particularly worrisome for Israel. In April 2012 Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that "what we hope to see is the European Spring of 1989. We could find that the Arab Spring turns into an Iranian winter."[10] He added that Teheran was trying to cash in on the mass uprising, exploiting the regional changed to improve its status and power within MENA.

9 Accordingly, due to security concerns and to its particular geopolitical position, there was from the outset a general uneasiness in Israel towards the prospect of a democratization of its Arab neighbors. Relying on both realpolitik and strategic assessments, Israeli analysts pointed out that the Arab Awakening would lead to the rise of Islamist political parties hostile to Israel, and to the weakening of the pragmatists (the useful autocrat, in other words). This perception was especially strong before the ousting and downfall of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, in July 2013. There was also the fear that Islamist parties would translate their anti-Israeli posture into foreign policy. For instance, the new elected government in Tunisia invited Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in January 2012, though no cooperation steps were taken at the political level after the meeting. Yet the concern about the growing role of Islamist parties and the mostly pro-status quo attitude explain why, at the beginning of the Egyptian revolution, Israel hoped that the Mubarak regime would weather the storm and survive.

10 The assessment was somewhat different on Syria, with a stronger internal debate on whether the status quo would benefit Israel, but overall the debate was still strongly centered on security, rather than democratic potential. What's more, Retired IDF Major General Giora Eiland reminded that, according to Ariel Sharon in his day, the stabilization of Syria under a more or less democratic regime with a pro-western orientation would not necessarily be an asset for Israel. Ariel Sharon claimed that having a democratic Syria at its borders could imply the need to seriously negotiate on the Golan.[11] Yet, President Shimon Peres expressed an opposite view on the impact of regional democratization for Israel: "Poverty and oppression in the region have fed resentment against Israel and the better our neighbors will have it, we shall have better neighbors."[12]

11 Thus, the Israeli government's security concerns do not prevent lively debates to take place domestically about what steps the country needs to take in order to improve its regional standing, notably on the Palestinian issue. The events in the Arab world might increase western countries' attention and distress over the lack of progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Yet, within the Israeli government, the Palestinian issue is not at the forefront of the domestic agenda and security debate, which currently prioritize the Iranian nuclear threat and the northern and southern fronts with Syria and Egypt. There is a sense in the EU that as long as the post-67 Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories persists, a normalization of relations between Arab societies and Israel cannot take place. Thus, according to some European voices, the Arab awakening should trigger a change in Israeli priorities.[13] This argument has also been

made from within Israel, with political analysts arguing that Israel needs "to ease the burden on the residents of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and inter alia, to reach understandings with Hamas (…) and withdraw its objection in principle to a thaw in relations between Fatah and Hamas."[14]

12 Yet, it is also worth noting that the EU invested relatively more political energy to cope with the upheavals in the Arab states than to engage with the Palestinian question in this context. As a matter of fact, much more space was devoted from 2011 onwards to the Arab states concerned by the Arab Awakening in the declarations of the EU Council of Foreign affairs. Moreover, the Member States' contributions to the financial mechanisms dedicated to the Palestinian Authority, PEGASE, and more particularly its direct financial support, dropped by 22% from 2011 to 2012.[15] The context of economic crisis in Europe provides the main explanation for the relative decreasing EU funding to the PA that still accounted for 451.7 million euros in 2012. Despite all this, Lady Ashton, the EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, recalled that ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remained even in this context a "high priority and a fundamental EU interest"[16].Overall, however, looking at the European and Israeli narratives on the democratic potential and impact of the Arab Awakening, it appears clear that there was a clash in perceptions between the EU and Israel. This gap narrowed as the events unfolded but remained significant. A deeper understanding of the different European and Israeli interests, especially defined in security terms, will help understanding this divergence.

The Arab Awakening from a Security Perspective

13 By and large, EU Member States' and Israel's assessments of the Arab Awakening have been guided by their different national security interests, as well as by the diverging understanding of the evolving political and social dynamics in the region, thus leading to distinct, and at times contrasting, security assessments.

14 Overall, Israel has been far more risk-adverse with respect to the Arab Awakening, both in its security assessment of the revolutions as well as in crafting its actual policies to cope with the changes at the regional level. This disparity in framing can in turn be explained by analyzing the different geo-strategic position and security interests of Israeli and European counterparts: Israel is far closer – both geographically as well as geo-strategically – to the states concerned by the Arab Awakening and, as such, any sharp deterioration in regional stability would inevitably and directly affect the country. Simply put, the stakes are much higher for Israel: for example, a collapse of the peace treaties with either Jordan or Egypt as a result of the regional turmoil could have an incredibly negative impact on the country's regional position and domestic security.

15 What is more, Israel – unlike its European counterparts – already had generally tense and complex relations with virtually all its neighbors, with the notable exception of Jordan and, to a lesser extent, with the Egyptian government under Mubarak. In this context, Israel feared that regional instability would rock the already fragile equilibrium.

16 Finally, Israel's scarce and antagonistic relations with the rest of the region also account for its pessimism in evaluating the Arab Awakening. In contrast, from a European perspective, the more extensive – although at times still problematic – relationship between European Member States and the Middle East, both at the government-to-government as well as at the civil society level, puts the EU Member States in a position to have both a better knowledge and a more nuanced understanding of the evolving dynamics taking place within the Arab world.

17 In other words, the different national security interests, geo-strategic positions, and past and current state of relations can account for the distinct European-Israeli security assessments of the regional revolutions.

18 Israel's security assessment has been directly informed by the country's concern for preserving regional stability in general, and the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan in particular. This national security-driven approach explains why changes in a 'peripheral' country like Tunisia were generally downplayed,[17] while the crisis and subsequent regime change in Egypt – a country crucial to Israel's regional standing and security – were met with considerable

uneasiness. Similar attention was also devoted to the ongoing political protests in Syria, particularly in light of the shared border and the country's historically important role in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

19 Firstly, Israel has been concerned about the rise in volatility in the region, with the Israeli government repeatedly expressing concern for heightened regional instability, and openly wishing for "stability to be restored."[18] Specifically, the Israeli government was interested in both the preservation of the peace treaties and the continuation of the status quo in Jordan. This perceived regional instability drove the Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to state that – give the uncertain dynamics in the region – Israel should more than ever bet on its own defense and national security.[19]

20 A second, related, security concern has been for the increasing state weakness and breakdown of central authority in post-revolutionary countries, with a special focus on Egypt. The fact that states in the Middle East have overall been 'weaker' since the beginning of the Arab Awakening spells trouble for Israel as the country worries about increasingly more porous borders, the rise in power and influence of non-state armed groups, and the increase in trafficking of weapons. The case of Sinai is an especially powerful example of the connection between weak state control and the proliferation of both armed groups and weapons, resulting in a direct – albeit not strategic – threat to Israel's security. Understandably, these fears were further heightened in August 2011 and again August 2012, following two high-profile terrorist attacks originating within Sinai.

21 Thirdly, especially before the overthrowing of the Morsi government in Egypt, Israel's security assessment of the Arab Awakening was also informed by the country's concerns for the rise of Islamist parties in post-revolutionary countries, from Tunisia to Egypt. Israel interpreted the rise of political Islam as a problematic development, expecting increased ideological rigidity, reluctance to deal with Israel, and a rise in anti-Israel feelings across the region. The growing power of the Muslim Brotherhood was initially met with a great deal of reluctance, fearing for the stability of the peace treaty as well as anticipating the rise of a Hamas-Ikhwan alliance which would embolden the Islamic party in Gaza. In the end, although neither of these fears proved well-founded, still the Egyptian government under now-former President Morsi did invest in making the peace between Egypt and Israel even colder, de facto freezing all relations other than in the field of security and intelligence cooperation.

22 In this context of heightened security concerns for regional stability and for preserving the status quo, the civil war in Syria has been at the center of an especially animated debate. The Israeli government has been worried about instability and state weakness, fearing the collapse of the Syrian state and the potential creation of a power vacuum next to the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights. This scenario is especially worrisome given the increasing number of foreign jihadists involved in the Syrian civil war. The conflict has also been seen as destabilizing at the regional level, with Israel being particularly concerned about the stability of neighboring states like Jordan – increasingly under pressure due to the country's own economic crisis and the massive influx of refugees seeking shelter in the Hashemite Kingdom.

23 Security concerns have also shaped the debate regarding which of the warring parties engaged in the civil war in Syria would represent a 'least bad option' for Israel. On the one hand, part of the Israeli defense and security establishment has argued that the downfall of the regime of Bashar al-Assad would not favor Israel, noting how the Assads had – by and large – shown both restraint and predictability, displaying no interest in a direct confrontation with Israel and striving to preserve calm at the border. On the other hand, there has also been a second, anti-status quo, camp that has been arguing that Assad's fall would actually represent a positive development for Israel, since it would deliver a blow to Iran, weaken Hezbollah, and improve Israel's immediate security environment.

24 The security assessments and discussions in Europe have also focused on the heightened regional risks resulting from increased volatility, state weakness, proliferation of weapons and armed groups, and rising number of foreign jihadists fighting against Assad in Syria. Overall, European discussions have highlighted a serious concern for regional stability, which is well

in line with the idea – expressed in the Barcelona Declaration – that the Mediterranean should become a "common area of peace, stability and prosperity."[20]

25 European concerns for increased state weakness in the MENA region, and especially in North Africa, have also been voiced over the past three years, especially in the context of the indirect threats that this trend could pose to European security, through increasing the risks in terms of smuggling of weapons, drugs, and people, as well as undermining counter-terrorism and anti-criminal policies.

26 Yet, overall, the discussion regarding the security threats derived from the Arab Awakening has gone hand-in-hand with a generally more optimist tone than Israeli counterparts, highlighting the positive aspects of the revolutions.[21] Accordingly, concerns over regional instability have been balanced with statements regarding the importance of supporting the post-revolutionary transition.

27 In turn, this leads to affirming that overall the Israeli and European narratives on the Arab Awakening, while converging on certain topics, have diverged over the different weight each party has put on both the importance of preserving regional stability as well as on the dominance of national security considerations over broader political ones.

European and Israeli policies: 'do what you must, come what may'

28 Despite these clashing narratives regarding the consequences of the Arab Awakening, it appears that in their respective policy, the EU, its Member States, and Israel are all pursuing a common objective: preserving their own interests in the region or, in other words, endeavoring not to 'miss the boat.'

An assessment of the EU's and the EU3's policies

29 Contrary to Israel, it turns out that remaining passive and not interfering in the process was not a strategic option for Member States, and more particularly for France and the United Kingdom. Overall, Member States proved to be better armed to tackle shifting political dynamics in the region from a hard power perspective, whereas, from a soft power one, EU common tools could turn out to be especially useful in the long run.

30 With regards to the EU3's reactions, despite hesitant beginnings, they all proved willing to defend their security and political interests. This attitude can be exemplified by France's foreign policy with respect to the Arab Awakening. To better understand the French policy, it is worth reminding that the country has substantial influence in the MENA region, and especially in the Maghreb, and that France's role in the region has a direct impact on its international status as a global actor.[22] Yet, France's diplomacy started badly with a disastrous first response in the case of Tunisia. On the 11th of January 2011, during the initial demonstrations, Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie alluded to a possible cooperation at the security level with the Tunisian government's security forces. She had to resign at the end of February 2011. This first reaction helps to better understand French military interventionism in Libya, together with the United Kingdom. President Nicolas Sarkozy rushed into urging Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, the Libyan leader, to resign and face trial before the International Criminal Court. Thus, one could even speak of an instrumentalization of the Libyan case by France to erase from Arab memory its own attitude towards Tunisia and its very cautious reaction in the aftermath of Egypt leader Hosny Mubarak's decision to resign in February 2011.

31 France and the United Kingdom then decided to sponsor the UN Security Council resolution 1973, enabling NATO to intervene in Libya for the "protection of civilians and civilian populated areas."[23] This international intervention, starting on the 19th of March and finishing at the end of October 2011(and despite Germany's abstention) demonstrates that, when it comes to employing hard power, NATO as a military alliance led by a small coalition of Member States – among which France and the United Kingdom – remains better equipped than the EU as a whole. It is also worth noting that the unity of purpose between the United Kingdom and France was facilitated by a preceding military rapprochement and by the fact that, contrary to the Iraqi case, the American factor was not here a source of divergence.

32 In this sense, British Foreign secretary, William Hague, described the Arab unrest as a major test for the EU to bring more democracy and stability in the MENA region, adding that "if we don't succeed, the dangers to the EU of instability or extremism on our frontiers are immense."[24]

33 With respect to Syria, though all Member States recognized diplomatically the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as the legitimate representatives of the aspiration of the Syrian People during the 19th of November European Council, divisions remained and prevented a common European strategy to be drawn up.

34 The bone of contention among Member States first concerned the military support to provide the Rebels with. Before the 22nd of April 2013 Foreign Affairs Council of the EU, France – who was one of the first Member States to recognize the legitimacy of Syrian opposition – and the UK hoped to convince other Member States (especially Germany) to lift the arms embargo to Syria that had been in place since May 2011. Yet, the growing divisions within the opposition and the steady rise of pro-Al-Qaeda factions within the anti-Assad ranks raised fears that the weapons provided to fight Assad would fall into the wrong hands. At the EU level, during the April 2013 Foreign Affairs Council, it was decided to lift partially the oil embargo so as "to help the civilian population and support the opposition."[25] Despite other Member States' opposition to lift the arms embargo, France and the United Kingdom managed to block an extension of the arms embargo in the May 2013 Foreign Affairs Council, so that this specific sanction was not renewed. Yet, these Member States notably made a commitment that the "sale, supply, transfer or export of military equipment (…) will be for the Syrian National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces and intended for the protection of civilians."[26]

35 Then, in the aftermath of the chemical attack of the 21st of August 2013 carried out in the outskirts of Damascus, the subject of dispute among Member States turned out to be the possibility of a military strike against Syria. On the 22nd of August, Laurent Fabius, the French Foreign Minister, defended this option and he declared that, if forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar Assad were responsible for the massacre: "We need a reaction by the international community, a reaction of force."[27]

36 Yet, while the United Kingdom's Prime Minister David Cameron shared the French position, the UK parliament, in an unexpected move, voted against a government motion endorsing a military action against Syria on the 29th of August. The possibility of a US-led strike stirred unpleasant memories among the British MPs. As questions were raised about the intelligence underpinning the strike, the Prime Minister conceded: "In the end there is no 100 percent certainty about who is responsible." At the same time, the PM confirmed to be "as certain as possible" regarding Bashar el-Assad's responsibility for the chemical attack.[28] It is crystal clear that the 2003 Iraqi precedent – when British MPs were presented with what turned out as an inaccurate assessment regarding the presence of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) in Iraq on the eve of the war – strongly influenced the 2013 vote.

37 Germany's government and Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle were unsurprisingly cautious and vague in their statements concerning a possible German support to a military operation in Syria. While France declared that it was still committed to a firm military action after the British vote, the German government's spokesperson, Steffen Seibert, declared : "We have not considered it and we are not considering a military strike."[29] Yet, he added that the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, emphasized during a conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin, that "the inhumane poison gas attack against Syrian civilians requires an international reaction."[30] As a matter of fact, Angela Merkel found herself in an uneasy position as she did not want to alienate German voters before the September 2013 elections, and at the same time was unwilling to upset the American ally after the German abstention concerning the conflict in Libya.

38 While the EU3 remained divided on the option of a military attack in Syria, the EU High Representative Catherine Ashton, following an informal meeting of EU Foreign Ministers in Vilnius, attempted to save face by expressing an EU consensus: "Strong evidence [shows] that

the Syrian regime is responsible for these attacks as it is the only one that possesses chemical weapons agents and means of their delivery in a sufficient quantity."[31]

39 The September 14, 2013 US-Russia led agreement committing Syria to swiftly get rid of its chemical arsenal permitted the Member States to reach a new consensus, while postponing the prospect of a military strike. During the October 2013 EU Foreign Affairs Council Member States all agreed to support the difficult mission of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical weapons (OPCW), in charge of achieving the complete elimination of Syria's chemical weapons by mid-2014.[32]

40 Overall, the functions of the EU for the Member States were threefold in the context of the Arab upheavals: discursive, by providing a forum where the 28 Member States could reach a consensus, but also punitive and normative. In fact, the EU also permitted the Member States to overcome their disagreements by adopting common sanctions against different Arab regimes and by providing strong economic and political baking to protestors.

41 Sanctions turned out to be the main common tool at the EU level. This instrument has been used since 2011 in Tunisia "to freeze funds and economic resources of certain persons responsible for misappropriation of Tunisian State funds, and natural or legal persons or entities associated with them"; in Egypt for the same purpose in 2011 (and then amended in 2012); and again in 2011 in Libya for the same purpose and to place a ban on exporting arms and equipment that could have been used for internal repression before Qaddafi's death. In the case of Syria there is a much longer list of sanctions, which somehow reflects the divisions among Member States about a potential intervention on the ground: it includes an embargo on weapons and equipment which can be used for internal repressions (for the regime), and restrictions on persons, trade, investments, payments, and financial support…in total 22 sets of restrictive measures since the beginning of the conflict.[33] Yet, the effectiveness of these sanctions may be rationally called into question as they still have not had a meaningful impact on the position of the Syrian regime.

42 Through the EU, Member States were also able to provide stronger diplomatic and economic backing to Arab movements so as to attempt countering former accusations of carrying out a double standard policy in the MENA region.[34] In fact, the EU council stepped in quickly to support these movements diplomatically and sent more consistent messages in support of democratic forces in the region. For instance, in the case of Egypt, as soon as the 4th of February 2011: "The European council called on the Egyptian authorities to meet the aspirations of the Egyptian people with political reform not repression."[35]

43 Moreover, the EU adopted different incentives to move towards a new form of engagement with respect to the MENA region. The new incentives can be summarized as the '3 Ms': More market access, more mobility, more money.[36] Mandates for negotiating Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA) with Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Jordan were approved by the Council on 14 December 2011 to bring these countries progressively closer to the EU single market. What's more, the European Investment bank's (EIB) funding available for investment in the Southern Neighborhood has been increased by 1 billion euros. The EBRD's (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development) lending mandate has also been extended to cover the region, allowing for 2.5 billion euros in additional lending per year.

44 Mobility partnerships were initiated with Tunisia and Morocco – notably concerning visa facilitations – to increase mobility, with for instance more Erasmus mundus grants provided.

45 A Civil Society Facility was created – with 22 million euros for 2011-2013 – as well as an European Endowment for Democracy. Yet, it is worth noting that the EU democracy assistance resources still have remained a drop in the ocean compared with the US budget. A so called 'Spring program', that stands for Support for Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth, allocated 350 million euros for the period 2011-2012 for the region.

46 It remains to be seen, beyond the speeches, if the plethora of instruments introduced will not prove to be empty shell only echoing European distress towards the unexpected regional dynamics. The '3 Ms' should provide actual incentives to new transitioning governments so as to attract them towards Europe in the long run and to answer those critics who point out EU contradictions in its relation with former dictators. Otherwise, the introduction of these

new tools and initiatives could lead to deepen the "capacity-expectation gap"[37] created by the EU in its external action.

47 Yet, it is worth noting that the unstable and opaque course of the political transitions from Libya, to Syria and Egypt make this task particularly difficult. For instance, concerning negotiations on a DCFTA (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement) with Egypt – beyond the current EU-Egypt Association – exploratory discussions were held in 2012 and a dialogue on the DCFTA was launched in June 2013. But, in the aftermath of the overthrow of the Egyptian government in July 2013 by the Egyptian army, no other meetings have been foreseen. This exemplifies the difficulty for the EU to live up to its commitments in this unpredictable political context.

Israeli Policy Responses to the Arab Awakening – An Assessment

48 The Israeli policy responses to the Arab Awakening and to the wave of social and political changes that took the Middle East by storm have been informed by a desire to keep a low profile and stress the country's interest in staying out of its neighbors' political transitions.

49 In turn, this policy stemmed from Israel's understanding that its actual direct influence and capacity to affect domestic politics in the Arab world were limited, at best. The Israeli leadership was indeed aware of Israel's own unpopularity in the region, which further prevented the country from having a strong direct impact, while also limiting the chances for Israel to directly back any of the emerging political groups, as that support would also inevitably have hindered such groups' domestic stance and legitimacy.[38]

50 In addition, Israel felt it was important to stress that, in its own reading of the revolutions, the Arab-Israeli conflict and Israel's policies with respect to the Occupied Palestinian Territories was not a core driver or trigger of the protests. In the words of Foreign Ministry Avigdor Liberman: "For years we have dealt with misrepresentations of the conflict. Today, it is clear by what is happening in Syria and Egypt, that the problem is primarily internal and domestic. It is not the conflict, or the Jews – it is the radical Islamic wing in Arab society."[39]

51 Israel's policy of keeping a low-profile was certainly carried out with respect to Tunisia, where the country overall abstained from making formal statements in support of either Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime or the opposition forces, while still emphasizing its concern for regional stability.[40] This same attitude was reiterated in the aftermath of the revolution, with the exception of some sporadic and very general displays of public support for the region's yearning for a 'democratic future.'[41]

52 But whereas by and large the revolution in Tunisia did not result in any drastic policy or strategic shift for Israel, the same cannot be said when looking at the impact of the changes occurring in Egypt, where the downfall of Mubarak led to a shaky internal transition, followed by the swift rise and fall of the Muslim Brotherhood, and leaving the country in a state of deep internal polarization and instability. In this sense, Israel's policy with respect to Egypt has mostly been minimalist, aiming at weathering the storm, while preserving both the peace treaty as well as the generally good security and intelligence cooperation with the Egyptian security apparatus.

53 In this context, the shaky security situation in Sinai has been seen especially problematic, as the proliferation of weapons smuggling, trafficking, and terrorist activities in Sinai represented both a security as well as a political threat to Israel. The latter has struggled to balance its need to protect itself from any type of attack originating from within Egypt with the necessity of preserving the peace treaty and steering clear of any type of confrontation with its southern neighbor. As a result, Israel focused its Sinai policy on investing on its own border security, while aiming at preserving security coordination. While relations with Egypt were more complex during the brief reign of the Muslim Brotherhood, the post-Morsi interim government's interests in curbing smuggling and proliferation of arms groups in the Sinai are overall more in line with Israeli security interests.

54 The same combination of boosting domestic security while preserving a minimalist foreign policy can be observed with respect to Syria, where Israel's condemnation for Assad's violent

crackdowns on his own population have not been accompanied with an open endorsement of the anti-government opposition forces.

55 Indeed, Israel has repeatedly asserted not to be interested in becoming a direct party in the ongoing civil war, while – at the same time – communicating a number of 'redlines' and hinting its willingness to intervene directly to prevent the transfer of advanced weaponry to Hezbollah. In turn, reported Israeli attacks within Syria in the past year can be interpreted as Israel's acting on its own redlines and sending a signal to the Assad regime regarding its unwillingness to accept large scale weapons transfers to its regional foe, Hezbollah. The assumption behind this policy has largely been that such sporadic and limited use of force would not drag Israel into the Syrian civil war. This assessment is also shaped by the expectation that both Hezbollah as well as the Assad regime – already bogged down in their own domestic conflict – would not risk an all-out war with Israel by responding to Israel's attacks.

56 In other words, the calculus on Syria has been that Israel can continue to remain an external observer to the conflict, as limited use of force will not trigger retaliation, nor will it lead to a significant escalation. Needless to say, this assumption has created an extremely fragile equilibrium between Israel, the Assad regime, and Hezbollah.

57 Finally, in a brief excursus of Israeli policies with respect to the Arab Awakening, it is important to mention the impact of the regional changes on the country's policy with respect to the Arab-Israeli conflict. On this front, even though Israel has been adamant in de-linking the two issues, as already mentioned above, still it is hard to dispute the connection between Israel's policies with respect to Palestine and its uneasy regional position. In this sense, looking forward, it appears evident that not addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the issues of settlements in the West Bank and the current refusal to deal with Hamas, lift the economic restrictions on Gaza, and encourage inter-Palestinian reconciliation, will inevitably derail any effort to improve its political and diplomatic relations. In other words, Israel's position in the region remains deeply connected to its policies with respect to the Palestinians. The lack of a genuine peace process only hurts the country and contributes to strengthened negative feelings on the Arab street.

Conclusion

58 Notwithstanding diverging perceptions concerning the Arab Awakening, Israel and the EU – including the Member States – were both very much concerned not to lose out substantially in the new balance of power created by the shifting regional dynamics. While the EU and most of the Member States stepped in to express their solidarity to the rebels in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria, Israel remained cautious and kept a low profile, also due to its own unpopularity in the region. For geopolitical reasons, and due to their historical relations with Arab societies, EU and Israeli respective policies also strongly differed. The EU and Member States invested significant financial, political and diplomatic resources in boosting their involvement and status in the region. Conversely, Israel purposely remained relatively passive hoping that 'the storm' would pass without worsening the state of its already complicated relation with its neighbors.

59 Despite difficult beginnings, the EU managed to 'go with the flow' of the Arab Awakening events. At the Member States' level, France and the United Kingdom proved their capacity to act militarily in the European neighborhood when deemed necessary, such as in the Libyan case, despite the German veto. At the same time the current divisions regarding Syria show that without a consensus among the EU3, not much can be done at the EU level, with the exception of sanctions. Yet, the effectiveness of sanctions in the Syrian case remains to be demonstrated.

60 The EU had generally three functions for the Member States: punitive with the adoption of sanctions, discursive with the definition of general consensus, and normative by providing a diplomatic and economic backing to protestors.

61 Yet, Member States should make sure that EU instruments are not a mere substitute for an actual common strategy towards the MENA region. The plethora of tools introduced can make it more difficult for EU decision makers to identity an actual strategy aimed at promoting stability in the region, no longer synonymous with the former status quo. The Arab upheavals

could instead provide a new opportunity to prove, in the aftermath of the Lisbon Treaty, that the EU really enables Member States to increase the scope of their foreign policy capacity, rather than undermining it. The Lisbon Treaty, in force since December 2009, aims notably at improving consistency in EU external action. Since then, the Arab Awakening is the first big challenge Member States have had to face together. Their answer should reflect the Lisbon objective by defining a common strategy, as well as identifying specific goals based upon the EU's as well as Member States' power resources. Otherwise, the numerous EU financial instruments introduced could turn out to be counter-productive.

62 Israel, for its part, is under a very different set of constraints and challenges. The country perceived the increased instability in the MENA region as a potential security threat and its entire policy architecture has been aimed at containing potential spillovers and instability rather than, like the EU, increasing its role and profile. Yet, complete pessimism is not warranted, as there is still an expectation that, in the long run, the affirmation of democratic forces and the economic and political development in the region would overall represent an improvement for Israel. Still, there is widespread skepticism toward the capacity of the Arab Awakening to deliver such results.

63 These mixed feelings have resulted in an ambivalent posture toward the ongoing regional transformations, characterized by a concern for stability, an effort to boost domestic defense, and a strategic retreat. In the longer term, there is a debate within the Israeli society over what steps—starting with committing to deliver concrete progress in the Israeli-Palestinian arena—the country needs to take in order to adopt a more proactive attitude and improve its regional standing.

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Droits d'auteur

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Résumés

Depuis la fin de l'année 2010, le 'Printemps arabe' a entièrement redéfini le statu quo politique et social de la région Moyen Orient et Afrique du Nord (MENA). L'ensemble des principaux acteurs régionaux ont été touchés – de manière directe ou indirecte – par ces soulèvements sociaux et politiques de masse.
Israël a suivi ce processus de transformation politique avec une attention toute particulière, faisant preuve à la fois de scepticisme et d'anxiété mais aussi d'espoir et d'empathie. Au niveau politique, avec quelques exceptions notables néanmoins, cette attitude ambivalente s'est traduite par une politique minimaliste et favorable au maintien de la stabilité.
L'UE et ses États membres, quant à eux, se sont empressés, plus ou moins rapidement, d'exprimer leur soutien aux forces de démocratisation dans la région. La réaction de l'UE

envers ces révolutions en cours est dotée de deux caractéristiques distinctes : en premier lieu, dans le cadre de son *soft power*, l'UE est intervenue rapidement afin de soutenir ces mouvements en introduisant notamment des instruments financiers visant à soutenir la démocratie, telle qu'un dispositif d'assistance à la société civile ainsi qu'un fond européen pour la démocratie. Néanmoins, quant à l'exercice d'un éventuel *hard power* européen, les Etats membres ont tergiversé et sont restés divisés sur la question de l'apport d'un soutien militaire direct aux rebelles, dans le cas libyen et ensuite sur le dossier syrien.
Le premier objectif de cet article est de déconstruire et de comparer les discours européen et israélien concernant le Printemps arabe, en analysant plus spécifiquement l'équilibre trouvé entre défense de valeurs démocratiques et celle d'intérêts sécuritaires par chacun. La comparaison de ces discours est suivie d'une analyse des politiques israéliennes et européennes introduites afin de répondre aux défis mais aussi aux opportunités représentés par les évènements du Printemps arabe.
Cet article montre finalement que malgré des perceptions fortement contrastées concernant leur compréhension de la démocratie et de la sécurité dans la région, l'UE et ses États membres – et plus particulièrement l'UE3, la France, l'Allemagne et le Royaume-Uni – et Israël ont réagi à ces mouvements avec la même volonté de défendre leurs intérêts et d'adapter leurs politiques à ce nouvel environnement régional. Ces deux acteurs se sont en effet évertués à tirer parti (ou au moins à ne pas trop perdre) de ces évènements venant bouleverser en profondeur la région MENA.

Since late 2010, the so-called Arab Awakening has dramatically redefined the political and social status quo in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. All the main regional players have been affected – either directly or indirectly – by the mass-scale social and political upheaval, with significant implications both at the regional and international level.
Israel has been following the ongoing process of political transformation extremely carefully, showing at the same time skepticism and anxiety, but also hope and empathy. At the policy level, despite notable exceptions, this ambivalent attitude has been translated in a generally minimalist and pro-stability policy.
The European Union and its Member States also followed the Arab Awakening closely, rushing to voice support for the forces of democratization active in the region. The EU reaction to the unfolding revolutions displayed two distinct features: at a 'soft power' level, the EU rapidly stepped in to support the Arab Spring movements, thus introducing new financial-democracy assistance instruments, like the Civil Society Facility and the European Endowment for Democracy. Yet at a 'hard power' level, Member States remained divided and oscillated continuously between direct military support to the rebels and a 'wait and see' approach, first in the Libyan case and now in Syria.
The main aim of this article is to deconstruct and compare the dominant Israeli and European narratives on the Arab Awakening, focusing especially on how each party has framed the revolutions and balanced between pro-democratic values and stability and security concerns. In addition to comparing narratives, the study also analyzes the Israeli and European policies introduced to respond to the double challenge and opportunity represented by the Arab Awakening.
The study shows that, despite clashing perceptions on their understanding of security and democracy in the region, the EU and its Member States – and more particularly the EU3, France, Germany and the United Kingdom – and Israel reacted to the upheavals with the same willingness to defend their interests and to adapt their policy to the new regional landscape. It seems indeed that both actors have been focusing on how to benefit (or at least not lose out) from this new MENA context.