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EU delegations as intermediaries of perceptions of the EU: A view from the MENA region

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ABSTRACT

The European Commission in its 2015 study on the perceptions of the EU acknowledged that mutual perceptions held by actors in the international arena affect their expectations about the other's behaviour and hereby guide the interpretation of the other's actions. Knowledge of how and what image of the MENA countries and of the EU is conveyed by country delegations is important for understanding whether the information that influences EU foreign policy-making is representative, and of whom. EU delegations are an acknowledged source of knowledge that feed into EU policymaking, and proposals have even been made for strengthening their role. Based on interviews with heads of delegations/Ambassadors in 2021, four interlinked categories of concerns affecting the perceptions of the EU are identified: historical legacy; knowledge about and expectations towards the Union; competing values and aims; and the EU's internal policy inconsistencies. The findings in the interviews are contextualized through an analysis of previous research on the perceptions of the EU. Further, the article discusses the role of delegations in EU policy-making and invites to take a critical view of Ambassadors' 'perceptions of the EU'.

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KEYWORDS EU delegations; EU foreign policy; MENA; perceptions; values

1. Introduction

The EU Global Strategy, which guides Union decision-making in its foreign relations, underlines the centrality of sustainable development, human rights protection, and rule-based governance as key values in EU external action (European Union Global Strategy, 2016, pp. 26–27, 34). It also emphasizes the local neighbourhood as a priority area of action, one of which is the Middle East and North African (MENA) region. The region has high geopolitical significance for the EU both historically and presently (Fawcett, 2018). Although the 'MENA region' is a contested concept, the currently prevailing

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understanding includes the band of 22 Arab states and the non-Arab states of Turkey, Iran, and Israel (Fawcett, 2018).

In its relations with the MENA region, the beginning of the 21st century has brought about several fundamental changes to the EU's foreign policies. The 'War on Terror' and the subsequent military interventions by the United States (US) in Afghanistan (2001) and in Iraq (2003) altered the geo-political environment in the EU's neighbourhood. The Union has come to realize that security concerns are intimately connected with the stability of its neighbourhood (Stivachtis, 2018b). The EU has therefore sought to develop a zone of prosperity and friendly relations around the Union (Ikani, 2020). However, the MENA has become a region of chronic instability and conflict, especially in the wake of the Arab uprising in 2011 (Hiltermann, 2019). The so-called refugee crisis of 2015 epitomizes the securitization of the EU's relations with MENA, with migration management having grown into a distinct field of diplomacy and a prioritized area of foreign and security policy (Seeberg & Völkel, 2020).

In its relations with MENA countries, the EU seeks to promote the values upon which it is based. The EU uses a strategy of positive reinforcement where the reward for desired behaviour is intensified collaboration and for example financial assistance (Stivachtis, 2018b). The political and economic needs of non-EU states to maintain close relations with the Union, has allowed the EU to impose standards of behaviour on those states (Stivachtis, 2018a). This means that partner countries should commit, among other things, to the values defined in the Global Strategy. However, the diffusion of EU values in the MENA region has been somewhat ineffective. One reason for this is that these values are locally contested (Tholens & Grob, 2015). While EU member states view the Union as an agent of peace, democracy, development, and good governance, from a third country perspective the Union is also an actor exercising political power, prescribing patterns of behaviour, dictating rules and imposing constraints (Stivachtis, 2018a; Zielonka, 2011).

The European External Action Service (EEAS) holds a key position in communicating EU values externally, as well as in the development of EU foreign policy (Morgenstern-Pomorski, 2018). A core function of the EEAS is performed by EU diplomatic representations, also called country delegations. This article discusses the role of country delegations to the MENA region as a source of information and expertise for EU foreign policy making. As these delegations have a central role in the representation of the EU in the region, in the formulation and implementation of common positions, and in the communication of country situations towards the EU, they also have a potentially influential position in agenda-setting. The role of EU delegations is also foreseen to grow ever more important (Blockmans et al., 2021).

The article is divided into two parts. The first part outlines the structure of EU foreign policy making with a view to the EEAS and country delegations. This part makes the case for the importance of perceptions for successful

foreign policy making and analyses the role of the EEAS and country delegations as sources of information and interpreters of those perceptions. By highlighting both practical and principled difficulties with acting as an intermediary the article invites to take a critical approach to Ambassadors' 'perceptions of the perceptions of the EU'.

The second part reports on the actual perceptions of country delegations in the MENA region and contextualizes these through an analysis of previous research on perceptions of the EU. Knowledge of how and what image of the MENA countries (and of the EU) is conveyed by country delegations is important for understanding whether the information that influences EU foreign policy-making is representative, and of whom. The article does not make claims in respect of the legitimacy of the EU as a foreign policy actor in the MENA regions, as such an analysis would need to transcend a focus on country delegations only. Nor does it claim to represent the (presumably) broad range of conceptions of the EU present in the MENA region – insights into which may lie also beyond the scope of Ambassadors. The interviews reveal common elements that in the Ambassadors' interpretations are characteristic of the perception of the EU. However, the findings also raise some question marks which underline the inherent difficulties of using delegations and Ambassadors as sources of knowledge.

2. The EEAS as co-ordinator of EU foreign policy

The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is defined as a *sui generis* competence in Art 2(4) TFEU, characterized as neither exclusive, shared, nor supplementary. Declarations 13 and 14 clarify that the CFSP will not affect the responsibilities of the EU's member states for the conduct of their foreign policy. While states are bound by decisions taken, they hereby retain full competence to act (Cremona, 2015) and can continue to conduct an independent foreign policy (Tonra & Christiansen, 2011). As for the institutional framework, the European Council is the main policymaker in the CFSP, and its mandate covers all external policies (and not only the CFSP (Art 22 TEU)). The Commission, the Council, and especially the Foreign Affairs Council all have specific mandates to act in the field. In the TEU, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR) and the Vice-President of the European Commission (VP), are given the task to 'conduct the Union's common foreign and security policy ... as mandated by the Council', as well as the common security and defence policy. This means that the EEAS, and in extension the delegations, act on all EU external policies (Michalski, 2022).

The intergovernmental nature of the CFSP means that the enactment of EU diplomacy in third countries is shared with EU member state embassies. A characteristic feature of European foreign policy is its fragmentation among competing initiatives and actors (Grevi et al.,

2020).¹ This fits uneasily with the unanimity requirement for joint decision-making in the CFSP. Achieving agreement is therefore rarely straightforward, and one of the main objectives of the CFSP is to manage differences among member states (Maurer & Wright, 2021).

The EEAS that became operational in 2011 plays a 'central but somewhat illusive role' in this complex picture of EU foreign policy (Hedling, 2022, p. 96). The EU Global Strategy acknowledges the fragmentation of EU external action and calls for more cooperation among the EEAS, other external action institutions, and the member states (European Union Global Strategy, 2016). This is crucial, the Strategy states, for the credibility of the EU, as it hinges on 'our unity, on our many achievements, our enduring power of attraction, the effectiveness and consistency of our policies, and adherence to our values' (European Union Global Strategy, 2016).

The HR/VP are charged according to Art. 19 TEU with ensuring the consistency and co-ordination between the EU's external action and preside over the Foreign Affairs Council. In this role, the HR/VP may initiate policies by submitting proposals both individually and with the support of the Commission. The main task of the EEAS is to help the HR/VP fulfill their mandate. In addition to its headquarters, the EEAS consists of more than 130 EU delegations in non-member countries and international organizations. This structure positions the EEAS as the centre of EU foreign policy co-ordination (Lequesne, 2015). Delegations have a similar role to embassies (Hedling, 2022). The Council Decision of 26 July 2010 to establish the EEAS defines the tasks as: the assistance of the HR/VP and the EEAS to carry out EU foreign policy on the ground, the representation of the EU in third countries and international organizations (European Council, 2010). This description, however, hides a more complex picture of what EU delegations do and how they operate, which includes representation, observation, reporting, and promoting friendly relations with the host country. Delegations have been characterized as the 'eyes, ears and mouths of the European Commission and the EEAS' (Balfour, 2013; Michalski, 2022). Delegations assume local co-ordination responsibility, and work to implement EU decisions for example in the fields of human rights and development policy.² As such, delegations combine diplomatic and operational tasks. As delegations constitute a point of contact for their host countries' administration, engage in political dialogue, and are tasked with improving awareness and understanding about the EU in third countries, they are in a key position to sense the perception of the EU in the host country (Helly et al., 2014). Indeed, EU delegations have become an acknowledged source of local knowledge that feed into EU policy making (Sellier, 2018; Weilandt, 2022; Wouters & Duquet, 2011).

3. The function of delegations in EU foreign policy-making

Studying European diplomatic practices cannot be done without looking at the sites where European diplomacy is produced and ‘happens’ (Bicchi & Bremberg, 2016). EU delegations can nowadays be regarded as the most visible representation of an emerging European diplomacy and are recognized as diplomatic missions by their host countries. The tasks of delegations are similar to national foreign services, with the difference that the tasks vary in accordance with the division of competences between the EU and the member states. In performing its co-ordinating tasks, delegations share knowledge about EU external policies, formulate a shared EU approach vis-à-vis third countries, conduct diplomatic representations, and organize joint action in terms of public outreach and communication (Michalski, 2022). EU delegations also provide continuous political reporting for the High Representative, the President of the European Commission, relevant commissioners, and the EEAS. Also, the Commission Directorates-General and services may request reporting in areas of their competence through the Head of Delegation (European Commission 2015). At times, delegations prepare joint reports for EU institutions and member states in the name of the EU and member states’ ambassadors. These reports are considered an authoritative perspective on developments in the host country (Michalski, 2022). The Ambassadors not only have the overall responsibility for the work of delegations but are also the people representing the EU at the highest diplomatic level, and in that capacity are for example heard by the European Parliament (Blockmans et al., 2021).

The EEAS cannot adopt legal acts, but the Council Decision of 26 July 2010 to establish the EEAS characterizes it as a ‘functionally autonomous body’ (European Council, 2010, article 1(2)). For example, in respect of the programming and management cycle for development, the Council Decision Article 9.3 states that ‘the EEAS ... shall have the responsibility for preparing the ... decisions of the Commission regarding the strategic, multi-annual steps ...’ (European Council, 2010). Analyses have demonstrated that the EEAS can exert influence on the EU foreign policy process. Its regulatory influence derives from the ‘entrepreneurial use’ of the EEAS’s central position, the co-ordinating role, access to informal networks and communities on the ground (Hedling, 2022). As a core administrative dimension of EU foreign policy making, the regulatory impact of the EEAS, and in extension delegations, derives from the implementation of foreign policy, as well as the production of information that shapes the EU policy agenda. In this role, administrations have even been called a ‘fourth branch of government’ (Gatti, 2016). The regulatory influence of the EEAS has even been compared to that of EU Agencies (Van Vooren, 2011).

4. Delegations as a source of knowledge

Acting as knowledge broker by delegation goes two ways. The diplomatic service is in a key position for the EU's external relations performance, as well as in contributing to the development of EU foreign policy (Hedling, 2022). The European Commission in its 2015 study on the perceptions of the EU acknowledged that mutual perceptions held by actors in the international arena affect their expectations about the other's behaviour and hereby guide the interpretation of the other's actions. This means that if the EU is viewed negatively in a country, it is likely that the majority of the EU's actions will be understood negatively as well (European Commission, 2015, p. 14). The perception of the EU is also important for upholding its image as an 'ethical power' on the global arena (Aggestam, 2008; Raube & Tonra, 2018; Sjursen, 2018). Consequently, one of the main tasks of the EU public diplomacy is to raise awareness of its foreign policy goals and to positively influence the perception of the EU (European Commission, 2015). Not only incorrect perceptions but also ignorance and indifference must be overcome before the EU can deliver its political message (Fanoulis & Revelas, 2023). While this entails an important co-ordinating task for delegations, the verification of information, debunking misconceptions, and delivering alternative interpretations are also more important than ever in a time of widespread disinformation (Hedling, 2021). At the same time, there is an identified lack of information and knowledge about societal dynamics in the MENA countries in EU policy making. This lack has for example prevented the EU from a proper engagement with civil society actors (Colombo & Soler i Lecha, 2019). In respect of developing countries in particular, delegations feed information to the Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development in policy planning.

The position of delegations as knowledge brokers underlines the role of expertise in Union delegations (Blom & Vanhonor, 2021), but also personal networks, training and country circumstances can affect the image conveyed of host country perceptions. In addition to local media coverage of the EU for many non-EU countries, the image of the Union is personified by its delegation Ambassadors (Bensons-Rea & Shore, 2012). For example, the nationality, personality, and local language skills of the EU Ambassadors play role in the two-way image and knowledge formation process (Pitjanka, 2021). As delegations have only limited staff and no major information-gathering capacities, knowledge of the host country can be limited to daily experiences and encounters, which tend to be geared towards government representatives. Depending on the local language skills of the delegation staff, the Ambassador is informed about the images of the EU mediated in the local newspapers and other outlets (Pitjanka, 2021). There can also be great variation as to how the views of delegations are picked up in EU decision-

making (Blom & Vanhonor, 2021; Weilandt, 2022). The views of delegations and Ambassadors should therefore not automatically be taken as representative of the range of conceptions of the EU that might prevail in a particular country.

Furthermore, while the institutional role of EU delegations is shared, as actors they constitute a heterogeneous group that performs activities in very different manners (Biedenkopf & Petri, 2019). They act as intermediaries both in the intersection between the host state and the EU institutions, as well as in-between EU member states. Performing these functions can vary between delegations, due to a range of circumstances. As for EU institutions, the nature and strength of the relationship can affect the quality of the interaction. As delegation staff can consist of individuals from different parts of the Commission, there may also within the delegation exist competing views in respect of focus areas and working methods (Bensons-Rea & Shore, 2012). Also expertise and experience among staff can vary and need not always be in the field of the tasks assigned to a delegation. Moreover, the intermediary function is affected by local circumstances in the host country, but also by the level of policy agreement among EU Member States (Biedenkopf & Petri, 2019).

Apart from these 'institutional' circumstances, also the role of delegations in the social construction of knowledge needs to be acknowledged. In a constructivist approach to public policy, crucial questions to be raised concern how policy problems are construed, what problems are prioritized, and how for example the socialization of delegations/ambassadors affects the identification of perceptions of the EU (and herewith the formulation of policies) (Saurugger, 2018). The perceptions of the EU communicated in the interviews, in this perspective, are not descriptive of an objective reality, but are identified and elevated to the policy agenda by the ambassadors (building on Parsons, 2003). At the same time, ambassadors as well as delegations at large are embedded in cognitive frames that inform their actions and preferences. As put by Saurugger (2018): 'Sometimes, the beliefs of actors guide their actions and sometimes perceived beliefs only rationalize strategies that can be chosen for other reasons. Empirically distinguishing between the two situations remains difficult'.

5. Method

For this article, eight³ EU Ambassadors to countries in the MENA region were interviewed, or in two cases, desk officers, working within the delegation, pointed out by the respective Ambassador. The anonymous interviews were conducted during 2021. The interviews were semi-structured and the questions addressed issues such as the perception of the EU (including the views of the political elite, but also that of citizens), what is expected of the EU, whether the EU's mission is known by locals,

whether the EU's values are known and if people perceive the EU acting accordingly, whether there was something negatively affecting the credibility and strength of the EU and what could possibly improve citizens' and politicians' perception of the EU in respective countries. The topics were sent to the interviewees prior to the interview, but the interviews were open to any significant aspects regarding the countries. The representatives could openly share their knowledge about the country concerned. The length of the interviews varied from one hour to nearly two and a half hours. During the interviews, detailed notes were made, including direct quotes. The material was analysed both in terms of a theoretically driven content analysis to distinguish concerns affecting the perception of the EU, as well as through an empirically oriented content analysis identifying Ambassadors' conception of EU perceptions. The contextualization of the interview data was done by mirroring the findings against previous research on the perceptions of the EU in the MENA region. While the views of the eight Ambassadors cannot be considered representative of a 'true' perception of the EU in the region, the findings can be complementary to more comprehensive studies (such as Chaban & Holland, 2019; Del Sarto & Tholens, 2020; Isami & Schlipphak, 2017; Lucarelli & Fioramonti, 2010; Teti et al., 2017). From the interview data, four different but interlinked categories of concerns that affect the perception of the EU were identified.

6. Perceptions of Ambassadors to MENA countries

6.1. *The historical legacy*

The images of the EU and Europe are rooted in history. Lack of reconciliation with colonialism is still visible, for example, when promotion of values such as human rights and democracy are perceived to have hegemonic and imperialist tendencies (Fawcett, 2018; Onar & Nicolaidis, 2013). Individual European states, notably Britain and France, but also Italy and Spain entered the modern MENA equation as defining powers in the early twentieth century, sketching out the future territorial, economic, and political arrangements for the region (Fawcett, 2018). Given differences between the historical engagement, these states still have different priorities, strategic cultures and for example make different threat assessments (Grevi et al., 2020). This means that in some countries the legacy has a stronger impact on the image of the EU than in others. Algeria, for instance, brings together various spatiotemporal factors affecting cooperation dynamics. The Algerian particularity is a result of the historical development of its own security conditions, influenced by the traumatic liberation process from France (Seeberg & Völkel, 2020), which has formed

and still affects the EU–Algeria relationship. Moreover, during the Cold War era, Algeria belonged to the socialist/communist camp, and established ties that remain strong. The underlying conflict with Morocco at varying intensities and the different phases of the civil war from the 1991 onwards (see Seeberg & Völkel, 2020) also shape the Algerian perceptions of the EU. As one of our interviewees pointed out:

Algeria, for example, went through an era of Islamist terrorism in the 1990s. It felt it did not get enough attention from the EU. Algerians felt betrayed by France at that time. Europe ignored Algeria back then, as it was busy with Balkan wars and expanding to the east. We [EU] were not focused on what was happening in the Southern Mediterranean.

From the MENA countries perspective, Hiltermann (2019) claims, outside powers have had multiple interests in the region – stability, hydrocarbon resources, markets, products and labour, and individual states’ allegiance in superpower rivalry – whereas the unity and peace of the region have not been among them (Hiltermann, 2019). The perception of disunity is aggravated by the fact that the EU member states operate at different levels, through different channels and arrangements, as they see fit to advance their interests (Grevi et al., 2020). Depending on historical ties with particular MENA countries, EU member states may or may not have common views on the aims in a specific third country. How to balance the historical legacy of different interests, policies, and interests of individual states, with the demands for a CFSP constitutes a central challenge (Hadfield et al., 2017).

The 2011 Arab uprisings and regime changes did not alter the major structural features of the EU’s relations with its southern neighbourhood (Férez-Molina, 2017). To the contrary, the Arab uprising has been seen to have left the EU’s credibility and influence in the region at a low (Ikani, 2020). Interviewee 6 concluded that, *‘After the Arab spring, all what we [EU] say has less impact’*, whereas interviewee 8 said, *‘Gaddafi was thrown out leading to distrust in the EU. First they [EU] were welcoming him with open arms, but then he was thrown out’*. This suggests that perceptions are not only formed based on the actions the EU carries out in the respective country of the Ambassador but are also based on the activities elsewhere in the region. Indeed, Furia and Lucas (2006) argue that the (perceived) behaviour of the EU towards any MENA country world crucially shapes citizens’ attitudes in all MENA states towards the EU. However, even though most of the interviewees mentioned the colonial past as causing certain distrust or reservation towards the EU, the majority in unison agreed with interviewee 6 claiming that *‘Despite the connotation of the colonialism, EU is at large seen as bringing something good rather than bad’*. This suggests that at least in the perceptions of some MENA Ambassadors, the colonial past need not in itself be detrimental to EU relations.

6.2. Knowledge about and expectations towards the union

EU foreign policy is a multi-level game, requiring horizontal co-ordination between different EU institutions and vertical co-ordination between the EU and 27 member states (Cadier & Lequesne, 2020). The EU has its own diplomatic status and capacities, yet does not enjoy the unitary nature of foreign policy action we would associate with a state (Maurer & Wright, 2021). This was also reflected in the interviews, as interviewee 4 stated that *'We are still on a very early stage in the common EU foreign policy'*. Moreover, interviewee 6 expressed a shared position in stating that *'... people are quite uninformed about the EU. They say they don't know what the EU does'*.

The level of knowledge is also uneven. According to the interviewees, people possessing higher education and/or living in urban areas tend to have more knowledge about the EU compared with people with less education and/or living in rural areas. However, most of the interviewees admitted that people in their respective host countries do not have a complete understanding of what the EU actually is, which affects both the perception of the Union and the expectations towards it. In the words of interviewee 2, *'People don't have clear understanding what the difference between the UN and the EU is'*. Similarly, interviewee 6 pointed out that the *'EU is seen almost as UN or another big organization. EU is not understood'*. More confusion is caused by the fact that there is an EU foreign policy and European foreign policies (including the national foreign policies as well as initiatives of other groupings and coalitions) (Grevi et al., 2020). There are EU delegations in various MENA countries, but also the delegations of individual EU member states. Individual states have distinct national foreign policies in respect of specific regional interests, global issues, as well as in relationships to other states (Tonra & Christiansen, 2011). This is a cause of confusion: *'Is not clear what the EU is and what Europe is. Fifty per cent of the population doesn't know what the EU is'*, exclaimed interviewee 7. Interviewee 1 said, *'EU actions are often confused with the actions of one member state'*. Interviewees 3, 5, 6 and 4 illustrated the same challenge: *'It is actually difficult to understand what the EU is and what singular member states do'*, explained the interviewee 3. Lack of knowledge also taps into the problematic historical legacy. As interviewee 8 put it, *'It is still difficult for the EU to disassociate itself from France over here. France is very influential, but there is deep resentment'*.

Coherence between the initiatives of various groups of member states on the one side, and EU decisions and goals on the other, is critical to advance the common EU foreign policy agenda (Grevi et al., 2020). However, difficulties with distinguishing EU actions from the actions of member states make it harder to evaluate whether the EU is acting coherently and in accordance with its guiding principles. Expectations, in other words, can become unrealistic which was emphasized by most of the interviewees. The Union needs to

be clear on *'What the EU can offer as community that singular member states cannot'*, interviewee 6 reminded. Key instruments for formalizing EU relations with third countries (particularly under the European Neighbourhood Policy) are Action Plans or Association Agreements, which outline country-specific policies to promote the approximation of the third country to EU standards (Lavenex et al., 2009, p. 820). Countries that embark on political reforms are offered incentives such as market access, economic integration and development, the mobility of people and a greater share of the EU financial support (Stivachtis, 2018a). Such incentives are also expected of the Union, as confirmed by interviewee 5 as well as most of the interviewees, *'EU is seen as something, which should and will improve the standard of living, facilitate movement and so on. Expectations are related also to the economic development'*. Interviewee 7 further held that people expect the EU to help with the deep social and economic crisis of their country. Interviewee 1 listed similar expectations, *'They want possibilities for personal development with EU's help. It is easy to reach consensus on these softer issues. However, there are some expectations we cannot always meet'*.

This last concern echoes the capability-expectations gap which is a characteristic of EU external action (the seminal analysis being, Hill, 1993). According to interviewees 1, 2, 4, 8 and 3, the EU should perform more as a political actor. Interviewee 4 described, *'EU should not appear just to be following the US. US doesn't have too good a reputation in the region. Especially young people put hope in the EU'*. Interviewee 1 illustrated similar opinions from the country s/he represented, *'The EU should take a more political stance. Could the EU do something more than just condemn, I hear people asking. People ask me why the EU isn't harder on Yemen or Iran'*. *'EU's silence on Yemen issue and Saudi intervention is perceived as strange'*, interviewee 8 confirmed. Furthermore, according to interviewee 2, *'The EU is not seen as so political an actor compared with the US for example'*. To this, interviewee 1 concurred,

EU is seen to be shy and hiding behind regional actors. Citizens are asking for more EU engagement. Yes, we are seen as weak and dependent on the US and following the US policies. We suffer from it. We should have strategic autonomy. People ask me, why don't you distance yourself from the US.

The expectations towards the EU can also pull in different directions. For example, prisoners, as interviewees 8, 6 and 3 explained, would expect EU to intervene more vigorously in human rights violations and protect people from armed militias. On the other hand, some think that the EU should not impose standards worldwide. As interviewee 8 explained, *'People think that the EU might whenever add something new to the list of human rights. It [EU] should not consider itself as mandating what human rights are'*. Expectations can also differ between MENA countries. Some expect the EU to bring change, whereas others think that all EU policies are designed primarily

with its own self-interest in mind, however altruistic they might appear (Hiltermann, 2019). In this light, the interviews confirmed that, at best, the EU is perceived as a reliable partner with a clear vision and mission. *'The EU is united over here. The member states are like-minded regarding the issues in the country. The policies are in line with the aims of the EU'*, interviewee 2 concluded. Regardless of the degree of mistrust towards the EU as a global political actor, the Union is seen as a good and overall reliable partner. *'The perception of the EU is rather positive and stable. People don't question the mission'*, told interviewee 1.

6.3. Competing aims

As to the EU's foreign policy aims, according to Article 21(1) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), the Union's action on the international scene should be guided by the principles of 'democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law'. According to the interviewees, the EU is perceived overall as the most important trading partner and as an actor without a hidden agenda (yet not meaning that the agenda would always be endorsed). Interviewee 4 put this clearly, *'EU is still seen as neutral without a hidden agenda. EU needs to capitalize that'*.

Yet, at the same time, EU foreign policy is riddled with dilemmas. Among other things, these concern the aims of that policy (and especially the dilemma between rights and security concerns); the balancing of engagement and coercion; and the EU's own credibility as an ethical power (Balfour, 2017). A common claim, for example, is that the EU's promotion of human rights and democracy in the MENA region has frequently been trumped by economic or security interests (Stivachtis, 2018b). This has been particularly visible in times of crisis. When circumstances in the MENA region (as well as external pressures) have made it difficult, or unfeasible to pursue an agenda of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, the EU has turned towards stability and security as the more pressing objectives (Colombo & Soler i Lecha, 2019; Börzel and Lebanidze 2017). In fact, this is even institutionalized in EU foreign policy making as the values underlined in the Global Strategy run parallel with its emphasis on the concept of 'principled pragmatism' as a counterbalancing factor (Raube & Tonra, 2018; Sjursen, 2018). The sentiment of inconsistency, however, stands out from the interviews, *'There are two poles of values. Values as such on one side and the stability on the other'*, as interviewee 6 expressed it, *'The EU is accused of putting democratization aside in front of stabilization'*.

A self-imposed civilizing approach to third countries is also a source of criticism. In the interviews, this critique takes two main forms. First, despite

insistence on being committed to human rights, democracy promotion, and conflict resolution, a discrepancy is felt between EU rhetoric and practice. Interviewee 8 pointed out that EU's perceived duplicity affects the legitimacy of the Union negatively, *Hypocrisy is felt in the EU human rights field. We [EU] criticize but sit and do business with those in power. We don't actually walk the talk. How far do we stand with what we say?* The interviewee 2 made a similar point from a slightly different perspective, *'Some people think that it is wrong to work with the government in this country.'* Second, lack of agreement generates competing conceptions of those fundamental values. Interviewee 8 told that, *'It is difficult to find common grounds in topics like democracy, the rule of law or human rights'*. This was not a unique opinion.

Migration management epitomizes the EU's struggle with upholding competing values. The migration policies of individual member states occasionally compete with the EU's external policies (Reslow, 2019). The multilevel nature and the division of competences in migration management, are sources of legitimacy challenges as the multitude of bilateral migration agreements risk eroding the regional agenda (Bisong, 2019). Push-back policies, the detention of migrants, the securitization of borders, and poorly coordinated policies, some claim, have hollowed the concept of Europe as a normative power out (Fawcett, 2018). Interviewee 7 highlighted this, *'How the EU treats migrants affect negatively [the credibility of the EU]'*. *'The EU is seen as wanting just to keep the migrants out from Europe'*, interviewee 2 explained. The practice by which the EU presses third countries to sign 'migration compacts' for controlling migration, the *'The EU is seen as arrogantly selling itself as a moral high ground while treating migrants in such a negative way'*, explained the interviewee 7. Moreover, as the EU has deployed aid as leverage to respond to strategic challenges (Youngs & Zihnioğlu, 2021), this has led to trade-offs in migration management.

6.4. Intra-EU practices

Since the development of the CFSP, there has been an attempt to portray Europe as a united actor in respect of the MENA region, particularly in respect of its southern, Mediterranean-focused agenda (Fawcett, 2018). The veto rights of member states and the diverse strategic cultures and foreign policy interests across the EU have led, however, to disappointing results when it comes to the capacity of the EU to speak with one voice (Grevi et al., 2020). The EU decision-making process is perceived as inert, as interviewees 1 and 2 confirmed: *'EU is a representative of 27 states, each having own interests too'*, said interviewee 2. The interviewee 1 pointed out that *'It takes a long time to proceed the programs. Bilateral actions are perceived as easier and faster in that sense'*.

Support for international intervention in Libya led by France and Britain, non-support for Bahrain's reform movement, then qualified support for the engagement in Syria's civil unrest, reveals the EU's divided stance on foreign policy issues (Fawcett, 2018). EU foreign policy, as described by Hegemann and Schneckener (2019, pp. 38–42, 134), has also become increasingly subject to internal contestation and politicization (Ikani, 2020; Gadd, 2021). This has not gone unnoticed. Interviewee 2 pointed out that some people follow closely what happens within the Union. *'The people here are rather educated and knowledgeable overall. They follow what happens to the Union. Will it remain united? Brexit actually increased the credibility of the EU as it, in the end remained united'*. Disunity is not always a problem. Differentiated cooperation, not including all member states, can contribute to the effectiveness and coherence of EU foreign policy when pursued in consultation and cooperation with the Commission and other EU institutions, and with a view to advancing shared EU goals (Grevi et al., 2020). However, such differentiated cooperation can also lead to the application of double standards, for example if member states ignore promotion of shared values as a condition in their bilateral dealings with MENA countries (Stivachtis, 2018a, 2018b).

The domestic policies of EU member states can also give rise to questions concerning commitment to shared values. This can concern the presentation of a human rights critique of MENA countries: *'There is criticism to the EU countries not holding the values themselves. There is sexual harassment and women inequality happening within the EU also'*, told interviewee 6, and interviewee 2: *'There are human rights violations inside the EU too'*. Also, other EU-internal challenges affect the external perception of the EU, such as the rule of law-crisis in Poland and Hungary (Cadier & Lequesne, 2020). A particularly worrying sign in this respect is the strong increase in populist rhetoric in domestic politics. The current performative contestation of the EU (frequently for domestic purposes) builds on questioning the added value of European cooperation, often by building on imperial analogies (Juncos & Pomorska, 2021; Maurer & Wright, 2021; authors 2020). Even if populism has not reportedly dramatically affected the substance, the process, and reliability of the EU foreign policy (Cadier & Lequesne, 2020), the EU-internal challenges have been prone to increase criticism also outside EU borders. By questioning the fundamental values of democratic governance and the rule of law internally, populist rhetoric weakens the EU's normative stance abroad (Cadier & Lequesne, 2020). The further this critique is phrased through targeting particular groups, the more distant the possibility seems also of reaching a shared conception of rights. As interviewee 3 pointed out, *'People think that we should shut up. European Islamophobia, such as the restrictions posed by France, are highly criticized'*.

7. Ambassadors' views in perspective

The existing literature on public attitudes towards the EU has shown that the perception of the EU is quite positive across the globe, with citizens being largely supportive of the Union (e.g., Barcevičius et al., 2015; Isami & Schlipphak, 2017). However, Arab citizens, outside elites, are much more sceptical than citizens in other regions of the world and see the EU as a selfish and somewhat untrustworthy and unreliable actor (Elgström, 2007; Scheipers & Sicurelli, 2007, 2008). While most aspects affecting the perception and credibility of the EU identified above echo previous research, the extent to which those aspects have resulted in a negative perception of the Union seems to differ.

To what extent is the EU regarded as a reliable and honest partner? One reason for lack of trust towards the EU has been noted to stem from the (perceived) Western support for authoritarian rulers in the region after World War II, a point also touched upon by our interviewees (see Boukhars, 2011; Telhami, 2013). According to Isami and Schlipphak (2017), Arab citizens do not trust domestic public actors to a comparable extent as citizens in other parts of the world – a sentiment that also extends to external actors such as the EU. This contradicts with the view of some Ambassadors of the current study who interpreted the EU to be perceived as rather reliable. However, what seems to constitute a contradiction might also be reflective of the institutional structure of delegations. As the Ambassadors described, people with higher education and/or a more positive outlook regarding the economy are more satisfied with their government and hence also are more favourable towards the EU. It has also been noted in previous research that the more willing an individual is to accept external demands for reform, the more likely s/he perceives the EU positively (Isami & Schlipphak, 2017). With this in mind, the discrepancy in findings might stem from the limited information-gathering capacities of delegations discussed above.

Why does the EU fail to deliver on its promises? This criticism, as noted by the Ambassadors, underlines that the EU should be better in promoting the values of the Global Strategy, as well as to live up to them itself. This echoes a frustration within the EU on the failure to gain real leverage and political impact on the region. The foreign policy approach of the EU is deplored for being based excessively on the EU's expectations and objectives, for lack of rights-based and people-centred approach, and for being fragmented between the EU and member states (see European Parliament resolution, 2019). Simultaneously, the findings from other research indicate a difference in worldviews, mindsets and practical agendas between the Union and MENA countries (see also Chaban & Holland, 2013). The survey data of the project Arab Transformations and the latest Arab Barometer (AB VII, 2022) suggest a considerable disjoin between EU policy goals and the priorities in MENA public opinions. Teti et al. (2017) and opinion polls of ArabTrans (and AB VII from, 2022) conclude that large majorities

today view socio-economic issues such as housing, jobs, welfare, social services, education, corruption as the top priorities of governance, even at the cost of increased freedom and political representation. In fact, in recent years, there has been an increase in the degree to which MENA region's citizens believe that democracy is bad for the economy and stability of their countries (AB VII). Furthermore, in all countries surveyed in the Arab Transformations project, only a minority of citizens wanted the EU for example to support women's rights and empowerment (Jordanians supporting this policy area the most with only 10 per cent, Moroccans and Tunisians with around 7 per cent, and the remaining countries less than that). This means that although women's rights are central to the EU's policy agenda, there is a low degree of readiness to endorse it (in this respect). The end result is a dichotomous situation where the EU, by pushing stronger in order to deliver results, will potentially empower the critique of patronizing as argued e.g., by Onar and Nicolaidis (2013) and Stivachtis (2018b). Accepting external demands for reform might be seen as putting a dent in the sovereignty of the countries in MENA (Isami & Schlipphak, 2017). Indeed, the interviewed Ambassadors mentioned the difficulty finding common grounds in some of the issues important for the EU.

Is there knowledge about, and confidence in, the EU? Although the Ambassadors noted the challenge of finding common ground in their host countries, they were nevertheless unanimous about MENA citizens considering the EU to bring something positive, some even wanting 'more of the EU'. In this respect, the Ambassadors' views seem to differ from previous research results. Based on Teti et al. (2017) even a third of Egyptians and a quarter of Jordanians said the EU should not get involved at all (for Libya and Morocco, the percentages are 21.2 per cent and 16.5 per cent respectively). The EU was viewed as stabilizing by just over half in Morocco and Tunisia but destabilizing by nearly half in Jordan and by about a third in Egypt, with Libyans and Iraqis more evenly split (Teti et al., 2017). At the same time, this result should be read together with the lack of knowledge of the EU, identified both by the interviewed Ambassadors and in previous research. According to the survey conducted by Arab Transitions, only a few respondents had heard of European programmes: only 5 per cent of the respondents in Egypt, 17 per cent in Tunisia, 22 per cent in Jordan, and 45 per cent in Morocco said they had heard of development cooperation programmes (Teti et al., 2017).

Many actions have been proposed to improve the diplomatic role of the EU. The EU would benefit from working ever more with local stakeholders and representatives of non-EU countries in general, and operating at grassroots level (Teti et al., 2017). The EU should avoid pushing agendas in a top-down fashion but ensure that its policies are based on the wants and needs of the citizens (see Elgström, 2007; Emerson & Young, 2007; Pace, 2009; Scheipers & Sicurelli, 2007). To avoid being perceived as 'preaching' to the world, the normative role of the EU would need to pass a 'cultural filter' whereby

normative claims turn from a one-way monologue into an exchange of ideas (Chaban & Pardo, 2018). Whether such an engagement currently lies within the capacity of EU delegations is highly uncertain. Moreover, the more this stands out as a compromise in the pursuit of central foreign policy aims, the higher also the risk becomes that EU's acts stand out as inconsistent with its values (authors 2020; Clapp, 2020). A lot also depends on the extent to which the ambassadors have embodied the idea of EU diplomacy as Bensons-Rea and Shore (2012) pointed out and how visible those ideas are in the work of the delegations. The MENA region has already been identified as the one region that has suffered most from the pragmatist turn in EU foreign and security policy, generating a claim that EU policies on the region are in an outright contradiction with the ambitions of the EU Global Strategy (Colombo, 2021).

8. Concluding remarks

This article has provided a snapshot of the perceptions of the EU as conveyed of EU Ambassadors to eight countries in the MENA region. As the perceptions of the EU in third countries can affect the extent to which these countries are open to accept EU policy preferences, it is important to understand how those perceptions are formed. While the interviewees were not completely unanimous on how the EU is perceived, some common elements were identified affecting the perception. Moreover, they agreed on the view that pre-existing legitimacy concerns still prevail. These concern the historical legacy of the EU and its member states; its imperial or civilizing approach; lack of knowledge creates unrealistic expectations, which in turn affect the assessment of whether the EU actually 'practices what it preaches'; and the balancing between competing values and preferences. The interviews confirm that inconsistencies in EU external and internal policies give rise to suspicions of double standards, as does a conception of the EU not living up to the standards of international law and human rights that it itself advocates. The recent rule of law backsliding within the EU is one example of this (internally) and the outsourcing of migration management is another (externally).

The interviews suggest in a somewhat contradictory manner that alongside a scepticism, there are high hopes and trust in the EU as a partner. While the EU cannot change the historical legacy, it can make sure that when it is united, it acts on a cause that is felt legitimate also in the MENA countries. In the light of previous research on the perceptions of the EU, this is an enduring challenge as the EU's values are not necessarily shared by all countries in the MENA region, or at least that country preferences may be tilted towards prioritizing economic development before political freedoms. The absence of a uniform perception of the EU, in other words, is in such a case aggravated by an absence of shared policy priorities.

EU delegations are by no means the sole source of information in formulating EU foreign policies. Nonetheless, they have a role both in implementing EU policies in third countries and in informing policy priorities within the EU. This article suggests that commonalities can be found in respect of how the EU is perceived in the MENA region, and that some conceptions are persistent over time. However, some of the noted contradictions and discrepancies also raises a question concerning the role and function of delegations in knowledge production (and consequently in EU foreign policy making). The intermediary function of delegations is affected by both 'institutional' circumstances but is also inevitably subject to a constitution of perceptions (of the EU) by the delegation and its staff. This fact is underlined in particular where the interview results pull in opposite directions, such as when reporting lack of knowledge of the EU on the one hand, but on the other hand also an accusation of the EU applying double standards due to its own internal human rights concerns. This does not question the professional skills of the interviewed Ambassadors (both perceptions can certainly feature within a single country) but underlines both the complexity and the political nature of conveying the perceptions of the EU in third countries. Moreover, the extent to which the results of this study are attributable to ambassadors as individuals is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, as shown in this paper, there is a need for a future endeavour to combine the rather disembodied theorization of the role of the Ambassadors and the information on who they actually are and whether their characteristics and suitability for their posts affect the information conveyed regarding the perception of the European Union in their host country.

Notes

1. For a mapping of member state foreign policy priorities, see https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_eu_leverage_mena/
2. EU Delegations are at the forefront e.g., in implementing the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024, see Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024, JOIN/2020/5 final.
3. Representatives of the EU from Jordan, Algeria, Lebanon, Tunisia, Iraq, Egypt, Syria, and Turkey participated in this research. This is not the numerical order used in the text. In addition to these, the invitation to participate in the research was sent to Ambassadors to Israel, Libya, Morocco, and West Bank/Gaza, but we did not receive reply.

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