

U.S. AND EU ENGAGEMENT WITH ISLAMISTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Sarah Wolff

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Transatlantic Academy
1744 R Street, NW
Washington, DC 20009
T 1 202 745 3886
F 1 202 265 1662
E Info@transatlanticacademy.org

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SARAH WOLFF¹

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¹ Dr. Sarah Wolff, a Fulbright-Schuman fellow at the Transatlantic Academy, is lecturer in public policy at Queen Mary, University of London and senior research associate fellow at The Netherlands Institute for International Relations. She is the author of *The Mediterranean Dimension of EU's Internal Security* (Palgrave, 2012). The U.S. analysis is the result of fieldwork conducted in Washington between August and October 2014 thanks to a Fulbright-Schuman grant. The EU analysis is the result of fieldwork conducted in Brussels in March 2015 thanks to a Leverhulme Research Grant. The author is thankful to the 2014-15 Transatlantic Academy fellows for providing feedback on previous drafts, to U.S. and EU officials for their time and feedback, as well as to Ted Reinert for his editing skills.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Arab uprisings have reminded U.S. and EU diplomats that they need to communicate with Islamist actors in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Western diplomacy has undergone a modest yet nonetheless significant “religious turn” as a result, acknowledging the relevance of religion in foreign policy, particularly in this key region. While the United States has had a long history of both promoting religious freedom internationally and accommodating the political influence of domestic faith-based groups, the European Union has only recently started to account for religion in its external relations. This paper investigates the origins, evolution, and future prospects of this new approach within the context of the Middle East and North Africa, with a particular emphasis on engagement with Islamist religious and political actors.

Religion has always played a central role in the politics of the MENA region, the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But there is an erroneous assumption that religion, and Islam in particular, is the source of the democratic deficit across the Arab countries.¹ Contrary to predictions, globalization and modernization did not bring about secularization in the region. Instead, identity crises have reinforced personal faiths and religious communities. Historically, religion has been central to state-society relations as well as in resistance against authoritarianism and intervention by foreign powers.² Over time, however, restrictions on religious freedom have increased across the

region.³ In fact, it is not religion but regulation of religion by government in Muslim-majority countries that is correlated to democratic decline. Religious regulations have been used to muzzle Islamist domestic opposition and Muslims resisting state control of religion. Over the years, authoritarian Arab governments have relied on nationalist, controlled forms of Islam from which they could derive some amount of legitimacy. Islamist actors have meanwhile used religion to mobilize the population against foreign domination and despotism; ie., the founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna, used Islam to try to liberate Egyptian society from British colonial control.⁴

As the Arab uprisings began in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread across the region, “people’s power” demands for freedom and civil rights challenged the Arab states’ legitimacy strategy, which involved not only religious regulation but also the Palestinian resistance front and the concept of pan-Arabism, today only a marginal definer of Arabs’ identity.⁵ With the failures of the revolutions in Egypt, Libya, and Syria and the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State group (ISIS), a new “arc of crisis” has emerged in which the Arab state is either unstable, or, in the case of Libya, nearly non-existent. Competitive regional sectarianism is also on the rise. Religion is used to mobilize masses where there is state failure. Religious soft power is expanding thanks to globalization and the increasing permeation of public and private spheres. These strategies alienate ever more of the citizens who mobilized during

There is an erroneous assumption that religion, and Islam in particular, is the source of the democratic deficit across the Arab countries.

¹ L. Diamond, “Why are there no Arab democracies?” *Journal of Democracy*, 21.1 (2010), pp. 93-112.

² Recent research based on newly available archives have shown that even Saddam Hussein’s regime intensively used its Islamist networks during the weapons inspection crisis of 1998, thus abandoning its secular ideology in the last year in power. See S. Helfont, “Saddam and the Islamists: The Ba’thist Regime’s Instrumentalization of Religion in Foreign Affairs,” *The Middle East Journal*, 63.3 (Summer 2014).

³ B. Bloom, P. G. Arkan, and U. Sommer, “Globalization, Threat, and Religious Freedom.” *Political Studies*, 62.2 (2014), pp. 273-291.

⁴ G. Krämer, “Modern but not secular: Religion, identity and the *ordre public* in the Arab Middle East,” *International Sociology*, 28.6 (2013), pp. 629-644.

⁵ C. Phillips, “The Arabism Debate and the Arab Uprisings,” *Mediterranean Politics*, 19.1 (2014), pp. 141-144.

Religion is being integrated in U.S. and EU foreign policies around three axes: 1) the promotion of religious freedom, 2) religious engagement, and 3) religious awareness.

the revolutions and overshadow new and thriving political debates and a participative culture that demands more accountability from Arab leaders.⁶

Confronted with the geopolitical challenge of fracturing Arab states as well as an increasingly religious world,⁷ European and North American⁸ diplomats have operationalized a “religious turn” in their foreign policies, which were historically thought to have a strong secular bias.⁹ Religion is being integrated in U.S. and EU foreign policies around three axes: 1) the promotion of religious freedom, 2) religious engagement, and 3) religious awareness. While the promotion of religious freedom has been anchored in U.S. foreign policy since 1998, when the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) was signed into law,¹⁰

⁶ H. Malmvig, “Power, Identity and Securitization in Middle East: Regional Order after the Arab Uprisings,” *Mediterranean Politics*, 19.1 (2014), pp. 145-148.

⁷ Demographically, the percentage of population with religious affiliation is on the rise. By 2050, demographers predict that the number of Muslims will equal the number of Christians worldwide, that the Hindu and Jewish populations will grow, and that atheists, agnostics, and non-religiously affiliated people will decline worldwide, except in France and the United States. Data obtained from Pew Research Center, “The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050” (April 2015).

⁸ While Canada and EU member states have taken some steps to integrate religion into their diplomacy, this paper will focus on the foreign policies of the United States and the European Union institutions.

⁹ P. Mandaville and S. Silvestri (2015). *Integrating Religious Engagement into Diplomacy: Challenges & Opportunities*, The Brookings Institution (January 2015), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/01/29-religious-engagement-diplomacy-mandaville-silvestri>.

¹⁰ The International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), passed by Congress and signed into law by U.S. President Bill Clinton, mandated the creation of an Office for International Religious Freedoms inside the State Department under the direction of an ambassador at large. The department issues annual reports on international religious freedom in every country and naming the worst offenders “countries of political concern.” In addition, the IRFA also required the creation of an independent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), which monitors religious freedom violations globally and sends recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress. USCIRF often formulates recommendations regarding

Europeans only adopted common guidelines on freedom of religion or belief in 2013. Religious engagement relates to the formal and informal contacts that U.S. and EU diplomats have established with religious actors, communities, and leaders worldwide as part of multi-track diplomacy that recognizes the role of transnational civil actors. Finally, diplomatic academies and institutions have been striving to improve the religious literacy and awareness of their practitioners.

Because one cannot overlook the fact that when Western policymakers speak about religion they often speak about Islam,¹¹ this paper discusses the drivers of this religious turn in relation to the MENA region around three structuring time periods: before the Arab Spring, during the Arab Spring, and following the July 2013 coup that seemingly ended the democratic experiment in Egypt. In doing so, it also considers engagement with Islamist political actors as “religiously oriented parties.” Pitfalls of these strategies are highlighted and recommendations are given on how European and North American diplomats can address the transnational challenge of religious resurgence without becoming oblivious to the failures of the Arab states and their own foreign policies.

the need for the State Department to add new countries to its list of “countries of particular concern.” In its 2015 Annual Report, the USCIRF recommended that State add the Central African Republic, Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria, Tajikistan, and Vietnam to the list. However, the State Department regularly designates fewer countries than the Commission recommends, because of other U.S. foreign policy concerns.

¹¹ M. Barnett, “Religion and the Liberal International Order,” in M. Barnett, C. Bob, N. Fisher Onar, A. Jenichen, M. Leigh, and L.L. Leustean, *Faith, Freedom, and Foreign Policy: Challenges for the Transatlantic Community*, Transatlantic Academy (April 2015), <http://www.transatlanticacademy.org/publications/Faith-Freedom-and-Foreign-Policy>.

2

2001-11: ENGAGING WITH ISLAMISTS AND THE ROLE OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Until 9/11, U.S. and European engagement with Islamist actors was marked by the fear of potential instability and distrust of actors that supposedly did not share the same interests. The 1979 Iranian Revolution left a strong legacy with U.S. and European diplomats, who had difficulty comprehending and framing the rise of a theocracy, which did not fit the Cold War narrative. The emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the negative regional consequences of U.S. involvement in the first Gulf War led to strong divisions amongst U.S. diplomats between those who favored confronting and controlling Islamists and those who took a more accommodating stance. The former envisage a “clash of civilizations” between the United States and Islam while the later foresee potential peaceful coexistence.¹² Europeans have often been trapped in post-colonial friendly relationships with authoritarian regimes in MENA, perceiving Islam as a source of instability. September 11, however, marked a modest rupture, leading Western diplomats to become more acquainted with the religious dimension of policy in the region by engaging with Islamist political actors. Subsequent events such as the Danish cartoon crisis in 2006 or the outcry against U.S. human rights abuses at Guantanamo Bay also prompted the United States and the EU to include religious engagement in public diplomacy exercises. These initiatives have not always been successful due to double standards in policy, as illustrated in the case of the EU and the 2006 victory of Hamas in Palestinian elections, and U.S. public diplomacy engagement exercises that were bound to fail due to their blunt marketing of U.S. values.

¹² F.A. Gerges, *American and Political Islam: Clash of Cultures or Clash of Interests?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Engaging with Islamist Political Actors: EU Reticence vs. U.S. Pragmatism

Historically, the EU has been reticent to engage with Islamist actors. Instead, it has shown a strong preference for preserving stability by supporting friendly incumbent authoritarian regimes in its neighborhood.¹³ This is well illustrated by the EU’s support for the military regime and continued aid during the Algerian civil war in the 1990s in spite of blatant democratic and human rights violations. The short suspension of aid between 1997 and 1999 was linked to obtaining more economic concessions from the Algerian regime during trade negotiations with the EU, not democratic or rights failures.¹⁴ In addition, in spite of a series of inter-cultural dialogues that discussed Islam and democracy (see below), little was done to concretely support those Islamists engaged in pro-democracy campaigning in the same way other pro-democratic groups in the region were supported.¹⁵ Instead, frameworks such as the state-to-state Euro-Mediterranean Partnership excluded Islamists actors from the dialogue, and European governments in the 1990s were keen to arrest Islamists in exile.¹⁶ This was clearly a missed opportunity given that Islamists have generally positively viewed European democracy and its promotion of political rights. Before 2011, the

¹³ S. Wolff, “The Arab Revolts: Time for the Transatlantic Partners to Consider Strategies for Freedom, Security, and Justice?” EUISS, Chaillot Paper n°127 (January 2012).

¹⁴ F. Volpi, “Regional Community Building and the Transformation of International Relations: The Case of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership,” *Mediterranean Politics*, 9.2 (2004), pp. 145-164.

¹⁵ M. Emerson and R. Youngs, “Political Islam and the European Neighbourhood Policy,” in *Political Islam and European Foreign Policy: Perspectives from Muslim Democrats of the Mediterranean*, Centre for European Policy Studies (2007), p. 5, <http://www.ceps.eu/publications/political-islam-and-european-foreign-policy-perspectives-muslim-democrats-mediterranean>.

¹⁶ R. Gillespie and R. Youngs, ed., *The European Union and Democracy Promotion: The Case of North Africa*, (London and Portland: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002).

The emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the negative regional consequences of U.S. involvement in the first Gulf War led to strong divisions amongst U.S. diplomats between those who favored confronting and controlling Islamists and those who took a more accommodating stance.

The 2006 victory of Hamas in the Palestinian legislative elections highlighted the contradictions of EU's democratization policy and the limits of U.S. pragmatism.

Islamists valued freedom of association in order to achieve their own domestic political gains. Yet the EU did not facilitate legal recognition that would have made them eligible for EU funding. This is the case, for instance, with Morocco's Al Adl Wal Ihsane, a prominent Islamist movement that promotes a radical transformation of society toward an Islamic state based on Sharia but with procedural democracy and reduced power for the monarchy. Even though those movements tend to reject liberal civil rights for their "moral laxity,"¹⁷ it is surprising that the EU has not been keen on establishing more links with these movements, which have proven to be rational and politically astute actors and, in some cases, such as that of Al Adl, are also widely popular among the diaspora in Europe. Without meddling in the domestic politics of neighbors, promoting the evolution of these countries toward a democratic and pluralistic system that includes such movements should be a strategic goal for European and U.S. diplomats. Many agree that such a strategy would encourage the moderation of such actors.¹⁸ The suspension of EU aid to Hamas following its democratic election in 2006 and Turkey's tormented EU accession process have further damaged the EU's credibility in the region.

Unlike the EU, the United States has opted for pragmatism. Eager to expand trade opportunities in the region, the Clinton administration became interested in Islamist politics, realizing early on that Islamism was replacing pan-Arabism. Several conferences and speeches were devoted to Islam as a force for tolerance and moderation.¹⁹ Yet, as with the EU, stability in the region was prioritized

under the Clinton administration since "in U.S. eyes, the good Islamists appear to be the ones who were apolitical, moderate and liberal Islam [were] also equated with the pro-Western regimes of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, and Malaysia."²⁰ Therefore, like the EU, the United States tried to constrain the rise of Islamist actors.²¹

The 2006 victory of Hamas in the Palestinian legislative elections highlighted the contradictions of EU's democratization policy and the limits of U.S. pragmatism. In particular, the EU's evolution from strong support of Palestinian Authority reforms in 2001 to the withdrawal of aid after the Hamas victory marked a shift in spreading a disastrous EU image in the region. It conditioned its aid on Hamas recognizing Israel (much in line with the Quartet policy at the time), renouncing terrorism, and recognizing previous signed agreements with Israel. Some of these demands were perfectly legitimate given Hamas' terror history. Standing in elections was, however, quite new for the movement, which made a couple of important conciliatory moves such as being part of a government of national unity and accepting the Palestinian Authority's existing international agreements. The embargo imposed by the EU and the United States only further fueled the radicalization of Hamas and impeded it from becoming a credible partner for Israel in the Middle East peace negotiations.²² Overall it also lost credibility in the eyes of Palestinian people who could not understand the double standard policy of the EU, hammering against Hamas while letting

¹⁷ M. Emerson and R. Youngs (2007), p. 9.

¹⁸ V. Sakthivel, "Al-Adl wal-Ihsan: Inside Morocco's Islamist Challenge," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (August 2014), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-adl-wal-ihsan-inside-moroccos-islamist-challenge>.

¹⁹ F.A. Gerges (1999), p. 89.

²⁰ F.A. Gerges (1999), p. 109.

²¹ S. Hamid, *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 22.

²² C. Grant and C. O'Donnell, "The EU should Talk to Hamas," Center for European Reform (July 11, 2007), <http://www.cer.org.uk/insights/eu-should-talk-hamas>.

other actors in the region get away with human rights violations and corruption.²³

Public Diplomatic Outreach to Global Muslim Communities

After 9/11, engagement with Muslim communities abroad became a central element of U.S. and EU public diplomacy. The United States and Europe were eager to change their negative image in the MENA region. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, on the other hand, had a disastrous effect for the U.S. image abroad. But even before that intervention and its consequences, reaching out to Muslim communities became a priority in rebranding U.S. foreign policy in the region. The U.S. efforts were described as a “campaign of political warfare” unprecedented since the Cold War.²⁴

One of those initiatives was the Shared Values Initiative, later known as Brand America.²⁵ The 2003 Muslim World Outreach Initiative conducted by the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) shared the same public communications objective: to win the hearts and minds of Muslim communities abroad. But a new generation of U.S. policymakers advocating the added value of a religious engagement policy considered these initiatives short-sighted and ineffective.²⁶ One of the drawbacks was that they sought the most moderate interlocutors within Islam, essentially trying to reform Islam from

the outside instead of promoting ownership of engagement with the United States amongst Muslim communities abroad.²⁷ Even initiatives such as the State Department’s Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), which increased aid to Muslim countries, were trapped by their unilateral export of U.S. values and marketing of U.S. foreign policy.²⁸ The general view amongst U.S. foreign policy-makers in the mid-2000s was that “we had screwed up toward Islam and that there was a need to include religion in foreign policy.”²⁹

In parallel, the idea that religion could advance U.S. interests abroad was advocated on a wider scale by those outside of government. Building on Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson’s seminal 1994 book *Religion: The Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright advocated for a renewed role of religion in shaping U.S. foreign policy in her 2006 book *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs*. Noting U.S. religiosity, these authors argued that the degree of religious freedom and diversity in the United States was a prime component of the country’s soft power. U.S. International Religious Freedom (IRF) policy since 1998 has a very mixed record, however. Disenchanted pioneers of the IRF policy such as Thomas Farr, the first director of the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom, who laments its weak implementation, point out that it is difficult to identify any single country in the past 15 years where U.S. policy changed the state of religious freedom positively.³⁰

Disenchanted pioneers of the IRF policy point out that it is difficult to identify any single country in the past 15 years where U.S. policy changed the state of religious freedom positively.

²³ A. Siniver, “The EU and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” in R. Whitman and S. Wolff, *The EU as a Global Conflict Manager* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 86.

²⁴ D. Kaplan, “Hearts, Minds, and Dollars,” *US News & World Report* (April 25, 2005).

²⁵ D. Ezell, “Enriching Post-Secular Discourse in Faith Diplomacy,” in N. Leight, *Essays on Faith Diplomacy* (Los Angeles: Figuera Press, 2011).

²⁶ L. Danan, “Mixed Blessings: U.S. Government Engagement with Religion in Conflict-Prone Settings,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (August 2007), p. 14.

²⁷ S. Mahmood. “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation.” *Public Culture*, 18.2 (2008).

²⁸ D. Ezell (2011), p. 70.

²⁹ Interview with U.S. State Department official (October 2, 2014).

³⁰ T. Farr, “Examining the Government’s Record on Implementing the International Religious Freedom Act: Testimony before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on National Security,” (June 13, 2013), <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/>

Drawing lessons from the past failures of the IRF policy, some argued that religious freedom could be best advocated through a broader religious engagement strategy, with public diplomacy at its heart.

Drawing lessons from the past failures of the IRF policy, some argued that religious freedom could be best advocated through a broader religious engagement strategy, with public diplomacy at its heart.³¹ It would strengthen U.S. soft power by reaching out directly to a foreign audience that is increasingly defined by a religious identity.

The evolution from IRF toward religious engagement was also motivated by the belief of Presidents Bush and Obama that faith-based organizations were possibly better equipped than governments and their secular counterparts to deal with welfare service delivery and humanitarian aid.³² Obama's leadership was crucial in expanding the religious engagement of U.S. foreign policy initiated under his predecessor. First, pushed by domestic electoral concerns, Obama continued with the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Initiatives established under Bush. Today renamed the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, it aims at "building bridges between the federal government and non-profit organizations, both secular and faith-based, to better serve Americans in need."³³ In an attempt to sweep away the disastrous image of the previous administration, in his April 2009 speech in front of the Turkish Parliament, Obama called for "a broader engagement" with Muslim communities "based on mutual interest and mutual respect," not just upon "opposition to terrorism."³⁴ His high-

profile June 2009 speech in Cairo went further by arguing that "faith should bring us together" and that it was high time to turn a decade of interfaith dialogues into "interfaith service, so bridges between peoples lead to action."³⁵ Like-minded people in the State Department started to meet informally in a Forum on Religion and Global Affairs.³⁶ They advocated for a survey of U.S. embassies to know what U.S. officials were doing on the ground in terms of religious engagement.³⁷ This 2009 survey served as a basis to set up the religion and foreign policy working group within the State Department's Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society,³⁸ a 2011 initiative of then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton based on the need of U.S. foreign policy to engage with non-state actors and to advance U.S. interests through shared objectives with civil society at home and abroad.

Unlike Americans, modern Europeans are not known for their religiosity. However, secular views prevail among academia and foreign policy elites in both Europe and the United States. If U.S. diplomats often claim that the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution's statement that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof" is an obstacle for them in dealing with religion in international affairs, Europeans tend to claim that they are driven by a normative role

GO/GO06/20130613/100970/HHRG-113-GO06-Wstate-FarrT-20130613.pdf.

³¹ L. Danan, *Religion and Global Affairs: A Public Diplomacy Approach*. (Washington: U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2011).

³² L. Marsden, "Bush, Obama, and a Faith-Based U.S. Foreign Policy," *International Affairs* 88.5 (2012) p. 956.

³³ See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/ofbnp>.

³⁴ B. Obama, *Remarks By President Obama To The Turkish Parliament*, The White House (April 6, 2009), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-turkish-parliament>.

³⁵ B. Obama, *Remarks by the President at Cairo University*, 6-04-09, The White House (June 4, 2009), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.

³⁶ *The Immanent Frame*, "The State Department and Religious Engagement," (July 18, 2013), <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2013/07/18/the-state-department-and-religious-engagement/>.

³⁷ Interview with U.S. State Department official (August 28, 2015).

³⁸ A. Frykholm, "Under Hillary Clinton, the State Department Pursued Greater Religious Engagement," *Religion & Politics* (May 8, 2013), <http://religionandpolitics.org/2013/05/08/since-hillary-clintons-tenure-the-state-department-pursues-greater-religious-engagement/>.

conception of the EU. The Normative Power Europe narrative of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) promotes democratization, human rights, and the rule of law, traditionally embedded in a liberal-secular model. Yet, religion has been relatively absent from foreign policy considerations until 2005. The debate over Turkish EU accession, negotiations for which started that year, crystallized discussions over the “Europeanness” of Turkey and the Judeo-Christian roots of Europe. The publication in September 2005 of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad by the conservative Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* sparked a foreign policy crisis involving religion, with Danish embassies set on fire and besieged by demonstrators across the Middle East. European diplomacy was quickly mobilized on all fronts.³⁹ The EU declared that an embargo against Danish products would be an embargo on EU products, while consular assistance by other EU member states was offered to Danish citizens in difficulties in the region. European solidarity was key to taming the crisis, and some have even seen the emergence of a transnational European sphere in the treatment of the problem by the media as a European problem raising issues about European values.⁴⁰ Debates in the General Affairs and External Relations meeting of the European Council on January 30, 2006 were however tinted by cleavages amongst EU member states, with the United Kingdom, Finland, Sweden, and Luxembourg criticizing the handling of the crisis.⁴¹

³⁹ U. Federspiel, “The International Situation and Danish Foreign Policy 2006,” in N. Hvidt & H. Mouritzen (eds), *Danish Foreign Policy Yearbook 2007*, Danish Institute for International Studies (2007), p. 15, http://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/61452/yearbook07_whole.pdf.

⁴⁰ A. Triandafyllidou, “The Mohammed Cartoons Crisis in the British and Greek Press. A European Matter?” *Journalism Studies* 10.1 (2009), pp. 36-53.

⁴¹ The U.K. foreign affairs minister was glad that British media did not publish the cartoons. See H. Larsen, “The Cartoons Crisis in Danish Foreign Policy: A New Balance between the EU and the U.S.?” In N. Hvidt and H. Mouritzen, (ed.), *Danish*

The Finnish government sent a letter to newspapers in the Middle East insisting that Denmark had to apologize. Europeans were divided on either promoting a maximalist vision of the freedom of expression and or a minimalist vision that sees freedom of expression as involving “a responsibility to depict all religious groups and their symbols in an inoffensive manner.”⁴² Thus, while the U.K. government was eager to express deep regrets, for example, the Dutch government was against it.⁴³

Improving knowledge of Islam and fostering interreligious dialogue nonetheless became quickly a consensual priority amongst European diplomats. The Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue Between Cultures was created in 2005 as part of the intercultural dialogue of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the policy framework for EU’s relations with its Arab Mediterranean partners and Israel. In the aftermath of 9/11, EU institutions and leaders adopted a discourse around the notion of “dialogue.”⁴⁴ However the inter-cultural dialogue was lost amid diverse and sometimes disconnected issues such as migration, youth, media, or the environment. The potential for synergies was low.⁴⁵ One of the main drawbacks of the EU inter-cultural dialogue was that it implicitly espoused the “Clash of Civilizations” argument. By defining cultures such as Europe, the “Arab world,” and “Islam,” the EU reproduced Islam-West and North-South dichotomies, which perpetuates a hegemonic view of cultures and politics by political and religious elites.⁴⁶

Foreign Policy Yearbook 2007, Danish Institute for International Studies, p. 63.

⁴² H. Larsen, (2007), p. 64.

⁴³ H. Larsen, (2007), p. 67.

⁴⁴ S. Silvestri, “EU Relations with Islam in the Context of the EMP’s Cultural Dialogue,” *Mediterranean Politics*, 10.3 (2005), p. 394.

⁴⁵ R.A. Del Sarto, “Setting the (Cultural) Agenda: Concepts, Communities, and Representation in Euro-Mediterranean Relations,” *Mediterranean Politics*, 10.3 (2005), p. 314.

⁴⁶ R.A. Del Sarto, (2005), p. 326.

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3

2011-13: THE ARAB UPRISINGS AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Washington never imposed conditions on its financial and military aid after Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi became president in June 2012.

The Arab uprisings marked a significant rupture in U.S. and EU foreign policies. First, foreign services were forced to find new interlocutors when Islamist parties won democratic elections. Second, drawing lessons from the failure of the IRF policy and under the pressure of domestic faith-based groups, the U.S. government designed a new strategy and operated institutional reforms in order to ensure that U.S. foreign policy interests would be advanced through engagement with faith-based communities and religious leaders at home and abroad. Third, the EU embraced new guidelines on the promotion of the Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in its external relations.

Widening of Transatlantic Engagement with Islamist Political Actors

These policy reforms were enacted during a time of enormous upheaval in the Middle East and North Africa. U.S. and European engagement with Islamist political actors continued, but many had now acceded to power and political office in countries in which they had previously been marginalized or banned. The challenge was to engage with Islamist groups that had become mainstream political parties. The changes allowed a wide diversity of Islamist actors to compete for power, from Salafists to Sufis.⁴⁷

In Egypt, the Obama administration consistently engaged with the Muslim Brotherhood-linked Freedom and Justice Party as it won parliamentary and presidential elections. Washington never imposed conditions on its financial and military aid after Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi became president in June 2012. In February 2011, following the fall of President Hosni Mubarak, the United States supported the involvement of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt's political

⁴⁷ I. Werenfels, "Beyond authoritarian upgrading: the re-emergence of Sufi orders in Maghrebi politics," *The Journal of North Africa Studies*, 19.3 (2014), pp. 275-295.

dialogue. This positive stance was not only new but also "big news" for the U.S. government.⁴⁸ Director of National Intelligence James Clapper even testified in front of Congress that the Muslim Brotherhood was "a 'moderate' and 'largely secular organization' that has 'eschewed violence' and has 'no overarching goal, at least internationally.'"⁴⁹ A delegation of Muslim Brothers visited Washington in April 2012. U.S. embassies in Morocco and Jordan quickly engaged with Islamists, including with the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood.⁵⁰

The European Union, which had long been criticized for not engaging with Islamist political actors, or only engaging when it came to combating radicalization,⁵¹ particularly since the victory of Hamas in 2006,⁵² pragmatically normalized its engagement with Islamist actors. The EU set up task forces with Tunisian and Egyptian political leaders, including members of Ennahdha and Muslim Brothers, to discuss how to ease democratic transitions.

Amongst EU member states, strategies of engagement have differed. While the U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) had, like the United States, engaged with Islamists in order to fight radicalization, in particular after the 2005 terrorist attacks in London, the government of

⁴⁸ A.R. Pierce, "U.S. 'Partnership' with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and its Effect on Civil Society and Human Rights," *Global Society*, 51 (2014), p. 75.

⁴⁹ Quoted in A.R. Pierce, (2014), p. 75.

⁵⁰ S. Brooke, "U.S. Policy and the Muslim Brotherhood," in L. Vidinio, (Ed.) *The West and The Muslim Brotherhood After the Arab Spring*, Foreign Policy Research Institute (2013), p. 26.

⁵¹ S. Hamid and A. Kadlec, "Strategies for Engaging Political Islam," Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Project On Middle East Democracy (January 2010), <http://pomed.org/pomed-publications/hamid2010/>.

⁵² T. Behr, "Dealing with Political Islam: Foreign Policy Making between the Union and the Member States," Draft Paper, Fifth Pan-European Conference on EU Politics, ECPR Porto (June 23-26, 2010), <http://www.jhubc.it/ecpr-porto/virtualpaperroom/158.pdf>.

Prime Minister David Cameron took a different stand vis-à-vis Islamists and in particular the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. After displaying some reluctance to meet with the Brotherhood, Cameron came under criticism for ordering an investigation, led by former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Sir John Jenkins, to consider the activities of the group. The report is believed to clear the Muslim Brothers from being a terrorist organization, but its publication was delayed just before the 2015 British elections.⁵³

Overall, engagement with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has been severely limited since the coup that removed Morsi from power on July 3, 2013. In short succession, the old regime was essentially restored under the leadership of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, later elected president, and the Islamist group was repressed. Human Rights Watch has denounced European “continuous support” to the Egyptian regime and silence on the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and the regime’s more general repression.⁵⁴

The Institutionalization of U.S. Religious Engagement

In parallel, the U.S. government institutionalized its religious engagement strategy, which was designed to cover non-Muslim majority countries and regions as well. Domestic concerns have been an important driver in explaining U.S. religious engagement. With the launch of the State Department’s Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society in January 2011, U.S. faith-based groups were given the opportunity to influence U.S. foreign policy. Six working groups led by diplomats and including civil society actors were established: governance

⁵³ G. Parker, “David Cameron pulls Muslim Brotherhood report,” *Financial Times*, (March 16, 2015).

⁵⁴ Human Rights Watch, “Egypt: Year of Abuses Under al-Sisi,” (June 8, 2015), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/08/egypt-year-abuses-under-al-sisi>.

and accountability, democracy and human rights, empowering women and girls, global philanthropy, religion and foreign policy, and labor.

The religion and foreign policy group gathers several key leaders of U.S. faith-based organizations such as Ruth Messenger of the American Jewish World Service, William Vendley of Religion for Peace, Imam Mohamed Magid of the Islamic Society of North America, and Chris Seiple of the Institute for Global Engagement.⁵⁵ The working group advocates for more training of diplomats on engagement with religious communities and the promotion of religious freedom.⁵⁶

They notably pushed for two main policy innovations, which were ultimately implemented. First, the White House issued a National Strategy on Integrating Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement into U.S. Foreign Policy in July 2013.⁵⁷ Devised by the National Security Council, the document highlights three main objectives. First, engaging with religious leaders and faith-based communities will “promot[e] sustainable development and more effective humanitarian assistance.” More specifically, the strategy foresees that “working in partnership with such leaders and designing programs with the religious context in mind, U.S. foreign assistance efforts can become more effective and sustainable.” Second, it establishes a clear link between the religious engagement agenda and religious freedom. Thus the strategy hopes to “advanc[e]

⁵⁵ See membership list of the Federal Advisory Committee on the Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society, <http://www.state.gov/s/sacsed/c47728.htm>.

⁵⁶ Institute for Global Engagement, “Chris Seiple meets with Hillary Clinton, presents religion and foreign policy updates at the State Department,” (May 21, 2012), <https://globalengage.org/news-media/from-the-president/chris-seiple-meets-with-hillary-clinton-presents-religion-and-foreign-policy>.

⁵⁷ U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement,” <http://www.state.gov/s/rga/strategy/>.

With the launch of the State Department’s Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society in January 2011, U.S. faith-based groups were given the opportunity to influence U.S. foreign policy.

Three main training modules on religion were developed for U.S. diplomats: one on the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution’s “Establishment Clause” and the limits it imposes on government engagement with religion; another on perceptions and identities to fight cultural stereotypes; and a module on “navigating the religious landscape.”

pluralism and human rights, including the protection of religious freedom.” Third, religious engagement is seen as a way to “prevent, mitigate, and resolve violent conflict and contribute to local and regional stability and security.”

The other important innovation was the creation of an Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives within the State Department. Already renamed the Office of Religion and Global Affairs (S/RGA), it is headed by Shaun Casey, the U.S. special representative for religion and global affairs. Casey reports directly to Secretary of State John Kerry and is in charge of implementing the Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement. S/RGA “advises the secretary on policy matters as they relate to religion; supports our posts and bureaus in their efforts to assess religious dynamics and engage religious actors; and serves as a first point of entry for individuals, both religious and secular, who would like to engage the State Department in Washington on matters of religion and global affairs.”⁵⁸ The so-called “God Squad”⁵⁹ unites offices that were previously dispersed within the Department of State. Shaarik H. Zafar, representative to Muslim communities since July 2014, is in charge of implementing “Secretary Kerry’s vision for engagement with Muslims around the world on a people-to-people and organizational level.” He reports directly to the secretary of state. Arsalan Suleman serves as acting special envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and Ira Foreman as special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism. Three main training modules on religion were developed for U.S. diplomats by the office: one on the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution’s

“Establishment Clause” and the limits it imposes on government engagement with religion; another on perceptions and identities to fight cultural stereotypes; and a module on “navigating the religious landscape.”⁶⁰

Additionally, after several years of doubts about who would fill the Congressionally mandated position of ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, Rabbi David Saperstein was confirmed by the Senate in December 2014. The Office of International Religious Freedom, which Saperstein runs, remains separate from the S/RGA, and is instead a part of the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

The EU’s Human Rights Approach

While far from developing a similar religious engagement agenda, the European External Action Service (EEAS) has responded to the global resurgence of religion by 1) adopting guidelines on the promotion of Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) in its external relations and 2) expanding EU diplomats’ awareness about religion in international affairs.

Although the 2013 EU guidelines on FoRB are not legally binding, the fact that they were decided at the ministerial level “represent[s] a strong political signal that they are priorities for the Union.” Officially, their adoption was motivated by the rise of “violent incidents and terrorist attacks targeting individuals and sites on grounds of religion or belief.”⁶¹ However, domestic factors also explain that time was ripe for the adoption of the guidelines by EU member states. The Dutch government had called for more “pressure to be applied in the

⁵⁸ U.S. Department of State, “Office of Religion and Global Affairs,” <http://www.state.gov/s/rga/>.

⁵⁹ This nickname was given by Maryann Cusimano Love in “The God Squad,” Arc of the Universe (March 5, 2015), <http://arcoftheuniverse.info/the-god-squad>.

⁶⁰ Interview with U.S. State Department official, (September 25, 2014).

⁶¹ Council of the European Union, *EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World in 2013* (June 23, 2014), 11107/14, p. 83.

framework of trade agreements if third countries fail to respect freedom of religion.”⁶² The U.K. adopted its FoRB “toolkit” for its diplomats as early as 2010⁶³ and created an Advisory Group on FoRB as a subgroup of the foreign secretary’s Human Rights Advisory Group.⁶⁴ The European Parliament, via its working group on FoRB (now an Intergroup) had heralded the FoRB as a key principle of EU external action. External events, in particular the rise of violence toward Christian minorities in the Middle East, widely mobilized all political groups in the European Parliament.⁶⁵ Christian Democrat ministers, in particular, also supported FoRB action in the Council.⁶⁶

The 2013 EU Guidelines on the FoRB specify instruments to be used in bilateral or multilateral venues. The concept of freedom of expression is particularly central to the approach as “the two are interdependent, interrelated, and mutually reinforcing as they protect all persons.”⁶⁷ Consultation with civil society, both religious and non-religious, was broad. EEAS delegations have been asked to monitor and assess the situation,

⁶² Government of the Netherlands, “Protecting freedom of religion and belief,” <http://www.government.nl/issues/human-rights/protecting-freedom-of-religion-and-belief>.

⁶³ GOV.UK, “Freedom of Religion or Belief - how the FCO can help promote respect for this human right,” https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/35443/freedom-toolkit.pdf.

⁶⁴ GOV.UK, “Foreign Office Advisory Group on freedom of religion or belief,” (March 25, 2014), <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-office-advisory-group-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief>.

⁶⁵ See for instance political parties’ leaders comments in European Parliament, “European Parliament resolution of 20 January 2011 on the situation of Christians in the context of freedom of religion,” (January 20, 2011), <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2011-0021+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>.

⁶⁶ P. Vimont, “Religion et droit de l’homme: une perspective européenne,” in D. Lacorne, J. Vaisse, and J-P. Willaime (Eds.), *La Diplomatie au défi des religions. Tensions, guerres, médiations*. (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2014).

⁶⁷ Council of the European Union (2014), p. 82.

but also to hold contact with local actors, issue demarches or public statements, and to use political dialogues with partner countries on FoRB issues. The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) for 2014-17 prioritizes projects “to combat and prevent religiously motivated discrimination for example against persons belonging to religious or belief minorities, intolerance and violence, in all its forms, including where this derives from traditional practices or legislation discriminating against women and girls.” It also specifies that it will “particularly pay attention to countries that penalize individuals for changing their religion or belief, as adopting or abandoning a religion or belief through free choice is guaranteed by international human rights norms.”⁶⁸

While the first review of the Guidelines is expected in 2016,⁶⁹ European Union implementation beyond the FoRB has unfolded in two main areas: crisis management and training. First, as for the United States, although much more modestly, religion is starting to become relevant in EU crisis management and crisis prevention. In 2012, the Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN), an EU-funded three-year project to enhance dialogue on peacebuilding issues between civil society and EU policymakers, identified inter-faith dialogue has one of the potential EU responses to violent acts by Boko Haram in northern Nigeria.⁷⁰ A

⁶⁸ Council of the European Union (2014), p. 84.

⁶⁹ See M. Leigh, “Religious Freedom in the European Union and Its Southern Neighborhood,” in M. Barnett, C. Bob, N. Fisher Onar, A. Jenichen, M. Leigh, and L.L. Leustean, *Faith, Freedom, and Foreign Policy: Challenges for the Transatlantic Community*, Transatlantic Academy (April 2015), <http://www.transatlanticacademy.org/publications/Faith-Freedom-and-Foreign-Policy>.

⁷⁰ Civil Society Dialogue Network, “Conflict Risk Assessment and Possible EU Responses: Northern Nigeria and Boko Haram,” (February 24, 2012), http://www.eplo.org/assets/files/2.%20Activities/Civil%20Society%20Dialogue%20Network/Crisis%20Response%20Meetings/Nigeria/EPLO_Meeting_Report_CSDN_Meeting_Nigeria.pdf.

External events, in particular the rise of violence toward Christian minorities in the Middle East, widely mobilized all political groups in the European Parliament.

recent program embedded in the Instrument for Stability has also developed specific training with religious leaders in the Central African Republic. The EU-funded project, implemented by the U.K.-based NGO Conciliation Resources, has relied on inter-community and inter-religious dialogue to de-escalate tensions since December 2014.⁷¹ However, these remain exceptional and piecemeal initiatives. Concrete initiatives in the MENA region have been difficult to pursue.⁷² Specific training for European diplomats on religious issues takes place twice per year using a more sociological approach to sensitize diplomats to religious issues as part of the specific cultural context in which they operate.

⁷¹ See European Commission, “2013 Annual Report on the Instrument for Stability,” (December 2, 2014), http://eeas.europa.eu/ifs/docs/comm_staff_work_doc_2013_voll_en.pdf.

⁷² Interviews with European External Action Service officials.

4

2013 – PRESENT: FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR ISLAMIST ENGAGEMENT AFTER THE EGYPTIAN COUP

The 2013 coup in Egypt has inaugurated a new era for both Islamist actors and U.S. and EU diplomacy in the MENA region. The rise of ISIS, the demise of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the overall impression of an “Arab Winter” has led Islamist actors to be more cautious, acknowledging that they are confronting new challenges. The rise of religious violence in the region has also prompted U.S. and European diplomats to look into forms of engagement and cooperation that would contain radicalization and extremism abroad and at home, especially in Europe.

Several Islamist political parties have become mainstream political parties, even though their religious identity is still central to their political programs. The “Islamic Revolution” as such did not happen and many wonder whether Olivier Roy’s prediction of an ideological “failure of political Islam” is proving true. Over the past 15 years, the Justice and Development Party (PJD) has attracted a support base of middle class voters interested in incremental change rather than “grievance voters” with frustrated aspirations.⁷³ But neither Ennahdha in Tunisia nor the PJD in Morocco, though they were able to govern, have been able to deliver on a future “perfect Islamic” society and a good governance agenda.⁷⁴

Political Islamists need to compete with other forces that contest their religious legitimacy. In Morocco, the popular Islamic organization Al Adl al Issane, which is officially banned but nonetheless tolerated by the regime and advocates a radical transformation toward an Islamic society, is a challenge to the governing PJD, its religious legitimacy and its co-optation by the

ruling elite around the monarchy since it came to power in November 2011. The emergence of civil rights grassroots movements, such as Egypt’s Kifayat formed in 2004 in opposition to the rule of President Hosni Mubarak or Morocco’s 20 February movement, which gathered various civil society actors in numerous protests in 2011 and 2012, have pushed Islamists politicians to adapt their political strategies. This competition has also pushed established forces such as Ennahdha or the Justice and Development Party in Turkey to enter the realm of “post-Islamism.”⁷⁵ Coined by the sociologist Asef Bayat, the concept refers to core transformations of Islamism in terms of ideas, approaches, and practices where there is a fusion between “religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty.”⁷⁶ Even if a majority of Muslim citizens respond that they would like to have Islamic Sharia as the main source of law in their country, they do not necessarily support strict interpretations of Sharia regarding criminal punishments but rather its application in family law, for instance. This is not incompatible with their wider support for democracy and freedom of religion.⁷⁷

Another big challenge for Islamist actors has been to distance themselves from ultra-conservative Salafists as well as radicalism and violent extremism. For example, in Morocco, many of the PJD cadres insist that they are not Islamists, but a political party with an Islamist frame of reference.⁷⁸ Egypt’s death sentence on Morsi has been an important warning for other Brotherhoods

The “Islamic Revolution” as such did not happen and many wonder whether Olivier Roy’s prediction of an ideological “failure of political Islam” is proving true.

⁷³ M. Pellicer and E. Wegner, “Socio-economic voter profile and motives for Islamist support in Morocco,” *Party Politics*, 20.1 (2014), pp. 116-133.

⁷⁴ O. Roy, “There will be no Islamic Revolution,” *Journal of Democracy*, 24.1 (January 2013), p. 16.

⁷⁵ A. Bayat, “What is Post-Islamism?” *ISIM Review* 16, (Autumn 2005).

⁷⁶ A. Bayat, ed., *Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces of Political Islam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 8.

⁷⁷ Pew Research Center, *The World’s Muslims: Religion, Politics, and Society* (April 30, 2013), <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-overview/>.

⁷⁸ Interview with PJD leaders, Rabat, Morocco, June 2015.

Combating the radicalization of young Europeans and their departure for Syria and Iraq is a key feature of EU initiatives in recent months.

in the region when it comes to out-flanking the Salafists. In Tunisia, Ennahdha had to distance itself from the Salafists after suspicions of links to the assassination of Chokri Belaid and Mohammed Brahmi, two left-wing opposition leaders. In Egypt, Salafism has been one of the most dynamic socio-political and religious movements since 2011 and has been a real competitor for the Muslim Brotherhood.⁷⁹ In particular, Salafists are contesting the religious legitimacy of other Islamist political parties. The challenge for the latter is thus to manage to implement socio-economic reforms that would please both religious and secular citizens, while remaining relevant for those who could be tempted by the more extremist religious discourse found in Salafism. This is definitely one of the biggest future challenges for Ennahdha, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the PJD.

The intensification of the geopolitics of sectarianism, the rise of the so-called Islamic State, and the phenomenon of foreign fighters⁸⁰ as well as the ongoing Libyan conflict also present key challenges for the West when it comes to countering radicalization and fundamentalism. Combating the radicalization of young Europeans and their departure for Syria and Iraq is a key feature of EU initiatives in recent months. Three thousand to 5,000 EU nationals, including an estimated 500 women, are estimated to be fighting in the region.⁸¹ After the attack on the Jewish

⁷⁹ A. El-Sherif, "Egypt's Salafists at a Crossroads," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (April 29, 2015), <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/04/29/egypt-s-salafists-at-crossroads/i7y8>.

⁸⁰ Tunisia for instance has the largest contingent of foreign fighters in Iraq with 4,000 people. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Foreign fighters: Urgent measures needed to stop flow from Tunisia – UN expert group warns," (July 10, 2015), <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16223&LangID=E#sthash.xNqpx2QV.dpuf>.

⁸¹ E. Bakker and S. de Leede, "European Female Jihadists in Syria: Exploring an Under-Researched Topic," ICCT Background Note, (April 2015), <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT->

Museum of Belgium in Brussels in May 2014, the EU revised its 2005 Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism, encouraging EU member states to develop national strategies on combatting radicalization that would be more comprehensive and involve NGOs, front line workers, and security experts. The European Council has attempted to further capitalize on the Radicalization Awareness Network's exchange of best practices across member states since 2011, and also to develop exit strategies to help individuals disengage from violent extremism.⁸² In April 2015, European foreign and interior ministers adopted the Vienna Declaration on Tackling Violent Extremism and Terrorism, in which the role of religious actors is seen as being at the core of combating violence. Committing to protecting Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities as well as promoting Islam together with European values, the declaration stresses that religious leaders should be involved in prevention campaigns and that more religious training in educational systems and more religious support in prison would be pursued.⁸³

Washington is particularly concerned by the fact that fighters with European citizenship can easily travel into the United States, a problem that has been at the heart of transatlantic meetings between law enforcement officials. On the occasion of the Countering Violent Extremism Summit in February 2015, the White House insisted on the role of the U.S. Strategy on Religious Leaders and Faith Community engagement in addressing "both religious and non-religious causes of violence and extremism, including by working with religious

Bakker-de-Leede-European-Female-Jihadists-In-Syria-Exploring-An-Under-Researched-Topic-April2015(1).pdf.

⁸² Council of the European Union, "Revised EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism," May 19, 2014, 9956/14.

⁸³ Council of the European Union, "Vienna Declaration - Tackling Violent Extremism and Terrorism," April 7, 2015, 7500/1/15.

leaders on projects emphasizing peace, tolerance and coexistence at the community level and training religious leaders on outreach to at-risk youth.”⁸⁴

Within these counter-terrorism global initiatives, Morocco has been heralded as a key ally of transatlantic partners, which capitalize on its religious “model.” The country will serve as the new co-chair of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) together with the Netherlands beginning in May 2016, following the joint chairmanship of the United States and Turkey. Moroccans are one of the largest contingents of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria, and they also constitute one of the biggest Muslim communities in Europe. This international leadership role is in line with the new religious diplomacy of the Kingdom, capitalizing on a Moroccan model of moderate Islam. The Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Morchidines, and Morchidates was opened in Rabat in 2015; several agreements have been concluded with Nigeria and Mali to train their imams. At the moment, the Institute offers training to 447 foreign students (212 Malians, 37 Tunisians, 100 Guineans, and 75 Ivoirians as well as 23 from France).⁸⁵

⁸⁴ The White House, “Fact sheet: The White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism,” (February 18, 2015), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/18/fact-sheet-white-house-summit-countering-violent-extremism>.

⁸⁵ Moroccan Agency Press, “HM the King, Commander of the Faithful, Inaugurates Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Morchidins, and Morchidates in Rabat,” (March 27, 2015), <http://www.maroc.ma/en/royal-activities/hm-king-commander-faithful-inaugurates-mohammed-vi-institute-training-imams>.

5 CONCLUSION

Religious engagement can only be effective if Western diplomats embrace the ongoing individualization and democratization of the religious space in the region.

Religion has been a blind spot of U.S. and EU diplomacy for a long time, but today it is being addressed. Like environment, gender, or culture, it is a factor that ought to be mastered by diplomats. Religious literacy can lead to better diplomacy and can inform and improve engagement with Islamist actors in societies where they are important players. Religion should not, however, become the main prism through which to read developments in the MENA region. That would be a drawback for advancing U.S. and EU interests in the region.

Policy Recommendations

- Religion is not a neutral policy field. It is constantly being negotiated, contested, and resisted. U.S. and EU diplomats should think carefully about which religious actors they engage with and whom they allow to become insiders in the foreign policymaking process.
- Global and EU interreligious dialogues such as the Alliance of Civilizations have not proved to be particularly efficient over the past decade, given the rise of religious hostilities and conflicts. They also risk perpetuating the idea of a “clash of civilizations.” Aims are unclear and often end up as an exercise in ticking boxes for diplomats eager to demonstrate that they engage with “the other.” Instead, diplomats should make sure that religious leaders are able to steer and sustain processes of interreligious dialogues. A good example is the French initiative to organize a “Summit of Conscience” in July 2015 before the Paris Conference of the Parties (COP21) Climate Conference. This summit brought together major religious and moral figures to sign a “Call to Conscience for the Climate.”⁸⁶ Religious and moral leaders were identified as key interlocutors to ensure the success of the

COP21 in their local communities and with their political leaders by French diplomats.⁸⁷

- The transatlantic partners should not give up on the magnetism of their liberal model. Many members of Muslim societies are working toward achieving greater civil rights for women and gays, access to abortion, and a level of religious freedom where individual liberties and religious identities is compatible. Strengthening and partnering with these voices is important. It would provide the EU and United States with leverage in promoting freedom of religion or belief policies and fighting the criminalization of blasphemy.
- The United States and Europe should also avoid the trap of siding with authoritarian regimes that rely on their religious legitimacy to survive. Engaging with all domestic actors embracing democratic values, irrespective of their religious identity, should continue to be the first priority. Fighting poverty and malignant socio-economic factors are also key strategic areas where more engagement and aid to diverse grassroots movements is crucial.
- Religious engagement can only be effective if Western diplomats embrace the ongoing individualization and democratization of the religious space in the region. The younger generation, which was responsible for the successful revolution in Tunisia, is more individualistic and diverse in its religious practices than the older generation. During the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, research has shown that Qur’an readers were more likely to be equal proponents of democracy and fighting injustice than non-readers.⁸⁸ U.S.

⁸⁶ See “Why Do I Care: L’appel des consciences pour le climat,” <https://www.whydoicare.org/en>.

⁸⁷ Interview with diplomat at French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, (July 10, 2015).

⁸⁸ M. Hoffman and A. Jamal, “Religion in the Arab Spring: Between Two Competing Narratives,” *The Journal of Politics*,

and EU diplomats need to avoid privileging a majoritarian and state-sponsored understanding of Islam. This will ensure ownership and avoid giving the impression of foreign intervention in the “governance of Muslims.”⁸⁹

- The religious turn could also lead to a de-politicization of crucial dynamics and socio-political practices ongoing in the region. The biggest problem of transatlantic foreign policies in the MENA region is not that they are too secular or overlook religion, but rather that they are too state-centric. Foreign policymakers should focus on going beyond the state to develop further expertise on what drives MENA domestic and transnational politics. Focusing too much on religion as an explanatory variable of MENA developments and in explaining the evolution of Islamism in a way overlooks the desire of Arab citizens to engage in the public sphere and politics. It ultimately leads to falling back into the path dependency of orientalism.⁹⁰

76.3 (2014), pp. 593-60.

⁸⁹ P. Mandaville, “Islam and Exceptionalism in American Political Discourse,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 46. 2 (2013), pp. 235-239.

⁹⁰ Nadia Marzouki in *The Immanent Frame*, “Engaging religion at the Department of State,” (July 30, 2013), <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2013/07/30/engaging-religion-at-the-department-of-state/>.

1744 R STREET NW

WASHINGTON, DC 20009

T: 1 202 745 3886

F: 1 202 265 1662

E: INFO@TRANSATLANTICACADEMY.ORG

WWW.TRANSATLANTICACADEMY.ORG