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**Why It Matters What We Do:  
Arab Citizens' Perceptions of the European Union  
after the 2011 Uprisings**

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No 312

March 2018

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# Why It Matters What We Do: Arab Citizens' Perceptions of the European Union after the 2011 Uprisings

## Abstract

In the Middle East and North Africa, EU foreign policy has tended to prioritise regime stability over democratisation. Existing research has argued that this could create anti-European sentiment in the respective populations. However, empirical evidence on the relationship between the EU's stance towards regime change and citizen attitudes remains rare. Focusing on Morocco and Egypt, this study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative case studies with original survey data to examine whether the EU's divergent responses to the 2011 uprisings in these two countries are mirrored in regime opponents' support for EU cooperation.

Keywords: EU Mediterranean policy, Arab uprisings, external democratisation, foreign policy perceptions, survey research

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# Why It Matters What We Do: Arab Citizens' Perceptions of the European Union after the 2011 Uprisings

Kressen Thyen

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## 1 Introduction

The European Union (EU) perceives itself as a normative model of international action and a driving force of democratisation.<sup>1,2</sup> The external transmission of its fundamental values – human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights – is consid-

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1 Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union specifies that “[t]he Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.” Article 3(5) of the Treaty obliges the EU to uphold and promote these values in its relations with the wider world.

2 This research was supported by the Volkswagen Foundation (Grant AZ 86210). I am deeply indebted to all the members of the international research project “Arab Youth: From Engagement to Inclusion?” led by the University of Tübingen, particularly Nadine Sika, Saloua Zerhouni, and Amani El Naggare, who carried out the surveys in Cairo and Rabat that are used here. I am also grateful to the GIGA’s “Authoritarian Politics” research team for their constructive comments on an earlier version of this paper.

ered essential to the emergence of a common European identity (Youngs 2004: 416).<sup>3</sup> However, the EU's reaction to the 2011 Arab uprisings has revealed its limited capacity to promote political change. Despite publicly emphasising its commitment to "deep democracy"<sup>4</sup> and the inclusion of civil society, the EU endorsed the demands of the opposition movements for *karama* (dignity) and *hurriya* (freedom) only where the fall of the government had become inevitable, as in Tunisia or Egypt (Behr 2012: 79). Where the protests had not succeeded in bringing about regime change, the EU continued to advocate top-down reforms. Scholars have warned that the open display of double standards in dealing with authoritarian regimes could negatively impact the EU's credibility among domestic publics, with serious implications for its political influence and identity as a foreign policy actor (e.g. Kausch and Youngs 2009; Teti 2012).

Indeed, the EU is not responsible for the political developments in the Middle East and North Africa. But its capacity to serve as a model of democratic government – and hereby counterbalance the growing influence of authoritarian rising powers such as China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia – ultimately resides in how it is viewed in the respective countries. Despite the relevance of this issue, there are no empirical studies to date examining the link between the EU's positioning in times of regime contention and citizen attitudes towards the EU. This article contributes to filling this research gap by integrating insights from foreign policy and public opinion research with relational approaches to contentious politics. Specifically, it asks whether citizens who opposed the authoritarian regimes in 2011 are more likely to favour or reject cooperation with the EU.

As I argue theoretically and demonstrate empirically, citizens assess external powers such as the EU according to their perceived political alignment with one side or the other in a contentious episode. Where the EU credibly endorses demands for regime change, regime opponents tend to view EU cooperation favourably. Where the EU continues to support the authoritarian government, they tend to be sceptical. Consequently, pro- or anti-European sentiment is determined less by the EU's normative claims than by its actual positioning in a given political context. This finding carries important implications for the study of external democratisation, as it challenges the idea of a quasi-natural alignment between self-declared democracy promoters, such as the EU, and pro-democratic forces in the respective countries.

Focusing on the divergent cases of Morocco and Egypt, the empirical analysis adopts a mixed-methods approach. First, I qualitatively examine the EU's perceived support for regime change during and following the 2011 uprisings based on policy documents, systematic consultation of secondary sources, and interviews with EU representatives and activists from

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3 The term "EU" is used even if, technically speaking, the European Commission (EC) or the European External Action Service (EEAS) is meant. Moreover, domestic understandings of the EU may vary as local respondents did not necessarily differentiate between "the EU," "Europe," or "European countries."

4 Remarks by the EU high representative Catherine Ashton at the senior officials' meeting on Egypt and Tunisia, European Commission, Brussels, 23 February 2011 (A 069/11).

the opposition movements.<sup>5</sup> To protect respondent confidentiality in politically sensitive contexts, all interviews have been anonymised. Second, I quantitatively model citizen support for EU cooperation using original survey data gathered from a sample of university students (N=1,638) in Rabat and Cairo. Despite only covering a specific subset of the population, the survey has the advantage of including more fine-grained items related to political and foreign policy preferences than conventional surveys. The focus on students is justified by the fact that knowledge of the EU correlates with education levels and socio-economic background (Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2008). Furthermore, educated youth played a central role in triggering the 2011 uprisings (Madani et al. 2012; Abdallah 2016). The data used here was collected in 2012 and 2013, during the first government of Abdelilah Benkirane of the Justice and Development Party (PJD) in Morocco and the government under Mohammed Morsi of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) in Egypt. The triangulation of methods and data sources corroborates the validity of the results.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: It first provides a review of the literature, identifying the gaps in the current research, then, second, outlines the study's theoretical framework and research design. Third, it details the EU's perceived support for the opposition movements for the cases of Morocco and Egypt. Fourth, it predicts citizen support for EU cooperation based on a quantitative analysis and evaluates the results against the backdrop of the case studies. The article concludes by discussing the broader implications of the research findings.

## **2 Insights from External Democratisation, EU Mediterranean Policy, and Perception Research**

Research on Arab citizens' attitudes towards the EU remains a rare endeavour, particularly when it comes to integrating context-related political factors. On the one hand, this is due to the difficulty of obtaining reliable data on political attitudes in countries under authoritarian rule. On the other hand, most studies examining the EU's influence on domestic change remain grounded in the paradigm of external democratisation, which obscures the question of whether citizens in the respective countries actually perceive EU cooperation as conducive to their political aims.

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5 In total, I conducted eight expert interviews with EU representatives: two in Brussels (EEAS and EC) and three each at the EU delegations in Cairo and Rabat. The study also draws on selected interviews from a broader interview corpus comprising about 80 semi-structured interviews with youth activists in Egypt and Morocco, which was established as part of the international research project "Arab Youth: From Engagement to Inclusion?" led by the University of Tübingen (2012–2014). In Egypt, three interviews with former activists employed in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were added. For the purpose of this research, I utilised only those interview segments including information on activists' perceptions of political developments and international donors, specifically the EU. All quotes were translated into English by the author.

External democratisation research generally starts from the assumption of a “normative power Europe” (Manners 2002) dedicated to spreading its fundamental norms and values. The EU’s success in doing so has been found to vary geographically and over time. Most scholars assert that this is because democratisation constitutes an “essentially ‘domestic drama’” (Morlino and Magen 2009: 29), with recent studies focusing on context-related factors in explaining the outcomes of foreign involvement (Börzel and Hackenesch 2013; Hackenesch 2015; Escribà-Folch and Wright 2015). However, the EU’s “democratizing pressure” (Levitzky and Way 2006) also varies. In the Middle East and North Africa, the lack of pressure has been related to the “democratization-stabilization dilemma” in foreign policy (Jünemann 2003; see also Pace 2009; Bicchi 2014; Börzel and van Hüllen 2014), increased “threat perceptions” (Asseburg 2013), and constraints emerging from the EU’s institutional setup and divergent member state preferences (Behr 2008; Echagüe et al. 2011; Noutcheva 2015). Yet, most of the above studies adhere to the assumption that the EU is dedicated in principle to supporting democratic aspirations in other parts of the world, but that *realpolitik* gets in the way.

By contrast, a second strand of scholarship considers the EU to be no more than “a realist actor in normative clothes” (Seeberg 2009: 81). Often taking a regional studies perspective, these scholars argue that the preservation of the status quo has constituted the EU’s real foreign policy objective in the Middle East, both before and after the 2011 uprisings (e.g. Kienle 1998; Schlumberger 2011). It has been suggested that the EU prefers cooperation with liberal authoritarian governments over democratically elected Islamist ones, as the latter would be more likely to challenge its material and security objectives in the region – including agreements on trade, the prevention of mass migration, and the fight against international terrorism (Cavatorta et al. 2008; Kausch and Youngs 2009; Voltolini and Colombo 2018). These double standards in external policy are considered both “at odds [...] with its own supposed identity as foreign policy actor, and with the interests of European and North African citizens” (Kausch and Youngs 2009: 963). Yet, the studies provide limited empirical evidence of this presumed divergence of interests, or of the – presumably negative – consequences for Arab citizens’ attitudes towards the EU.

A third, more recent strand of research focuses on external perceptions of the EU (e.g. Chaban et al. 2006; Chaban et al. 2013; Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2008; Keuleers 2015). These studies show that the EU is not perceived as the normative actor it claims to be. For instance, research on public opinion towards EU cooperation reveals geographical variations that mirror the EU’s fluctuating commitment to democratisation. In the Middle East and North Africa, where the EU has been hesitant to push for political change, citizens tend to be more sceptical of EU cooperation than in any other part of the world (Schlipphak 2013; Isani and Schlipphak 2017). Yet, the above-mentioned studies do not explicitly link the EU’s stance towards regime change in a given country to the citizens’ attitudes. Therefore, as the authors them-

selves admit, they cannot explain important intra-regional variations (Isani and Schlipphak 2017: 514).

Overall, there is a gap in the current research concerning the question of whether and how the EU's positioning in times of regime contention affects citizens' views of EU cooperation. The following section proposes an analytical framework that draws on EU Mediterranean policy and political attitudes research, as well as relational approaches to contentious politics.

### **3 Studying Arab Citizens' Attitudes towards the EU: Theoretical Framework and Research Design**

Critical accounts of EU Mediterranean policy suggest that because of its long-established cooperation with authoritarian governments, the EU risks losing support among citizens dissatisfied with repressive regimes (Kausch and Youngs 2009). This assumption is in line with political attitudes research showing that citizens tend to assess political organisations and institutions based on first-hand experiences rather than abstract ideals (Mishler and Rose 2001: 306). Moreover, trust in the domestic government has been found to predict trust in international organisations, suggesting that citizens establish a cognitive link between the two (Munoz et al. 2011; Harteveld et al. 2013; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015). This also holds for the Middle East and North Africa, where low levels of trust in government correlate with low levels of trust in the EU (Isani and Schlipphak 2017). Accordingly, one could assume that citizens opposed to the authoritarian regime should be particularly sceptical of EU cooperation.

However, research on contentious politics suggests that the cognitive link between the government and the international organisation is interrupted when shifts in domestic and/or international politics alter political alliances. The emergence of domestic opposition can enable foreign governments to increase their leverage in international disputes, whereas power shifts in the international arena can open up opportunities for protest mobilisation (McAdam 1998). In such contexts, "external certification" (McAdam et al. 2001: 121) of the opposition movement can strengthen its relative influence in domestic politics. Regime opponents no longer extend their distrust of the government to the international actor, as the latter supports their cause. Thus, the hypothesised mechanism is one of perceived political alignment: in contexts where the EU continues to support the status quo, regime opponents will be sceptical of EU cooperation; in contexts where the EU endorses demands for regime change, regime opponents will view the EU more favourably.

This raises the question of how to identify regime opponents in authoritarian contexts, where freedom of expression tends to be severely limited. The legal opposition, in the form of political parties and human rights organisations, will not substantially criticise the regime for fear of losing its privileges (Lust-Okar 2005: 5). Therefore, active regime opposition tends to take the form of political protest. Following Tarrow, such protest can be defined as all



“disruptive collective action that is aimed at institutions, elites, authorities, or other groups on behalf of the collective goals of the actors or of those they claim to represent” (Tarrow 1991: 11). In authoritarian contexts, the definition has been further narrowed to actions in which “protesters make explicit demands for changes in political rights or rulership” (Bratton and van de Walle 1997: 129). Because governments tend to respond to political protests with disproportional repression (Davenport 2007; Carey 2009; Schedler 2017), only citizens highly dedicated to regime change and willing to take the related risk would participate in such events. The Arab uprisings fulfil the above conditions, even if the national protest movements differed in terms of size and the level of confrontation.

In examining the political alignment hypothesis formulated above, the research design follows a confirmatory, diverse-case selection strategy (Seawright and Gerring 2008). Morocco and Egypt reflect two extremes with regard to the EU’s positioning during and following the Arab uprisings. While the EU continued to support the status quo in Morocco, it realigned with the opposition after President Mubarak had resigned in Egypt. At the same time, the two countries share a number of similarities concerning their relationship with the EU. Both have maintained bilateral relations with the EU since the early 1960s, and their respective Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreements (EMAAs) entered into force in 2000 and 2004, respectively. Since then, the bilateral relations have been framed in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Finally, Morocco and Egypt constitute the largest beneficiaries of EU financial support in the region.

Regarding the choice of methods, it is crucial to note that research into political attitudes in authoritarian contexts faces important challenges relating to data availability and reliability. On the one hand, large-scale surveys on politically sensitive topics are not only impeded by legal restrictions, they also carry the risk of preference falsification due to fear of repression. On the other hand, interview-based research is often limited in terms of sample size and carries the risk of interviewer bias. To increase the validity of the results, the empirical analysis thus adopts a mixed-methods approach. In the following, the EU’s positioning in the 2011 uprisings and the resulting perceptions of the EU among regime opponents are compared via two qualitative case studies. The results of these case studies are subsequently contrasted with a quantitative analysis of citizen attitudes towards EU cooperation in Morocco and Egypt.

#### **4 EU Support for Non-Democratic Reform in Morocco: Disillusionment among the Opposition**

The Moroccan government can be considered the EU’s preferred partner in the region. The accession of Mohammed VI to the throne in 1999 gave both Moroccans and international scholars the impression of a qualitative break with the overly repressive regime of Hassan II (Desrues and Moyano 2001; Campbell 2003). Promises of democracy and successive top-

down reform contributed to perceptions of the regime's increasing "democraticness" (Thyen 2017). However, neither the domestic reform agenda nor the EU's ongoing support for political and justice reform led to substantive changes in the Moroccan regime. Participatory mechanisms developed under the principle of "good governance" have reinforced rather than prevented clientelist relationships with unelected leaders. Hence, "the evolution of European policy in Morocco is symbolic of a move from aspiring to foster democratic governance to supporting more efficient decision-making" (Kausch and Youngs 2009).

In 2011, the so-called February 20 Movement triggered Morocco's largest anti-regime protests to this day. While the protesters did not target King Mohammed VI in person, they demanded the establishment of a "parliamentary monarchy in which the King doesn't order."<sup>6</sup> Such a system should include a democratic constitution, separation of powers, and recognition of the Amazigh heritage (Madani et al. 2012: 10-11). On 9 March 2011, Mohammed VI answered to these demands by announcing constitutional reform. This resulted in the demobilisation of the movement, specifically the more moderate rank-and-file members.

Yet neither the new constitution, nor the process of developing it, nor the constitutional referendum corresponded to democratic standards. To this day, political power remains under the effective control of the palace. While election observers attested that the 2011 legislative elections were relatively free and fair, the elected government under Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane (PJD) was not provided with effective decision-making power. Criticism targeting the monarchical institution continues to be severely punished. The Freedom House indices for Morocco measuring the state of civil liberties, political freedoms, and freedom of the press show no significant variation between 2000 and 2012 (Freedom House 2012). As an activist of the February 20 Movement stated,

This was not a step towards democracy. Us, it's not their "democracy" we want. We want the king to leave the political arena and let us deal with our problems ourselves. [...] But *their* democracy is a democracy following *their* constitution, and that's really no step forward. Because you can change all constitutions of the world – if the premises stay the same, all stays the same.<sup>7</sup>

The movement continued to mobilise against the revised constitution, which it considered undemocratic, but it was the target of negative media campaigns and outright repression. The discrepancy between the non-democratic reforms and societal demands for political change was something that EU representatives were aware of, as the political advisor at the EU delegation explained:

If we talk of democratic process, I believe that there are two aspects. One that changes and the other that hasn't really changed. What hasn't really changed is the separation of powers. Neither the decentralisation, nor the justice reform, even the separation

6 Interview by research assistant with opposition activist, Rabat, March 2013.

7 Interview by the author with opposition activist, Rabat, December 2012.

between the prerogatives of the parliament and the executive monarchy – we see very well that this isn't translated into practice. [...] What has changed, I believe, is that the realm of speech does not cease opening, the political debates do not cease to cross new thresholds. [...] So even if the central power hasn't been weakened, I believe much has happened with regard to the political debate.<sup>8</sup>

Despite this assessment, the EU's reaction to the constitutional reform was entirely positive, thereby undermining the February 20 Movement's calls for genuine democratisation. Before the Consultative Council for the Reform of the Constitution (CCRC), a body charged by the monarch with the constitutional reform, had come together for the first time, the EU had already declared the reform to be "in line with the ambitions of the Advanced Status" and that it would "stand ready to support Morocco's efforts to implement such far-reaching reforms."<sup>9</sup> Even when the shortcomings of the reforms became obvious, the 2011 ENP progress report stated that they would move in "the direction of solid and sustainable democracy." Admitting that "some cases of violence by the security forces have been reported," it concluded that "the demonstrations organised by the February 20 Movement have given its participants the possibility to express their socio-economic and political demands," hereby relativising the struggle and aspirations of the opposition movement.<sup>10</sup> The political advisor replicated official government discourse when explaining the reasoning behind the EU's stance:

Power-sharing by the executive monarchy [...] is not a demand that carries very far. The other day the chief of government said, "But the Moroccans, they want a king with power, they don't want a king like you have, they want a king able to do things." The popular legitimacy of the person of the king, this is the fundamental difference between Morocco and the rest of the region.<sup>11</sup>

By the same token, EU representatives consistently underlined the need for gradual reform instead of abrupt regime change.<sup>12</sup> The activists of the February 20 Movement therefore viewed the EU as openly supportive of the existing regime and as prejudicial to demands for democratisation. This stance was criticised heavily, as many activists believed that the movement would have benefited from external backing. An activist working for a human rights organisation reflected on a March 2011 meeting convened by the EU delegation:

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8 Interview by the author with the political advisor at the EU delegation, Rabat, December 2012.

9 Joint statement by EU high representative Catherine Ashton and EU commissioner Stefan Füle on Morocco's future constitutional reform, European Commission, Brussels, 10 March 2011 (A 100/11).

10 *Mise en œuvre de la Politique Européenne de Voisinage au Maroc. Progrès réalisés en 2011 et actions à mettre en œuvre*, European Commission, Brussels, 15 May 2012 (SWD(2012) 119 final): 4-5.

11 Interview by the author with the political advisor at the EU delegation, Rabat, December 2012.

12 Interviews by the author at the EU delegation in Rabat, December 2012, as well as at the EEAS and EC in Brussels, January 2013.

We really felt that international politics had an enormous influence on national politics. After 20 February, the delegation of the European Union convened all associations [benefiting from EU funding] in Morocco. At the time we didn't know why they called us together, because it wasn't in our action plan. When we arrived, we realised that they had called us together to tell us, "The reforms are good, the CNDH [National Council for Human Rights] is cool, long live the king" [...]. The European Union's bias for the Moroccan regime really had a strong impact here.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, most activists did not consider the EU to be more dedicated to democracy than individual governments or other regional and international organisations. Moreover, they suspected that EU representatives could not seriously consider the country to be undergoing democratic transition:

All the financial support for Morocco – whether it comes from the Middle East, petrodollars, or the European Union – is to keep a regime in place. [...] Because this *transition*, it doesn't exist, and even from the point of view of the officials from the European Union, Morocco isn't in transition.<sup>14</sup>

However, this criticism of the EU should not be equated with a general anti-European sentiment. While Western donors were often perceived as being culturally biased and guided by individual interests, many interviewees differentiated between the governmental and the societal level. As one activist asserted, many European societies "passed through the same steps that we have to pass, religious repression, repression through the monarch – they know what we are going through."<sup>15</sup>

## 5 EU Support for Political Change in Egypt: Perceived Realignment with the Former Opposition

In post-uprising Egypt, the EU deviated from its status-quo approach. Before 2011, EU–Egyptian dialogue and cooperation had been strongly determined by the country's geo-strategic importance and its role as a regional power broker. Under Mubarak, Egypt featured a highly personalised neo-patrimonial regime, in which a number of competing elite groups received different forms of privileges for their loyalty to the president and the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). Nevertheless, the EU avoided overt criticism of the repressive regime and its stark human rights abuses. Its support for civil society mainly went to quasi-governmental organisations, including the National Council for Human Rights, the National Council for Women, or the General Federation of NGOs and Foundations (Kausch 2010: 7).

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13 Interview by the author with opposition activist and NGO employee, Rabat, December 2012.

14 Interview by the author with opposition activist, Rabat, December 2012.

15 Interview by research assistant with opposition activist, Rabat, March 2013.

The 2009 ENP progress report, published in 2010, claimed that the Egyptian government exhibited a “strong commitment to social, economic and sector reforms, and to a lesser extent to political reform.”<sup>16</sup>

The Egyptian uprisings took both the government and the EU by surprise, despite the fact that protest movements such as *Kefaya* (Enough) and April 6 had opposed the regime for almost a decade. In 2011, the April 6 Movement called for nationwide protests on 25 January, a national holiday and the anniversary of the “second revolution” in 1952 that had resulted in the ouster of King Farouk. Through this symbolic move, it managed to draw large parts of the aggrieved population onto the streets. On 6 February, the organisers released a manifesto demanding Mubarak’s immediate resignation, the dissolution of the parliament, the establishment of a transitional government, a new constitution respecting the principles of freedom and social justice, the prosecution of those responsible for police killings, and the immediate release of detainees.<sup>17</sup>

Initially, the EU reacted to the protests by advocating restraint from all sides and top-down reforms. However, when Mubarak resigned on 10 February, the EU quickly realigned with the opposition. The following day, EU high representative Catherine Ashton signalled the Union’s support for regime change:

The EU salutes the courage of the Egyptian people who have pursued their campaign for democratic change peacefully and with dignity. Violence can never be accepted. As I have always said, peaceful but real and lasting transformation delivering deep democracy is what is now required. Full respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms is essential. All abuses must be investigated.<sup>18</sup>

The ensuing transition period was managed by the Security Council of the Armed forces (SCAF), which had taken over as the interim government after the collapse of the Mubarak regime. This arrangement was enabled through a “tacit pact” with the Muslim Brotherhood, whose leaders did not contest the process. However, the transfer of power proved to be difficult, as old and new political forces struggled over their future influence and power. In light of the political tensions and unrest, EU policy towards Egypt remained focused on the establishment of a democratically elected government. Throughout the interim rule, the EU was vocal on human rights abuses and pressed for elections, which the SCAF had delayed until November 2011. The ENP policy officer interviewed for this study confirmed that the emergence of the opposition movement had opened up opportunities to be more outspoken on human rights violations and civil society restrictions than was previously the case.<sup>19</sup>

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16 ENP Country Progress Report 2009 – Egypt, European Union, Brussels 12 May 2010 (MEMO 10/175).

17 Statement of the April 6 Movement Regarding the Demands of the Youth and the Refusal to Negotiate with any Side, Jadaliyya, 6 February 2011.

18 Statement by EU high representative Catherine Ashton on Egypt following the speech of President Mubarak, European Union, Brussels, 10 February 2011 (A 051/11).

19 Interview by the author with ENP policy officer, EEAS, Brussels, January 2013.

In response to internal and external pressures, the SCAF government played the “nationalist card.” Calculated media campaigns framed ongoing protests as an international conspiracy to destabilise Egypt, and protesters were accused of being foreign agents and having caused the economic breakdown following the “revolution” (Ghannam 2012). On 29 December 2011, the still-ruling SCAF government launched investigations against scores of unregistered NGOs, including EU-funded organisations. In total, 16 Egyptians and 27 foreign nationals were charged with operating “unlicensed” groups under the existing law on associations. These developments created a difficult environment for civil society support. As such, the EU delegation received a limited response to its 2012 call for funding, particularly with regard to more controversial topics<sup>20</sup>

When the parliamentary elections, held between November 2011 and January 2012, resulted in a landslide victory for the Islamist political parties, “everybody was shocked at the results – obviously.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, in contrast to its previous reluctance towards Islamist organisations in Egypt, the EU demonstrated some support for the elected authorities (see also Voltolini and Colombo 2018). It strongly criticised a court ruling dissolving the constituent assembly, which had been elected by the parliament to write a new constitution, as well as a decree issued by the SCAF government to limit the powers of the future president. Just before the presidential run-off, the EU published its 2011 ENP progress report, which was highly critical of the SCAF and its persistent human rights violations.<sup>22</sup>

The 2012 presidential elections raised hopes that Egypt would still be able to transition into a democratic regime. Two days after Mohammed Morsi was elected president on 17 July, High Representative Catherine Ashton flew to Brussels to reiterate the EU’s commitment to “stand by Egypt and the Egyptian people in their quest for deep democracy and economic opportunity.”<sup>23</sup> In return, one of President Morsi’s first foreign visits was to Brussels. It resulted in the agreement to resume bilateral contacts through the EMAA and restart negotiations on a new ENP Action Plan. However, it soon became clear that democratisation would be unlikely, as political tensions between counter-revolutionary forces, the liberal opposition, and the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) increased.

In the following months, the EU attempted to serve as a broker between different political camps, which involved a number of political balancing acts. For example, on the occasion of the first EU–Egypt Task Force meeting from 13–14 November 2012, the delegation to Egypt cancelled its invitation of leading Egyptian human rights organisations to the civil society round table upon the government’s request:

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20 Interview by the author with the cooperation officer for civil society relations at the EU delegation, Cairo, March 2013.

21 Interview by the author with the human rights advisor at the EU delegation, Cairo, March 2013.

22 Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in Egypt. Progress in 2011 and recommendations for action, European Union, Brussels 15 May 2012 (SWD 2012/113).

23 Remarks of High Representative/Vice President Catherine Ashton following her meeting with President Morsi, European Commission, Cairo, 19 July 2012 (Memo 12/588).

On something like this you need to work with the government, with the authorities. And the government insisted on not having human rights NGOs in that particular gathering. So we organised a separate gathering at the residence of the ambassador to which we invited all the human rights NGOs that the government had not wished to invite to the round table. So you're trying to find your way. You keep insisting, you keep trying and [...] hopefully you have an impact<sup>24</sup>

Tensions between the EU and the government grew when President Morsi began to undertake efforts to limit the influence of powerful state actors affiliated with the former regime. These efforts included a constitutional decree issued on 22 November 2012 that rendered presidential decisions immune from judicial oversight. Following an alarming report by the Arab Centre for the Independence of the Judiciary and the Legal Profession (ACIJLP) on 5 March 2013, the European Parliament issued a non-binding resolution demanding that all budgetary support should be halted in the absence of further democratic progress.<sup>25</sup> The 2012 ENP progress report affirmed that the Egyptian government's measures had "pitched the nation into a deeply divisive political crisis" and called for an inclusive dialogue to "ensure that the Constitution is co-owned by all Egyptians and enshrines respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms."<sup>26</sup> In this volatile situation, individual activists cautiously interpreted the EU's more critical stance as a sign of re-emerging democratic ideals:

[D]uring the first two month of Morsi's power, the European Union backed him really, really strongly. So this backing actually shifted to the other way, at the point he announced this presidential decree on November 22. So, there is a shift in the European understanding of Egypt [...] towards more democratisation as a value.<sup>27</sup>

Most interviewees, however, still believed Western involvement to be primarily driven by economic or even imperialist interests. As one activist asserted, "once the revolution happened, such Western state actors, they have seen the scene as completely unpredictable. They needed a new alliance."<sup>28</sup> This "realist" perspective did not, however, result in a general rejection of EU cooperation, as the EU's realignment had, at least until mid-2013, served the opposition movement. In this context, interviewees tended to distinguish between cooperation between equals and external funding, since they tended to see the latter as a form of incapacitation:

I am not saying that we should be aggressive with the West, but it's our turn as Arab countries to be leading countries in the world and take our own decisions and take de-

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24 Interview by the author with the human rights advisor at the EU delegation, Cairo, March 2013.

25 European Parliament resolution on the situation in Egypt, European Parliament, Brussels, 6 March 2013 (2013/2542(RSP)).

26 Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in Egypt. Progress in 2012 and recommendations for action, European Union, Brussels, 20 March 2013 (SWD(2013) 89).

27 Interview by the author with former opposition activist and NGO employee, Cairo, February 2013.

28 Interview by research assistant with opposition activist, Cairo, May 2013.

cisions in other countries. [...] This [development funding] is the game of throwing a bone to the dog. Even if the dog is starving, this bone will make the dog be quiet for a while. [...] So they [the Western donors] will work with development, but minor development. Not the kind of development that the Arab world deserves. They do not want these countries to be independent.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, interviewees were beginning to notice the EU's incipient withdrawal from dealing with politically sensitive topics, both verbally and in practice, in light of the stalling transition and the rise of nationalist discourse. As a former activist employed in a human rights organisation noted,

In our private messages to the European Union or other international actors we can be much more outspoken, and get into details [...]. I can see it with my foreign colleagues that they are doing all these disclaimers. They distance themselves because it gets very sensitive. So it really impairs the political work we could be doing, because of this conspiracy theory [on Western interference] that the society has internalised, and before we realise, we have internalised it as well.<sup>30</sup>

In sum, the EU's role in post-2011 Egypt was far more complicated than in Morocco but offered it new chances to engage with the former opposition and other emerging political actors. Its pre-emptive and critical stance towards political forces of the "old" regime resulted in more favourable perceptions of it among regime opponents than was the case in Morocco. The following section examines whether these dynamics can be confirmed from a quantitative perspective.

## 6 Predicting Support for EU Cooperation: Evidence from a Student Survey

The quantitative analysis is based on a student survey conducted in the spring of 2013 in Rabat and Cairo. The full sample includes 1,638 respondents – 656 in Egypt and 982 in Morocco.<sup>31</sup> While the survey is not representative, it includes a range of items on political preferences not available in conventional surveys conducted in the region. The research team opted for the self-completion method in order to guarantee anonymity and minimise preference falsification, which usually plagues survey research in authoritarian settings.<sup>32</sup>

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29 Ibid.

30 Interview by the author with human rights activist, Cairo, March 2013.

31 The survey was carried out in the context of the aforementioned research project "Arab Youth: From Engagement to Inclusion?" The sample is multi-stage and clustered. Primary clusters were selected based on faculties and fields of study, which were then subdivided into secondary clusters based on degree programmes. Students within the selected clusters were surveyed in the context of regular lectures to maximise their presence. Due to close monitoring, the return rate was 98 per cent in Morocco and 93 per cent in Egypt.

32 Despite our precautions, we had relatively high percentages of missing data in of Morocco. As we did not have the same problem in Egypt, this could be due to feelings of insecurity in a stable authoritarian context.



The descriptive statistics offer support for the political alignment hypothesis, according to which regime opponents should be more favourable towards the EU where it endorsed regime change, and more sceptical where it continued supporting the existing regime. In Egypt, 82 per cent of the protesters viewed EU cooperation favourably, compared to 18 per cent of non-protesters. In Morocco, the difference between the two groups was less clear-cut, with 64 per cent of protesters in favour of EU cooperation compared to 73 per cent of non-protesters.<sup>33</sup> However, these numbers tell us little about additional factors that might have impacted the likelihood of favouring or opposing EU cooperation. To get a more detailed picture, *support for EU cooperation* was thus modelled using binary logistic regression. A preference for *less* EU cooperation was coded with "0", whereas a preference for *more* EU cooperation was coded "1" (see the appendix for details). The explanatory variable, *protest participation*, was measured through the respondents' participation in the protests of 25 January in Egypt and 20 February in Morocco. The reference category was set at protest participation.

The model further includes a number of control variables, which can be expected to impact the relationship between the dependent and the independent variable. First, particularly the Moroccan case study demonstrates a split between the more moderate rank-and-file members, who were satisfied with the concessions announced by King Mohammed VI on 9 March, and the militant core, which remained dedicated to democratic change. Indeed, social movements are always composed of a number of different groups and organisations. In order to fragment the opposition, governments can thus provide incentives for more moderate groups to demobilise – for example, by granting concessions or even political inclusion (Gorringer and Rosie 2008: 187–205; Thyen, forthcoming). Therefore, to account for potential splits between groups of protesters after 2011, the model controls for *perceived government responsiveness* – that is, agreement with the statement that "the government took the demands of the protesters seriously." The item corresponds to a 4-level Likert scale, but is treated as linear in the model.

Second, the EU advocates a liberal political and economic order, and has demonstrated a consistent unease towards Islamist organisations (Pace 2010; Wolff 2018). Therefore, it has in the past preferred cooperation with liberal authoritarian governments over elected Islamist ones (Cavatorta et al. 2008). Conversely, representatives of mainstream Islamist parties have been found to perceive EU policies as anti-Islamic (Emerson and Youngs 2007). However, the Egyptian case study demonstrates that the 2011 uprisings initiated a shift in the EU's policies towards Islamist organisations (see also Voltolini and Colombo 2018). In this light, the study controls for the *preferred state model*. The categorical variable offered respondents a choice between "civic democratic state," "Islamic democratic state," "Shariah-based state," "strong state," or "no preference." The categories were based upon domestic discourses and termi-

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However, a non-significant Little's MCAR test [ $\chi^2(982) = 17965.93$ ,  $p = .458$ ] revealed that the missing data is completely random and should therefore not bias the analysis.

33 The percentages refer to the valid responses.

nology. "Civic democratic state" was chosen as the reference category, as this corresponds to the EU's preference.

Third, perceptions of Western imperialism or neo-colonialism are widespread in the Middle East and North Africa (e.g. Asseburg 2013: 57). Such perceptions can lead to protectionist nationalism and the rejection of foreign influences. This is particularly important in contexts such as Egypt, where the uprisings were inspired by nationalist sentiment (Thyen and Gerschewski 2018: 49-50). The model thus controls for *protectionist nationalism* through the item "International development aid is usually just used as a pretext to interfere in Morocco's/Egypt's internal affairs." It further tests for *anti-Western sentiment*, which is measured via the item "Too much Western influence is not good for a society." Both items correspond to 4-level Likert scales and are treated as linear in the model.

Finally, it is well known that political attitudes tend to vary with access to political information. In authoritarian regimes, governments use their control over the national media to influence the ways in which citizens think about politics (McAllister and White 2015). This also includes representations of the EU, alongside Western governments more generally. In such contexts, the Internet constitutes a comparatively "neutral" source of information, in the sense that it can be used by all kinds of different actors to disseminate information. Therefore, a dummy variable was introduced to measure *Internet access*.

**Table 1. Logistic Regression Model: Support for EU Cooperation**

Variable	Morocco		Egypt	
	Coefficient	Odds	Coefficient	Odds
Protest participation	-0,567*	0,567	0,641***	1,899
Perceived government responsiveness	0,333**	1,395	0,177	1,194
Preferred state model (ref. Civic democratic state)				
Islamic democratic state	-0,770*	0,463	-0,375	0,687
Shariah-based state	-1,416***	0,243	0,067	1,069
Socialist state	0,384	0,968	-0,458*	0,632
Strong state	-0,062	0,940	0,312	1,366
Indifferent	-0,193	0,824	-0,781	0,458
Protectionist nationalism	-0,104	0,901	-0,189*	0,828
Anti-Western sentiment	-0,130	0,878	-0,278**	0,758
Internet access	0,950**	2,586	0,375*	1,455
Constant	0,696	2,005	1,646**	7,028
N	303		656	
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	15,5%		7,2%	
HL test	x2 (8) = 8,139 p=0,420		x2 (8) = 10,237 p=0,055	
Classification accuracy	73,3%		73,3%	

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

As Table 1 shows, the estimation yielded the following results. First, *protest participation* predicts support for EU cooperation in both cases, though at different levels of significance. In line with the political alignment hypothesis, the effect varied between the two cases: in Morocco, where the EU supported the reform agenda of the executive monarchy, protest participants had 1.8 lower odds of favouring EU cooperation than non-participants. The picture was reversed in Egypt, where protest participants had 1.9 higher odds of favouring EU cooperation.

Interestingly, the effects of the controls also varied according to the political context. For example, *perceived government responsiveness* played an important role in Morocco, where the government had succeeded in fragmenting the opposition movement through political and material concessions. Each increase on the 4-level scale raised the odds of favouring EU cooperation by 1.4. In Egypt, the effect was not significant, conceivably due to the high degree of polarisation between the government and the opposition, due to which the latter would not concede to Mubarak's offer of concessions.

Moreover, the influence of the *preferred state model* on attitudes toward EU cooperation varied. In Morocco, where the EU continued to support the liberalised authoritarian regime at the expense of the elected Islamist government, respondents' preference for an Islamic democratic state or a Shariah-based state decreased the odds that they would favour EU cooperation by 2.2 and 4.1, respectively, compared to those who preferred a civic democratic state. At the same time, there was no significant difference between those preferring a strong authoritarian state and those favouring a civic democratic state. In Egypt, this gap was not visible. Compared to supporters of a civic democratic state, only the preference for a socialist state significantly decreased the odds of supporting EU cooperation in Egypt. This result suggests that the EU's engagement with Islamist political actors in post-uprising Egypt altered public perception regarding its allegedly exclusive support for liberals.

Finally, *protectionist nationalism* and *anti-Western sentiment* had significant effects only in the Egyptian case. This finding mirrors the qualitative case studies, which demonstrated the use of nationalist and anti-Western sentiment by the SCAF to squelch further opposition. Only *Internet access* had a significant and positive effect in both cases, supporting the assumption that the Internet is an important source of political information.

In sum, the quantitative analysis both confirms and adds nuance to the qualitative case studies. It seems important to note, however, that in Egypt the above results are applicable to the specific political context in the period 2012–2013 only. The establishment of a military regime following the 2013 coup d'état resulted in the de-politicisation of EU–Egypt relations, and official dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood and the former “revolutionary movement” came to an end. It is therefore highly likely that citizen attitudes have changed over the past four years.

## 7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has demonstrated empirically that perceptions regarding the EU's support for democratic change are not shaped by its normative claims of promoting democracy, but rather by its actual positioning in times of regime contention. The analysis, which is based on qualitative and quantitative data, has shown that in the stable authoritarian context of Morocco, regime opponents were less likely to support EU cooperation than regime supporters. In transitional Egypt, the picture was reversed. This finding has several implications for research on external democratisation efforts generally, and those of the EU in particular.

First, it shows that the EU is neither a normative nor a realist actor per se. Rather, its commitment to democracy as a value appears to vary according to the political context. In the case of Morocco's stable authoritarian regime, the EU endorsed authoritarian reforms as democratic in order to maintain its good relationship with the government, thereby de facto delegitimising calls for genuine democratisation. In the transitional context of Egypt between 2011 and 2013, the opposition movement's initial success created opportunities for the EU to take a more normative approach. Overall, however, the EU does not appear to have the will or capacity to promote change against the interests of a strategically important partner government. It thus does not constitute a serious counterweight to the current erosion of liberal democracy throughout the world.

Second, the finding concerning the link between the EU's actual positioning and its perception among Arab citizens demonstrates the importance of examining democratic-authoritarian cooperation from a societal perspective. The analysis shows that even though Euro-Mediterranean relations constitute an elite project, at least educated citizens appear to have an idea of what the EU is or represents. Their attitudes mirror the range of positions held by the different political forces within a country and are therefore more likely to provide an adequate picture of Arab citizens' approval of EU cooperation than studies focusing on elite views. Certainly, such a micro-approach constitutes an empirical challenge, particularly in authoritarian contexts where survey research is often difficult, if not impossible. However, it represents an important complement to policy or discourse analysis examining the interests and motivations behind EU foreign policy towards the Middle East and North Africa and its consequences for authoritarian regime survival.

Lastly, it is important to point out that maintaining relations with authoritarian partner governments is not illegitimate in itself. Political and economic globalisation requires cooperation with different types of governments. However, the EU – like any other external actor – must weigh the consequences of its open support for authoritarian regimes. From a cost-benefit perspective, there is a risk that anti-European sentiment may increase among the very groups pursuing similar ideals. From an identity perspective, such behaviour could erode the EU's identity as a vanguard of democracy and human rights – a worrisome development in times of waning internal cohesion.

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**Appendix: Measures and Coding**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Question</i>	<i>Coding</i>
Support for EU cooperation	"Should Morocco/Egypt cooperate more or less with the following countries or regions? European Union."	Much more (4); a little more (3); a little less (2); much less (1). Recoded into binary variable: More (1); Less (0)
Protest participation	"Did you participate in the demonstrations?"	Yes (1); No (0)
Perceived government responsiveness	"The government took the demands of the protesters seriously."	Strongly agree (4); rather agree (3); rather disagree (2); strongly disagree (1)
Preferred state model	"In your view, what is the state model that should be followed by your country?"	Civic democratic state (1); Islamic state based on the principles of democracy (2); Islamic state based on a strict interpretation of the Shariah (3); strong state, no matter the nature of the regime (4); socialist state (5); Don't know (6)
Protectionist nationalism	"International development aid is usually just used as a pretext to interfere in Morocco's/ Egypt's internal affairs."	Strongly agree (4); rather agree (3); rather disagree (2); strongly disagree (1)
Anti-Western sentiment	"Too much Western influence is not good for society."	Strongly agree (4); rather agree (3); rather disagree (2); strongly disagree (1)
Internet access	"Do you have regular access to the Internet?"	Yes (1); No (0)

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