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European aid and democracy support to MENA countries after the Arab Uprisings: A critical juncture missed

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ABSTRACT

The Arab Uprisings represent a critical juncture for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), even though they did not result in the democratic change that many expected at the time. To what extent do European development donors use aid to support democracy in MENA countries when faced by such a critical juncture? We examine the policy and operational responses of four major European donors: France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the European Institutions. Based on policy documents and development aid data from the OEDC-DAC database, our analysis shows that Europeans expressed rhetorical support for MENA democracy, but set very different country and thematic priorities and did not coordinate their aid responses with each other. Donors focused on an indirect developmental approach, rather than a direct political approach, to democracy support. Aid policies and practices became increasingly securitized, with the negative effect of strengthening authoritarian regimes. The lesson of the Arab Uprisings is the need for a coordinated approach among donors focused on political democracy support, in order to be prepared for future critical junctures that could lead to democratization.

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KEYWORDS Democracy support; development aid; critical junctures; Arab uprisings; OECD-DAC aid data

1. Introduction

For many observers, the Arab Uprisings in 2010 and 2011 offered a unique opportunity for Middle East and North African (MENA) countries to democratize. A decade and a half later, it is clear that the transformation many expected in 2010 and 2011 has not been realized. Autocracy proved remarkably resilient across the region. Tunisia's return to authoritarianism in 2021/22

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appeared to confirm the failure of democracy in the Arab world. Nevertheless, this was not foreseeable immediately following the 'Arab Spring' of 2011.

According to historical institutionalists, Critical Junctures (CJs) are defining events where decisions are taken that steer a country's institutional and political development in alternative directions (Hogan, 2019). Capoccia and Kelemen (2007, p. 348) define CJs as 'relatively short periods of time during which there is a substantially heightened probability that agents' choices will affect the outcome of interest'. The institutionalist literature has generally conceptualized crises as CJs where major change is likely (Ansell, 2021). After an initial shock, the changes brought by a CJ occur through the actions of policy entrepreneurs seizing opportunities to realize their ideas and objectives (Capoccia, 2015). A CJ closes off potential options (Mahoney, 2001; Volpi & Gerschewski, 2020), thereby creating path dependencies for institutional developments that are difficult to change subsequently (Pierson, 2011).

A CJ does not always lead to change. The causal chain of events of a CJ can be divided into two phases (Soifer, 2012). First, the 'permissive conditions' phase creates a window of opportunity in which existing restrictions are relaxed or lifted. The permissive conditions create the necessary conditions for change, in which 'productive conditions' then lead to new structures, or not depending on whether actors are willing and able to make changes. Stark (2018) points out that CJs can result in 'near misses' where the status quo is successfully defended. As Ikani (2021) argues, policy responses to CJs can be constrained by 'institutional plasticity', where pre-existing formal and informal frameworks resist radical change and result in outcomes that are different from those expected when a crisis first arises.

The Arab Uprisings represent a CJ for the MENA region and its countries and peoples. In most Arab countries, citizens protested against what they considered to be dysfunctional and illegitimate social contracts, calling for 'bread, freedom and justice' (Loewe et al., 2021). This does not mean that the protesters were unified or wanted liberal democracies modelled on Western norms, which were viewed sceptically by many in the region (Rosiny & Richter, 2016). Nevertheless, pressure from civil society for genuine democratic reforms has long existed in MENA countries (Lust, 2011). As Heydemann noted, 'the removal of entrenched incumbents initiated transitions similar to those that occurred in other cases of authoritarian breakdown and democratization' (Heydemann, 2016, p. 193). Most Arab countries experienced socio-political changes. Formerly repressed political parties and civil society groups emerged, competitive elections were held and constitutional reforms were launched, raising legitimate expectations both in the region and in the West that democracy was possible (Kilavuz & Sumaktoyo, 2020). Outcomes ranged from a new constitution in Morocco, to ill-fated elected governments in Egypt and Tunisia, to disastrous internationalized civil wars in Libya, Yemen and Syria (Lynch, 2021). The social,

economic, and political tensions behind the Arab Uprisings remain unresolved, meaning that lessons from the period following 2011 remain highly relevant (Heydemann, 2025).

Democracy support is an important instrument of Western development aid, especially since the democratic transition of post-communist countries in the 1990s (Leininger, 2019). Carothers (2009) distinguishes between 'political' and the 'developmental' approaches to democracy support. The political approach includes direct measures to support democratic actors and institutions, such as political parties, democratic elections, civil society organizations, and independent media. The developmental approach sees democratization as a natural process reliant on indirect processes such as economic growth, education and institutions to support democratic development. This distinction is analytically useful, both for understanding policy frameworks and for identifying patterns in aid data.

The Arab Uprisings also represented a CJ for European development aid donors. If we assume that the collapse of an authoritarian regime offers a window of opportunity for democratization, then democratic donors should not let this go to waste. This naturally raises the question of how European donor countries could have responded to the challenges posed by the Arab Uprisings. Research has shown that donor countries can have decisive influence on democratization processes. Based on a systemic review of quantitative studies on 'democracy aid', Gisselquist et al. show that in 65 per cent of cases there was a positive, long-term impact on democratic outcomes (Gisselquist et al., 2021). Focussing on the political approach, Blanken et al. (2025) identify a positive association between democracy aid channelled through civil society organization with both the strength of civil society and democracy levels in the recipient country, even in closed authoritarian regimes in the MENA region.

However, less research has been done on the extent to which development assistance has been used to support democracy in response to CJs. Among the few examples is a study by Leininger and Nowack (2022), who show that international donors were able to prevent an extension of presidential term limits through conditionality and support for civil society in Mali and Senegal, thereby contributing to a democratic outcome. Similarly, Fiedler (2018) finds that donors were able to contribute to ending violence and ensuring democratic elections following ethnic unrest in Kenya and Kyrgyzstan through coordinated action and by taking the local context into account. For the Arab Uprisings, Marzo (2020a) shows that international democracy support was central to successful democratic consolidation in Tunisia. There are also examples of missed opportunities. In the case of the 2005 Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, Clark and Zahar (2015) argue that Western donors misread the CJ by ignoring local civil society and working instead with government agencies and international NGOs.

Methodologically, this article deploys a mixed methods approach based on an analysis of 12 policy strategy documents, and data on aid spending in the years immediately following the Arab Uprisings. We focus on four major European donors: the European Institutions, France, Germany and the United Kingdom. This selection is based on their large development budgets, which together may have made a difference to the outcome of the Arab Uprisings (Gafuri, 2022).¹ We have chosen 2011–16 as our observation period. The period is short enough to examine the reactions of donor countries to the CJ phase of the Arab Uprisings, but also long enough to include the policy effects of changes of government at state and EU level.²

We selected policy strategy papers using a relevance-based sampling approach, identifying documents that explicitly articulated each donor's priorities and intended use of development aid towards MENA countries after the Arab Uprisings. Because no donor published an official aid framework, we searched publicly available sources and drew on expert networks to obtain the most authoritative strategic papers. This ensured that our sample captures the most representative and policy-shaping statements of donor intent during the period. Our aim is to ascertain the qualitative extent to which decision makers in European donor countries and at the EU-level seized the opportunity to support democratization in MENA countries, and whether this was prioritized in their development aid commitments. We use OECD-DAC data (OECD, 2023) to examine donor countries' spending patterns in response to the Arab Uprisings, and thereby to ascertain the extent to which they responded to the critical juncture for democratization. The OECD-DAC data records all development aid spending by OECD donor countries, including specific projects. This makes it ideally suited to documenting democracy support. We discuss aid commitments at four levels: total bilateral aid to the MENA region, bilateral aid to individual MENA countries, aid spending in the social infrastructure and services sector, and aid spending in the government and civil society sub-sector.

Our argument is that, despite initial impulses across Europe to respond to the Arab Uprisings by supporting democracy, the opportunity to influence the CJ through development aid was missed. No European donor offered a clear strategy for supporting political change in the Arab world. Some changes in aid spending are visible in the data, which mostly infer that donors focused on a developmental approach to democracy support rather than a direct political approach. Meanwhile, security and anti-migration agendas that were already shaping European aid policies before 2011 became dominant. Faced with uncertainty, European actors used their aid not to foster democratic change but to support the (authoritarian) status quo in the MENA region.

The rest of this article is arranged as follows: the next section outlines the aid policy responses of the four key European donors to the MENA region. We

discuss how donors expressed intent to use development aid to support democratic change, and identify areas in which we should expect to see changes in aid spending. [Section 3](#) turns to the practice dimension, with reference to data on aid spending by the four donors from 2011–16. The final section concludes, highlighting themes that can serve as starting points for future analyses of development aid in crisis and CJ situations.

2. Donor aspirations and the strategies after the Arab Uprisings

Research on aid policy and spending following the Arab Uprisings has identified gaps 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). In what follows, we show that the four donor countries committed themselves to supporting democracy rhetorically, albeit with some hesitation. The EU's position shifted from support for 'deep democracy' to one of 'mutual interest', focusing on regional stability, security and migration management. France reacted late to the challenges of democratization and was initially willing to support the under pressure MENA autocracies. Germany, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of the social contract in the MENA countries and the role of prosperity and democracy as prerequisites for stability and migration control. The UK also advocated support for democracy, but emphasized its own security and economic interests.

2.1. The European Union: 'More for more', but of what, exactly?

The EU institutions – including the Commission's Directorates-General primarily responsible for development aid (especially DG INTPA and DG NEAR) – have a key role as a conduit for European interests and priorities. At the same time, the EU is an actor in its own right. Article 21 TEU (Treaty on European Union) obliges the EU to conduct external actions in line with the principles that inspired its creation, including developing and consolidating democracy. Its policy framework, the 'Southern Neighbourhood', is arguably the most developed of the four European donors in terms of regional and country strategies and reports. Since its launch in 2004, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has been re-evaluated several times in response to regional events and political changes in Europe. The ENP's core objectives, which include support for democratic change, support for economic development (including for European investment), and support for 'stability' (which in practice meant risk-averse cooperation with authoritarian governments and their security sectors), have never been easy to reconcile with each other (Natorski, 2016).

The key policy documents published by the EU in the wake of the Arab Uprisings were 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 Uprisings and the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis. In May 2011, the EU published 'A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood' (EC/HR, (European Commission/High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) [EC], 2011). This initial response has been described as not offering 'more for more', but rather 'less of the same' (Bicchi, 2014). The document did not revisit the ENP's core premises but re-iterated the EU's reliance on positive conditionality for incentivizing political reform. In addition to sectoral programmes for inclusive economic development, the policy framework also had elements of direct political support for 'building deep democracy', such as support for political parties, independent judiciaries, accountable security services and corruption-free administrations. The document was followed up by diplomatic overtures in support of democratic processes, especially in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. An extra EUR 1 billion was promised, although this was a re-budgeting of existing funds rather than 'new money' (Schumacher, 2011).

The stalled popular movements in many countries, the military coup in Egypt and the civil wars in Libya and Syria prompted new Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker to launch a more fundamental review of the ENP. In the 'Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy', published on 18 November 2015, the EU retreated from proposing governance models for neighbouring countries, concentrating instead on cooperation based on mutual interests. European interests, especially in regional stability, security, and migration management, were outlined much more explicitly than before. Shared interests in trade, investment, and energy cooperation were also prominent. For ENP countries, the policy represented a menu from which they could choose a particular cooperation model, ranging from a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement to projects in one or two sectors (EC/HR, (European Commission/High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) [EC], 2015). In the revised ENP, the EU maintained its rhetoric on universal values, democracy and human rights, albeit in 'mutually agreed formats' with MENA partners. The outcome was to focus the ENP on economic cooperation, security, and migration management priorities, reducing its ambitions in support of democratic transformation (Dandashly, 2018).

The change in emphasis evident in the two policy documents indicates that the transformation promised by the Arab Uprisings that was initially seen as in Europe's interest came to be interpreted as a threat. Nevertheless, although the term was not used, the potential for a CJ was acknowledged at the EU-level. EU leaders made several visits to MENA countries as the

uprisings unfolded, and appointed an EU Special Representative. The Commission created a Civil Society Facility to support grass roots social movements and actors (EC, (European Commission) [EC], 2013).

Despite these initiatives, EU policy was largely premised on continued cooperation with authoritarian regimes. This appears to be based on the assumption that the MENA region's problems were primarily economic, and that the tensions that had erupted in the Arab Uprisings stemmed from rising poverty rather than from political frustration. While this reflects the developmental approach to democracy support, in practice the EU merely supported the regimes' survival strategies. For instance, in the cases of Jordan and Morocco, whose governments were more responsive to the EU, increased development aid helped to insulate the regimes from the uprisings (van Hüllen, 2015). After 2015, as civil wars in Syria and Libya drove a surge in refugees and irregular migration to Europe, and as terrorist attacks inside Europe reinforced the securitization of EU-MENA relations, the EU's commitment to supporting transformation diminished further (Youngs & Zihniöglu, 2021).

2.2. France: Conflicting interests and complacency

As a former colonial power, France shares a complex history with the MENA region in terms of economic interdependence, political ties, and migration. President Nicolas Sarkozy saw France's foreign policy as his personal domain, and cultivated close personal contact with North African heads of state (Thomas, 2012). Against this background, the Arab Uprisings came as a shock to France's political establishment. Sarkozy's first reaction was to express solidarity with the under pressure regimes. Ties between the French and Tunisian governments were close, not least because of the significant Tunisian diaspora in France and France's role as an economic partner (Krüger & Stahl, 2018). French Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie offered Tunisian President Ben Ali's security forces assistance for bringing the demonstrations under control (Beauregard et al., 2019). Even after Ben Ali's fall, the French government remained silent, justifying this with reference to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of a former colony.

When protests broke out in Egypt, the French Foreign Minister again took a defensive stance and insisted on non-interference (Beauregard et al., 2019). However, as other Western governments expressed support for the 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 Arab Uprisings was thus inconsistent. Initially, France focused on regime stability, but then it switched to supporting

democracy, albeit with 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 supplied weapons to the insurgents (Beauregard et al., 2019). France nevertheless reacted differently to violent clashes in Bahrain, which also threatened to turn into civil war. As Saudi Arabia intervened to end the clashes, France held back and again invoked the principle of non-intervention. This was easier because the conflict could be presented as a religious dispute between Shiites and Sunnis (Beauregard et al., 2019).

The French government's motivations and positions regarding development policy were detailed in three key official documents. The first French White Paper on Foreign and European Policy 2008–20 (Juppé & Schweitzer, 2008) reflects the French government's assessment of the situation prior to the Arab Uprisings. The White Paper addressed the challenges of democratization in general terms, without mentioning the MENA region specifically. It formulated five priorities for France's foreign policy, including democratic governance. A second key document from 2011, 'Development Cooperation: a French Vision', set out the principles of development cooperation and explicitly mentioned a focus on human rights and the promotion of democratic governance, whereby democracy promotion should not promote external standards, but should be adapted to local needs through targeted, supportive actions (MEAE, (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs) [MEAE], 2011; Phillips & Stephens, 2022).

The White Paper and Development Vision were followed by the 'Assises on Development and International Solidarity', which highlighted the security dimension specifically (OECD, 2014). The Assises took place under President Hollande in 2012–13 and consisted of a series of dialogues between actors from politics, business and civil society. The Assises formulated three priorities. The first was the promotion of democracy, the rule of law, and women's rights. The second priority was security, which was seen as indispensable for development. Protecting the planet from the effects of the climate crisis was the third priority. It is likely that President François Hollande formulated the second priority with regard to the increasingly difficult security situation in Mali at the time (Jacquemot, 2013).

In France's official documents in the years immediately following the Arab Uprisings, references to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law are clearly evident. However, as the situation evolved, security concerns assumed a central role in shaping development policy. 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 Assises show that political stability and security were prioritized ahead of democracy. This indicates that the CJ was

recognized, but was perceived as a threat to stability. This led in turn to France adopting an ambiguous approach, calling for democratic reforms, but also non-interference with Libya the major exception.

2.3. Germany: Generosity without strategy

Germany has traditionally been a 'payer' rather than a 'player' in the MENA when compared with actors that have influenced the regional balance of power, such as the USA, Russia or France (Furness, 2020). Germany has, nevertheless, influential diplomatic, commercial, and development presence in several MENA countries. Germany's interests in the region have largely been economic, and the German government has focused on supporting political stability and promoting private and public sector investment, with active engagement from civil society and the German political party foundations. In this context, the tension between democracy support and other goals such as stability and migration management is clear, especially as German foreign and development policymaking responsibilities are shared between several federal ministries who set their own priorities. The Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) is primarily responsible for aid policy, but the Foreign Ministry (AA) also reacted to the Arab Uprisings with financial support for democracy.

Following the Arab Uprisings, the German government did not detail the political, social, and economic processes it wanted to support in the MENA, nor the role of aid in pursuing these. The BMZ made several attempts to define a regional strategy for MENA aid after 2011, but these were not published due to difficulties in finding consensus across Germany's federal decision-making system. In August 2014, an internal position paper was circulated among Germany's implementation agencies, stressing the strategic importance of the MENA region for Germany and Europe due to its proximity and energy resources. The paper also noted 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 frustration at the lack of political influence. The paper affirmed that Germany and the EU shared the interests of MENA citizens with regard to stability, prosperity, and democracy, without which more people would flee to Europe. It also raised concerns about security and uncontrolled migration following the Arab Uprisings (BMZ, (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung) [BMZ], 2014b).

Aid was allocated to addressing these issues 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. Like at the EU-level, Germany's approach is consistent with the developmental approach to democracy support, rather

than directly supporting democratic change. The EUR 400 million instrument aimed at speeding up Germany's response to challenges, especially youth unemployment, economic stabilization, democracy and the stability of Syria's neighbours (BMZ, (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung) [BMZ], 2014a). Political questions around democratic transformation in the region were addressed by the AA through its 'transformation partnerships', which aimed to support constitutional and justice reform, human rights, and civil society (AA, (Auswärtiges Amt) [AA], 2022). These initiatives were not closely coordinated with the BMZ's sector governance initiatives in MENA countries.

Like France, Germany had to balance competing interests affecting its policy towards the MENA region. Germany refrained from joining the NATO assault on Libya. 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 also provided strong support to democracy in Tunisia. However, Germany also supported the Jordanian and Moroccan government responses to the Arab Uprisings, and the El-Sisi government in Egypt following the coup against the elected Morsi government in 2013. Domestically, the political backlash from the 2015 migration crisis saw German development aid increasingly used for programmes to keep displaced people in the region, especially in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Libya, Egypt and Tunisia.

2.4. The United Kingdom: Intellectual leadership without moral authority

Phillips and Stephens (2022) summarized 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 conflicts in a neighbouring region can spill over and threaten British security. However Hollis (2022), argued that the UK is not interested in resolving conflicts, but rather in managing divisions between regional actors. British trade interests have 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 (CAAT, (Campaign Against the Arms Trade) [CAAT], 2021).

Values, including taking a stand with regard to human rights violations and governance issues, have been considered a 'third wheel' in British MENA foreign policy, to be prioritized 'as long as it doesn't seriously hinder security or trade' (Phillips & Stephens, 2022, p. 5). 'British values' were in any case rarely raised following the Arab Uprisings. For example, solidarity with human

rights and women's rights that often finds expression in the UK political discourse did not result in pressure to act (Hollis, 2022). Furthermore, the UK's involvement in military interventions in Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011) further reduced its moral authority with many regional actors, especially with regard to democracy (Fawcett, 2023).

As Leech and Gaskarth (2015) noted, the Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition that took office in 2010 did not develop grand new ideas but rather adopted a 'networked foreign policy' for a 'networked world', focusing on flexible bilateral links that adapted to changing contexts. This approach produced highly inconsistent UK foreign policy towards the MENA region following the Arab Uprisings. In seeking to take advantage of the crisis to advance interests that were poorly defined and inconsistent with supporting political change, the UK missed its chance to play a role in directing the CJ towards a democratic outcome.

The UK has traditionally been a leading actor, intellectually and operationally, in the foreign aid and development policy field, and it is likely that its development policy specialists were well aware of the Arab Uprisings' potential as a CJ. The UK's MENA aid policy framework for the period between the Arab Uprisings and the 2016 Brexit referendum, when severe aid cutbacks began, reflects this intellectual leadership. The UK published several papers on its MENA aid programmes in this period. Among the most significant was the 2014 Department for International Development's (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, (Department for International Development) [DFID], 2014, p. 4).

The main UK aid response was the 'Arab Partnership Programme Approach 2011–2015' (Foreign and Commonwealth Office [FCO], 2011). Like Germany, the UK government established a special aid instrument: the Arab Partnership Fund, with GBP 110 million in programme funds over four years. One part of this fund – The GBP 40 million Arab Partnership Participation Fund – corresponds with a direct, political approach to democracy support. The Participation Fund focussed on 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. Another part of the Fund, the 'Arab Partnership Economic Facility' (also GBP 40 million) corresponds to Germany and the EU's indirect, developmental approach, by supporting projects promoting economic exchange and poverty reduction.

An evaluation by The Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) of British responses to the Arab Uprisings found that the Arab Partnership Participation Fund had 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, (Independent Commission for Aid Impact) [ICAI], 2013). This fits with Leech and Gaskarth’s assessment that although the UK government called for change 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 protests, but otherwise to remain noncommittal (Leech & Gaskarth, 2015, p. 143).

3. MENA aid in practice

Our objective in this section is to identify patterns in aid spending that may indicate that donors attempted to support democracy in the wake of the Arab Uprisings. The major limitation of this approach is that the OECD-DAC dataset, the official source for bilateral aid data, does not have a separate category for ‘democracy support’. This form of spending is subsumed under several governance categories (Leininger, 2019), which are documented in Gisselquist et al. (2021) systematic review on the impact of democracy support. Some studies simply use the total amount of development aid. Others take a more targeted approach and look at political democracy support via direct measures to support the media, civil society, and other agents of change. There are also studies that analyse the developmental approach, assessing sector programmes whose intended impact is to indirectly promote democratization processes (Freyburg et al., 2011).

Since the policy papers vary regarding preferences for a political or a developmental approach to democracy support, we look at both. The OECD-DAC does not enable us to differentiate between direct and indirect democracy aid very easily. We start by looking at changes in the total amount of bilateral development aid to assess the overall reaction irrespective of sector strategy. We then look specifically at the ‘Social Infrastructure and Services’ sector. Since the roots of the Arab Uprisings have been attributed to broad dissatisfaction with the social contract (Loewe et al., 2021), it is to be expected that donors would want to support democratic change by supporting human welfare, in line with a developmental approach to democracy support. Finally, we look at the sub-category ‘Government and Civil Society’, which is often used in statistical analyses of democracy support (Leininger & Nowack, 2022). Although this may indicate that donors are supporting the regime rather than forces which oppose it, we nevertheless expect that any measures to provide direct support for democracy will turn up in this category. This sub-category is the closest we can get to an indicator of the political approach to democracy support, and we therefore go into more detail about individual projects to illustrate specific approaches. Given the complexity of the data, our analysis can only illustrate ‘highlights’ that emerge.

In our interpretation of the data, we adopt the common assumption that donors wish to support positive changes in recipient countries by increasing their financial commitment (Leininger, 2022). We are explicitly not addressing the question of whether these measures actually served to democratize MENA countries. Indeed, democracy support can have negative consequences, undermining objectives such as political stability or socio-economic development (Grimm & Leininger, 2012). We are interested in whether the donors followed up their rhetoric on MENA democracy with concrete action. Our expectation is that after the Arab Uprisings, donors would increase their development aid budgets for MENA countries overall, and that this would be visible in those categories best associated with democracy support. Some interesting trends are discernible in light of the approaches to democracy support discussed above.

Figure 1 shows the OECD-DAC data on total aid from the four European donors to MENA countries in the years following the Arab Uprisings.³ We have chosen 2011 as the starting point, as adaptation can only be expected after this. As development budgets are usually designed for the medium term, adaptation in response to the Arab Uprisings can be expected for a period of around 5 years from 2011. The figure clearly shows that the four donors increased their aid commitments to MENA countries in 2011 and 2012. After that, the picture is more complicated. German commitments to the MENA region increased the most, tripling from around USD 1 billion annually prior to 2011 to around USD 3 billion in 2016. UK aid to the region more than doubled, while French aid commitments fluctuated annually but remained steady overall. EU aid increased sharply and then levelled out. This may reflect the restrictions on the EU's budget, which is set by the member states for a seven-year period.

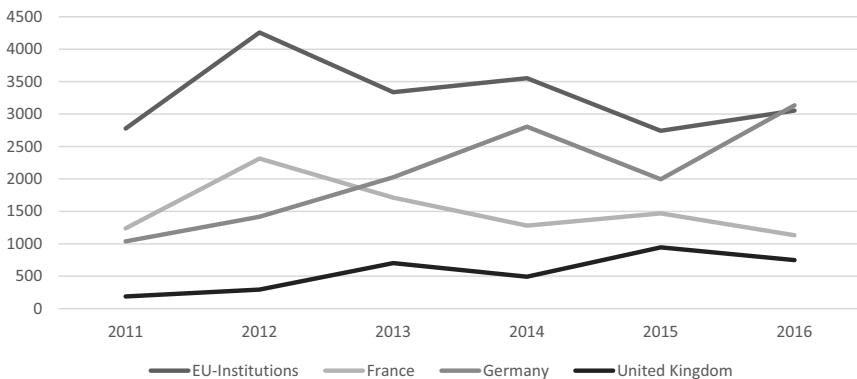


Figure 1. European aid flows to the MENA region, 2011–16, all recipients and sectors. Source: OECD Creditor Reporting System (OECD, 2023).

Figure 2 shows the total commitments of the four donors to individual MENA countries. This indicates in general terms the donors' geostrategic priorities, and also whether there is prima facie evidence that a donor supported a particular country (e.g., Tunisia's democratic transition). 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.⁴

If donors had responded to the CJ in the wake of the Arab Uprisings, we would expect an increase in aid around the beginning of the observation period, because that is when the permissive conditions emerge. Figure 2 does not reveal a consistent pattern of financial flows to MENA countries during the observation period. 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, following El-Sisi's coup in 2013. Although no donor imposed official sanctions, this could be consistent with coercive measures of democracy support in the form of aid withdrawal (Von Soest & Wahman, 2015). Aid to Morocco increased from 2012 and decreased somewhat in the following period, but remained at a high level overall. 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.

Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and (partially) Yemen received increased aid only after a time lag of four to five years. Jordan received considerable support in relation to its size, especially from the EU, and towards the end of the observation period 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 Palestine. Syria is an interesting case. As the Arab Uprisings morphed into a brutal civil war, the EU, Germany, and the UK nevertheless













































	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

Figure 2. European aid to MENA countries 2011–16, all sectors.⁵

increased their aid to Syria. However, the increases were mostly humanitarian aid or aid to Syrian opposition groups, and much of this was spent in the donor countries or in neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, but not in Syria itself.

The EU emerged as the most important donor to MENA countries during the period. Its support to Morocco was almost twice that of France and three times that of Germany. It was also a major donor to Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, and Palestine. France prioritized Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia and French aid played only a minor role in Libya, Iraq, and Yemen. Germany had the same priority countries as France, but distributed its support to the other countries more evenly at a higher level. As indicated by [Figure 1](#), UK aid spending in the MENA region was relatively small compared to the other European donors. While Germany gave Egypt a total of USD 1.1 billion, the UK contributed just USD 109 million. Even more striking is the low level of British support for Morocco and Tunisia, which amounted to around USD 40 million and USD 64 million respectively. Despite the expressions of solidarity and rhetorical commitments to democracy in the UK's policy documents, it is hard to infer that Arab democracy was really a priority for British aid.

[Figure 3](#) narrows the focus on developmental support for democratic change by showing a breakdown of aid in the social infrastructure and services sector. This includes aid for education, health, and sanitation, for government and civil society, and for conflict prevention, peace, and security. It can therefore be considered a rough indicator of the support that donors give to human welfare in a recipient country, and thus an example of the indirect developmental approach to democracy support in a CJ.

This category accounts for half of total donor aid in some cases, except for the EU, where it accounts for around a quarter of its total. We cannot identify any consistent upward or downward trend, except perhaps the tendency of the UK to increase support for a small majority of MENA countries over the













































	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

Figure 3. European aid for social infrastructure and services 2011–16.⁶

observation period. Tunisia received an increasing share from all four donors. 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 sharply in the years following El-Sisi's coup, although this was not announced as a sanction. France and Germany, by contrast, acted differently, increasing their contributions to social infrastructure and services in 2014, probably with the desire to stabilize Egypt, and therefore its authoritarian regime. Although Germany continued to fund its political party-affiliated political foundations, which traditionally provide political democracy support, the German government appears to have increasingly adopted the developmental approach with regard to Egypt. 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. We also see that Tunisia saw large increases from 2011 to 2016, indicating support for its transition process, albeit via the developmental approach. Another country where there were significant increases was Iraq, with the exception of France, whose support for Iraq decreased.

The EU was particularly active in this category in Morocco, where support jumped in 2016, as well as in Palestine despite its small population. Other major beneficiaries 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. Jordan received increased French support in 2015, as did Egypt, despite the 2013 coup. German aid in this category was more evenly distributed across countries. British aid in this category was often only a fraction of what the other donors provided, 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. This again shows that the perception of the Arab Uprisings as a CJ leading to democracy was not decisive for social infrastructure aid spending. The increase in aid was a late phenomenon, and it was also of benefit to countries that were already on an authoritarian path.

Aid increases in the social infrastructure and services sector therefore reflect a form of indirect developmental support for democracy, at least by the EU, France and Germany. In the case of Tunisia, this seems to have been in the interest of stabilizing the democratic process. In Egypt, however, support for the social sector following the coup may have stabilized the new authoritarian regime. This finding is consistent with the results of Clark and Zahar (2015), who also observed a donor focus on social infrastructure and services following the 2005 Cedar Revolution in Lebanon.













































	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

Figure 4. European aid for government and civil society 2011–16.⁷

Figure 4 shows aid for category I.5 Government and Civil Society. Category I.5 is further subdivided into sub-categories: I.5.a for State and Civil Society, and I.5.b for Conflict, Peace, and Security. In our view, the latter sub-category provides a rough indicator for the securitization of aid, whereas the category I.5.a represents a direct form of democracy support, as civil society organizations make decisive contributions to democratic consolidation.

Again, Tunisia had consistent increases in this category from all four European donors. France seems to have discovered the category 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 category – USD 239 million out of the USD 250 million committed to Syria in the social infrastructure and services sector. The EU's biggest partners in the category were Morocco and Tunisia. A closer look at EU funding in Tunisia in the years 2013 and 2016 reveals that USD 5.1 million committed in 2013 was allocated to sub-category I.5.a. The EU's largest project, with funding of over USD 2 million, financed the restoration of damaged prisons, and infrastructure and training for courts. Whether the restoration of prisons is conducive to democratization is debatable, although the support provided to courts could reflect the political approach to democracy support. Another EU-funded project, worth about USD 1 million, supported civil society in its role in consolidating the country's democratic structures, a clear example of political democracy support. This supports Marzo's (2020a) finding that the EU's direct support to civil society organizations in Tunisia was important for democratic consolidation.

This picture had changed by 2016. In that year, the EU also made significant expenditures in sub-categories 1.5a and 1.5b, namely USD 20.4 million and USD 13.7 million, respectively. This large increase reflects the priority shift outlined in the 2015 ENP review. In I.5.b, the EU financed an integrated border management assistance mission in Libya (USD 9 million), security sector

reform through equipment and infrastructure (USD 4.6 million), and the strengthening of border security management and community resilience to external shocks in border areas (USD 800,000). These investments in border security cannot be seen as contributing to democracy, either politically or developmentally. Interestingly, at the rhetorical level it was not the EU that expressed concerns about the growing numbers of migrants in the wake of the Arab Uprisings, but rather countries such as France. Here we observe an informal form of delegation of securitization to the EU, perhaps indicating that donor countries tried to shift the political risks of certain forms of aid to multilateral organizations (Eichenauer & Reinsberg, 2017).

The French government's reluctance regarding democratization is reflected in the aid data. France invested only USD 22,000 in category I.5.b in Tunisia in 2016, in conflict prevention. Its remaining commitments of USD 13.8 million went to category I.5.a, mostly for exchange scholarships. A small project supported legislative reforms to strengthen resilience to violence and terrorism and to improve gender equality (USD 142,000). Jordan was by far France's largest recipient in subcategory 1.5.a, with a focus on financial support for municipalities (USD 110 million) in 2016.

Germany provided the most support to Syria in sub-category 1.5.a: around USD 50 million in 2016. Of this, USD 17.7 million went to support the transition process in Syria and USD 16.5 million to the Syrian Recovery Fund. Other important projects included civilian peace building (USD 7.7 million), support for the opposition in rule-of-law and security (USD 2.7 million), and preparatory measures for the reconstruction of Syria (USD 1.6 million). Most of these funds were spent in Germany. 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 (USD 4.4 million), the fight against sexual harassment in the field of youth and sports (USD 2.2 million), and administrative reforms, national environmental strategies, and the economic empowerment of marginalized groups (USD 1.8 million). These projects include direct democracy support measures, but overall the data show that Germany mainly focused on the indirect developmental approach.

The UK used the political development approach, but for selected countries. Its aid spending in this category also reflected the influence of securitization. Like Germany, most UK support to Syria was also spent at home. More interesting was British support to Jordan and Lebanon. In 2016, there was a significant imbalance between UK funding for I.5.b and I.5.a for Jordan: USD 35 million in the former and only USD 1 million in the latter. In I.5.b, USD 20 million went to political stabilization (not further specified), USD 7.2 million to community security and peacebuilding, USD 5.3 million to security sector reform, and USD 1.2 million to economic development and

livelihood improvement. The largest item in I.5.a. was enhancement of the effectiveness of elected institutions (approximately USD 500,000). For Lebanon, the UK set similar priorities in 2016. Approximately USD 20 million was committed to I.5.b and only USD 280,000 to I.5.a. Major activities included economic development and livelihoods (USD 7.8 million), political stabilization (USD 10 million), and security sector reform (USD 2.8 million). While improved security can contribute to democratization, the securitization of aid spending served to neutralize the effect of democracy support, thus ignoring rather than exploiting the CJ offered by the Arab Uprisings (Marzo, 2020b).

In summary, [Table 1](#) provides an overview of the policy priorities, trajectory, largest recipients of total development aid, ratio of total aid to Government and Civil Society aid, as well as the largest budget items in the Government and Civil Society category for the four European donors. This provides an impression of the efforts donors made to support democracy after the Arab Uprisings. The EU took the leading role, followed by France and Germany with the UK some distance behind. The fact that the Government and Civil Society category played such a minor role for France and Germany, and to some extent for the EU, suggests that they did not adapt their democracy support policies in response to the CJ. Although the UK put more relative emphasis on supporting democracy politically, it was the smallest of the four donors and compromised by trade and security interests. Overall, there was a large number of democracy support projects, but with small amounts of funding.

4. Conclusions

Europe's initial response to the Arab Uprisings was to express rhetorical support for democracy in the MENA region, sometimes after hesitation. Nevertheless, despite widespread praise for and expressions of solidarity with the protestors from European politicians, European governments and the EU institutions did not make a collective effort to support democratic change in the MENA. They issued new development policy statements on the region and aid spending increased, at least initially. There is little evidence of donor coordination, and the policy frameworks of the four European donors were not strategic or comprehensive in terms of their support for democratic change. Actual spending in key areas was highly fragmented in terms of geography and approach in the crucial years from 2011–2016. In this sense, the CJ did not lead to significant changes in the levels or intensity of European democracy support aid.

While policymakers do not usually use the term CJ themselves, they are responsible for knowing when they are faced by one. That European policymakers realized the magnitude of the events of 2011 is evident from the aid

Table 1. Aid policy and democracy support practice after the Arab Uprisings.

	EU	France	Germany	UK
Policy changes following Arab Uprisings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Direct support for 'building deep democracy' ● Refraining from proposing governance models; cooperation on mutual interests and in mutually agreed formats ● Focus on European interests in regional stability, security, and migration management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Initially no reference to MENA ● In 2011, explicit references to human rights and the promotion of democratic governance. ● Priorities of the 'Assises': Promoting democracy, rule of law and women's rights; Security; Protecting the planet from the climate crisis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Decayed social contract seen as driving economic and political frustration ● References to stability, prosperity and democracy as a condition for addressing security threats and the risk of uncontrolled migration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reference to a prosperous, stable region based on open, democratic societies with greater social, economic and political participation of their citizens. ● Greater emphasis on political approach to democracy support, but UK security and economic interests prioritized
Overall aid flows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rapid increase in 2011–12, then steady decline; biggest donor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rapid increase in 2011–12, then steady decline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase until 2014, then slight decline, then increase again 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Steady increase until 2015, then decline
Largest recipients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, West Bank/Gaza Strip, Syria 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Morocco, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Jordan
Ratio G&CS to total MENA aid	1:9	1:33.5	1:20	1:3
Largest budget items in Government and Civil Society (G&CS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Restoration of damaged prisons, and infrastructure and training for courts ● Support of civil society in consolidating democratic structures ● Integrated border management assistance mission ● Security sector reform through equipment and infrastructure strengthening of border security management ● Community resilience to external shocks in border areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Financial support for municipalities ● Exchange scholarships ● Legislative reforms to strengthen the fight against violence and terrorism and to improve gender equality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Syrian Recovery Fund ● Civilian peace building ● Support for the opposition in rule-of-law and security preparatory measures for the reconstruction of Syria ● Reform of selected state institutions ● Fight against sexual harassment in the field of youth and sports ● Administrative reforms, national environmental strategies, and the economic empowerment of marginalized groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Political stabilization ● Community security and peacebuilding ● Security sector reform ● Economic development and livelihood improvement ● Enhancement of the effectiveness of elected institutions

policy documents and the initial increases in aid spending. CJs can produce a range of outcomes, and in many cases these are not the outcomes that appear likely or even possible at the beginning. The Arab Uprisings thus created the 'permissive conditions' for donors to step up their support for democracy in response to the CJ, but the productive conditions quickly narrowed the range of options available (Soifer, 2012). Even in the initial phase of the Arab Uprisings, influential voices expressed concerns about the risk of violence and political extremism amid the euphoria of the protests (Haddad, 2013). When the uprisings ran into resistance, the externalities of conflict (particularly migration and terrorism) came to be perceived as threats to Europe. The success of political Islam in Egypt and to a lesser extent in Tunisia may have weakened the resolve of some Europeans to defend democracy when authoritarians overthrew elected governments. Threat perception was instrumentalized both by the European far right and by the region's authoritarian governments, which proved highly adept at exploiting Europe's vulnerabilities and fears.

Accordingly, the conflict of objectives between democracy support and security and anti-migration agendas was resolved in favour of the latter. The stability of the MENA countries was prioritized, favouring the indirect, developmental approach to democracy support. This indicates that Europe's appetite for risk is a major factor in the extent to which it supports democratic change in neighbouring countries. The extent to which perceptions of risk impact on policy choices, the ways in which these perceptions are influenced by actors to further their agendas, are aspects that the data alludes to, but cannot fully capture. Even in hindsight, it is hard to say what an ideal response from European donor countries could have been. Had donors intervened primarily to support the CJ with direct, political democracy support, this may have steered the CJ towards sustainable democratization. We cannot know this for certain, because of the institutional inertia that resulted from the fear of negative externalities of democratic change in the MENA region.

Democracy support is often thought of in the long term, partly because democratization processes take time (Carothers, 2009). However, autocracies can collapse suddenly, creating a CJ. Such upheavals are not that rare, and the path to democratization is never guaranteed. Globally, there are clashes between democratic and autocratic forces in several countries, for example in Venezuela, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka or Georgia (Youngs & Panchulidze, 2024). In Syria, the revolution that began with the Arab Uprising in 2011 only succeeded in overthrowing the Assad regime in December 2024. It is at this stage that democracy support may make a crucial difference to long-term outcomes. When faced by a CJ that could lead to democracy, European donors could try an approach that explicitly and openly combines political and developmental democracy aid, supports democratic processes and

actors, and withdraws support from actors who breach democratic and human rights norms. Such an approach would be consistent with the values, and interests, that Europeans themselves espouse.

Notes

1. In 2011–16, the EU's largest donors to the MENA countries were as follows (USD million, 2022): EU 9472, Germany 6640, UK 4119, France 3469, Sweden 992, Netherlands 858, Spain 575, Italy 525 (OECD, 2023).
2. During this period, the EU Commission presidency changed from President José Manuel Barroso to President Jean-Claude Juncker (in 2014), the French presidency from President Nicolas Sarkozy to President François Hollande (in 2012), the German Christian Democrat-Liberal coalition to a Christian Democrat-Social Democrat coalition (in 2013, both under Angela Merkel) and the British government from a Conservative-Liberal Democrat to a Conservative government (in 2015, both under David Cameron).
3. We adopt the DAC's own regional definition of the MENA region.
4. We have not presented the sparklines with a uniform scale. Some bilateral aid volumes are so large that with a uniform scale other sparklines would appear only as flat lines. To make the trajectories visible for each line, we have a different scale for each dyad.
5. The figure shows ODA commitments in the category 1000: total all sectors (millions USD, constant prices 2020) for the years 2011–16. Source: OECD (2023) Creditor Reporting System.
6. The figure shows ODA commitments in the category 100: I. Social Infrastructure & Services (Millions USD, constant prices 2020) for the years 2011–16. Source: OECD (2023) Creditor Reporting System.
7. The figure shows ODA commitments in the category 150: I.5 Government & Civil Society (Millions USD, constant prices 2020) for the years 2011–16. Source: OECD (2023) Creditor Reporting System.

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