

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Staying safe by being good? The EU's normative decline as a security actor in the Middle East

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Abstract

The European Union's cooperation with Middle Eastern regimes to counter terrorism and prevent violent extremism has received increased scholarly attention following several terrorist attacks in Europe the last decade. Despite the EU's emphasis on good governance, democracy, and human rights to prevent violent extremism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), I argue that the Union is in fact declining as a 'normative power' as it has prioritised a 'security first' centred approach. This article demonstrates how the EU's normative projects have, first, appropriated a logic of securitisation; and second, how the Union downplays democracy and good governance in fear of alienating authoritarian key partners in the region. There are consequently inherent limitations to, and contradictions in, the EU's Counter-Terrorism (CT) and Preventing Violent Extremism (PvE) efforts. These conclusions are based on interviews with EU representatives and implementing partners on the ground. The interviews are complemented by an analysis of the scope and focus of the EU's CT and PvE projects. The findings have implications for our understanding of normative powers' priorities when facing a perceived dilemma of choosing between its security, on the one hand, and its identity and value aspirations, on the other.

Keywords: The European Union; CT/PvE; Normative Power; Terrorism; MENA; Securitisation

Introduction

The European Union (EU) persistently stresses good governance, democracy, and human rights as vehicles to counter terrorism and prevent violent extremism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).¹ In fact, the Union has, since the 1990s, pursued a 'messianic quest' to spread its liberal values as a key foreign policy instrument,² and 'we cannot overlook the extent to which the EU is normatively different to other polities with its commitment to individual rights and principles in accordance with the [European Convention on Human Rights] and the [United

¹Council of the European Union, 'Council Conclusions on the EU External Action on Counter-Terrorism', p. 3, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/23999/st10384en17-conclusions-on-eu-external-action-on-counter-terrorism.pdf> accessed 10 December 2020; Council of the European Union, 'Council Conclusions on Syria – Council Conclusions on (16 April 2018)', p. 5, available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7956-2018-INIT/en/pdf> accessed 10 December 2020; Council of the European Union, 'Council Conclusions on EU External Action on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism', p. 9, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44446/st08868-en20.pdf> accessed 10 December 2020.

²Michelle Pace, 'Paradoxes and contradictions in EU democracy promotion in the Mediterranean: The limits of EU normative power', *Democratization*, 16:1 (2009), p. 39.

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Nations].³ Accordingly, I investigate in this article why the EU continues to fund and cooperate with authoritarian regimes in the region at the expense of its liberal values.

By analysing the efforts of the EU in MENA to counter terrorism and prevent violent extremism (CT/PvE), and by interviewing relevant EU representatives and implementing partners responsible for these efforts, I demonstrate that the Union has moved towards a ‘security first’ centred approach in the region. This has followed a gradual transition towards an increasingly ‘realist-oriented’ paradigm, which undermines other EU concerns and contributes to its decline as a normative power. That is, the Union is increasingly pursuing a security policy model that is less influenced by liberal aspirations (acting ‘in a normative way in world politics’ by being ‘a changer of norms in the international system’) and instead premised on ‘bounded’ rational calculation of the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action – so-called *realpolitik*.⁴

This is not merely based on what projects the EU chooses to fund and prioritise, but also on the fact that the line between security and societal cohesion (strengthening inter-religious dialogue, youth empowerment, or conflict resolution) is blurred and social projects are now less premised on spreading human rights and democratic thinking as a goal and virtue in itself. Specifically, human rights, democracy, and good governance are not facilitated in local communities because they create better societies, but because they prevent violent extremism and stops terrorism. This causes EU normative funding projects to undergo a process of ‘securitisation’ through which target populations in MENA are presented as a threat that requires a solution (awareness of human rights, for example) because they are particularly prone to terrorism and violent extremism.⁵ Specific ethnic and religious groups are consequently transformed from political subjects to security issues receiving disproportionate attention through a geographical clustering of EU programmes, which ultimately causes alienation and cognitive dissonance on the ground. Because the EU is conceptualised as a normative power by virtue of what it *is* and what it *represents*, the Union’s nature must necessarily be altered when its programmes are no longer premised on liberal values but on increased control and security.

This shift towards security is not caused single-handedly by the trauma of the terrorist attacks in Europe over the course of the last decade. I argue that it is also caused by the EU’s belief that it has little or no leverage in negotiations and cooperation with authoritarian key partners in MENA. In fact, EU representatives from relevant Union organs, including the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS, the combined foreign and defence ministry of the Union), fear that a principled conditioning of diplomatic support and economic aid on tangible efforts towards good governance and democratic reforms will push these partners away because Arab regimes have little interest in giving up their privileges by promoting democracy, strengthening civil society, or implementing improved governance in their own societies. This means the Union is obliged to choose between short-term internal security considerations, on the one hand, and its identity, normative aspirations, and long-term human dignity considerations, on the other. The EU is in effect wrestling with a self-imposed diplomatic straitjacket because maintaining contact and dialogue with MENA regimes without results on the ground is deemed preferable in the short term, and continued dialogue is stressed as one of the Union’s most important foreign policy assets by EU representatives.⁶

³Ian Manners, ‘Normative power Europe: A contradiction in terms?’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40:2 (2002), p. 241.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 252; Adrian Hyde-Price, ‘“Normative” power Europe: A realist critique’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13:2 (2006), p. 221.

⁵Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO and London, UK: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), pp. 25–6.

⁶Author’s interviews (via WhatsApp) with: implementing partner (1) (all interviews listed in the footnotes are anonymous), 21 October 2020; EEAS representative (1), 1 October 2020; EEAS representative (2), 5 October 2020; EEAS representative (3), 5 October 2020; EU diplomat, 6 October 2020.

The question ‘why does the EU continue to fund and cooperate with authoritarian regimes in the region at the expense of its liberal values’ thus matters because it goes to the heart of the debate between the liberal school, which conceptualises the EU as a ‘normative power’ with ideational impact in international society through its promotion of specific values and principles, on the one hand, and the realist one, which contends that the Union is mainly a vehicle for the realisation of its member states’ strategic and economic interests, on the other.⁷ Indeed, if the thesis of Manners is correct – that ‘the EU as a normative power has an ontological quality to it – that the EU can be conceptualized as a changer of norms in the international system; [and that there is] a positivist quantity to it – that the EU *acts* to change norms in the international system’ – then it is to be expected that the EU promotes a different set of values when implementing its CT and PvE projects in the MENA region instead of pursuing a Moscow or Washington-style form of power politics.⁸

The question is also relevant for policymakers because groups such as the Islamic State, despite losing its initial foothold in Iraq and Syria, are far from defeated. The same applies to other salafi jihadi groups such as Hurras al-Din in Syria, as we in the last 15 years have ‘witnessed a remarkable growth in jihadism as a rebel ideology, a military guerilla force and a global terrorist menace’.⁹ Meanwhile, there are concerns over future spill-over effects to Jordan and Lebanon – both struggling with the influx of Syrian refugees and the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ In addition, Iraqi Shiite militias have not just developed into powerbrokers in the Iraqi political system but also into the government itself through their political alliances, members of parliament, and government officials.¹¹ EU-MENA co-operation may thus potentially do more harm than good if it contributes to regime stability in the region, because Arab autocrats are one possible driver for contemporary violence, insurgency, and turmoil.¹² Essentially, the key partners with which the EU cooperates may be the source of the problem that the Union aims to eradicate.

Accordingly, the article contributes to the literature in two ways: The first contribution is empirical insofar as I present new material on the EU’s CT and PvE efforts in MENA; I demonstrate how the EU’s efforts in the region have been securitised at the expense of good governance, human rights, and democracy promotion; and I analyse these efforts from third country perspectives. Second, the analysis of the apparent tension between the Union’s aspiration of spreading liberal values and its security cooperation with key partners in the Middle East contributes to the

⁷Manners, ‘Normative power Europe’; Richard Youngs, ‘Normative dynamics and strategic interests in the EU’s external identity’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 42:2 (2004), pp. 415–35; Helene Sjursen, ‘The EU as a “normative” power: How can this be?’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13:2 (2006), pp. 235–51; Federica Bicchi, ‘“Our size fits all”: Normative power Europe and the Mediterranean’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13:2 (2006), pp. 286–303; Hyde-Price, ‘“Normative” power Europe’; Sibylle Shepers and Daniela Sicurelli, ‘Normative power Europe: A credible utopia?’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 45:2 (2007), pp. 435–57; Pace, ‘Paradoxes and contradictions in EU democracy promotion in the Mediterranean’; Tuomas Forsberg, ‘Normative power Europe, once again: A conceptual analysis of an ideal type’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 49:6 (2011), pp. 1183–204; Richard G. Whitman, ‘The neo-normative turn in theorising the EU’s international presence’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 48:2 (2013), pp. 171–93; Vicki Birchfield, ‘A normative power Europe framework of transnational policy formation’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20:6 (2013), pp. 907–22; Ian Manners, ‘European Union, normative power and ethical foreign policy’, in David Chandler and Volker Heins (eds), *Rethinking Ethical Foreign Policy: Pitfalls, Possibilities and Paradoxes* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), pp. 116–36.

⁸Manners, ‘Normative power Europe’, p. 2.

⁹Brynjar Lia, ‘Jihadism in the Arab world after 2011: Explaining its expansion’, *Middle East Quarterly*, 23:4 (2016), p. 74.

¹⁰Juline Beaujouan and Amjed Rasheed, ‘The Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan and Lebanon: Impact and implications’, *Middle East Policy*, 27:3 (2020), pp. 76–98; Petter Nesser and Henrik Gråtrud, ‘When conflicts do not overspill: The case of Jordan’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 19:2 (2021), pp. 492–506.

¹¹Norman Cigar, *Iraq’s Shia Warlords and their Militias: Political and Security Challenges and Options* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2015), pp. 18–20.

¹²François Burgat, *Islamism in the Shadow of al-Qaeda* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008), pp. 102–03; Jean-Pierre Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015).

scholarship because it shows the inherent contradictions, restraints, and influence to which the Union is subjected when cooperating with authoritarian states. This article thus illuminates the dilemma which the EU is currently facing as a supposed normative power relying on – and outsourcing specific hard CT and PvE measures to – repressive and divisive MENA regimes, a dilemma of which EU representatives themselves are highly aware. As such, I argue that ideational impact in international society goes both ways when authoritarian regimes ban – or, at best, obstruct – projects that potentially threaten their domestic privileges, thus causing a ‘logic transmutation’ of the Union’s normative projects when it must prioritise between its short-term security interests and long-term normative aspirations.

This is, in other words, *not* a study of what the EU is doing or even what the EU is *doing in MENA*, but instead what the EU is doing *to counter terrorism and prevent violent extremism in MENA*; and, *in extenso*, how this effort reveals an increasing disconnect between the theory of normative power Europe and the actual practices of the Union on the ground. Hence, I do not include the EU’s position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because the Union itself does not categorise this involvement as CT/PvE.¹³ Moreover, it can be argued that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an outlier because it involves an occupier and an occupied according to international law.¹⁴ This is necessarily different from existing challenges and tensions faced in Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan, for example, and there are inherent methodological limitations to employing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a case to understand the EU’s efforts in the broader MENA region.

The article’s strength is that it goes beyond a strictly discursive analysis of EU documents, texts, and public statements. Instead, the article is based on several interviews with eleven representatives from the EEAS and the European Commission between September 2020 and November 2021, whose responsibilities are immediately relevant for the analysis provided in this article – from EU policy development and analysis through the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP); Unit for Resilience, Peace, Security; Unit for Counter-Terrorism; and the Foreign Policy Instrument (FPI). Other EU representatives interviewed for this article have obtained field experience in the MENA region through their diplomatic service the last decade; accompanying and facilitating EU delegations; participating in meetings and dialogues with MENA regime representatives; and supervising and coordinating relevant EU funding projects in the region.

I also interviewed nine implementing partners between October 2020 and February 2021 responsible for several of the EU’s PvE and CT funding projects in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Their responsibilities vary from training Jordanian and Lebanese law enforcement and intelligence units to working on youth empowerment in Egypt and Jordan. Mainly, our discussions revolved around the perceived challenges on the ground for EU policies and their projects. Other implementing partners were contacted but did not respond. This was presumably the case if the nature of the funding projects were too sensitive, as was the case for the EU implementing partner Crown Agents, which works on security and counterterrorism strategy in Iraq.

¹³On the EU’s involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a normative power, see, for example, Guy Harpaz, ‘Normative power Europe and the problem of a legitimacy deficit: An Israeli perspective’, *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 12 (2007), pp. 89–109; Sharon Pardo and Joel Peters, *Uneasy Neighbors: Israel and the European Union* (New York, NY: Lexington Books, 2010); Guy Harpaz, ‘Normative power Europe and the State of Israel: An illegitimate EUtopia?’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 48:3 (2010), pp. 579–616; Neve Gordon and Sharon Pardo, ‘Normative power Europe meets the Israeli-Palestinian conflict’, *Asia Europe Journal*, 13 (2015), pp. 265–74; Sharon Pardo, *Normative Power Europe Meets Israel* (New York, NY and London, UK: Lexington Books, 2015); Neve Gordon and Sharon Pardo, ‘Normative power Europe and the power of the Local’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 53:2 (2015), pp. 416–27; Anders Persson, ‘Shaping discourse and setting examples: Normative power Europe can work in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55:6 (2017), pp. 1415–31.

¹⁴See, for example, John Dugard, ‘Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied since 1967’, UN Document A/HRC/4/17, 29 January 2007, p. 3: ‘Israel is clearly in military occupation of OPT.’

I have respected all interviewees' wishes to be anonymous – either out of concern for their future careers and promotions within the EU system, or the possibility of not receiving future EU funding for their projects. All participants provided their written consent to be interviewed – either by mail or by signing a standardised form of consent. The interviews were all carried out digitally because of the COVID-19 pandemic (either by email, WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, or Zoom). I did not tape record the conversations to comply with general principles for secure data storage, but I did take written notes after receiving the oral consent of all participants at the beginning of the interview.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I assess the EU's CT and PvE efforts in MENA and its cooperation with local key partners in the region. Here, I empirically demonstrate how the EU is prioritising security in MENA at the expense of other projects focusing on human rights, good governance, and democracy. Then I proceed to discuss why the EU – while stressing the need for good governance, democracy, and human rights in MENA – cooperates with, funds, and, in effect, secures, Arab regimes although they constitute one of the main obstacles to achieving EU liberal values. In the final section, I summarise my findings and propose new fields for future research on which to focus.

A creeping sense of security: Assessing the EU funding projects in MENA

A comprehensive historical account of EU-MENA cooperation is outside the scope of this article. It suffices to note that the EU's CT and PvE approaches have largely been determined by critical junctures, to wit, armed attacks planned or carried out by non-state armed groups on European soil.¹⁵ Indeed, the unstable political situation in the MENA region was already perceived in the 1990s to potentially impact European interests and security,¹⁶ and a significant number of terrorist attacks in Europe have been connected to conflicts in the immediate European neighbourhood in the last three decades.¹⁷

Still, there is not one specific approach, method, working definition, or analysis of the root causes that defines the CT and PvE efforts of the EU in MENA over the last decade.¹⁸ Its programmes on the ground, for example, range from engaging youth leaders in Egypt to securing airports and borders in Lebanon. From training Jordanian law enforcement to rehabilitating children born in, or recruited to, the Islamic State.¹⁹ From facilitating the production of counternarratives and improving strategic communication in Kuwait to the creation of networks between religious leaders.²⁰ These efforts are organised through implementing partners on the ground in MENA, while the EU publicly stresses the importance of democracy, human rights, and good governance in dialogue with local authorities; and with regional experts dispatched from the EU to provide more detailed council and policy recommendations on the ground.²¹

The same applies to the EU's analysis of root causes of violent extremism in the MENA region, which is reflected by its emphasis on the range of conditions causing radicalisation: weak

¹⁵Sarah Wolff, 'The Mediterranean dimension of EU counter-terrorism', *Journal of European Integration*, 31:1 (2009), p. 138; Rik Coolsaet, 'EU counterterrorism strategy: Value added or chimera?', *International Affairs*, 86:4 (2010), p. 858; Mai'a M. K. Cross, 'Counter-terrorism in the EU's external relations', *Journal of European Integration*, 39:5 (2017), p. 613.

¹⁶Stefanie Georgakis Abbott, 'The EU and the Middle East: From the EU-Mediterranean partnership to the Union for the Mediterranean', in Yannis Stivachtis (ed.), *Conflict and Diplomacy in the Middle East* (Bristol, UK: E-International Relations Publishing, 2018), p. 93; Yannis Stivachtis, 'The EU and the Middle East: The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)', in Stivachtis (ed.), *Conflict and Diplomacy in the Middle East*, p. 112.

¹⁷See, for example, Petter Nesser, *Islamist Terrorism in Europe: A History* (London, UK: Hurst & Company, 2015).

¹⁸Author's interviews (via WhatsApp) with: EEAS representative (1), 1 October 2020; EEAS representative (2), 5 October 2020; EU diplomat, 6 October 2020; EU Commission representative (1), 14 October 2020; EEAS representative (5), 23 October 2020; EU Commission representative (2), 2 October 2020.

¹⁹Author's interview (via WhatsApp) with CEPOL representative, 19 January 2021.

²⁰Author's interview (via WhatsApp) with EEAS representative (5), 23 October 2020; author's interview (via email) with EU implementing partner (6), 23 October 2020.

²¹Author's interview (via WhatsApp) with EEAS representative (3), 5 October 2020.

democracy and authoritarian rule, rapid and unhinged modernisation, or the lack of social mobility, educational opportunities, and political prospects. As its Council Conclusion of June 2020 notes: ‘Democracy, rule of law and good governance are essential in fostering positive narratives and effective and non-violent means for addressing various political, social and other grievances.’²²

Fundamentally, the EU does not offer any specific working definition of terrorism or violent extremism in any of its counterterrorism strategies or council conclusions from November 2005 to February 2020 – for instance, what violent extremism is and is not, or what groups it includes and excludes.²³ Given the events and groups mentioned in its CT documents, it is nevertheless clear that the EU mainly refers to Sunni militancy in general and groups affiliated with al-Qaida and the Islamic State in particular. There is presumably an avoidance of clearly defined terms because the EU member states themselves do not agree on a definition or a PvE approach, and while southern EU member states prioritise security and stabilisation in MENA, eastern ones have a greater focus on Russia. Member states also differ on prioritising securitisation (France) or prevention (Germany) as the preferred CT and PvE approach.²⁴ In addition, clarity may alienate key partners in MENA, which have their own politicised definitions of violent extremism instrumentalised to delegitimise domestic opposition or to increase their own regional influence.²⁵

Despite the absence of a clear uniformity, when assessing the EU’s CT and PvE funding projects on the ground in MENA, much indicates that the Union’s normative approach of promoting democracy and human rights has been gradually replaced by a security-centred cooperation with its key partners in the region. This is apparent when categorising the EU’s CT and PvE funding projects in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia from 1 September 2014, to November 2023, according to their point of focus,²⁶ as illustrated by Figure 1. Examples of such cooperation are the funding projects Euromed Justice and Euromed Police, which both aim at fostering effective coordination and cooperation between key partners in MENA such as Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon, and EU member states in the areas of law

²²Council of the European Union, ‘Council Conclusions on EU External Action on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism’, p. 9.

²³Council of the European Union, ‘The European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy’, available at: {<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST%2014469%202005%20REV%204/EN/pdf>} accessed 11 December 2020; European External Action Service, ‘Shared Vision, Common Strategy: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy’, available at: {https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf} accessed 11 December 2020; Council of the European Union, ‘Council Conclusions on the EU External Action on Counter-Terrorism’; Council of the European Union, ‘Council Conclusions on EU External Action on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism’.

²⁴Assem Dandashly, ‘EU democracy promotion and the dominance of the security-stability nexus’, *Mediterranean Politics*, 23:1 (2018), pp. 62–82; Steven Blockmans, Loes Debuysere, Georges Fahmi, Magnus Langset Trøan, Pernille Rieker, and Olivier Roy, ‘D4.1 Working Paper on EU Policies and Instruments for PvE’, available at: {<https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/documents/downloadPublic?documentIds=080166e5db795160&appId=PPGMS>} accessed 15 November 2021.

²⁵Author’s interviews (via WhatsApp): with EEAS representative (2), 5 October 2020; EU diplomat, 6 October 2020.

²⁶The EU’s PvE funding projects in MENA have been categorised as either ‘securitisation’ (e.g., law enforcement, training, border control, airport security); ‘preventing radicalization’ (e.g., promoting moderate voices, fighting hate speech); ‘good governance’ (e.g., instilling liberal values, rule of law, democracy promotion); ‘societal cohesion’ (e.g., inter-religious dialogue, youth empowerment, conflict resolution); or ‘stakeholder capacity building’ (e.g., training and capacity building, data gathering, coordination enhancement between key partners). The list of all CT/PvE projects with their level of funding were collected from the website of the EU funded project CT-MORSE (Counter-Terrorism Monitoring, Reporting and Support Mechanism), which includes ‘national projects’ (projects exclusively for Syria, Jordan, etc.), ‘regional projects’ (projects including a number of MENA countries), and ‘global projects’ (projects also including countries in Asia, Africa, etc.). Each regional and global project has only been counted once (and not once for each relevant MENA country they apply to). The categorisation of each funding projects was based on interviews with implementing partners and a desk review of secondary open sources providing more elaborate detail than that from CT-MORSE. Six projects had no information besides that listed by CT-MORSE and is consequently categorised as ‘unknown’ (See CT-MORSE, 2020).

enforcement and justice system,²⁷ while the Tansiq programme in Iraq, implemented by Crown Agents, is aimed at enhancing relations with, and developing the capabilities of, the Iraqi government and ‘six Iraqi intelligence agencies’ to ‘respond coherently, inclusively and efficiently to terrorism threats and challenges’.²⁸

Another is the funding project implemented out by the European Union Law Enforcement Training Agency (CEPOL), which connects and creates networks between law enforcement in Europe and their counterparts in MENA such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt; trains and raises capabilities of MENA law enforcement and intelligence; and offers exchange programmes through which Jordanian, Lebanese, or Egyptian law enforcement, for example, can travel to the EU and learn security techniques, practices, and strategies from their European peers. As one CEPOL representative described the premise of the project: ‘The whole idea was that if you made your border safe, then you would be safe.’²⁹ The approach is thus similar to the ‘securitising practices’ of the European external borders agency FRONTEX, which trains national border guards and coordinate joint surveillance and control operations to secure European borders and manage migration.³⁰

Other EU funded projects are less orthodox, such as the Regional Strategic Dialogue – Security Challenges and Solutions. Implemented by the Israeli think tank Economic Cooperation Foundation, the Regional Strategic Dialogue aims to develop new ideas for – and increase and enhance – defence cooperation and – dialogue between Israel, The Palestinian National Authority (PA), Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. According to one Israeli representative working on this EU-funded project, the enhanced cooperation on defence and security between these states was not merely aimed against groups affiliated with, or inspired by, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, but also against the regional influence of Iran and its proxies.³¹ If correct, then the EU attempts to prevent violent extremism by strengthening the security of, and cooperation between, authoritarian states in the region, while, also, in practice, funding efforts to strengthen one side in a regional cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The focus on security is further accentuated when assessing the level of funding for each category, as illustrated by Figure 2. While there are more EU funding projects promoting societal cohesion through youth empowerment and inter-religious dialogue, securitisation efforts nevertheless receive the most funding – both in relative and absolute terms. Funding projects promoting ‘good governance’ (democracy promotion, liberal values, and human rights) in the Middle East, on the other hand, receive only 10 per cent approximately, despite EU documents’ insistence on its importance. The numbers thus confirm Daniel Keohane’s suggestion that the figures for EU aid spending promoting democratic and social reforms in MENA are much lower than for hard security measures.³² While EU representatives have traditionally emphasised ‘European values’ as a bulwark against terrorism, this is not reflected by its priorities on the ground as the EU ‘settled for a more realist approach to MENA politics’.³³ Essentially, the main objective of EU initiatives for the Mediterranean has been securing ‘the EU’s own concerns about (im) migration, security, and stability rather than [democratic and durable] “transformation” in MENA’.³⁴

²⁷ Author’s interview (via WhatsApp) with EU implementing partner (7), 30 October 2020.

²⁸ Crown Agents, ‘Tansiq in Iraq’, available at: {<https://www.crownagents.com/project/tansiq-in-iraq>} accessed 15 November 2021.

²⁹ Author’s interview (via WhatsApp) with CEPOL representative, 19 January 2021.

³⁰ Sarah Léonard, ‘EU border security and migration into the European Union: FRONTEX and securitisation through practices’, *European Security*, 19:2 (2010), pp. 231–54.

³¹ Author’s interview (via Zoom) with representative from Economic Cooperation Foundation, 29 October 2020.

³² Daniel Keohane, ‘The absent friend: EU foreign policy and counter-terrorism’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 46:1 (2008), pp. 131–2.

³³ Stivachtis, ‘The EU and the Middle East’, pp. 112, 115.

³⁴ Pace, ‘Paradoxes and contradictions in EU democracy promotion in the Mediterranean’, p. 45.

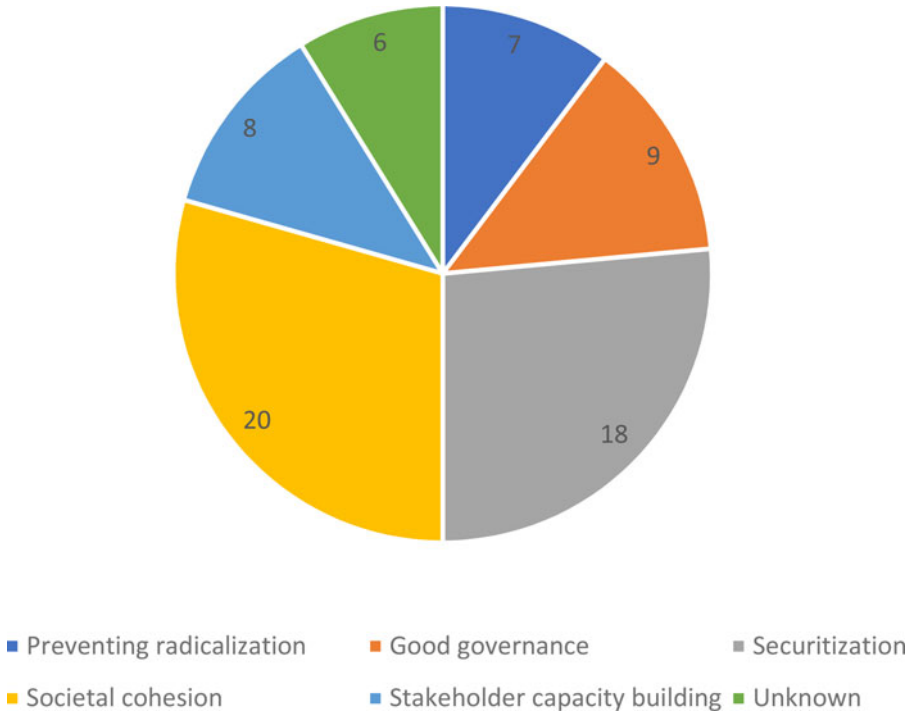


Figure 1. Number of EU PvE funding projects by point of focus.

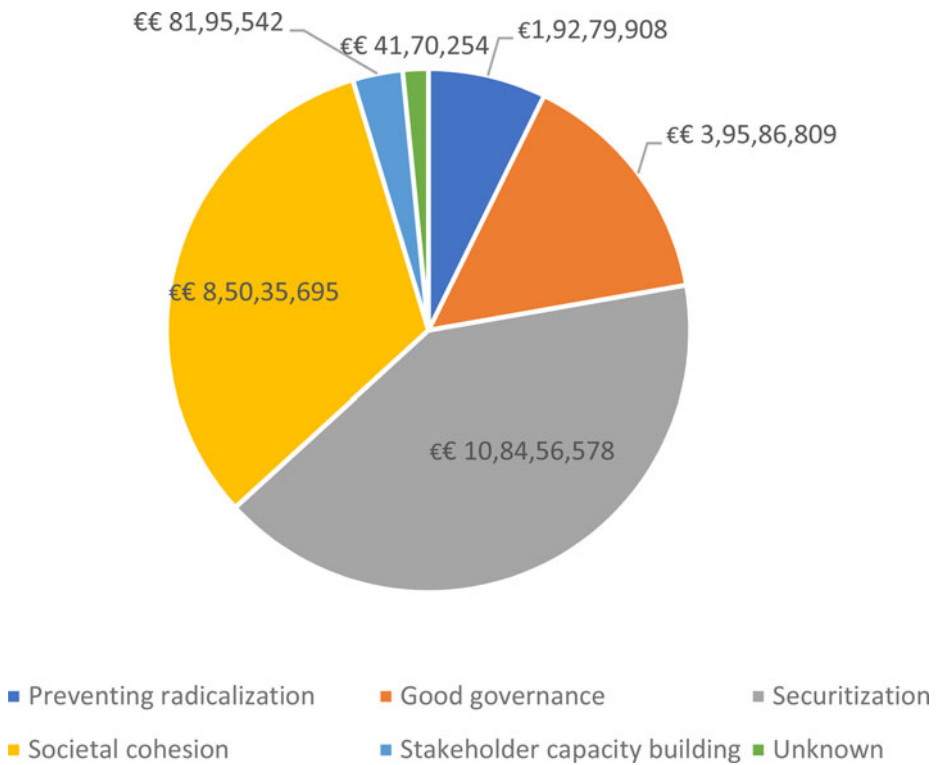


Figure 2. Level of funding for EU PvE projects in MENA by category.

Focusing solely on the number of EU CT and PvE projects and their level of funding by category is, however, to ignore how security is creeping into, and appropriating, the logic of other normative EU projects, insofar as these endeavours are decreasingly aimed at instilling liberal values and good governance because they are a goal and virtue in themselves. That is, awareness of human rights or the strengthening of democratic practices are not facilitated in local communities because it creates better societies, but because violent extremism is identified as latent in a segment of the population that must be treated with better education or improved governance before terrorism manifests and spills over into Europe. According to one EEAS representative with an extensive portfolio from the Gulf, the division between European security and the normative aspirations of the EU is blurred because ‘European policymakers prioritise civilisation over [democratic] change [in MENA]’,³⁵ while another complained:

Before, we used to build schools for the sake of building schools – because it was a humanitarian project. Now we do it to prevent violent extremism instead. Before, we used to train children for the sake of training children, because it was a humanitarian project, but now we do it to prevent violent extremism. The term violent extremism has been employed to securitise everything that we are doing ... What I am trying to say is that this was a genie coming out of a lamp ... It is a monster out of control.³⁶

This ‘logic transmutation’ of normative aspirations is not merely an issue of how EU funding projects are categorised or an issue of changing discourse but how real practical concerns and cognitive dissonance are created on the ground. Several implementing partners stated that they did not perceive their work to be related to CT or PvE at all – although the EU listed their projects as such. One implementing partner, responsible for funding projects listed by the EU as CT/PvE in Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt, mentioning just some, stated, for example, ‘We do not see this as a PvE programme, we do not see it as that. There is no evidence that our approach has any impact on preventing violent extremism. I suppose if you believe promoting critical thinking among some groups of young people have an impact, then it has some *indirect* effect.’³⁷

Other implementing partners similarly noted that they avoided mentioning PvE at all when describing their projects to the target population because it created suspicion against the programmes and made it unnecessarily difficult to create trust.³⁸ Consequently, the securitisation of aid and normative aspirations could potentially do more harm than good, as they now imply that a target population is particularly prone to radicalisation and violence in their communities – thus effectively alienating project participants:

You must be particularly careful about preventing violent extremism with social programmes because it is so sensitive. You can alienate the audience if you promote it as PvE and the young people participating would be quite distrustful if they heard we promoted it as preventing violent extremism.³⁹

Last, although admitting they did implement a PvE funding project, a DW Akademie representative admitted that they had to tone down the PvE aspect in Lebanon for similar reasons: ‘If you go somewhere as an international organisation and tell people they are radicalised and we need to help you, it does not work as well as telling them we are in this together and we should work together to make this a better place.’⁴⁰

³⁵ Author’s interview (via WhatsApp) with EEAS representative (5), 23 October 2020

³⁶ Author’s interview (via WhatsApp) with EEAS representative (1), 1 October 2020.

³⁷ Author’s interview (via Zoom) with EU implementing partner (2), 2 November 2020.

³⁸ Author’s interview (via Zoom) with EU implementing partner (5), 6 November 2020.

³⁹ Author’s interview (via Zoom) with EU implementing partner (2), 2 November 2020.

⁴⁰ Author’s interview (via WhatsApp) with EU implementing partner (3), 6 November 2020.

The inherent risk of alienating the target population is underscored by the geographical focus of EU PvE projects as they imply a view on violent extremism as synonymous with Sunni terrorism. Most of the PvE projects focusing on societal cohesion in Lebanon, for example, are organised in localities with a Sunni majority – with the associated possibility of stigma against specific religious groupings. This could, as noted above by the DW Akademie representative, potentially heighten sectarian tensions in a country where ‘the [Lebanese] army’s main mission has been to fight against Sunni jihadi groups’, with a number of associated questions about (Shiite) Hezbollah’s influence over the military.⁴¹ A unidirectional focus is similarly risky in other countries such as Iraq where Iraqi Shiite militias are not just military actors, but also political players with offices in government, parliament, and local Iraqi politics.⁴² EU funding of, and security cooperation with, the Iraqi government and its intelligence agencies, for example, may contribute to increased sectarian instability seeing that the disempowerment and marginalisation of the Iraqi Sunni population has fuelled the growth of extremist groups such as the Islamic State following the 2003 US invasion. Indeed, the Iraqi government’s reliance on Shiite militias to implement security in Iraq has ‘risk[ed] galvanizing [Iraqi Sunni] tribes to bandwagon with IS to prevent what many Sunnis would view as a [Shiite] invasion’.⁴³

It thus matters whether the EU funding projects focusing on human rights or good governance are premised on, and motivated by, spreading liberal values or to prevent violent extremism and terrorism because the latter entails securitising a target population rather than improving their lives. As shown, securitisation alters the dynamic between the EU and a target population, although spreading democracy and human rights would still be at the declared core of EU foreign policy. This is the case in Lebanon where a Sunni population is potentially alienated by being identified as a security issue to be treated by instilling liberal values and norms, and, whether by design or by accident, the clustering of EU PvE efforts may add to sectarian tensions in its quest to redesign and securitise the status quo.

The EU has in effect declined as a normative power focusing on spreading and strengthening human rights, good governance, and democracy and to influence what is ‘normal’ in international relations. Although democracy promotion is a strategic goal in EU’s security policy,⁴⁴ we see that ‘the EU has increasingly used its economic and political leverage to encourage Arab governments to cooperate with the EU on controlling illegal migration and sharing information on counter-terrorism, and less on encouraging democratic reform in those countries.’⁴⁵ We are hence currently witnessing a gradual transition towards an increasingly realist-oriented security paradigm premising and conditioning other concerns in the region. This is not particularly controversial, as we have witnessed a similar development in other regions, such as in the Sahel.⁴⁶

This logic transmutation is significant because it raises the question of what is normative about the EU as a normative power if the very premises and motivations of its projects cease to be liberal. Certainly, the work on human rights and good governance would persist, yet without its aspirations holding out the promise of a better future – a change of which EU representatives themselves are highly aware and to which they refer. This normative decline

⁴¹Tine Gade and Nayla Moussa, ‘The Lebanese army after the Syrian crisis: Alienating the Sunni community?’, in Are John Knudsen and Tine Gade (eds), *Civil-Military Relations in Lebanon: Conflict, Cohesion, and Confessionalism in a Divided Society* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 41–2.

⁴²Cigar, *Iraq’s Shia Warlords and their Militias*, pp. 18–20.

⁴³Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Sterling Jensen, ‘The role of Iraqi tribes after the Islamic State’s ascendance’, *Military Review*, 95:4 (2015), p. 109.

⁴⁴Dandashly, ‘EU democracy promotion and the dominance of the security-stability nexus’, p. 64.

⁴⁵Keohane, ‘The absent friend’, p. 143.

⁴⁶Morten Boås and Pernille Rieker, *EUNPACK Executive Summary of the Final Report & Selected Policy Recommendations: A Conflict-Sensitive Unpacking of the EU Comprehensive Approach to Conflict and Crisis Mechanisms* (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2019).

is partly caused by a union perceiving itself to have little or no leverage to pressure key partners in the MENA region. Securitisation efforts are, in other words, prioritised by the EU partly because its key partners have little interest in giving up their privileges by promoting democracy, strengthening civil society, or implementing improved governance. This is where I turn in the next section.

The alternative to talk is expensive: The diplomatic straitjacket of normative power Europe

One should not underestimate the impact of the terrorist attacks in Europe in 2015–16 on EU foreign policy, as illustrated by the Union's Global Strategy of 2016.⁴⁷ Nearly all representatives from both the EEAS and the European Commission acknowledged the terrorist attacks as a direct cause for the increased prioritisation of security and stability in MENA.⁴⁸ Some were more vocal than others: 'Let us be honest about this, we do so because we are suffering from violent extremism in Europe. So, in the case of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, the top priority is to prevent the impact of radicalisation in the region and the way it is exported into the EU and to minimise this impact.'⁴⁹

Still, fear alone ignores third country perspectives, as EU funding projects and policies must be negotiated and coordinated with authoritarian key partners in the region who care little about implementing democratic reforms for improved governance and the strengthening of human rights. In fact, when attempting to counter terrorism or prevent violent extremism, MENA regimes have traditionally favoured repression combined with religious reform. This is the case because they, largely, do not threaten the positions and interests of key partners in the region. On the contrary, they contribute to regime stability by securing infrastructure and strengthening police and security forces. Further, religious reform has shown itself useful for regimes such as Saudi Arabia to centralise ideological production,⁵⁰ or broaden the definition of 'deviant' ideas to encompass and criminalise bothersome opposition.⁵¹ For the al-Sisi regime in Egypt, one of the survival strategies after the Arab Spring has been the attempted co-optation of al-Azhar and setting the agenda for how Egyptian religious institutions engage with society.⁵² In Jordan, the regime has shifted from passively managing the religious space to actively shaping it through the creation of a Jordanian 'official Islam', which has contributed to maintaining regime dominance.⁵³

While these types of state-led religious reform in the MENA region may seem distant from the daily affairs of European bureaucrats, they are nevertheless immediately relevant for the CT and PvE efforts of the EU because the Union is directly involved in, and funds, some of these projects. One case is the EU-funded Hedaya Centre in Abu Dhabi (UAE), which states that it works on deradicalisation and countering violent extremism. Still, the 'extremism' the centre combats is defined so broadly by UAE authorities that Islamists calling for democracy and political reform

⁴⁷Nathalie Tocci, 'From European security strategy to the EU global strategy: Explaining the journey', *International Politics*, 54 (2017), p. 489.

⁴⁸Author's interviews (via WhatsApp) with: EEAS representative (3), 5 October 2020; EU Commission representative (1), 14 October 2020; EEAS representative (5), 23 October 2020; EU Commission representative (2), 29 October 2020.

⁴⁹Author's interview (via WhatsApp) with EEAS representative (5), 23 October 2020.

⁵⁰Stéphane Lacroix, 'Saudi Arabia and the limits of religious reform', *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 17:2 (2019), p. 98; Tine Gade, *Islam Keeping Violent Jihadism at Bay in Times of Daesh: State Religious Institutions in Lebanon, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia since 2013* (Florence: European University Institute, 2019), p. 2.

⁵¹Madawi al-Rasheed, *Muted Modernists: The Struggle Over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 39.

⁵²Georges Fahmi, 'The Egyptian State and the Religious Sphere', available at: {<https://carnegie-mec.org/2014/09/18/egyptian-state-and-religious-sphere-pub-56619>} accessed 25 August 2020.

⁵³Michael Robbins and Lawrence Rubin, 'The rise of official Islam in Jordan', *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 14:1 (2013), p. 73; Michael Robbins and Lawrence Rubin, 'The ascendance of official Islams', *Democracy and Security*, 13:4 (2017), p. 364.

in the Gulf are demonised under the pretexts that they distort religious teachings.⁵⁴ While EU representatives acknowledged the efforts of Hedaya as positive, some also admitted that this centre worked within the framework of an ‘Emirati narrative’ of Islam, which is employed opportunistically to serve the aspirations of the regime.⁵⁵ This engagement with ideological production in the MENA region was considered risky because the Union is not equipped to deal with theological interpretations and Islamic exegesis: ‘Ideologies are tricky issues because ... it is a risk of doing more harm than good. You could be promoting a version of Islamic tradition that suits the interests of one country, but which does not represent anyone else in the Islamic world ... the EU must be careful.’⁵⁶

This leads us back to the question posed in the introduction: If authoritarian partners have little interest in efforts threatening their privileges, why does the EU continue to cooperate with and fund these regimes at the expense of the Union’s liberal values? Indeed, fear of spill-over cannot be the sole answer if, in truth, the EU perceives authoritarianism, human rights abuses, and inequality – products of the MENA regimes themselves – as primary drivers for turmoil in the region.

Manners postulated that the EU’s greatest strength was its ability to shape conceptions of ‘normal’ in international relations, and he correspondingly rejected ‘the assumption that normative power requires a willingness to use force in an instrumental way.’⁵⁷ EEAS representatives nevertheless cited the inherent dilemma of aspiring to spread liberal values on the ground while not being in possession of the requisite ‘power tools’ to pressure relevant key partners in MENA to implement their responsibilities as outlined in its action plans.⁵⁸ Because the EU wants to export its values and principles to ‘problematic stakeholders’ without any real leverage to offer, they noted that it was actually the Union that had to continually adapt to what its local partners want to do and not vice versa.⁵⁹

Ironically, it is to a certain extent the EU’s self-identification as a normative power with a mission to spread liberal values through ‘diplomatic measures’ that causes the Union to persist in its security cooperation with authoritarian regimes.⁶⁰ Although the EU’s liberal logic transmutes by adapting to the desires of local key partners in the region, talking and maintaining dialogue is nonetheless perceived as an essential form of power for the Union. In this view, the EU cannot afford to cease security cooperation, because ‘engag[ing] with everyone’ is perceived to be one of the strongest assets in the Union’s foreign policy,⁶¹ and ‘if we want to expand our influence or want to achieve something with authoritarian regimes, we need to cooperate with them.’⁶² Essentially, as one European Commission representative working on Syria stated:

[w]hat is important is to keep everything open for communication. A complete shutdown of dialogue would be worse. We do not spare any opportunity to raise our concerns about human rights violations, but we have seen that a lack of dialogue is worse because we do not even have the opportunity to raise our voice. So, we need to find cooperation in key areas such as [CT] and PvE; and using those joint agendas to raise our concerns.⁶³

⁵⁴Erik Skare and Stéphane Lacroix, ‘Les quatre "R" de la déradicalisation dans le monde arabe (1990-2020)’, in Juliette Galonnier, Stéphane Lacroix, and Nadia Marzouki (eds), *Politiques de lutte contre la radicalisation* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2022), pp. 87–104.

⁵⁵Author’s interview (via WhatsApp) with EEAS representative (4), 7 October 2020.

⁵⁶Author’s interview (via WhatsApp) with EEAS representative (1), 1 October 2020.

⁵⁷Manners, ‘Normative power Europe’, pp. 239, 242.

⁵⁸Author’s interviews (via WhatsApp) with: EEAS representative (1), 1 October 2020; EEAS representative (2), 5 October 2020.

⁵⁹Author’s interview (via WhatsApp) with EEAS representative (2), 5 October 2020.

⁶⁰Sheipers and Sicurelli, ‘Normative power Europe’, p. 453.

⁶¹Author’s interview (via WhatsApp) with EEAS representative (1), 1 October 2020.

⁶²Author’s interview (via WhatsApp) with EEAS representative (2), 5 October 2020.

⁶³Author’s interview (via WhatsApp) with EEAS representative (3), 5 October 2020.

There are few indications, however, that the EU's emphasis on maintaining dialogue with authoritarian MENA regimes is a calculated strategy aimed to achieve defined objectives in the short- or the mid-term. It is, instead, a largely reactive approach as the Union uneasily manoeuvres *vis-à-vis* the looming threat of competing adversaries and the fear that pressing authoritarian regimes too hard on democratic reforms will push them into the arms of Russia or China. One EU diplomat working on the EU's CT and PvE policies in MENA, for example, suggested that

these [MENA] countries need our money, but if you go too far and are too demanding, they will just turn to other countries desiring influence (such as China, Russia, or Turkey); and these countries are excited to replace the EU. So we can push them, but not break off the relationship.⁶⁴

Undoubtedly, autocrats in the region appreciate Moscow's approach as it prioritises political stability and economic growth without any human rights conditionality.⁶⁵ As pushing too hard on the 'informational' or 'procedural' diffusion of liberal values through 'strategic communication' or 'the institutionalisation of relations' could push MENA regimes away, there is an implied hope that dialogue could cause a 'contagion' of liberal values – to wit, what Manners terms the 'unintentional diffusion' of the Union's ideas through continued contact and cooperation.⁶⁶

Yet, the discrepancy between maintaining dialogue as a means in itself combined with the lack of leverage creates a language game between the EU and its MENA key partners. Even when there was a stated willingness by autocrats to implement '[EU] reforms of accountability, human rights, and judicial systems',⁶⁷ there was an awareness that they were merely paying lip service to keep the aid flowing. While Manners referred to the unintentional diffusion of normative ideas from the EU to other political actors, it may be more precise to refer to the unintentional diffusion of normative *discourse*. As one EU diplomat lamented:

These countries use all the words that sound nice to the ear of the EU bureaucrats, but it does not lead to anything. So there is a nice paper published, such as in Iraq, where we received a nice PvE booklet, which on the face of it is perfect, with all the words of the EU resolutions. Yet, they have no impact in real life and are just to tick the boxes of EU expectations.⁶⁸

Although the shaping of discourse has been asserted as a form of normative power,⁶⁹ there are nevertheless few, clearly associated gains on the ground in the case of the MENA region. For all intents and purposes, while EU-MENA dialogue alters regime discourse, it also accelerates the pull of the EU towards securitisation because, in many instances, discussions on human rights issues are not carried out with diplomats, human rights lawyers, or civil society representatives with a genuine interest in liberal values. In Saudi Arabia, for example, one EEAS representative noted that the EU had to cooperate with the Saudi security apparatus in the absence of any vital civil society in the country, which necessarily impacted the Union's efforts.⁷⁰ Another problematised the fact that:

⁶⁴ Author's interview (via WhatsApp) with EU diplomat, 6 October 2020.

⁶⁵ Marco Siddi, 'The Mediterranean dimension of West-Russia security relations', in Andrew Futter (ed.), *Threats to Euro-Atlantic Security* (New York, NY Springer International Publishing, 2020), p. 171.

⁶⁶ Manners, 'Normative power Europe'.

⁶⁷ Author's interview (via WhatsApp) with EEAS representative (1), 1 October 2020.

⁶⁸ Author's interview (via WhatsApp) with EU diplomat, 6 October 2020.

⁶⁹ Forsberg, 'Normative power Europe, once again', p. 1196.

⁷⁰ Author's interview (via WhatsApp) with EEAS representative (4), 7 October 2020.

You have EU diplomats, on the one hand, and Saudi officials from the army and intelligence, on the other, so there is a disconnect there. ... Here, Saudi Arabia with its military officers meet EU Commission officials working on issues such as promoting trade. This is not exactly the same [things]. This affects the dialogue.⁷¹

This is significant because it is Normative Power Europe that is supposed to have ideational impact in international society according to the existing literature. Yet, it is instead the EU that appropriates a logic of security when the former must navigate between *what is* in MENA (to wit, shared security concerns with authoritarian regimes) and *what ought to be* (the Union's normative aspirations). Ironically, it is to a certain extent the EU's self-identification as a normative power that causes the absence of pressure to implement democratic reforms, as talking and maintaining dialogue is perceived as a form of power. The international standing of the EU depends on other actors accepting its normative self-conception, and the Union's ability to spread liberal values is effectively curbed when these values are no longer accepted by illiberal powers.⁷² The normative aspirations of the Union prohibit their own materialisation.

These tensions to which the EU and its normative self-conception are subjected become further augmented by the fact that civil society in the MENA region may not automatically be a viable alternative for CT and PvE project cooperation if present. The Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) has, for example, advanced its own interests and consolidated its power by actively fashioning civil society in the country, and 'seemingly civic organizations are supported and often created by the [Turkish] government to replace [independent organisations]'.⁷³ Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on the other hand, have actively attempted to nurture opinion leaders and popularise a politically shallow civil society providing professionally curated messages to justify government decisions and to praise the 'wise leadership' of the two countries.⁷⁴ This cooptation of civil society in MENA is not a new development that commenced following the Arab Spring in 2011. Raymond A. Hinnebusch, for example, described these 'corporatist forms of state-society linkage' in the early 1990s, and Maha Abdelrahman rightly points out how Egyptian civil society 'often actively engaged in reproducing unequal relations and an unjust status quo rather than providing alternatives to the existing system of power' under President Husni Mubarak.⁷⁵ Accordingly, although Western governments, think tanks, and foundations have doubled down on 'building civil society' in the MENA region post-Arab Spring,⁷⁶ the EU may find itself cooperating with a sector that does not merely abstain from challenging authoritarian state power but, in fact, advances it.

One could, on the one hand, argue that the EU's decline as a normative power in MENA is not precipitated by a faltering belief within the Union in the role and virtue of good governance, democracy, and human rights, but rather by what normative impact the Union believes it can achieve in the short term. In this sense, the transition to securitisation is part of the increasingly realist-oriented EU paradigm in MENA, insofar as its normative aspirations are reduced to what Adrian Hyde-Price terms 'second-order' concerns. That is, human rights and democracy rank below European security and are sacrificed when 'push comes to shove'.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Author's interview (via WhatsApp) with EEAS representative (1), 1 October 2020.

⁷² Anna Michalski and Niklas Nilsson, 'Resistant to change? The EU as a normative power and its troubled relations with Russia and China', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 15:3 (2019), p. 443.

⁷³ Jessica Leigh Doyle, 'Government co-option of civil society: Exploring the AKP's role within Turkish women's CSOs', *Democratization*, 25:3 (2018), p. 445.

⁷⁴ Robert Uniacke, 'Authoritarianism in the information age: State branding, depoliticizing and "de-civilizing" of online civil society in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 48:54 (2021), p. 992; Andreas Krieg, 'How Saudi Arabia and the UAE are silencing dissent', *Middle East Eye*, available at: {<https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/how-saudi-arabia-and-uae-are-silencing-dissent>} accessed 5 May 2022.

⁷⁵ Raymond A. Hinnebusch, 'State and civil society in Syria', *The Middle East Journal*, 47:2 (1993), p. 256; Maha Abdelrahman, *Civil Society Exposed: The Politics of NGOs in Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2004), p. 1.

⁷⁶ Joel Beinin, 'Civil society, NGOs, and Egypt's 2011 popular uprising', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 113:2 (2014), p. 404.

⁷⁷ Hyde-Price, "'Normative" power Europe', p. 222.

On the other hand, it is equally plausible that the EU's normative aspirations have managed to retain such coherence and longevity precisely because they are separated from, and have a limited effect on, the material, political, and social interests of key stakeholders (whether those of EU member states or those of MENA regimes). The separation between the normative aspirations of the EU and the economic interests of its member states has been one factor enabling 'EU members to promote and enable relations with countries that violate human rights'.⁷⁸ Trade with the GCC area, for example, negated the combined trade deficit the UK had with France and Japan in 2015, and the trade between the UK and Saudi Arabia saw a spike between 2014 and 2015 presumably because of the sharp increase in arms transfer following the Saudi-led intervention in the Yemeni civil war.⁷⁹ The EU's normative aspirations for the MENA region were thus never intended to succeed if they threatened the interests of its member states; and if there is a choice between security or normative aspirations, then it is the former that will triumph because the EU is not, and never has been, a uniform actor with its own distinct normative identity.

To summarise, the EU continues to cooperate with MENA regimes because dialogue is perceived as its best means of expanding influence. This is particularly the case when the EU fails to spread liberal values through institutionalised partnerships. Instead, several EU representatives implied, in interviews, a hope for an unintentional diffusion of normative ideas through continued EU-MENA cooperation. Still, I have argued in this section that the lack of leverage has caused the unintentional diffusion of normative discourse without discernible change on the ground. As such, I have argued that the EU does not exercise ideational impact alone in its engagement and cooperation with key MENA partners. On the contrary, MENA regimes have proven equally capable of exercising ideational impact, as well, and do not act as passive recipients as they pull the EU towards a logic of securitisation. This is crucial because it demonstrates that ideational impact goes both ways in international society.

Conclusion

This article has presented an in-depth assessment of the EU's CT and PvE efforts in the MENA region. It has revealed that the main EU approach to counter terrorism and prevent violent extremism is not to spread human rights, democracy, or good governance, but instead to cooperate with authoritarian MENA regimes to prevent possible spill-overs of terrorism and violent extremism to European territory. 'Normative' EU funding projects have correspondingly undergone a 'logic transmutation' and are now less concerned with spreading human rights and democratic thinking as a goal in itself and are more concerned with securitising a target population by identifying it as prone to violent extremism or terrorism. This is, as noted, significant because it raises the question of what precisely is normative about the EU as a normative power if the very premises and motivations of its projects cease to be liberal. This development is accelerated by the fact that the EU negotiates and maintains dialogue with security services and army officials when discussing CT and PvE in the absence of any strong civil society, as is the case in Saudi Arabia.

Despite causing its normative decline in MENA, the EU nevertheless persists with its security cooperation because dialogue and diplomacy, according to a number of EU representatives, are perceived as two of the strongest assets in the Union's foreign policy. Though EU representatives imply that this dialogue will cause an unintended diffusion of normative ideas (a Mannersian 'contagion'), I have argued this has mainly caused the unintended diffusion of *normative discourse* because the EU has no leverage or power tools to pressure MENA regimes.

The article's contribution is the empirical demonstration of the EU's turn to securitisation at the expense of normative projects focusing on democracy, good governance, and human rights in the MENA region following the terrorist attacks on European soil the last decade. While the EU

⁷⁸Gordon and Pardo, 'Normative power Europe meets the Israeli-Palestinian conflict', p. 266.

⁷⁹David Wearing, *AngloArabia: Why Gulf Wealth Matters to Britain* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018).

attempts to diffuse its liberal values to third parties and define what is ‘normal’ in international relations, this article shows that ideational impact goes both ways because the EU must continuously adapt to what MENA regimes want and allow. This is strengthened by the Union’s lack of leverage and ‘power tools’ – and its normative aspirations prohibits their own materialisation when dialogue is perceived, and maintained, as a means.

I anticipate at least two objections to my analysis. Some may argue that I have only assessed a sliver of the projects the EU is implementing in the Middle East and North Africa. To limit its assessment to its CT and PvE efforts does consequently not give justice to what the EU is doing. Yet, the purpose of the article has neither been to analyse ‘what the EU is doing’ nor ‘what the EU is doing in the Middle East and North Africa’. Rather, I have assessed its efforts based on what the EU categorises as its CT and PvE efforts. The EU itself thus disassociates these efforts (with their defined and delineated aims and aspirations) from other projects.

A second valid objection is that I have not differentiated sufficiently between the CT and PvE efforts of the EU, for the latter is a far broader category with a focus on social, economic, and ideological issues. The same pertains to the analytical categories applied in this article such as ‘securitisation’, ‘societal cohesion’, ‘preventing radicalisation’, as the dividing line based on focus area and prioritisation are not airtight. Though these distinctions would be significant, their exploration exceeded the scope of this article.

These conceivable objections imply questions for future research. The EU’s funding projects addressing ‘societal cohesion’ have not received sufficient attention given that they constitute most of the CT and PvE projects in MENA. They thus deserve some attention by scholars, as it is uncertain to what degree the participants and target population constitute a cross-section of their societies’ youth populations. Several of the implementing partners acknowledged that a certain level of social capital, education, and language skills was required to be recruited and participate in their funding programmes.⁸⁰ Future research should therefore untangle whether those most at risk of being radicalised are those actually being targeted by the EU’s projects, and, moreover, whether some funding projects help perpetuate social, economic, and political divisions – divisions that may perpetuate waves of violence. Economic class should certainly be given some attention. As lamented by one EU implementing partner in Lebanon: ‘I cannot tell people to learn about religious tolerance and organise an awareness session, while they are hungry. It does not work! They should be fed ... How can I ask them to come to an awareness session [when they are hungry]?’⁸¹

Future research should also address the extent to which implementing partners on the ground contribute to a logic of securitisation when designing and carrying out normative projects. As one EU diplomat noted, implementing partners often refer to ‘security’ to sell their projects in applications for EU funding because they believe it increases the chance of success.⁸² Presumably, the implementing partners themselves contribute to the securitisation logic of the EU funding projects insofar as they dramatise an issue, present it as being of supreme priority, and by labelling it as ‘security’ they claim the need for treating it.⁸³ The shift of securitisation is not necessarily the responsibility of the EU alone, although the precise nature of this dynamic is unclear.

My findings have several policy implications. First, if the EU is serious in its analysis of authoritarianism as a main driver for violent extremism and terrorism in MENA, then it should re-evaluate its cooperation with authoritarian regimes in the region. I do not suggest that the EU should cut aid indiscriminately; rather, that the Union should actively channel funds away from regime stability. The case of Saudi Arabia is the starkest one – where EU representatives

⁸⁰ Author’s interview (via WhatsApp) with EU implementing partner (4), 4 November 2020; author’s interview (via Zoom) with EU implementing partner (2), 2 November 2020.

⁸¹ Author’s interview (via WhatsApp) with EU implementing partner (1), 27 October 2020.

⁸² Author’s interview (via WhatsApp) with EU diplomat, 6 October 2020.

⁸³ Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p. 26.

choose to cooperate with the military and Saudi intelligence in the absence of a strong civil society.

Second, policymakers should evaluate the extent to which the perception of having little or no leverage serves as a self-fulfilling prophecy, as key partners of the EU risk little by ignoring bothersome clauses in the EU action plans. Notwithstanding, MENA regimes depend not only on EU aid, but also on the international legitimacy such funding bestows upon them. Cutting aid means harming regime legitimacy as an international player. Last, policymakers and implementing partners should be aware of the risk funding projects pose if the target population feels singled out as vulnerable to radicalisation – while other religious or ethnic groups are not. This is particularly so if funding projects are perceived to strengthen or whitewash regimes that are not merely authoritarian, but also sectarian.

If anything, doing ‘something’ may, in fact, be worse than doing nothing at all.

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