'EU Religious Engagement in the Southern Mediterranean: Much Ado about Nothing?

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Abstract. Since the Arab uprisings, religious engagement is central to EU relations with the Southern Mediterranean. Given that the EU is a liberal-secular power, this article investigates why and how the EU is practising religious engagement and whether it is a rupture with past EU modalities of engagement in the region. The main finding is that EU religious engagement constitutes both a physical and ontological security-seeking practice. This is illustrated in three steps. First, EU's physical security is ensured by the promotion of state-sponsored forms of religion in Morocco and Jordan that aim at moderating Islam. Second, the framing of religion as an expertise issue in the EEAS and European diplomacies reinforces EU's self-identity narrative as a secular power. This self-identity is, however, subject to politicization and framing contestation through the case of Freedom of Religion or Belief and the protection of Christian minorities in the Arab world. Overall, this article finds that EU religious engagement is conducive to selective engagement with some religious actors, which could potentially lead to more insecurities and polarization in the region.

Keywords: EU foreign policy; secularism; religion; Islam; freedom of religion or belief; Christian minorities; security-stability

Introduction

Religious conflict has been one of the defining features of the Arab world since the 2011 uprisings. The Syrian conflict has become a religious sectarian conflict rather than a freedom struggle. Persecutions against religious minorities by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as well as terrorism perpetrated by foreign fighters, are certainly new phenomena of violence in the name of God that have marked European public opinions. European foreign affair ministries, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Parliament (EP) have thus placed 'religious engagement' at the centre of EU relations with the Southern Mediterranean (Mandeville & Silvestri, 2015; Wolff, 2015; Hurd, 2015a). European diplomats are being trained on religion, EEAS delegations have been instructed to engage with religious

actors and a European Parliament Intergroup publishes an annual report on the State of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in the world.

Given the absence of EU competence on religion and its secular-liberal values, this religious engagement is rather surprising. Secularism, defined broadly as the separation of state and religious institutions and dignitaries, is indeed the main 'frame of reference' of EU foreign policy (Alidadi & Foblets, 2012: 390). In her vision for a post-conflict Syria, the High Representative Federica Mogherini wishes a country 'united, not divided, *secular*, inclusive and with space for all minority groups' (High Representative, 2016). Acknowledging that paradox, this article investigates why the EU is pursuing 'religious engagement', and to what extent it constitutes a rupture with past EU modalities of engagement in the Southern Mediterranean region. Analysing EU discourses on religion in relation with its Southern Neighbours, and building on the work of the critical scholar Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, this article researches the questions of why and how EU foreign policy decision makers frame religion as a foreign policy issue and what foreign policy practices of engagement it entails.'

This article contributes to literature that challenges the centrality of secularism in international relations (IR) (Birnbaum, 2016; Hurd 2015a; Mitchell, 2014; Berger, 1999). It confronts the literature on Normative Power Europe, EU foreign policy identity and values that take it for granted that EU secular values are universal and 'a force for good' (Poli, 2016; Risse, 2012, Lucarelli & Manners, 2006), with a few notable exceptions (Kinnvall, 2016; Mitzen, 2006). After all, IR as a discipline emerged with the end of religious wars with the Treaty of Westphalia. Until the end of the Cold War, religion was excluded from the discipline's thinking. Marxism considered it the 'opiate of masses', while methodological secularism prescribed 'resistance to appeals to supernatural authority in practical inscriptions of social worlds' (LeRon Schults, 2014: 185). Similarly, the literature on EU relations with the Southern Mediterranean has rarely explored the role of secularism and religion. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) was seen as an unreflexive attempt to export a 'one-size-fits all' regional model (Bicchi, 2006) and to establish cooperative security practices (Adler, Bicchi et al., 2006). The security-stability nexus explains traditionally EU (lack of) engagement with Islamist actors thus avoiding further disaggregating its relationship with secularism and religion (*Voltolini and Colombo*, this special issue; Behr, 2013; Volpi, 2004); except for some notable contributions (Larsen, 2014; Haynes & Ben-Porat, 2013). If one assumes though that secularism is 'one belief system among many that shape international politics' (Hurd, 2004: 237), two main implications emerge. First, it requires considering secularism as 'a problem-space', namely 'a historical arrangement of power' (Agrama, 2012: 40). Second, it means engaging with 'important debates about the moral bases of public order and incites a backlash

against its hegemonic aspirations' (Hurd, 2004: 237). Applied to the context of EU relations with the Southern Mediterranean, this article explores why and how the EU's secular worldview impacts on the modalities of its engagement in the region.

This article argues that although apparently 'innovative', EU religious engagement constitute physical and ontological security-seeking practices, which provide a stable regional environment as well as cognitive stability to the EU's identity as a liberal-secular actor. This urge to find 'security as being' is translated in 'an urge to establish routines in relations with other states or the ability to uphold a consistent biographical narrative' (Mälksoo, 2016: 3). The main finding is that the EU's framing of religion is a security performative practice shaped by the security-stability nexus outlined in this special issue. Starting with a discussion on how religion is framed within the EU multi-governance setting, the article proceeds to a case study on civilizational politics, namely inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogues. The analysis shows that this discursive practice has become *de facto* a 'shared organising frame' for EU and Southern Mediterranean elites aiming at moderating Islam. With this practice, the EU continues to produce hegemonic modes of engagement with state-sponsored and 'official' religions that provide stability for friendly regimes and physical security. The second and third case studies provide detailed accounts of this upholding of a biographical narrative that is subject to various understandings by EU foreign policy actors. By biographical narrative, we refer to states' narrative of the self. Building on the definition provided by Giddens, this refers to how 'states justify their action […] 'talk' about their actions in identity terms' (Steele, 2008: 10). In foreign affair ministries and the EEAS, the integration of religion into EU training and diplomatic practice is, in fact, driven by the concern to better 'know' the 'other' and thus to stabilize the EU's liberal-secular identity. The case of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) shows that the framing of religion as a 'freedom' issue is not neutral, in particular when rekindled through the persecution of (Christian) religious minorities in the Southern Mediterranean region. To conclude, this article argues that the EU's framing of religion and its subsequent modalities of engagement can lead to more insecurities and polarization in the region, as it tends to reproduce hegemonic and Euro-centric modes of engagement. This article relies on around 25 confidential semi-structured interviews which are either quoted directly or provided background information for this research, conducted in Brussels and Washington and on discourse analysis. Interviews were conducted with policy-makers involved in 'religious engagement' at national level in Europe, in the EEAS and with US officials, either in Federal agencies and US administration.

Religion: a frame servicing EU security

Although the nature of secularization (namely, the state-religion relationship) varies, secularism is a key feature of European politics (Norris & Inglehart, 2011; Berger et al., 2008). When asked which factors most help to create a 'feeling of community', fewer than one in ten respondents mention religion (Eurobarometer, 2015). Yet religion is a powerful frame in European and EU politics, instantiating that the EU's secular identity is increasingly being contested and negotiated internally. The EU is, indeed, not 'an a-religious sphere' and offers structures of opportunities for transnational religious actors to influence EU decision-making (Foret & Mourão Permoser, 2016: 1105). Religion is mobilized by actors on 'morality policies' such as bioethics, LGTB rights and abortion, framing what is 'right' or 'wrong' (Knill, 2013). It mobilizes networks, funding and volunteers (Schnabel, 2016). Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) has institutionalized a dialogue between EU institutions and European churches and religious organizations. Formerly initiated by President Delors, in search for a '*Soul for Europe*', this dialogue is structured around high-level annual meetings and involves also humanist and non-confessional organizations. Christianity, more specifically, has gained 'greater legitimacy in European deliberations' (Foret & Mourão Permoser, 2016) and has proven key to societal trust and cohesion (Schnabel & Groetsch, 2014). The enlargement to Eastern Europe and migration have brought religion back into EU policies (Kivisto, 2014; Byrnes & Katzenstein 2006). Eastern European churches use religion in the defence of national identity models confronted with a European secular and progressive model (Guerra, 2013). Thus, although the 'religious and secular' is acknowledged by elites as part of the EU's cultural identity (Mogherini, 2016), the 'resurgence' of religion is a sign of more pluralism and a contestation of the exclusionary practices of secularism (Snyder, 2011: 201; Roy, 2008).

Religious and 'traditional' values are also correlated to a rise of Euroscepticism and a reaction to a 'désenchentement' with European politics (Madeley, 2010), and with globalization. Ontological insecurity has increased, prompting actors and non-state actors to feel more existentially uncertain. Religious nationalism constitutes an 'identity-signifier' that is 'more likely than other identity constructions to arise during crises of ontological insecurity' (Kinnvall, 2004). Religious transnational actors have gained influence in international venues and states tend to bring more religious considerations into their foreign policy; thus, in 2013 Putin visited Crimea along with the Moscow patriarch, and India's secularism is being challenged by the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Religion is a constitutive element of international identities that 'influence the worldview or belief system of a policy-maker' (Fox,

2009: 279). Religion has become a source of expertise in conflict resolution and peace mediation. In the light of a crisis, and 'cognitive uncertainty, religious leaders display expert knowledge of non-verbal symbolism, community sensitivities and histories' (Gutkowski, 2013: 126). Thus, the Sant'Egidio community, a worldwide network of Christians based in 70 countries, is active in peace-mediation and 'faith-based diplomacy' and works in close cooperation with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Morozzo della Rocca, 2014).

Uncertainty as well as cultural and historical contexts are two relevant factors in apprehending the way the EU is framing religion in the MENA region. First, the activation of religion as a frame by EU foreign policy makers is not neutral as it produces, or stabilizes, identities and (re)allocates power (Surel, 2000: 500). In times of uncertainty, such as the Arab uprisings, states and organizations like the EU, competing for their ontological security (Mintzen, 2006b) in search for ' a consistent and stable identity or sense of self' (Giddens in Agius, 2016: 2). Religious engagement as a physical and an ontological security practice provides the EU with 'a sense of continuity of self-identity' (Agius, 2016: 3) as a global actor. This self-identity, although debated internally, has historically been constructed around secularism which shapes the way 'practitioners think about religion and what is perceived to be religious' (Birnbaum, 2016: 2). Religion is often seen 'as the ultimate threat to the creation and preservation of "secular" spaces' (Mitchell, 2014: 28). Secularism has acted as a survival strategy for European states, since 'without a resolution to the religious question, the self-destruction of the West was a very real possibility' (Hashemi, 2014: 5). As an ontological-seeking security practice, secularism considers religion as a cultural and identity marker that defines 'us' versus the 'other'. European identity has been constructed in relation with 'significant others' such as Islam (Mitzen, 2006: 271) as instantiated during the debate over Turkish accession. Turkish 'candidacy destabilises the European secular social imaginary' (Hurd, 2006: 402) and thus challenges its ontological security. Surprisingly though, even the most secular members of the European Parliament (EP) relied on religious argument to contest Turkish membership (Foret, 2015: 243-4). Although from different perspectives, both secular actors and Christian actors have found a common threat to their ontological security: Islam.

Second, framing processes evolve through historical and cultural contexts. Within the MENA region, secularism is associated with hegemony, imperialism and colonialism. Unlike Europe, where it emerged as an indigenous and bottom-up process, secularism was exported through 'forced modernisation, secularisation and Westernisation by the state' and 'generated widespread social and psychological alienation and dislocation' (Hashemi, 2014: 6). Post-colonial authoritarian governments relied on religious regulation to

muzzle Islamist domestic opposition, leading to a surge in restrictions on religious freedom across the region (Bloom et al., 2014).[1] Religion has been central to the resistance against authoritarianism and foreign powers. The founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna, used Islam to try to liberate Egyptian society from British colonial control. This explains why secularism is regarded as 'an ideology of repression' (Hashemi, 2014: 7) at the centre of the EU's normative agenda, another 'mission civilisatrice' that exports 'alien values of either secular of liberal nature' (Zielonka, 2013: 48) through informal domination that legitimises EU imperial policies in its neighbourhood' (Zielonka, 2013: 36-37). Similarly, history is key as the EU relies on 'already-familiar frames' to find the 'right kind of resonance between past, present and anticipated occurrences' (Hyvönen, 2014: 95). In this sense, when specific 'events' or 'crisis' happen, frames are 'not as much selected as semi-automatically adapted' (Hyvönen, 2014: 95) in relation to historical and cultural contexts.

The following case study illustrates the extent to which, since the Arab uprisings, the EU has used strategies of religious engagement with 'official' and state-sponsored 'moderate' forms of Islam[2] – providing the EU with some physical security in its neighbourhood and countering radicalization at home.

From engaging with civilizations to 'moderating Islam'

Although initially a discursive action ideationally motivated to counter Huntington's clash of civilizations, civilizational politics, also known as inter-religious and inter-faith dialogue, have provided a 'shared organising frame' (Gutkowski, 2016) to moderate Islam. This section shows that the EU has privileged engagement with official and state-led religious actors in Morocco and Jordan, thus servicing the security objective of moderating, or containing, Islam. This not only meets the physical security objective of supporting stable friendly regimes in the region but also engages with 'like-minded' religious officials that share EU security concerns. Civilizational dialogue has been instrumental for the EU to 'outsource' to its Southern Mediterranean neighbours the restructuring of Islam through socialization of inter-religious dialogue (Bosco, 2016: 2). [3]

Following Iranian President Khatami's initiative to organize a UN Year of Dialogue among Civilisation in 2001, inter-civilizational dialogue became a global priority for policy makers and intellectuals. The UN Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC) was launched in 2005. Civilizations, as cultural and religious identity markers, became strategic frames for governments eager to respond to the critique formulated towards globalization and its

process of homogenization and uniformity of local cultures and traditions (Bettiza, 2014: 17). In the aftermath of 9/11, fostering inter-religious dialogue became a consensual priority for European diplomats, who framed it mostly as dialogue with Islam (Silvestri, 2005: 394). The Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue Between Cultures was created in 2005 as part of the 'Social Cultural and Human affairs Dialogue' of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). Although the EMP's idealized vision was based on the idea of 'civilisations as material cultures' as defined by Fernand Braudel, it quickly evolved towards a religious understanding of civilization (Bettiza, 2014; Petito, 2011: 10). The EMP inter-cultural dialogue ended by embracing the 'Clash of Civilizations' argument that it wanted initially to reject. By defining cultures such as Europe, the 'Arab world' and 'Islam', the EU reproduced Islam-West and North-South dichotomies, which helped to perpetuate an hegemonic view of cultures and politics by political and religious elites (Del Sarto, 2005: 326). It has also become a security strategy to contain and moderate Islam. Jordan and Morocco strategically mobilized inter-civilizational dialogue as 'nation branding' in their public diplomacy and gained leverage vis-à-vis the West in their actions to moderate Islam (Gutkowski, 2016: 209). Moderation here is defined as a 'non-violent, non-radical, non-rejectionist stance towards Western (usually US) foreign policies and a non-hostile stance towards Israel' (Gutkowski, 2016: 215).

Through the 2004 and 2007 Amman Messages, Jordan took the lead in communicating what Islam should be (Browers, 2011). The messages, endorsed and promoted by the Jordanian king, summarizes the 'true nature of Islam' and provides a message of unity in face of the current discord among Muslims (Browers, 2011: 944). Perceived as a strategy to moderate Islam and gain a counter-terrorist partner in the region, the EU supported the Amman Message with European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) Instrument funding and the Instrument for Stability. Since 2013, the EU has funded the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies that promotes the Amman message in Europe and the Middle East (Gutkowski, 2016: 212). The ENP praises Jordan's' communicative action as a way to counter 'extremist interpretations of Islam, incompatible with human rights and democracy,' (European Commission, 2010: 17). In the ENP 2007–13, the Jordanian government is thus presented as 'a valuable partner in the fight against terrorism', 'actively promot[ing] the Amman Message to counter interpretations of Islam, disrespectful of human rights, in both the country and the region' (European Commission, 2010). Jordanian imams have gained an expert status on Islam among Western armies, as they 'cooperated with the Afghan National Army and US personnel stationed in Afghanistan' and 'advised Swiss, Saudi, British and Kuwaiti military personnel on Islamic moderation and combatting extremism' (Gutkowski, 2016: 219). In spite

of the lack of EU leverage on democratization and human rights reforms in Jordan, the rhetorical frame of a moderate and peaceful religion serves, in practice, EU security objectives. Domestically, this rhetoric has helped the Hashemite monarchy to find a legitimacy as a guarantee of regional peace and stability. Since the Arab uprisings, the Amman Messages have been used to 'undermine the claims of the opposition Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamic Action Front', one of the main domestic opponents to the monarchy (Gutkowski, 2016: 212-3). The reasons for the success of this 'shared organising frame' were not only that it fitted the interest of Southern Mediterranean states, but also, in the case of Jordan, that it corresponded to the ''Levantine myth of the mosaic' of religious, ethnic and nationalist minorities living with the Arab, Sunni majority' and that has helped to exercise authority domestically (Gutkowski, 2016: 216).

Morocco is another strategic partner that promotes a national model of moderate Islam. Following the 2003 Casablanca bombings, religion became central to the monarchy's political strategy. It engaged in a profound internal religious reform used to promote a model of 'moderate Islam' based on Maleki rite and Sufism to its counter-terrorist partners in Europe and the US. Sufis, traditionally considered as mystical and heretic Muslims, have indeed gained the image of 'Good Muslims' (Muedini, 2012:4). Since 9/11, this branch of 'liberal Islam' has been used strategically by Sufi actors themselves 'to assume a role within a struggle with both global and local implications' (Salomon, 2016). In the post-Arab uprisings, the Sufi-Salafi divide was increasingly used to narrate the contemporary history of North Africa. Sufism has thus been used by Morocco to support a strategic framing of 'moderate Islam'. Morocco's 'moderate Islam' offers an alternative to radical Islam and Wahhabist influences from the Gulf countries and is diffused internationally through the new Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Morchidines, and Morchidates. Launched in 2005, the institute has concluded several agreements with Nigeria and Mali, as well as France and Belgium, to train their imams.[4] Morocco has, through its image of being a 'moderate Islam' country, become one of the key EU security partners. Since May 2016, Morocco co-chairs with the Netherlands the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF). Morocco also took the lead in sponsoring FoRB and the rights of minorities with the January 2016 Marrakech Declaration. This Declaration, put together by 250 Muslim religious leaders, heads of state and scholars, provides a legal framework and a call to action on the Rights of Religious Minorities in predominantly Muslim Lands.

Following the Arab uprisings, inter-civilizational dialogue has evolved towards engagement with 'moderate' and 'stable' state partners, such as Jordan and Morocco, that guarantee EU security in the region. This is not without problems however. The mere

expression of 'moderate Islam' implies that Islam is not moderate and that it is a source of extremism and radicalization (Silvestri, 2010: 49). Religion is framed as a domestic and international security issue, and the EU's desire for regional stability has enabled the securitization of Islam (Behr, 2013). In turn, this securitization of Islam reproduces 'secular forms of subjectivity based on the privatization of religion and for disciplining and "producing" "good Muslims" compliant with the secular order' (Mavelli, 2013: 179). It is deemed, however, to serve the purpose of providing physical security to the EU by containing violent religion and thus possible destabilization of friendly regimes that have become strategic partners in EU counter-terrorism policy. In the European Union Global Strategy (EUGS), 'terrorism and violence plague North Africa and the Middle East' (EEAS, 2016: 7) and 'inter-religious dialogue' is presented as a tool in EU's counter-radicalisation policy (EEAS, 2016: 21). The deepening of relations with civil society actors, including 'religious communities' is instrumental in securing and promoting EU values such as freedom of speech. One can wonder if EU's pragmatic religious engagement is not also strategically used to avoid criticism about EU's inefficient neo-liberal and democracy promotion policies in the region.[5] The EU has narrated the Arab uprisings as pro-Western type of democracy, 'local and contained' (Hyvönen, 2014: 92) representing another 'wave' of democratization. This downplays the transnational linkages between the Indignados and Occupy Wall Street movements and the Arab uprisings. (Hyvönen, 2014: 92). Using the religious frame as an ontological security practice not only helps the EU to secure its identity as a secular power but also provides internal and external legitimacy of the 'political order it represents' (Hyvönen, 2014: 93).

The following case study explores the extent to which religious engagement is an ontological-seeking practice. It evidences how routinized practice of expertise on religion, which developed in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, is providing EU diplomats with 'the illusion of knowing the other [and thus] enable[s] the self to act within its continuous narrative' [of a secular power] (Chernobrov, 2016: 584).

'Expert religion' in the EU: framing religion as a 'knowledge issue'

The Arab uprisings have contributed to the framing of religion as a 'knowledge issue' and the development of European diplomatic training on religion. Although awareness regarding religion arose with 2006 Danish cartoons crisis, improving European diplomats' 'religious literacy' gained momentum with the 'uncertainty' related to the Syrian conflict. The Danish

cartoons marked the start of 'the fabric and imaginary of [EU's] ontological security' epitomized by the 'Je suis Charlie' phenomena that 'enunciate[s] a clear distinction between a peaceful self-identity and a violent other'(Agius, 2016:12).

The politicization and securitization of religion (or Islam) has fuelled cognitive uncertainty (Voltolini, 2015: 3). The Syrian crisis and the rise of religious violence following the Arab winter, were providential in strategically framing the need for more 'religious literacy'. The 2016 EU Global Strategy thus states that 'we live in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union. Our Union is under threat. Our European project, which has brought unprecedented peace, prosperity and democracy, is being questioned' (EEAS, 2016: 7). More engagement of EU institutions should improve 'societal resilience' through increased pluralism, which involves reaching out 'more to cultural organisations, religious communities, social partners and human rights defenders', in particular when it comes to 'violations of the freedoms of speech and association' (EEAS, 2016: 27). Religious sectarianism in the Arab world presents 'damaging prospects for reconciliation. This carries risks for the future unity of the country and needs to be factored into the EU's engagement' (EEAS/COM, 2016: 11). Out of the 752 occurrences of the word 'sectarian' on the EEAS website,[6] only nine appeared before 2010. Between 2000 and 2008 the term was used only in the Country Strategy Papers in Lebanon, Iraq and Indonesia. In 2010, the four occurrences of the word related to Iraq. Since 2011, the word 'sectarian' has occurred 743 times and has been almost always used in the context of the Arab world. EU funding has also been invested in Iraq and Syria to 'promot[e] an alternative to the prevalent sectarian and violent discourse (€3.6m with further €10m envisaged in this area)' (EEAS/COM, 2016). Although other frames have been enacted in the Syrian crisis, the sectarian frame, like the 'humanitarian frame', turns religious differences into the most salient features of the conflict, thus overlooking 'the many aspects of human identity, history, political allegiance, sociality and experience – including alternative religiosities – that are relevant to the conflict' (Hurd, 2015a:119).

Religious sectarianism and violence has nonetheless provided a structure of opportunity for a small community of European diplomats to frame the issue as a need for more 'expert religion'. As explained by one of its leading diplomats, Merete Bilde, the secular worldview of Western diplomats is a problem, as they 'often discard religion as an epiphenomenon at best and an irritant at worst' (Bilde, 2015: 157). European diplomats consider religion as 'intrinsically problematic for policy', 'most diplomatic handbooks still largely hinge on realpolitik and interests, leaving little room for religion, identity, old culture' (Bilde, 2015: 157). These diplomatic crises have led to 'a growing realisation […] that "religion" matters and that we need to, at minimum, understand when, where and how' (*ibid*).

Religion needs to be part of the EU's 'policy filter' that requires 'upgrading mindsets, skills sets and tools' (*ibid*). Since 2013, training on religion has been introduced as an optional module in the EEAS training. Accordingly, 'by increasing our religious literacy and sensitivity to non-secular worldviews, we hope to improve our ability to better navigate the politico-religious landscape in countries and situations where a religious component matters. This also helps to raise awareness about how an overly secular worldview can lead to not only blind spots, but also occasional misconceptions and inconsistencies' (Bilde, 2015: 158).

The multiplication of violence in the Arab world and its ramification on European soil through terrorist attacks has contributed to instilling ontological insecurity. The latter indeed 'emerges when there is a disruption to routines, which invokes instability and a break with what is knowable, consistent and comprehensible to the self' (Agius, 2016: 3). Foreign policy routines are then strategies to seek this ontological security, and through practice help to confirm specific identities (Agius, 2016: 3), like EU liberal-secular values. A close look at EU and European training on religion show that it serves the strategic purpose of promoting the implementation of the 2013 Guidelines on FoRB that I discuss in the following section. This remains a major focus of training,[7] although sessions have also aimed at addressing the role of religion in development (Bilde, 2015: 160). Overall, by developing more knowledge on religion, European diplomats will become 'smarter' foreign-policy actors (Bilde, 2015: 160).

The production of knowledge is not neutral, as it can become a 'basis for action' (Bicchi, 2013: 3). It frames the identification of problems, the solutions and the tools by providing meaning on what is 'right and wrong' (Huber in Bicchi, 2013: 3). The framing of religion as an 'expert issue' originated at domestic level and through transnational knowledge networks as an answer to rising religious violence in the Southern Mediterranean. The EEAS training has been modelled on a training organized by the Woolf Institute for the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). This training promotes FoRB but also helps 'British diplomats understand better the importance of religion in shaping foreign policy' (Baker, 2013). The training was attended by 100 diplomats and other themes have included issues such as 'religious tension and freedom, the Church of England and international diplomacy, the right to be secular in the MENA, and the impact of conflict on relations between communities in the MENA' (Baker, 2013). Religion and faith is presented as 'a legitimate and important tool of foreign policy practice' that is 'increasingly essential in a modern world' where religion, nonetheless, 'is ever more important as a driver of political, social, cultural and even economic motivation' (Baker, 2013). Like Bilde, Baker stresses that improving British diplomats' understanding of religion(s) 'needs to be an integral part of our diplomatic armoury', as 'expert religion' will better equip European diplomats in a region full of adversity.

Religious expertise is also central to French diplomacy. In spite of its *'laicité'*, France has integrated religious expertise within its Foreign Affairs Ministry. Although France has had an Advisor on Religious Affairs since 1920, a *'pôle religions'* was created in 2009 by Minister Bernard Kouchner within the Foresight unit of the Foreign Affairs Ministry with the aim of undertaking 'preventive' diplomacy and mediation. Concerned by the lack of knowledge of French diplomats on the role of religion in international relations, Kouchner recruited academics. Reporting directly reporting to the French Foreign Affairs Minister, the unit performs three functions: analytical, supporting the other geographical departments on religion-related questions or in the case of a crisis, and finally training future diplomats on religious issues. This new expertise was mobilized in the aftermath of the 7 January 2015 terrorist attacks at Charlie Hebdo and in Paris.[8] It became clear then that French embassies abroad had no contact at all with religious institutions and that more engagement was needed to 'explain better French position on laicité'.[9] Sufism and radicalization have attracted a lot of interest from the strategic unit, which also works with French external Intelligence services (*Direction Générale de la Sureté Extérieure*).[10]

Getting to 'know' religion and the 'other' is thus part of an ontological security-seeking practice that strengthens the EU's self-identity as a secular-liberal power. It is however, subject to contestation and negotiation by different EU foreign policy actors, as instantiated by the case of FoRB.

Freedom of religion and the Christian minority issue

The Syrian conflict has revived EU interest in FoRB and the protection of religious minorities in the Mediterranean. ISIS atrocities towards various ethnic and religious minorities has led to a strong mobilization of EU actors. Although many argue that existing human rights tools, such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, are enough to fight persecution against religious minorities, in 2013 the EU adopted guidelines on the promotion of FoRB, which are a basis for action for EEAS delegations. Without underestimating the unfolding tragedy of Middle Eastern Christians in the region, I show that the EU's promotion of FoRB is an ontological security-seeking practice. As such it ultimately acts as a 'technology modern governance' that reproduces hegemonic modes of governance in the region (Mahmood, 2012: 419) and is oblivious of the way European powers have used religious minorities to advance their interests in the region.

EU interest in promoting FoRB in the Southern Mediterranean region needs to be historically contextualized. In 1535, the signature of the 'Capitulations' between François 1er and Soliman the Magnificent extended France's protectorate to all Christians in the region.

They gained 'a considerable degree of self-government in matters of criminal and civil jurisdiction as well as freedom of religion and worship' (Mahmood, 2012: 421). Later on, post-colonial regimes in the region relied on the legacy of the Ottoman *millet* system to consolidate their power. Privileging 'the role of the spiritual head of the community' instead of communal representation, the system allowed the Syrian Ba'th regime and the Jordanian monarchy to ally with Christian minorities (McCallum, 2012). Middle Eastern churches' leaders privileged the stability of authoritarian governments over democratization as a strategy to protect their communities (Köse et al., 2016; McCallum, 2013). This explains why Christian minorities, in spite of sharing cultural values and practices with majority populations, still suffer from being 'agents of unwelcome Western influence' (Perchoc, 2015). This strategy was not very successful, as Christian minorities have been on the decline for many years. Although Europeans 'discovered' their dramatic fate in the summer of 2014 with the atrocities committed by ISIS against Christian and other religious minorities like the Yezidis, the Christian presence in the region was shrinking well before the Arab uprisings. At the beginning of the 20th century Christians represented 14 per cent of the population, but now represent only 4 per cent of MENA residents and are a minority in every country in the region (Pew Research Centre, 2011). In 2003, with the US invasion of Iraq, 1.5 million Christians fled the country. In 2015 only 500,000 remained (Griswold, 2015). Socio-economic difficulties, religious persecution and discrimination, as well as a low birth rate and emigration, have contributed to their demographic decline.

This historical context provides elements that help to understand the politicization of FoRB.[11] Traditionally, the EU has promoted FoRB during enlargement negotiations with the Western Balkan countries and Turkey. EU conditionality has, for instance, strengthened the position of the Alevis minority in Turkey (Ulusoy, 2013). Following the Arab uprisings, the EU adopted the 2013 EU Guidelines on FoRB (Council of the EU, 2013). The guidelines state that 'the EU will encourage states and other influential actors, whether religious or non-religious to refrain from fostering inter-religious tensions' (Council of the EU, 2013). The EEAS, as well as member states' embassies and consulates, are implementing the guidelines. Delegations need to 'identify and report on situations of concern' (Council of the EU 2013) and to develop 'more interaction and engagement with religious actors.'[12] At the EEAS headquarters, an internal platform was put in place to implement the guidelines as well as to address religious issues and FoRB from crisis prevention and crisis management perspectives. Coordination between the relevant geographical desks and the Organization of the Islamic Conference and Arab League desks takes place regularly.[13] On 9 May 2016, Ján Figel, ex-Commissioner and a Slovak Christian Democrat, was appointed first Special Envoy for the

external promotion of FoRB. Mandated by the President of the European Commission to act as Special Adviser to the Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development, he reports annually to the Article 17 TFEU dialogue (European Commission, 2016).

The EP is a central actor in promoting FoRB and religious minorities in EU's Southern neighbourhood. Following a series of resolutions in 2014 and 2015, it unanimously declared in 2016 that ISIS was perpetrating a genocide through the systematic killing and persecution of religious minorities. One month later, the US House of Representatives adopted a similar text (US Congress, 2016). An Early Day Motion had also been tabled in January 2016 by 54 UK MPs (UK Parliament, 2016) and echoed similar statements from presidential candidate Hillary Clinton (Sherwood, 2016). The EP Intergroup on FoRB and Religious Tolerance is the main advocate for more FoRB in the EU's external relations. FoRB is, however, a contested concept, since MEPs from the right (European People's Party, European Conservatives and Reformists and Europe of Freedom and Democracy) 'are much more sensitive about violations of the human rights of religious minorities in the rest of the world, often based on Christian solidarity with coreligionists' (Foret, 2015: 99). Instead, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe, the Gauche Unitaire Europeenne and Green groups insist upon 'individual freedoms' and tend to pay more attention to discrimination within Europe. Similarly, Christian Democrat ministers tend to be favourable to FoRB action in the Council.[14]

As with the concept of 'expert religion', global and domestic policy developments have influenced the framing of the FoRB as an EU policy issue. In 2000, the position of UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB was created, succeeding the Special Rapporteur on religious intolerance created in 1986. EU member states have also singled out FoRB as a special kind of human rights. The Dutch government has called for conditioning trade negotiations with third countries to respect for FoRB. Pilot projects were carried out by Dutch embassies in Armenia, China, Egypt, Eritrea, India, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan and Sudan.[15] The UK adopted a FoRB 'toolkit' as early as 2010 and created an Advisory Group on FoRB.[16] FCO ministers took part in seminars advocating that FoRB is better for business worldwide.[17] With the intensification of the crimes committed by ISIS against minorities, and in particular the enslavement and deaths of Yezidis, France co-sponsored with Jordan the International Conference on the Victims of Ethnic and Religious Violence in the Middle East in September 2015 to find solutions to what Laurent Fabius, then French Foreign Affairs Minister, called 'a systematic, barbaric process of ethnic and religious eradication' (Fabius, 2015). Recalling France's 'strong historic ties with the Middle East, and especially Eastern Christians', the 2016 Paris Action plan combines the issue of refugees with the objective of 'preserving the diversity and plurality'.[18]

The influence of European domestic politics shows that FoRB is a 'socially constructed and quite contested concept' (Richardson, 2015:1). The challenge of 'multiculturalism' has provided the FoRB with a 'new vitality' in Europe, allowing for 'deep diversity' by accommodating the pluralism of religious practices and minority rights (Alidadi & Foblets, 2012: 389). Its rekindling with the issue of religious minorities is, however, enmeshed in a state-centred Westphalian system that 'tolerates' religion (Zucca, 2013: 3). Thus, instead of being guided by a universal meaning, it is driven by a 'Euro-Atlantic' understanding of religion, which 'is very likely to divide rather than to unite' (Zucca, 2013: 15). The US and Europe have supported authoritarian 'secular' regimes in Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Libya before the Arab uprisings in the name of FoRB and because they would fight religious extremism. This does not always fit the reality of religious minorities in the region. Diplomatic engagement in the field of FoRB risks intensifying community divisions and reinforcing alienation (Roald & Longva, 2011). Religion is used to oversimplify the social and legal problems faced by minorities in their countries. It also tends to stress their status as victim, which 'overshadows their status as social agents, active devisers and users of strategies of accommodation and self-empowerment' (Roald & Longva, 2011: 3). Some minorities do not want to be regarded as such but instead as citizens. For instance, Copts reject their status of minority as 'it disenfranchise[s] them from their nation'. It is a term rejected by their church leaders (Monier, 2014: 3). Instead, Egyptian Copts have claimed a right to 'be considered an equal citizen deserving of inclusion and protection' on the basis of citizenship rather than their identity as a religious minority (Monier, 2014: 9). Secularism thus structures 'ideas and practices concerning religion'; 'by making sure that the public was free from religion, secularism also defined what the public needs to be freed from and thereby defined the scope of religion itself' (Birnbaum, 2016: 17). EU religious engagement runs the risk of being at odds with the aspirations of local minorities; it does, however, contribute to the narration of EU's biographical continuity, which it equates at times with secularism in the liberal sense, and at times with Judeo-Christian secularism, establishing solidarity with Christian co-religionists worldwide.

Conclusion: engagement or containment of religion?

In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, religious engagement has become a new frame for EU foreign policy makers. The investigation of the three case studies shows that it constitutes both a physical and an ontological security-seeking practice. Civilizational politics, European diplomatic training and the promotion of FoRB in relation to Christian minorities in the

Southern neighbourhood, all provide space for establishing new security alliances with 'like-minded' regimes in the region and with co-religionists. It is also a way for EU foreign policy actors to narrate their identity as secular-liberal actors, an identity which is the object of a politicization inside the EU's multi-level governance.

Although presented as innovative, these initiatives reproduce EU hegemonic practices that prevailed before the Arab uprisings. First, EU religious engagement privileges state-sponsored forms of religion that responds to EU's security interests. Religion is associated to conflict and crisis management and is framed in order to promote EU secular values. Yet, even where the EU engages with transnational religious actors such as Christian minorities abroad, it remains Euro-centric and overlooks the reality of the 'lived religions' of people in the region (Hurd, 2015a). The EU reproduces state-centred and secular approaches to either governing, or rather containing, religion and to moulding official forms of religion and actors with whom it can engage. Depending on who is framing this religious engagement, it contributes to creating a 'divide between officially favoured religion and the rest of world's religion'; 'all religions may be equal but some are always more equal than others' (Hurd, 2015b: 8). This can, in turn, have an impact on the legitimacy of EU action in the region, as the framing of politics towards the Southern Mediterranean overlooks the desire of Arab citizens to engage in the public sphere and politics and reproduce an orientalist vision of the politics of the region (Marzouki, 2013) where security and stability prevail.

This article has contributed to the burgeoning critical literature addressing the way the secular world order belief is affecting IR. Thus, when the EU adds religion to its discourse, this is not neutral and it is important to look into how European foreign-policy actors' perceptions of religion is shaped by various historical experiences such as the war of religion in Europe or colonialism. As rightly put by Birnbaum, simply adding religion 'to our analytical vocabulary will not make this vocabulary richer. Instead, it risks stabilising the normative historical construction of the concept – or particular manifestations thereof – and reaffirm the power structures relying on it' (Birnbaum, 2016: 16).

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[1] Government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion remain a permanent feature of the region, before and after the Arab uprisings (Pew, 2013).

[2] By using commas to the expression of 'moderate Islam', I want to stress the intersubjective dimension of this concept which depends on who is using it. I thank Frederic Volpi for this remark and refer to his work on this issue in Volpi, F (2007). "Constructing the 'Ummah'in European Security: Between Exit, Voice and Loyalty." *Government and Opposition* 42: 3, 451-470.

[3] Although we focus here at EU level, there are also similar bilateral relations between EU Member states and 'privileged' partners, such as between Germany and Turkey through the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs also known as DITIB

[4] 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-kingcommander-faithful-inaugurates-mohammed-vi-institutetraining-imams.

[5] I would like to thank François Foret for this suggestion

[6] Based on the calculation of the author as of 28 July 2016 through the search function of https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en

[7] Interview EEAS Official, Brussels, 25 February 2015

[8] Interview French Diplomats, Quai d'Orsay, 7 July 2015.

[9] Interview French Diplomat, Quai d'Orsay, 7 July 2015

[10] Interview French Diplomat, Quai d'Orsay, 7 July 2015.

[11] Interview EEAS Official, Brussels, 25 February 2015

[12] Interview EEAS Official, Brussels, 25 February 2015

[13] Interview EEAS Official, Brussels, 25 February 2015

[14] Vimont, P. (2014). Religion et droit de l'homme: une perspective europeenne. In: Lacorne, D.J., Vaisse et J-P. Williame (Eds) (2014). *La Diplomatie au défi des religions. Tensions , guerres, médiations*. Paris : Odile Jacob.

[15] https://www.government.nl/topics/human-rights/contents/protecting-freedom-of-religion-and-belief

[16] GOV.UK, 'Freedom of Religion or Belief'.

[17] https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/fco-minister-opens-seminar-on-freedom-of-religion-and-economic-prosperity

[18] The Paris action plan, 8 September 2015, available at http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/north-africa-and-middle-east/events/article/the-paris-action-plan-09-08-2015