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The case of the debate on normalisation during the Arab Awakening

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- 1 A lot of attention has been given to Egypt's relationship with Israel after Mubarak's fall and the crisis affecting the first Arab state to have signed a peace treaty with Israel, and very little to the Tunisian case. Tunisia, though it is not directly involved with Middle Eastern security issues related to Israel, does offer a fascinating case study regarding the Arab world approach towards Israel in the aftermath of the Arab Awakening.
- 2 This paper intends to assess the impacts of this regional turmoil on the Tunisian debate on normalization with Israel. To this end, it adopts a comparative approach by first exposing relevant precedents and analysing the factors that enabled a normalization of relations with Israel, whether to mark a political independence with the USSR in the case of some of its former satellites, or due to the influence of the EU in an integration process as in the case of Spain, or as for Egypt and Jordan, in the context of a peace treaty. This paper questions the influence of the democratization factor in the Tunisian debate in the context of the Arab Awakening and whether or not it enables a normalization of relations with Israel. It also take into account the role of the EU in this process in the framework of the EU-Tunisian partnership.
- 3 As argued by the different contributors of this volume, Israel has not been at the heart of the political and social dynamics leading masses of people to take the streets in Tunisia, Yemen, Syria, Libya and Egypt.
- 4 Yet, Israel's diplomatic history, marked by long periods of isolation, offers a wide diversity of cases to study the factors leading to a process of establishment or reestablishment of full relations and the Arab Awakening provides a very interesting context in which reassessing them.

Relevant precedents of normalization of relations with Israel

Relations of Post-Soviet countries with Israel : the political break factor

- 5 The Soviet Union and its satellite states had severed all ties with Israel after 1967 Six Day War. The USSR strongly supported Egypt and Syria in their military confrontation with the Jewish state. Romania remained the only exception within the socialist block in maintaining diplomatic relations with Israel. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War brought a complete change. During the processes of democratization of eastern and central Europe at the late 1980's -early 1990's, all these states re-established full diplomatic relations with Israel. The Federation of Russia and all the eastern and central European states took the same path and normalized their relations with Israel. Looking at the chronology of these evolutions, we see that the recognition of Israel and the establishment of a variety of partnerships with were not the results of outside pressures.
- 6 These moves took place many years before the enlargement of NATO and then the EU. For example, the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary had restored diplomatic relations with Israel since 1989-1990 and became members of NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004.
- 7 They followed a regional dynamic that was not limited to newly independent post-communist countries eager to join political and military alliances, as the study of the relations between Israel and the Federation of Russia shows.
- 8 In turn, the opening of full diplomatic ties with Israel was influenced by two different dynamics. For Central and Oriental European countries willing to integrate the European sphere, the normalization of their relations was due to the willingness of their new leaders. The latters wanted at the same time to mark a break with the anti-Israeli past of the Soviet period and to show a pro-western diplomatic orientation. The common past with Jewish communities decimated by the Nazis and their collaborators also played a role in these political development. Accordingly, in this case, neither the EU nor NATO triggered the establishment of relations with Israel. As a matter of fact, these new Member States seeked to influence the European foreign policy in a more pro-Israeli way¹.
- 9 Regarding the Russian Federation, the evolution of its relation with Israel had already started with the end of the Gorbachev era, the last President of the Soviet Union. The establishment of diplomatic ties with Israel, under Boris Yeltsin, responded to a political desire to universalize the diplomatic relations of Russia². The development of a partnership with Israel, notably at the economic level, continued under the term of Vladimir Putin since summer 1999. Thus, the degree of pluralism of Russian institutions as well as its relations with NATO and the EU do not account for the definition of Moscow's bilateral relation with Israel at least in a decisive way.

The Spanish scenario: the influence of the integration in the EU

- 10 At the time of its creation, in 1948, Israel did not intend to establish official ties with Spain. Governed by Franco, whose victory over the Republicans in the 1936-39 civil war had to do with military support and direct implication of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, Spain was seen by the left-wing leaders of the new-born State of Israel as an international actor to exclude. Israeli leaders repeatedly publicly condemned the regime of Madrid. On May 16 1949, Israel, which had become an elected member of the United Nations just 5 days before, voted against a proposed resolution on the lifting of the diplomatic sanctions imposed on Spain since 1946³. On the Spanish side, two dynamics were colluding in the shaping of diplomacy towards Israel. Franco seemed to have hoped for a moral support from the Jewish state because of some aspects of his policy towards Jews escaping Europe under Nazi rule during the Second World War. Indeed, Spain did help a certain number of Jews, between a few hundreds and a few thousands. From May to autumn 1940, a “generous” visa policy allowed them to cross the Spanish territory if they had valid documents to the United States from Portugal⁴. Madrid’s diplomats also helped and saved an uncertain number of Jews of Sephardic origins in different parts of Europe and the Balkans⁵. But for Spain, the most important dimension in the way it viewed the Middle-East was the privileged relationships established with the Arab world at war with Israel⁶. These relations were essential in the first years after 1945 when the country was isolated on the international scene⁷. After the death of the *Caudillo* on 20 November 1975, the question of the recognition of Israel emerged in the public debate in Madrid. Normalization and universalization were two proclaimed goals of the new diplomacy in this period, but the stance towards Israel did not change substantially during the first years of the democratic transition, even after the Egyptian-Israeli breakthrough following Sadate’s visit in Jerusalem in November 1977. Israeli leaders also called on European states to convince Spain to change its position⁸.
- 11 It is only when Madrid was in the last stage of its adhesion process to the European Community that several countries, such as France, the Netherlands and the Federal Republic of Germany, insisted on the need for Spain to establish full diplomatic ties with the Jewish State. Nevertheless, the fear of commercial retaliation and a possible embargo from the Arab world pushed Spanish leaders to delay the normalization of their ties with Israel. The Arab League tried to prevent the move until the last minute. Despite the threat of the Arab boycott, on the 17th of January 1986, a decade after the fall of Franco, the two countries established full diplomatic relations, during a public meeting between the Israeli and Spanish Prime ministers, Shimon Peres and Felipe Gonzalez⁹. Eleven years after Franco’s death, Spain and Israel finally normalized their relationship and ambassadors were exchanged between Spain and Israel¹⁰. This political event had historical meanings. Shimon Peres presented the establishment of diplomatic relations as the end of five centuries of a forced separation rooted in the 1492 expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula ordered by the Catholic monarchs of Spain¹¹.
- 12 This paper questions whether a similar scenario could apply to post-2011 Tunisia. Of course it does not intend to draw a full analogy with the Spanish scenario as Tunisia is not a candidate country to the EU. Yet, Tunisia has presented itself since its independence as a bridge between the Arab world and Europe. Moreover, it is the first Mediterranean country to sign an Association Agreement with the EU in 1995. Thus, it does provide an

interesting case study when it comes to the debates and factors dealing with the normalisation of the relations between the Arab world and the State of Israel.

The Egyptian/Jordan scenario: the necessity of peace treaties

- 13 Before examining the case of Tunisia, it is necessary to recall briefly the process leading two Israel's Arab neighbours, Egypt and Jordan, to conclude peace treaties with it.
- 14 As Tunisia, they are Arab states, members of the Arab league. The history of their relations with Israel is one of several deadly wars then the signature of peace treaties.
- 15 Egypt, the most populated Arab state, fought four wars against Israel in a quarter of a century: 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973. Then, in November 1977, in a speech before the People's Assembly, Egyptian President Anwar-al Sadat announced that he was ready to go anywhere, including the Israeli Knesset, to achieve peace in the region. His journey to Jerusalem marked the history of the Middle-East. In what context did this normalization between two arch-enemies take place?
- 16 The recognition of Israel and the peace process that followed and led to the 1978 Camp David accords was part of a profound reorientation of Egypt's foreign policy. Cairo shifted alliances in putting an end to the alliance with the Soviet Union (abrogation in March 1976 of the 1971 Egyptian-Soviet Friendship) and gradually established a military and financial partnership with the United States, receiving since the end of the 1970's an annual American assistance of around 2 billion dollars¹². The "Egypt first" policy, where Cairo signed a peace treaty with Israel in order to recover its full sovereignty over the Sinai peninsula outside of a concerted Arab policy, led to its regional isolation, illustrated by its exclusion from the Arab league. This massive re-orientation of Egypt's foreign policy was not the result of a national debate nor a ratification by parliamentary bodies elected in transparent and fair elections. While Kirk Beatie's assessment that "by Egyptian political standards, the measure of support for Sadat's peace treaty was truly impressive", the decision-making process was undoubtedly a top to bottom one¹³.
- 17 The first peace treaty signed between Israel and an Arab state survived Sadat's assassination (1981), the invasion of Lebanon (1982) and the two Palestinian *intifadas* (1987 and 2000). But the relationship between the two countries is a cold peace with strong oppositions from cultural and intellectual circles to normalization.
- 18 Jordanian-Israeli relations took a different path but the decision making was similar to the Egyptian one and the civil society largely remained excluded from the strategic orientation towards Israel. Discrete mutual understandings took place between the Hashemite kingdom and Israel from 1948 onwards¹⁴. But it is only in 1994, after the declaration of principles between Israel and the PLO, that Amman signed a peace treaty with its western neighbor. The will expressed by King Hussein to achieve a warm peace where cooperation and trust would prevail, thus distancing his policy from the Israeli-Egyptian, did not last. As Robert Satloff emphasised in an article published a few weeks after the signature of the treaty: "The overriding psychological element in the Egypt-Israel treaty is respect--the two sides will "respect the territorial integrity of the other;" "respect each other's sovereignty"; and "respect each other's right to live in peace." In substance, the content of the treaty is suffused with concerns about security, including detailed annexes outlining the creation of an international force to monitor the intrusive and lopsided security regime mandated for the Sinai. In the Jordan-Israel treaty, the

concept of “partnership” replaces the emphasis on “respect,” while “cooperation” replaces the focus on “security.”¹⁵

- 19 But in reality the relations have been limited to security and some economic cooperation and a cold peace prevail while anti-normalization mobilizations are still very present, especially since the outbreak of the second *Intifada* in autumn 2000¹⁶.
- 20 Egypt and Jordan share the same top-down decision making process. The strategic choice to recognize Israel came from the top of the regime and very little space was left in the public sphere for debating and choosing the degree of the relation with Israel. In other words, opposition to the peace treaty with Israel meant an opposition to the regime.

Ongoing reflexion on the Tunisian debate: Could democracy be a factor enabling future normalization?

The Tunisian case compared to the Spanish scenario

- 21 Three decades after the democratic transition in Southern Europe and its implications in the relations between Europe and Israel, Tunisia offers a fascinating comparative case.
- 22 More than 2,000 kilometers separate Tunisia from Israel. Independent from France since 1956, it is not a strategic player in Middle-East politics. As the quote attributed to Henry Kissinger goes, “You can’t make war in the Middle East without Egypt and you can’t make peace without Syria”. But that does not automatically disconnect the Maghreb from the Palestinian question. Tunisia did not have the same attitude as Libya and Algeria, which saw themselves as champions of Arab nationalism, as both condemned the Camp David accords and gave political and material support to Palestinian armed groups. By contrast, Tunisia developed an original diplomatic approach towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- 23 As a matter of fact, in April 1965, Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba’s declarations on the topic created a political storm in the Arab Middle-East. In a speech he gave at a refugee camp near Jericho, under Jordanian sovereignty at the time, the father of Tunisia’s independence openly criticized the strategies adopted by the Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world in their conflict with the Zionist movement and, since 1948, the State of Israel. He condemned the approach that characterized according to him the Arab leadership on the Palestinian matter: “As for the policy of the “whole or nothing”, it brought us to the defeat in Palestine and reduced us to the sad situation we are struggling with today.” Recalling his own attitude during the Tunisian quest for independence, when he accepted autonomy as a first step towards sovereignty, he lamented the fact “that in Palestine, on the contrary, the Arabs pushed away the compromise solutions. They refused the division [the 1947 partition plan] and the clauses of the White Paper. Then they regretted it.” He stressed the need to accept the UN resolutions, first of all the 181 one—the partition plan voted in November 1947 by the General Assembly – a *de facto* recognition of the international legitimacy to a Jewish sovereignty on Palestine¹⁷. His position of sober realism towards the physical existence of Israel triggered a diplomatic storm between Tunisia and the other members of the Arab league¹⁸. Following this, Israel developed an indirect policy in favor of Tunisia by trying to use Diaspora Jews for the purpose of reaching Bourguiba. For this purpose, in 1965-1966, Golda Meir’s asked the Israeli ambassador in Washington to encourage American Jews to visit Tunisia « as a

token of goodwill » towards an Arab state that was challenging Nasser leadership on the Israeli-Arab dispute. The articulation between tourism and the interactions with Diaspora Jews constitute since then two very important factors in the evolution of Israeli-Tunisian ties¹⁹.

- 24 Tunisia's special connections to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must also be understood through its Jewish heritage. In the early 1950's, the Jewish population was estimated around 95,000²⁰. Thousands of them emigrated in the following years to France and Israel. In June 1967, following the victory of the Israeli army in the Six-day war, revolts targeting the Jewish communities in took place in Tunis where 25 000 Jews lived at that time. The government's efforts to crackdown on the attackers didn't stop the acceleration of the emigration process. As a result, only 10 000 Jews have since remained in the country. The Tunisian authorities have always attached great importance on presenting the Jewish community as an integral part of the national identity. Public discourses traditionally underlined the necessity to dissociate the Tunisian Jews from the issue of Tunisia's stance on the Israeli-Arab conflict.
- 25 The importation of the conflict in Tunisia received fresh impetus after Yasser Arafat and more than 4,000 fighters and militants of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) found refuge in Tunisia after being expelled from Lebanon at the end of the summer 1982 during the Israeli invasion and blockade of Beirut. In its third exile in an Arab state, after Jordan and Lebanon, the Palestinian leadership crossed the Mediterranean Sea, under French escort, and settled in the Tunisian capital. The decision came with a cost for Bourguiba's country when in October the 1st 1985, eight Israeli jets bombed several PLO buildings in the Hammam al-Shatt neighbourhood, located in the south of the capital, killing dozens of Palestinians and Tunisians. Arafat escaped from the bombing but Israel hit again the Tunisian territory three years later, in April 1988, when a *Mossad* squad assassinated Abou Jihad²¹.
- 26 Following the signature of the 1993 declaration of principles between the Israeli government and the PLO, Israel and Tunisia took several steps enabling mutual recognition²². President Ben Ali, who succeeded Bourguiba in 1987, did not venture as far as Morocco during the Oslo peace process. The level of public dialogue fell short from what took place between King Hassan II and Israel. The Israeli delegation, headed by Prime Minister Itzhak Rabin, made a stop on September 14 1993 on the way back to Israel from the signing ceremony in Washington and Moroccan and Israeli leaders, like Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, met on several occasions. In Tunisia the contacts focused mostly on promoting Israeli tourism in Tunisia and facilitate the arrangement for visas .An Israeli Interest office opened in Tunis in 1996 and a Tunisian bureau was established in Tel-Aviv. Israeli citizens, especially those coming for the Ghriba pilgrimage in the Djerba peninsula could enter the Tunisian territory with their passports²³. Public contacts were severed after the outbreak of the Second *Intifada* in autumn 2000 but Israeli nationals continued to be authorized to visit Tunisia and so were travellers holding a passport with an Israeli stamp.
- 27 Now, Tunisia has been the starting point of the Arab spring. It is there than for the first time the massive mobilization of the population of an Arab state lead to the fall and departure of an authoritarian leader. Diplomats, journalists and researchers have focused on the major internal dynamics within the Tunisian society since 2011: emergence of political parties, challenges of building new institutions, the role of religion in the public sphere, etc. But, as emphasized in this paper, the Tunisian public opinion also addressed

international questions. The most urgent issues concerned immediate challenges at the border of Tunisia, such as a humanitarian and security crisis during and following the Libyan civil war, the NATO military intervention and the fall of Khadafi's regime. The relationship with France, the former colonial ruler, was also a sensitive issue, as illustrated by the demonstrations leading to the early departure of Boris Bouillon, the French ambassador in Tunis from February 2011 to August 2012. To what extent has the Palestinian question become an issue in the post-Ben Ali Tunisia?

- 28 Before tackling this question, it is worth noting that some European leaders established a parallel between the new political era in the Arab world and the resolution of the Palestinian question. Nicolas Sarkozy, France's President from 2007 to 2012, stressed the absence of hostile slogans against Israel as a positive factor in his judgement of the Arab springs. Inspired by French intellectual André Glucksmann, he highlighted the absence of any Israel-related slogans in the demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt²⁴. In a conference given in Paris at the end of the summer 2011, in front of all the French ambassadors he declared: "What were these young people saying, almost in unison? They weren't saying "Down with the West" or "Down with America," or even "Down with Israel." They were demanding freedom and democracy, respect and dignity. They showed that in our interconnected world, people have the same expectations on the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean"²⁵ He repeated this argument a few days later at the UN General assembly: "I want to tell the Israeli people, with deep and sincere friendship: Listen to what the young people of the Arab Spring are screaming. They are screaming, "Long live to freedom!" They are not crying, "Down with Israel." You cannot remain motionless when this wind of freedom and democracy is blowing through your region." He again put forward this argument in February 2012 at the annual dinner of the Representative Council of French Jewish Institutions.
- 29 The French president also stressed the absence of the Israeli question in the rhetoric of the demonstrators as a proof explaining that these events were not the Arab version of the Iranian Islamic revolution. What's more, David Cameron, Prime minister of the United Kingdom, at the UN general assembly in September 2011, described the Arab Spring as "a massive opportunity to spread peace » and a « challenge to the Israelis and Palestinians, to take the bold steps to come to the table and make lasting peace. » He added that "a key part of the Arab Spring is the right of Palestinians to have a viable state of their own, living in peace, alongside a safe and secure state of Israel. »²⁶
- 30 In the Tunisian case, the absence of hostile slogans against Israel during the demonstrations and its different political outcomes compared to the Islamic revolution of Iran, did not mean the absence of support to Palestinians.

Palestine as a lasting mobilizing cause in Tunisia

- 31 The National Constituent Assembly was elected on October 23, 2011, with a majority of *Ennahda*, the Islamic party, members. Its main role was to draft and adopt a new constitution.
- 32 The draft of the Tunisian constitution published in the spring 2012 was the first text of this kind emerging from a post-Arab Spring country. Interestingly enough, it did specifically mention the Palestinian issue, thus illustrating the fact that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict clearly remains very high in the public agenda of such a young democracy. Its preamble stated that Tunisia stands "with the peoples of the world;

achieving victory for the oppressed everywhere, for the people's right to self-determination, and for rightful liberation movements including the Palestinian Liberation Movement; and fighting all forms of discrimination and anti-human racism including Zionism;"²⁷

- 33 Zionism was labelled as racism, following the heritage of the 1975 United Nations General Assembly related resolution, which was revoked in 1991. To the best of the author's knowledge, this was the only direct reference to an external conflict explicitly mentioned in the draft constitution. It did not trigger specific reactions from the European Union or Member States' leaders. Yet, criticisms were voiced by the organization Human Right Watch. In a document pointing out what it considered as "serious flaws" in the text, the international non-governmental organization stated that " the draft constitution contains another article criminalizing any form of 'normalization' with 'Zionism and the Zionist state' which could lead to repressing various forms of peaceful expression and exchange with Israeli citizens."²⁸
- 34 The Constituent Assembly released a new draft on December 14, 2012, maintaining these articles. The concern was openly reiterated by HRW on January 22 2013, in a letter to the Tunisian National Constituent Assembly²⁹. The article concerning Israel were presented as potential threat to freedom of expression, Nevertheless, these articles still did not draw public criticisms from European leaders despite the actual coverage of this issue in the European and Israeli presses. Nothing compared to the European pressures on Spain can be found when it comes to Tunisia.
- 35 It is worth considering that the context surrounding this constitutional debate was tense. In January 2012, Ismayl Haniyeh, Hamas Prime Minister of Gaza, made a diplomatic tour in the Middle-East and North-Africa. In January 2012, he spent several days in Tunisia. He was greeted at Tunis Carthage international airport by a crowd of hundreds of who screamed "death to the Jews!", an event widely reported in the international press ³⁰
- 36 Another example on how heavily the Palestinian question resonates in Tunisia was indirectly highlighted by Choukri Belaïd's death. Shot in the streets of Tunis in February 2013, the lawyer was a fierce secular opponent of the party *Enahada* but also the head of the "anti-normalization" committee, a group devoted to the prevention of any contact between Tunisia and Israel. Belaïd's position shows the alliance between the Islamists and the Arab nationalist stream, fiercely opposed on all issues but on Israel.
- 37 The anti-Israel bill was eventually abandoned in the definitive version of the Constitution adopted in January 2014, but the preamble maintained a specific reference to the Palestinian question, stating that the Tunisian Republic supports "just liberation movements at the forefront of which is the Palestinian liberation movement". Sophie Bessis, a Franco-Tunisian historian and journalist, emphasized the importance of Bourguiba's legacy in the way different actors position themselves today on the conflict³¹. According to her, the outcome of the constitutional controversy can be seen as a victory of a pragmatic approach in the footsteps of Bourguiba's diplomacy: no peace treaty with Israel before the creation of a Palestinian state but the rejection of the maximalist approach combined with the need to defend Tunisia's essential economic interests, tourism, which means to continue to accept Israeli tourists.

Conclusion

- 38 The Tunisian situation towards Israel is unique. This Arab and Muslim country located far geographically from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is conserving a small Jewish community while showing a strong sense of solidarity towards the Palestinian cause. It is the only country of the 'Arab revolutions' that has been continuing successfully to implement a democratic and pluralist political agenda. As such, this case permits to rethink the study of the relations of the Arab world with Israel as well as the foreign policy of the EU. At the time of writing (Spring 2014), the debate on the degree of normalisation with Israel is going on in Tunisia. It focuses on the authorization or not for Israelis to visit the country. A majority seems to favour a formula which authorizes the entrance of Israeli tourists, for the sake of economic interests, yet without seeking to establish any relation at the official level with Israel.
- 39 If this were the case, for the first time, an Arab society would have decided the nature of its relation with Israel following an internal debate. As seen bellow, any attempt aiming at preventing future changes in the relation with Israel have been suppressed from the Constitution. The repetition of the Spanish scenario, in which total normalization results from a European collective pressure, does not seem realistic in this context.
- 40 Regarding the EU's relative silence on this issue, two hypothesis can be put forward as avenues for future research. The first would be that Europe is aware of its limited power outside of its frontiers and does not believe that it could force Tunisia to adopt a policy of diplomatic normalization with Israel while the Palestinian question remains unsolved. The second one concerns the evolution of the EU-Israel partnership in the light of the crisis of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Brussels has shown a growing dissatisfaction towards Israel's settlement policy in the West Bank by issuing in summer 2013 new guidelines concerning Israeli entities and their activities in the occupied territories.

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ABSTRACTS

The deep political transformations that have taken place in Tunisia since the overthrow of president Ben Ali in January 2011 have shaped a new framework when it comes to the diplomatic relations between Israel and Arab states. For the first time, a pluralistic Arab society, openly debates, through democratic institutions, on its diplomatic strategies regarding Israel. This article analyzes the interactions between Tunisia's internal transformations and the debate on the level of normalization with Israel. Post-1975 Spain is taken as an example where democratic transition, combined with European pressure, lead to normalization with Israel. The Tunisia case offers a complex on-going situation where the European Union seems to play a limited role.

Les profondes transformations politiques intervenues en Tunisie depuis le renversement du président Ben Ali en janvier 2011 créent une nouvelle configuration dans les relations diplomatiques entre Israël et les pays arabes. Pour la première fois, c'est une société arabe pluraliste, dotée d'institutions démocratiques, qui débat publiquement de ses stratégies à l'égard d'Israël. Cet article analyse les interactions entre les changements politiques internes de la Tunisie, mis en miroir avec le cas de l'Espagne post-franquiste, et les débats concernant une éventuelle normalisation avec Israël. Le cas tunisien offre une situation complexe et mouvante, face à laquelle l'Union européenne semble être en retrait.

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Mots-clés: Israël, Tunisie, Union Européenne, Relations diplomatiques, Transitions démocratiques

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