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Working Paper

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WIDER Working Paper, No. 2023/48

Provided in Cooperation with:
United Nations University (UNU), World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER)

Suggested Citation: Bodenstein, Thilo; Furness, Mark (2023) : European aid to the MENA region after the Arab uprisings: A window of opportunity missed, WIDER Working Paper, No. 2023/48, ISBN 978-92-9267-356-7, The United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER), Helsinki, https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2023/356-7

UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY
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WIDER Working Paper 2023/48

European aid to the MENA region after the Arab uprisings

A window of opportunity missed

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March 2023

In partnership with

Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation

European Commission

United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research

wider.unu.edu

Abstract: European official development assistance to Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries increased sharply after 2011, ostensibly in support of the social, economic, and above all political changes demanded by the Arab uprisings. The subsequent turn to development policies driven by security and anti-migration agendas, especially following the Syria refugee crisis in the autumn of 2015, raises the question whether initial expressions of support for democratic transformation expressed by European donors were ever backed by concrete measures. This paper discusses this question with an exploratory review of the policy and practice dimensions of four European MENA aid programmes between 2011 and 2016. The policy dimension is explored via an analysis of available documents from the EU, France, Germany, and the UK. The practice dimension is discussed with reference to OECD-DAC aid data on bilateral aid to MENA countries, focusing on aid in the social infrastructure and services sector, and in particular on the government and civil society sub-category. Our analysis reveals that, while all donors promised to support democracy in MENA countries, none had a clear strategy for doing so via their development cooperation. At the practice level, while programmes and projects were aimed at supporting change in specific contexts, increases in aid were mostly unrelated to political change. This indicates a preference for avoiding risks, which served to underpin the region's political and socio-economic status quo. Accordingly, European donors missed an opportunity to test whether their aid could make a difference in supporting democratic transformation in the MENA. The social, economic, and political tensions behind the Arab uprisings remain unresolved more than a decade on, meaning that there is likely a need to learn lessons from the period following 2011.

Key words: Arab uprisings, European development assistance, democracy support

JEL classification: D78, F50, N45, O21

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank the participants at the Deutsche Arbeitsgemeinschaft Vorderer Orient (DAVO) conference in Berlin (September 2022) and the 'International Research Conference on the Effectiveness of Development Cooperation' in Brussels (November 2022) for helpful comments and suggestions. All errors and omissions are the responsibility of the authors. This research study is released in connection with the International Research Conference on the Effectiveness of Development Cooperation, jointly organized by UNU-WIDER, the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC), and the European Commission (DG INTPA) on 17–18 November 2022 in Brussels, Belgium.

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This paper is published under the UNU-WIDER project The state and statebuilding in the Global South – international and local interactions. It is released in connection with the International Research Conference on the Effectiveness of Development Cooperation, jointly organized by UNU-WIDER, the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC), and the European Commission (DG INTPA) on 17–18 November 2022 in Brussels, Belgium.

Information and requests: publications@wider.unu.edu

ISSN 1798-7237 ISBN 978-92-9267-356-7

https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2023/356-7

Typescript prepared by Joseph Laredo.

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The Institute is funded through income from an endowment fund with additional contributions to its work programme from Finland and Sweden, as well as earmarked contributions for specific projects from a variety of donors.

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1 Introduction

More than a decade after the Arab uprisings of 2010 and 2011, it is abundantly clear that the transformation many expected has not been realized. Tunisia's return to authoritarian rule in 2021/22 appeared to herald the end of the brief chapter of democratization in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Authoritarian rule across the region has proved remarkably resilient. This disappointment does, however, serve to highlight one truth. The social, economic, and especially political challenges that drove the Arab uprisings have not been resolved; in many cases the pressure on MENA country social contracts has increased (Loewe et al. 2021). Tensions are seldom far below the surface and sometimes erupt into the open. So-called 'Arab Spring 2.0' protests rocked Lebanon, Iraq, and Algeria in 2019 and were supressed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The internationalized civil conflicts in Yemen, Libya, and Syria are far from being settled, with tragic consequences for their societies. In Egypt, the Sisi government's repressive authoritarianism may be working for now, but the losers it has created are unlikely to accept their lot for ever. In Morocco and Jordan, careful social reforms may have eased pressure, but fundamental weaknesses in the monarchical systems remain.

As Chou en Lai may never have said when supposedly asked about the French Revolution, it is too soon to say what the outcome of the Arab Spring will be. As one Yemeni activist quoted in the *New York Times* pointed out, 'Anyone who says that the Arab Spring is dead does not know the history of people's struggle' (Hubbard and Kirkpatrick 2021). Processes of epochal change take a long time, and are rarely smooth. Demographic and environmental factors, exacerbated by deepening global crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine, are testing MENA governments' ability to deliver the most basic levels of social protection for their citizens. Even though it is impossible to know where and how it will happen, another Arab uprising cannot be ruled out.

The course of European history has always been intertwined with that of its nearest neighbouring region. Their interdependence is increasing in many areas, perhaps most clearly with regard to renewable energy and migration, and Europe will undoubtedly be called upon again to respond to change brought about by political, social, and economic pressures in MENA countries. The immediate aftermath of the Arab uprisings is an excellent example and therefore an ideal case for exploring how European governments (and the EU) reacted to a massive, potentially epoch-defining crisis on its borders, and how they decided to use one of the key tools at their disposal, development aid, in response.

In this paper, we take a close look at the role of European development policies and aid spending in supporting reform processes in the wake of the upheaval in the Arab world. The role of development aid is paradoxical, because on the one hand it is designed for the long term, while on the other hand it is called upon to react to short-term crises. This paradoxical situation is not new. Frot et al. (2014) show that, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Western development aid system was faced with the challenge of short-term action and rapid decision-making. They note that aid flows followed geographical proximity and trade links and were often tied, with consequences for the coherence and effectiveness of programmes. Furness et al. (2020) discuss how aid, and European aid in particular, has come to be seen as a tool that can address almost any problem, from poverty to civil war to irregular migration to climate change to energy insecurity. Hackenesch et al. (2021) argue that European aid has become increasingly politicized and instrumentalized in recent years, a trend at least partly driven by the increased salience of fears about instability in the MENA region. Previous studies on European policies following the Arab uprisings have argued that the focus of support was quickly directed to stability

rather than change in response to fears about security and mass uncontrolled migration flows. Mullin and Pallister-Wilkins (2015) argue that, in the wake of the Arab Spring, the EU essentially continued its 'security' agenda, with a focus on supporting security sector reform. This was not aimed at dismantling repressive power apparatuses, but rather at improving their usefulness for counterterrorism and migration management.

In retrospect, it is not clear that this had to happen. Initial reactions to the Arab uprisings in Europe were euphoric and emotional, but also tinged with fear at the unknown. While there was genuine excitement and the desire to support change was widely expressed, reactions were also tinged with concern about the violent responses of authorities to the protests in several countries. Decision-making around development aid was also affected by uncertainty about the direction that the Arab uprisings would take. The eventual securitization of aid in the MENA context contradicted its basic principles. Aid is legitimized by a reasonably narrow set of criteria, above all the requirement that it target poverty. While this is often couched in terms of mutual interests, the principal drivers are moral: it is right to help poor people; the wealthy should share their good fortune; charity is a moral duty. Official development assistance (ODA) has to fit a set of criteria defined in accordance with these factors, and moral, normative drivers are clearly still strong in the political culture of most OECD-DAC donor countries (Gulrajani and Swiss 2017). These core principles became less important as drivers of development aid decision-making for the MENA region as the euphoria of the Arab uprisings faded.

The paper makes the following arguments. The impact that the Arab uprisings made in Europe was reflected in aid and development policy-making. Development aid was seen as a key instrument, and changes were made to European aid programmes. No European donor, however, advanced a clear strategy defining the sort of change they wanted to support, and outlining the role of aid along with other policy tools in achieving these objectives. Despite the need for a European response to the regional crisis across the Arab world, there was little European-level strategizing and coordination. When the Arab uprisings ran into resistance, the externalities of conflict came to be seen as threats to Europe. Faced with uncertainty and rising domestic criticism, some of it instrumentalized by far-right political actors, European governments used their aid to support 'stability' rather than risking support for 'change'. As it is highly likely that social and economic pressures will again drive political change in the Arab world, looking at what the four biggest European donors did and did not do with their aid programmes can help us draw lessons to inform decision-making next time.

As this is an exploratory study, we have not developed an explicit analytical framework for this paper (Eckstein 1975; Thomas 2011). Our discussion is informed by assumptions and principles from three main strands of literature. The first strand is the literature on aid and development effectiveness. According to this literature, ODA-financed development cooperation programmes work best when they are problem-driven, strategic (with clear goals and a step-by-step approach), as coherent as possible with other policy tools, and organized through collective action when several actors are engaged in similar activities (Andrews 2013). Our analysis is also informed by historical institutionalist (HI) understandings of how decision-making processes in bureaucratic systems work. The historical institutionalist framing explores how decision-makers embedded in institutions change their policies, strategies, and approaches in response to external shocks and pressures, internal bureaucratic logics, and actor agency. Policy changes respond to changing realities, but they usually do not happen optimally, while outcomes are affected by exogenous and endogenous factors. We also draw on literature that explores the role of norms and ideas in international development policy-making and aid effectiveness (Brown 2020; Taggart 2022).

The rest of this paper is arranged as follows: the next section outlines the policy positions of four key European aid donors to the MENA region: the European Union institutions, France,

Germany, and the United Kingdom. Drawing upon publicly available policy documents, some internal documents, and other literature where appropriate, we discuss how and why positions on supporting political reform in MENA countries changed vis-à-vis the situation before the Arab uprisings. We indicate whether and how donors intended to use development aid to support change, and identify areas in which we should expect to see changes in aid spending to support change. Section 3 turns to the practice dimension, with reference to figures on aid spending by the four donors in the years 2011–16. We discuss four levels: total bilateral commitments to the MENA region, bilateral commitments to individual MENA countries, aid spending in the social infrastructure and services sector, and aid spending in the government and civil society sub-sector. The final section draws conclusions from the preceding discussion. Our analysis of the MENA aid policy statements of the EU, France, Germany, and the UK reveals the initial optimism sparked by the Arab uprisings. It also shows the differentiated influences of uncertainty and fear on policymakers and decision-making processes, resulting in fragmented and poorly coordinated programmes.

2 MENA aid policy

Although some observers expected that Western countries would change their approaches to the MENA region following the 2011 Arab uprisings, others were more sceptical (Schumacher 2011). For development aid, the scepticism was at least partly proved justified. Most observers of Western aid programmes in the MENA since 2011 found that donors did not fundamentally change their approach, even though some promised to. Researchers identified a gap between rhetoric and practice, especially between official expressions of support for democracy, and continuity in how aid programmes were funded and run (Boogaerts et al. 2016). Others argued that aid was not used for problem-solving with regard to development deficits that had been repeatedly identified in the UN's Arab Development Reports (Challand 2014).

These reflections on aid in the MENA since the Arab uprisings are rooted in normative expectations established by the international aid and development effectiveness agenda (Furness 2020). According to these expectations, donors use aid to help developing countries address their own economic, political, and social challenges. This support needs to be provided in line with strategic planning that sets up coherent and attainable objectives and defines an iterative, step-by-step approach to reaching them (Andrews 2013). Furthermore, development and humanitarian aid cannot work effectively in isolation because most socio-political and economic challenges have multiple causes and effects. Aid should therefore be used in conjunction with other policy instruments, such as diplomacy, defence, and trade, in furthering local, national, and regional objectives (Christopoulos et al. 2012).

As Ramalingam (2013) pointed out, these principles are best understood as aspirations that are not usually met by donors. Decision-making processes around aid allocation and spending involve an array of institutional, political, and even individual actors, and rarely produce clear, coherent policy strategies (Dietrich 2013). Aid is often spent without a clear focus on the problems that partners are facing. Instead, aid is often allocated and programmed to address development needs defined by donors or even with strategic goals that are only vaguely linked to socio-economic development deficits. As expected by historical institutionalist understandings of bureaucratic decision-making, policy changes respond to changing realities, but they often do not happen optimally and outcomes are affected by an array of endogenous and exogenous factors.

2.1 The European Union

The EU institutions—including the Commission's Directorates-General, which are primarily responsible for development aid (especially DG INTPA and DG NEAR)—have a key role as a conduit for member state interests and priorities. At the same time, the EU is an actor in its own right. Its policy-level framework, the 'Southern Neighbourhood', is arguably the most developed of those of the four European actors in terms of regional and country strategies and implementation reports. Since its launch in 2004, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has evolved in response to events in the neighbourhood, and political changes in Europe, which have prompted several re-evaluations of the policy framework. The ENP's core objectives, which include support for democratic change, support for economic activity (which has often meant support for European investment), and support for 'stability' (which has in practice meant risk-averse cooperation with authoritarian governments, up to and including with their security sectors), have never been easy to reconcile with each other (Furness et al. 2019; Natorski 2016).

The key relevant policy documents published by the EU in the wake of the Arab uprisings are the 2011 and 2015 ENP revisions. Both were heavily influenced by the crises that unfolded as the documents were being developed by the EU-level decision-making system: the Arab Spring and the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis. In May 2011, the EU published 'A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood' (EC/HR 2011). The document did not revisit the ENP's core premises but re-iterated positive conditionality with the 'more for more' approach, and it was followed by diplomatic overtures in support of democratic processes, especially in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. An extra €1 billion was promised, although this was merely a re-budgeting of existing funds rather than 'new money'. The result has aptly been described not as 'more for more' but rather as 'less of the same' (Bicchi 2014).

The Arab Spring did not, of course, transform the EU's southern neighbourhood in a liberal democratic direction, as many had hoped. The stalled popular uprisings, the return to military government in Egypt, and the violent nightmares in Libya and Syria prompted Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, who took office in November 2014, to launch a more fundamental review of the ENP. In the revised ENP, launched on 18 November 2015, the EU refrained from proposing models for its neighbours, instead concentrating on cooperation on mutual interests. European interests, especially in regional stability, security, and controlled migration, were outlined much more explicitly than before. Interests in trade, investment, and energy cooperation were also prominent. For ENP countries, the policy represented a menu à la carte, from which they could choose a particular cooperation model, the options ranging from a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement to projects in one or two sectors (EC/HR 2015). The outcome was to focus the ENP on its economic cooperation, security, and migration management priorities, and reduce its ambition to support democratic transformation.

The EU's strategy for supporting political change in MENA countries was to foster economic growth as the basis of transformation. This appears to be based on an assumption that the MENA region's problems were primarily economic, and that the tensions that had erupted into the Arab uprisings stemmed from rising poverty. Aligned to this assumption was a long-standing premise that improving the business environment would support democratic transition, because it would require better functioning and more transparent institutions.

The political transformation promised by the Arab uprisings was initially seen as being in Europe's interest. As Italian journalist Lorenzo Trombetta pointed out, 'to help stabilise these regions both politically and economically means having more reliable neighbours, governed by political classes that are able to resolve economic depression and mitigate future political conflict' (Quoted in Suber 2021). EU leaders made several visits to MENA countries in the early days of the uprisings and an

EU Special Representative was appointed, while the Commission created a Civil Society Facility to support grass roots social movements and actors (EC 2013).

Despite these initiatives, EU policy was largely based on co-operation with the authoritarian regimes in the MENA region. As Van Hüllen (2015) points out, the EU's post-Arab Spring approach actually matched the regimes' survival strategies in the face of the uprisings. For instance, in the cases of Jordan and Morocco, whose governments were more responsive to the EU, EU policies helped to insulate the regimes from 'the full force of the uprising'.

2.2 France

As a former colonial power, France shares a complex history with the MENA countries of North Africa in terms of economic interdependence, political ties, and migration. The further development of the European Mediterranean Policy (EMP) towards a 'Union for the Mediterranean' was a foreign policy hallmark of Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency. This project was primarily about common economic interests, but controlling migration flows to the north and the fight against terrorism and organized crime were also on the French agenda (Gillespie 2013; Henry 2012). President Sarkozy saw France's foreign policy as his personal domain, and cultivated close personal contact with other heads of state (Henry 2012; Thomas 2012).

Against this background, the demonstrations and uprisings of the Arab Spring came as a shock to the French political establishment. In a first reaction, France under President Sarkozy stood by the side of the regimes under pressure. For example, French Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie offered Tunisian President Ben Ali support for his security forces to bring the demonstrations under control (Beauregard et al. 2019). The ties between the French government and the Tunisian president had been close for years, not least because of a significant Tunisian diaspora in France and France's role as an economic partner (Krüger and Stahl 2018). Even after Ben Ali's fall, the French government initially remained silent, justifying this with reference to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of a former colony.

The nonchalance with which Sarkozy had previously ignored democratic deficits in Tunisia before the Arab Spring had already been criticized by the opposition (Krüger and Stahl 2018), but with Ben Ali's departure, the norm conflict that France faced became even more apparent. When protests broke out in Egypt, the French Foreign Minister initially again followed a defensive stance and insisted on France's non-interference (Beauregard et al. 2019). However, as other Western governments expressed support for the democratic protests, Sarkozy also sided with the demonstrators and called for political, economic, and social reforms. A step in this direction was the Deauville Partnership at the G8 summit in Paris in May 2011, which pledged support for political and economic reforms in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Libya, and Yemen.

France's reaction to the events of the Arab Spring was thus mixed. Initially, France focused on regime stability, but then it switched to demands for democracy and freedom with simultaneous non-intervention. In the case of Libya, however, France completely abandoned its policy of non-interference. Following a call by the Arab League, France backed the establishment of a no-fly zone and later also supplied weapons to the insurgents. The norm of non-interference had become untenable from France's point of view, especially as the Arab League was advocating intervention to depose Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. France, however, reacted differently to the violent clashes in Bahrain, which also threatened to turn into civil war as a result of the Arab Spring. As Saudi Arabia intervened to ended the clashes, France again held back and invoked the norm of non-intervention. This was easier because the conflict could be presented as a religious dispute between Shiites and Sunnis. Although French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé insisted on the right

of the people of Bahrain to democracy and freedom, this did not result in concrete action by France in this case (Beauregard et al. 2019).

France's ambiguous attitude was rooted in a deep-seated conflict of norms. France's Mediterranean policy under Sarkozy also always had a pronounced domestic dimension (Henry 2012). To reconstruct the French assessment of the Arab Spring, it is necessary to recall the purpose of French Mediterranean policy at the time. Migration policy was a central item on President Sarkozy's agenda (Gastau 2012) and the management of migration from the countries of North Africa an important *raison d'être* of the Union for the Mediterranean. France's material interests in security cooperation and economic cooperation were another pillar. The promotion of democracy remained secondary in this project, also because of the resistance of the participating North African states (Henry 2012).

The French government feared increasing migration from the countries of North Africa as a result of the Arab uprisings. In particular, refugees from Tunisia initially came in greater numbers, especially to the French–Italian border area (Gastau 2012). The Algerian Civil War of the 1990s had alarmed France, and the civil wars in Libya and Bahrain, and later in Syria, gave rise to fears of another Algerian scenario as a consequence of the Arab Spring. Did the Arab Spring nevertheless give reason to hope for a sustainable democratic transformation of the entire region? Rhetorically, France did call for democratic reforms, albeit with the reservation of the principle of non-interference. Immediate French policy adopted a reassurance approach aimed at maintaining regional stability and retaining the pattern of personal relations at the level of heads of state (Lafont Rapnouil 2018).

The French government's view and motivations regarding development policy engagement can be seen in more detail in three key official documents. The first French White Paper on Foreign and European Policy 2008–20 (Juppé and Schweitzer 2008) reflects the French government's assessment of the situation on the eve of the Arab Spring. The Paper initially addressed the challenges of democratization in general terms, without, however, mentioning the MENA region specifically. It then formulated five priorities for France's foreign policy, including democratic governance. A second key document from 2011 was 'Development Cooperation: a French Vision' (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs 2011), which set out the principles of development cooperation and explicitly mentioned a focus on human rights and the promotion of democratic governance.

Despite the promising rhetoric of the previous two documents regarding the promotion of democratic values, the 'Assises on Development and International Solidarity' (OECD 2014: 15) highlighted the security dimension specifically. The Assises took place under President Hollande in 2012–13 and consisted of a series of dialogues between actors from the political arena and from business and civil society. The Assises formulated three priorities. The first was the further promotion of democracy, the rule of law, and women's rights. The second priority, however, was security, which was seen as indispensable for development. President François Hollande probably formulated the second priority with regard to the increasingly difficult security situation in Mali at the time (Jacqemot 2013).

We thus can see that in the key official documents of the French government in the years immediately following the Arab Spring, a focus on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law is clearly visible but, as the situation evolved, the aspect of security took on a central place in the context of development policy, as the Assises show.

2.3 Germany

As former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon rather sardonically pointed out with reference to the EU, Germany has traditionally been seen as a 'payer' rather than a 'player' in the MENA region, when compared with actors that have tried to change the political balance of power, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. Germany has, nevertheless, maintained its engagement in the region via a diplomatic, commercial, and development presence in several MENA countries. Germany's interests in the region have largely been economic, and to this end the German government has focused on supporting political stability and promoting private and public sector investment, with active engagement from civil society groups and the German political party foundations.

The growing importance of the MENA to Germany is reflected in sharp increases in humanitarian and development aid to the region, which more than tripled from around €750 million in 2011 to around €2.8 billion in 2016. German aid to the MENA region increased more dramatically than that of the other three major European donors following the Arab uprisings. However, the increases in German ODA were not being accompanied by a strategic policy statement setting out the objectives of the MENA aid programme (Furness 2020). The German government has not officially outlined the political, social, and economic processes it wants to support in the MENA, nor the role of aid in pursuing these goals. This raises the question what the German government's strategic objectives for its MENA aid were, at a time when the volume of aid was increasing rapidly.

Prior to the Arab uprisings, the German development ministry (BMZ)'s regional policy papers indicated a broad strategic orientation towards the resolution of the development problems outlined by MENA partners in the Arab Human Development Reports (AHDRs) of the early 2000s (BMZ 2008). The BMZ made several attempts to define a regional strategy for aid in the MENA region after 2011. These efforts consistently ran into difficulties with the question of the role that aid should play in combination with other policy tools.

The Arab uprisings prompted the BMZ to undertake a strategic reflection, resulting in an internal position paper that was circulated among Germany's implementation agencies in August 2014. The paper stressed the strategic importance of the MENA region for Germany and Europe due to its proximity and its energy resources. The 2014 paper blamed the decayed social contract between Arab regimes and citizens for the Arab uprisings and noted that the regimes were no longer delivering the prosperity that citizens were expecting. The paper also acknowledged that the calls for bread, freedom, and social justice in the spring of 2011 were motivated not only by citizens' dissatisfaction with rising prices and a falling standard of living but also by their frustration at their lack of influence over political decision-making. The paper also raised security concerns and the fear of uncontrolled migration arising from the Arab uprisings. It affirmed that Germany and the EU shared the interests of MENA citizens with regard to stability, prosperity, and democracy, without which more people would try to flee to Europe (BMZ 2014a).

The 2014 position paper also promised to focus on four specific problems: the potentially explosive problem of youth unemployment; economic instability; the democratic deficit; and stability in crisis countries, especially with regard to the humanitarian crisis in Syria (BMZ 2014a). Aid was allocated to addressing their issues in concrete form via the BMZ's 2014 launch of a 'Special Initiative for Stabilisation and Development in North Africa and the Middle East', which set out the framing narrative for German development cooperation with MENA countries. The €400 million budget promised to expand on and strengthen the core areas of cooperation and speed up Germany's response to challenges, especially youth unemployment, economic stabilization, democracy and the stability of Syria's neighbours (BMZ 2014b).

In comparison with France or the UK, which have much more centralized foreign policy decision-making systems, Germany's fragmented federal structure is not well set up for producing comprehensive, 'whole of government' approaches to complex international challenges. With regard to the MENA region, the relevant federal ministries (the foreign ministry (AA), the Federal Chancellery (BKAmt), the Economics Ministry (BMWi), the Ministry of Defence (BMVg), and the BMZ) all represent different constituencies and pursue distinct mandates. The core political questions around democratic transformation in the region, and therefore the defining objectives for democracy aid, were addressed by the AA through its 'transformation partnerships' aimed at supporting constitutional and justice reform, human rights, and civil society. From 2012, around 150 projects were implemented in 11 MENA countries with the goal of strengthening democratic reforms and consolidating democratic structures (Siebert 2022). These initiatives were not closely coordinated with the BMZ's sector governance initiatives in MENA countries (Furness 2020).

Germany has also had strong influence over EU policy towards the southern neighbourhood. German influence behind the scenes on EU aid spending has been instrumental, especially with regard to the European Commission's trust funds for the Syrian refugee crisis and managing migration from Africa. The German government has supported multilateral diplomatic and cooperation initiatives in the region, both at the United Nations and in 'club governance' formats such as the G7 and G20 (Behr 2008). Germany has taken a strong role in all of the main multilateral initiatives for the post-Arab Spring MENA region, particularly the UN-led 3RP initiative for promoting resilience in refugee populations, and the G7 Deauville Partnership to support Arab countries in transition.

Germany has had to balance competing normative drivers of its policy towards the MENA region, which are to an extent reflected in its decentralized foreign policy-making structure. Germany refrained from joining the NATO assault on Libya, taking a position that was both principled and pragmatic. Its great moment of solidarity came in 2015 when it opened its borders to refugees fleeing the Syrian conflict. Its humanitarian aid increased dramatically, and it has also provided strong support to democracy in Tunisia. However, Germany has also used development aid to foster stability: it supported actors such as the Sisi government in Egypt despite governance concerns, and it offered strong support for Jordanian and Moroccan responses to the Arab uprisings. Domestically, the political backlash from the 2015 migration crisis saw German aid increasingly used for programmes to keep displaced people in the region, especially in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Libya. Germany has oscillated between a desire to play a greater role in the region as others (particularly the US, but also the UK) have lost influence and a reluctance to risk greater engagement, particularly on political questions.

2.4 The United Kingdom

The UK's approach to the MENA region following the Arab uprisings was in keeping with the best traditions of British transatlanticism. The UK has long oscillated between US regional strategy and European strategy, and the Arab uprisings presented the UK with a typical foreign policy crisis where dangers and opportunities could be traded against each other. As Leech and Gaskarth (2015) have pointed out, the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition that took office in 2010 did not develop any grand new ideas but rather adopted a 'networked foreign policy' for a 'networked world', focusing on flexible bilateral links that adapted to changing contexts. According to Leech and Gaskarth, the inconsistencies in UK foreign policy towards the MENA region may have been a logical outcome of this flexible policy-making approach.

Phillips and Stephens (2022) summarize the UK's interests in the MENA region as having traditionally been defined by security, trade, and values. As with other European actors, the UK's security concerns have been driven by the perception that the negative externalities of conflicts in

a neighbouring region can spill over and threaten British security. As Hollis (2022) has noted, the main strategic pillar defining the UK's engagement with the MENA region is conflict management. She argues that the UK is not interested in deep resolutions to conflicts, but rather in managing regional divisions at the regional level. From the UK perspective, these divisions have traditionally shifted between three main blocs: a Muslim Brotherhood bloc, including Turkey and Qatar, where the UK has had a historic role; a Saudi–UAE–Egypt bloc; and a Shi'a–Iran–Hezbollah bloc (Hanau Santini 2017).

British trade interests have long centred around hydrocarbons from the Persian Gulf, which have traditionally financed lucrative business for British exporters, including arms manufacturers. The British NGO Campaign Against the Arms Trade reported that UK sales of weapons to the Middle East almost doubled in the five years that followed the uprisings, from average sales of £41.3m for small arms, £7m for ammunition, and £34.3m for armoured vehicles in 2011 to £58.9m for small arms, £14m for ammunition, and £59.6m for armoured vehicles by 2016 (CAAT 2021).

Values, including taking a stand with regard to human rights violations and governance issues, have been considered a 'third wheel', to be prioritized 'as long as it doesn't seriously hinder security or trade' (Phillips and Stephens 2022: 5). British values were rarely expressed more than rhetorically following the Arab uprisings, and it is likely that the UK's involvement in military interventions in Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011) further reduced its moral authority with many regional actors (Fawcett 2023). The solidarity with human rights and female rights concerns that exists in the UK political discourse did not result in pressure to act (Hollis 2022).

The UK has traditionally been a leading actor, intellectually as well as in terms of effectiveness, in the foreign aid and development policy field. Its MENA aid policy framework for the period between the Arab uprisings and the Brexit referendum, when severe UK aid cutbacks began, reflects this leadership. The UK published several papers on its aid programmes in the MENA region after the Arab uprisings. Among the most significant was the 2014 DFID 'Operational Plan 2011–2016, MENAD Regional'. The paper offered a vision of a 'prosperous, stable region based on open, democratic societies with greater social, economic and political participation of its people' (DFID 2014: 4).

The main UK aid response to the Arab uprisings was the 'Arab Partnership Programme Approach 2011–2015', a joint approach between the FCO and DFID. The UK government established the Arab Partnership Fund, with £110 million in programme funds over four years. The Fund had three priority areas: political participation, public voice, and freedom of expression; good governance including rule of law, transparency, integrity, and tackling corruption; and effective and accountable institutions. Specific projects included 'Ongoing support for Libya', 'Finding an end to the crisis in Syria', 'Working to destroy the threat of ISIL', 'The Middle East Peace Process – promoting a peaceful 2-state solution', and 'Stabilising Yemen'.

An evaluation by The Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) of the FCO and British Council responses to the Arab Spring found that the FCO put major effort into developing the capacity to deliver rapid and flexible support in response to the Arab Spring. The FCO's largest programme in the MENA region, the Arab Partnership Participation Fund, was evaluated as having a sound strategy and good delivery capacity. The evaluation noted that the Fund's 'focus on the values and institutional "building blocks" of democracy is strategic but would benefit from clearer "theories of change" on how it proposes to accomplish its goals, particularly in the area of good governance' (ICAI 2013: 1). This assessment fits with Leech and Gaskarth's conclusion that although the UK government called for change or welcomed restraint on the part of regional governments in several cases, it did not commit substantial support either for or against the regime in most countries. Rather, the UK's tendency was to express 'concern' about 'reports' of heavy-

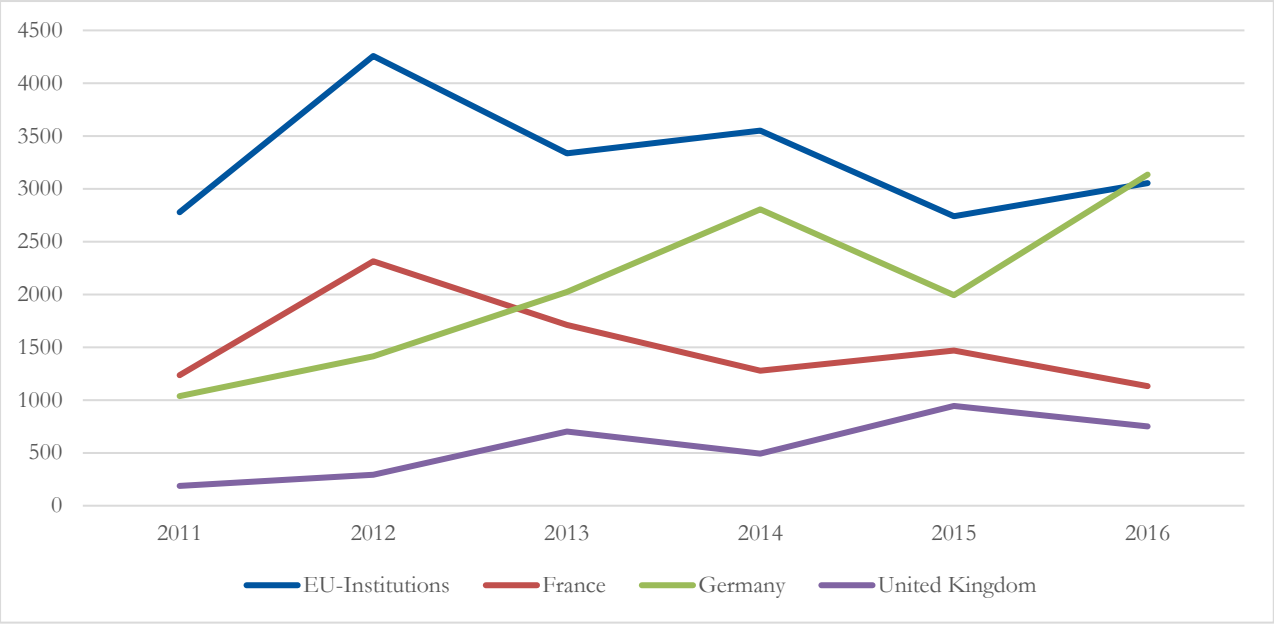
handed responses to protects, but otherwise to remain noncommittal (Leech and Gaskarth 2015: 143).

3 MENA aid practice

In this section, we present OECD-DAC data on MENA aid commitments by the EU, France, Germany, and the UK from 2011 to 2016. The complexity of the data becomes immediately apparent from the figures below. Our analysis can therefore only illustrate some of the 'highlights' that emerge from the aid data. Some interesting trends are nevertheless discernible, especially in the light of the key aspects of the respective policy frameworks highlighted above.

Figure 1 shows the OECD-DAC data on total aid from the four European donors to MENA countries (defined by the DAC's own regional classifications of aid recipients) in the years following the Arab uprisings. The figure clearly shows that the four donors all reacted to the upheaval in the Arab world by increasing their aid commitments to MENA countries in 2011 and 2012, though the EU's initial 'increase' reflects the US$1 billion that was re-programmed in the 2011 ENP south review. After that, the picture starts to get more complicated. German commitments to the MENA region increased the most dramatically of the four major European donors, tripling from around US$1 billion annually prior to 2011 to around US$3 billion in 2016. UK aid to the region more than doubled, while French aid commitments fluctuated annually but remained steady overall. The levelling out of the EU's aid spending may have resulted from the fact that the EU has restrictions on its budget, which is set by the member states for a seven-year period.

Figure 1: European aid flows to the MENA region, 2011–16, all recipients and sectors



Note: millions US$ (constant prices 2020) for the years 2011–16.

Source: OECD (2023) Creditor Reporting System.

Figure 2 shows the total commitments of the four donors for individual MENA countries. These figures indicate in general terms the donors' geostrategic priorities, and also whether there is prima facie evidence that a donor supported a particular country and process (e.g. Tunisia's democratic

transition) or not. The right-hand column in each donor country shows the total for the period 2011–16, and the left-hand column indicates the trend through sparklines. We have not presented the sparklines with a uniform scale. Some bilateral aid volumes are so large that with a uniform scale the other sparklines would be seen only as flat lines. However, to make the trajectories visible for each line, we have a different scale for each dyad. The visibility of the gradients comes at the price that the sparklines can no longer be directly compared visually. Thus, no comparison can be made between the countries based on the sparklines alone, but the respective course of the spendings can be traced by looking at the trends.

Figure 2: European aid to MENA countries 2011–16, all sectors

	EU		France		Germany		UK	
	Trend	Total	Trend	Total	Trend	Total	Trend	Total
Algeria		416		719		58		33
Egypt		2721		1663		1123		109
Libya		286		35		81		142
Morocco		4264		2868		2877		40
Tunisia		3273		1586		1073		64
Iraq		747		79		933		359
Jordan		1313		881		853		324
Lebanon		784		384		657		249
Syrian Arab Republic		2120		127		1981		873
West Bank and Gaza Strip		2401		347		756		227
Yemen		437		16		674		481

Note: the figure shows ODA commitments in the category 1000: total all sectors (millions US$, constant prices 2020) for the years 2011–16.

Source: OECD (2023) Creditor Reporting System.

Figure 2 does not reveal a consistent pattern of financial flows. Donors did not clearly increase their support to MENA countries during the observation period. Germany, for example, seems to have consistently increased its aid to Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, but not to Egypt or Morocco. In the case of Egypt, a key country of the Arab Spring, all four donor countries initially increased their support, and then reduced it. Aid to Tunisia, the one country where a democratic process appeared to take hold, remained high but with considerable variation across the donors and years.

In absolute numbers, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco received the most support from the European donors, with the exception of the UK. Aid to Egypt was scaled down from 2012, and especially from 2014, presumably following Abdel Fatah El-Sisi's coup in 2013. Aid to Morocco was increased significantly from 2012 and decreased somewhat in the following period, but remained at a high level overall. A similar picture emerges for Tunisia, with aid tending to increase towards the end of the observation period.

Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and (partially) Yemen received an increase in aid only with a time lag of 4 to 5 years. Jordan received considerable support in relation to its size, especially from the EU, and aid increased towards the end of the observation period, mainly from Germany and the UK. For the other recipient countries, the picture is mixed. The EU and France scaled down their aid to Libya after an initial high, whereas Germany and the UK increased their aid to Libya towards the end of the observation period. Similar trends can be seen in Lebanon and the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Syria is an interesting case, because the Arab uprisings descended quickly into a brutal civil war in the country. The EU, Germany, and the UK nevertheless increased their aid to Syria quite substantially over the observation period. However, the increases were mostly in humanitarian aid

or aid that went to Syrian opposition groups, and much of it was spent in the donor countries or in neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, and not in Syria itself.

The EU emerges as the most important donor to the MENA countries during the period. Its support to Morocco is almost twice that of France and three times that of Germany. Notably, it was also a major donor to Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip. France set its priorities in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia. In contrast to the other donor countries, France played only a minor role for Libya, Iraq, and Yemen. Germany had the same priority countries as France and was sparing with its aid to Algeria and Libya. Otherwise, it distributed its support to the other countries rather evenly at a high level. The UK took on an interesting role as a donor. As already indicated by Figure 1, the UK's aid spending in the MENA region was relatively small in comparison with the other European donors. While Germany gave Egypt a total of US$1.1 billion, the UK contributed just US$109 million. Even more striking is the low level of British support for Morocco and Tunisia, which amounted to US$40m and US$64m, respectively, at most. Despite the solidarity and rhetorical commitments to supporting democratic change expressed in the UK's policy documents, it is not easy to conclude that the Arab Spring was really a priority for British aid.

Figure 3 starts to narrow the focus on support for political change by showing a breakdown of aid in the social infrastructure and services sector. This includes aid for education, health, and sanitation, and also for government and civil society, as well as for conflict prevention, peace, and security. It can therefore be considered a rough indicator of the support that donors give to the society in a recipient country. If a donor were to look to provide concrete support for a particular form of societal change, it should increase its aid in the social infrastructure and services sector.

Figure 3: European aid for social infrastructure and services 2011–16

	EU		France		Germany		UK	
	Trend	Total	Trend	Total	Trend	Total	Trend	Total
Algeria		210		690		25		17
Egypt		506		441		552		53
Libya		216		26		55		116
Morocco		1180		1233		783		27
Tunisia		572		654		764		42
Iraq		285		52		212		84
Jordan		601		506		590		244
Lebanon		515		245		152		135
Syrian Arab Republic		175		85		404		250
West Bank and Gaza Strip		1632		122		447		161
Yemen		125		11		456		98

Note: the table shows ODA commitments in the category 100: I. Social Infrastructure & Services (Millions US$, constant prices 2020) for the years 2011–16.

Source: OECD (2023) Creditor Reporting System.

This category accounts for half of total donor aid in some cases, except for the EU, where spending on social infrastructure and services tends to account for only a quarter of its total. We cannot identify any consistent upward or downward trend, except perhaps the tendency of the UK to increase the share of its support in a slight majority of MENA countries over the observation period. Tunisia received an increasing share from all four donor countries. Germany and the UK increased their share in this category for Algeria, whereas the EU and France noticeably reduced their respective contributions.

Egypt benefited unevenly from donors in this category. The EU increased its funding in 2012, only to cut it back sharply in the years following Sisi's coup. France and Germany acted differently, increasing their contributions to social infrastructure and services in 2014. The UK's contribution to Egypt remained low, just one tenth of that of the other donors. In Morocco, France and Germany spent just a third and a quarter of the EU's total in this category, respectively. Jordan, on the other hand, received half of its total EU support in this category alone but more than half from the other three donors. We also see that Tunisia saw large increases in this sector from 2011 to 2016, indicating support for its transition process. Another country where there were significant increases was Iraq, with the exception of France, whose support for Iraq decreased significantly.

The EU was particularly active in this category in Morocco, where support jumped in 2016, as well as in the West Bank and Gaza (remarkable, considering the small population of the latter territory). Other major beneficiary countries of EU aid for social infrastructure were Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, and Lebanon, although only Tunisia saw a steady increase in support. For France, Morocco remained a large recipient in this category, albeit with a decreasing trend, followed by Algeria, Tunisia, and Jordan. The last of these countries saw increased French support in 2015, as did Egypt, despite the 2013 coup. German aid in this category was again more evenly distributed across countries. Germany supported Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, and Egypt the most. Its aid to Iraq remained substantial, as did German support for Syria and the West Bank and Gaza Strip, although this consisted mainly of scholarships in post-secondary education. British aid in this category was often only a fraction of what the other donors provided in the same countries, especially Morocco and Tunisia. The countries that received the most UK aid were Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. The UK thus clearly diverged from the other donors.

Figure 4 shows aid for category I.5 State and Civil Society, which is a sub-category of Social Infrastructure and Services. This sub-category is the closest we can get to an indicator for donor support for political change. In this sub-category, we therefore go into more detail about the projects of the individual donors. Due to the small amount of data, this can only be done by pointing out some highlights, which serve to illustrate specific donor approaches to support. Category I.5 is further subdivided into two sub-categories. I.5.a refers to Government and Civil Society, whereas I.5.b includes Conflict, Peace, and Security. In our view, the latter sub-category provides a very rough indication of the securitization of aid.

Again, the first thing to note is that Tunisia had consistent increases in this sub-category from all four European donors. We also see that France seems to have discovered this category for itself towards the end of the observation period, at least in relation to the countries of the Levant. Furthermore, the UK spent a large part of its aid in Syria in this sub-category—US$239 million out of the US$250 million earmarked for Syria in the social infrastructure and services sector.

The EU's biggest partners in the area of government and civil society were Morocco and Tunisia. Unlike Morocco's, Tunisia's support increased steadily. A closer look at EU funding for government and civil society in Tunisia in the years 2013 and 2016 reveals that the US$5.1 million committed in 2013 was exclusively allocated to sub-category I.5.a. The EU's largest project, with funding of over US$2 million, included the restoration of damaged prisons and further infrastructure and training for courts. The next largest project dealt with institutional support for the Ministry of Labour (US$1.9 million). The third project, worth about US$1 million, supported civil society in its role in consolidating the country's democratic structures. Smaller projects, of between US$500,000 and 1 million, supported organizational reforms in the hospital system, legal reform in the area of juvenile justice, reform of the Court of Audit, integration of persons with disabilities, and measures relating to occupational health and safety.

Figure 4: European aid for government and civil society 2011–16

	EU		France		Germany		UK	
	Trend	Total	Trend	Total	Trend	Total	Trend	Total
Algeria		115		19		0		8
Egypt		141		3		62		24
Libya		181		11		32		102
Morocco		385		16		38		11
Tunisia		356		18		66		32
Iraq		162		24		76		67
Jordan		249		125		26		83
Lebanon		254		7		15		72
Syrian Arab Republic		109		7		141		239
West Bank and Gaza Strip		202		27		74		126
Yemen		31		3		26		36

Note: The table shows ODA commitments in the category 150: I.5 Government & Civil Society (Millions US$, constant prices 2020) for the years 2011–16.

Source: OECD (2023) Creditor Reporting System.

This picture had changed by 2016. In that year, the EU also made significant expenditures within categories I.5.a and I.5.b, namely US$20.4 million and US$13.7 million, respectively. Compared with 2013, this is a significant increase in funding overall, and there was also a considerable shift in priorities. In I.5.b, the EU financed, among other things, an integrated border management assistance mission in Libya (US$9 million), security sector reform through equipment and infrastructure (US$4.6 million), and the strengthening of border security management and community resilience to external shocks in border areas (US$0.8 million). This can be interpreted as increase in the securitization of EU aid, particularly in the area of migration management.

In I.5.a, the EU financed general budget support in the area of decentralization (CAP2D; US$16.5 million) and infrastructure measures in the judiciary (US$3.8 million). Other major projects in I.5.a (the list is long) included national statistics, civil aviation, and parliamentary partnership activities. It is important to note here that the EU provided a lot of support in numerous areas, and often also supported institutional and material infrastructure measures.

France invested only US$22,000 in category I.5.b in Tunisia in 2016, and this was in the area of conflict prevention. The remaining budget of US$13.8 million went to category I.5.a. A significant proportion of the projects were exchange scholarships. One major project dealt with legislative reforms to strengthen the fight against violence and terrorism and to improve gender equality (US$142,000). Jordan, however, remained by far France's largest recipient in subcategory 1.5.a. Here, however, the vast majority was spent on providing financial support for municipalities (US$110 million) in 2016, but without further specification.

Germany provided the most support to Syria in sub-category 1.5. In 2016, it spent around US$50 million on this. Of this, US$17.7 million went to support the transition process in Syria and US$16.5 million to the Syrian Recovery Fund. Other important projects included civilian peace building (US$7.7 million), support for the opposition in the area of rule-of-law and security (US$2.7 million), and preparatory measures for the reconstruction of Syria (US$1.6 million). The majority of these funds were spent in Germany itself, not in Syria. Germany's contribution to Egypt was modest in comparison. I.5.b included three projects in dialogue, youth work, and monitoring of the transformation partnership. In I.5.a, the most important projects were the

reform of selected state institutions (US$4.4 million), the fight against sexual harassment in the field of youth and sports (US$2.2 million), and administrative reforms, national environmental strategies, and the economic empowerment of marginalized groups (US$1.8 million).

The UK also provided the most support to Syria in this sub-category, but more interesting was its support to Jordan and Lebanon. In 2016, there was a significant imbalance between UK funding for I.5.b and 1.5.a for Jordan. The UK invested US$35 million in the former and only US$1 million in the latter. In I.5.b, US$17 million went to political stabilization in Jordan, US$7.2 million to community security and peacebuilding, US$5.3 million to security sector reform, and US$1.2 million to economic development and livelihood improvement. The largest item in I.5.a. was enhancement of the effectiveness of elected institutions, development of parliamentary blocs and political parties, and strengthening of links between the government, parliament, governorate councils, and citizens (approx. US$500,000). For Lebanon, the UK set similar priorities in 2016. Approximately US$20 million was allocated to I.5.b and only US$280,000 to I.5.a. The major activities included economic development and livelihoods (US$7.8 million), political stabilization (US$10 million), and security sector reform (US$2.8 million).

This brief overview of the projects funded provides an initial impression of how the MENA countries were to be stabilized and democratization promoted after the Arab Spring. The EU took the leading role as the most important donor, followed by France and Germany. The UK followed some distance behind. Nevertheless, the category Government and Civil Society played a minor role for all donors. In some cases, there were a large number of projects, but with low funding amounts. It should also be noted that each of the donors had a different country focus, although this was somewhat less pronounced for Germany, which distributed its funds the most evenly. From our point of view, it is not possible to determine whether and which transformation philosophy was behind the spending patterns, or to clearly link the priorities outlined in the donors' policy statements with the programmes and projects that were actually funded. The four European donors' policy frameworks can hardly be considered strategic or comprehensive in their support for democratic change, and the actual spending in key areas was even more fragmented in the crucial years following the Arab uprisings.

4 Conclusions

Europe's initial response to the Arab uprisings was to support political, social, and economic change. Development aid was seen as a key instrument, and changes were made to aid programmes. The EU, UK, and France issued new policy statements on the region, while Germany and the EU reacted largely by re-programming aid from existing budgets (to a greater extent than the UK and France). Nevertheless, European governments soon adjusted their reactions in accordance with their particular economic, commercial, and political interests in the MENA. Despite widespread rhetorical praise for the protestors from European politicians, EU member states mostly responded to the Arab uprisings with short-term and ad-hoc policy changes. This raises the question whether European policy-makers ever realized the magnitude of the events of the spring of 2011.

No European donor (with the possible exception of the UK) advanced a clear strategy defining the changes they wanted to support, and outlining the role of aid along with other policy tools in achieving these objectives. This led to ad-hoc and patchwork responses. Despite the need for a European response to a regional crisis, there was little European-level strategizing and coordination. Windows of opportunity to exercise influence were missed or misinterpreted, with devastating consequences, for example, in Libya. Accordingly, there was a high degree of

fragmentation and volatility in European aid spending, which can clearly be seen in the key sub-category of aid for government and civil society.

A long-term democracy support strategy cannot be discerned, either at the policy level or at the operational level, from any European donor. Rather, as Gerges (2015) argues, 'Both the EU and the US have increased the amount of aid committed to the MENA region since 2011, suggesting a preference for stable and Western-oriented autocracies over the instability which has transpired from genuine democratization processes in Egypt, for example'. This reflects the reality that, for European donors, supporting the wave of democracy would have meant turning their backs on generations of support for 'stability' in the MENA region, which in practice has meant providing financial, military, and diplomatic aid to authoritarian governments.

Security and anti-migration agendas were already shaping European aid policies before the Arab uprisings. When the uprisings ran into resistance, the externalities of conflict (particularly migration and terrorism) came to be perceived as threats to Europe. The region's authoritarian governments proved highly adept at exploiting Europe's vulnerabilities and fears. This threat perception was also amplified and instrumentalized, both by the European far right and by MENA authoritarians. Security and anti-migration agendas came to dominate aid policy and spending, especially after the so-called Syrian refugee crisis in 2015. Faced with uncertainty, controversy, and political costs at home, European actors used their aid not to support change but to maintain the status quo in the MENA region.

We cannot say whether aid could have made more of a difference if it had been used more coherently and in greater volume in support of political change in the MENA. It is in any case unlikely that aid could have made a difference on its own, despite the high expectations that are placed on it. Development aid is a foreign policy tool, and it will only really make a difference if European actors' foreign policy supports political change in the recipient country. At the same time, development aid is an important sign of solidarity, and the ways in which it is spent provide crucial evidence for whether Europeans are actually prepared to defend the values they espouse.

Although the most significant trends that mark European aid to MENA countries in the immediate wake of the Arab uprisings are understandable, they are unsustainable in the long term. As indicated by decades of research into aid and development effectiveness, aid programmes that focus on supporting partner countries to address their social, economic, and political problems are likely to have greater impact than programmes that focus primarily on donor interests (Andrews 2013). The social and economic tensions that drove the desire for political change expressed in 2010 and 2011 remain unresolved. The fundamental weaknesses in the rentier social contracts that govern state–society relations in most Arab countries have not been addressed. Most MENA governments do not have sufficient resources, and often also lack the political will, to deliver a decent standard of living for citizens in order to compensate them for their lack of participation in decision-making. Many of the region's authoritarians must instead resort to repression, which in turn creates greater social and political tension. It is therefore likely that Europeans will again be called upon to decide whether they want to support popular change in the MENA region, meaning that there is likely to be a need to learn lessons from the period following 2011.

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