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Normative power Europe and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the EU's peacebuilding narrative meets local narratives

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ABSTRACT

This article conceives the EU's normative power in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a narrative that projects views of the international system, the EU's identity as a peacebuilder, and its positions on specific conflict issues. Highlighting the importance of local narratives as cultural filters, this article argues that a high degree of alignment of local narratives with key elements of the EU's normative power narrative facilitates positive images of the EU as a normative power in peacebuilding, whilst diverging local narratives tend to give rise to more critical views. Yet, the case of Palestine also shows that strong narrative alignment with the EU may encourage high expectations, resulting in critical views about inconsistencies between the EU's normative aspirations and its actual foreign policy conduct.

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1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) is frequently described as a normative power in peacebuilding that projects its own experience, norms, and values as a liberal peace project externally (Tocci 2008, Diez and Pace 2011, Richmond *et al.* 2011). The projection of the EU's normative power in peacebuilding has been particularly pronounced in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Harpaz 2007, Gordon and Pardo 2015, Persson 2017). The Israeli-Palestinian conflict constitutes a longstanding priority of the EU's foreign policy agenda that has been reaffirmed in the EU's Global Strategy of 2016 and the EU has dedicated considerable time and resources to address the conflict (Pardo and Peters 2009, Musu 2010, Müller 2012).

This article employs a narrative framework to the study of the EU's normative power in peacebuilding. As Diez and Pace (2007) have argued, the success of EU norm projection depends on how its discursive self-construction as a normative power in peacebuilding is shared by the parties to a conflict. Engaging more systematically with the discursive dimension of the EU's normative power, this article draws on strategic narrative theory (Miskimmon *et al.* 2014) to shed new light on the ways in which normative power is discursively constructed, projected and received.

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From the perspective of strategic narrative theory, the EU's self-image as a peace project – and its liberal peacebuilding norms and values – are incorporated in a broader peacebuilding narrative, which, in turn, is interpreted by external actors who receive this narrative. Specifically, we argue that the success of projecting the EU's normative power narrative in peacebuilding depends on the way core elements of this narrative – related to the “international system”, “EU identity”, and specific conflict issues resonates with the local narratives held by the parties to a dispute. Local narratives held by conflict-parties have long been identified as an important dimension of peacebuilding, revealing how they understand key political, social, cultural and historic aspects of their conflict (e.g. Mac Ginty and Firchow 2016). Local conflict narratives are also understood to provide a prism through which the parties to a dispute make sense of the peacebuilding approaches of external actors, with previous research also indicating the importance of national narratives for processes of international policy diffusion (e.g. Malone *et al.* 2017).

Core elements of the EU's normative power narrative may conform to and even reinforce related domestic narratives; but the EU's peacebuilding narrative may also conflict and compete with local narratives. We expect that inconsistent or conflicting narratives between the EU and the conflict parties can cause significant tensions, with third parties ignoring, rejecting or even resisting core elements of the EU's normative power narrative (e.g. Björkdahl *et al.* 2015). Conversely, positive resonance will likely be perceived in terms of shared or compatible meanings that facilitate positive views of the EU as a normative power. To assess the local reception of the EU's normative power narrative in peacebuilding empirically, we examine how core elements of the EU's construction as a normative power are perceived by local elites in the case of Israel and Palestine in light with their own local narratives. External perceptions have been identified in previous research as a key indicator to shed light on external reactions to EU narratives (Björkdahl *et al.* 2015, Chaban *et al.* 2017). At the same time, external perceptions of the EU are also of great relevance from a policy-perspective. Importantly, perceptions are considered to inform behaviour and the way local actors respond to EU peacebuilding practices (Nathan 2008, Elgström *et al.* 2018). The projection of the EU's normative power in peacebuilding has been particularly longstanding and pronounced with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Harpaz 2007, Gordon and Pardo 2015, Persson 2017). The Israeli-Palestinian conflict constitutes a strong priority of the EU's foreign policy agenda that has been reaffirmed in the EU's Global Strategy of 2016 and the EU has dedicated considerable time and resources to address the conflict (Pardo and Peters 2009, Musu 2010, Müller 2012). This makes it an illustrative case for studying EU normative power.

The article relies on the assessment of primary and secondary documents to establish the narratives of the EU as well as of the conflict parties. For the analysis of the conflict parties' external recognition of the EU's normative power narrative in peacebuilding it uses evidence from elite opinion responses gained from 46 interviews with members of the Israeli and Palestinian “elite” in the domains of politics, business, media, culture, and civil society. The interviews were conducted face-to-face on the basis of a questionnaire using predominantly open questions that were carried out in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Ramallah in 2016 and 2017.¹ The interview questions were related to information on local perceptions concerning the international system, the EU's international identity (including its coherence as a normative power and key underlying values) as well as perceptions of conflict issues, including of the positions taken by the EU.

The article proceeds as follows. It first develops the conceptual framework for exploring the EU's normative power through narrative projection and reception. Subsequently, it delineates the EU's normative power narrative in peacebuilding – based on the narrative elements of international “system”, EU “identity”, and conflict “issues”. The ensuing section explores the way in which the EU's normative power narrative resonates with the parties to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and provides an analysis of their EU-narrative. The conclusion summarises our main findings.

2. The discursive dimension of the EU's normative power: a narrative-based conceptual framework

The initial emphasis of the normative power Europe literature has been on the construction of a normative power Europe discourse that seeks to promote a common identity of the EU as an international actor (Manners 2002, Manners and Whitman 2003). The EU's normative power identity is understood to be based on the founding principles of European integration (set out in Art. 6 TEU), including liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law as well as on the unique institutional set-up of the EU (Manners 2002, p. 252). At the same time, research has taken an interest in the “power of normative power discourse” (Diez 2005; Diez and Manners 2007, p. 174), including in the way the EU's discursive self-construction resonates with third countries (Diez and Pace 2011). Building on this latter perspective, scholarship has looked at the articulation and promotion of the EU's normative power through means of public diplomacy and other strategic communication instruments (Manners and Whitman 2013, Rosamond 2014, Wagnsson and Hellman 2018). This highlights that normative power is not only understood as the construction of the EU's normative identity, but may also be purposefully employed to pursue the EU's influence in the world (see Del Sarto 2016).

The narrative framework employed in this article provides a novel perspective on the EU's discursive construction as a normative power in peacebuilding. Despite a so-called “narrative turn” in international relations (Roberts 2006, p. 703) – which has also been reflected in scholarship on EU foreign policy (Tonra 2011, Coelmont 2012, Chaban *et al.* 2017) – thus far only few efforts have been made to employ narrative theory in the study of the EU's normative power.² In our view this is unfortunate, as narrative theory offers considerable potential to facilitate a better understanding of the discursive construction, projection and external reception of the EU's normative power. Importantly, employing a narrative lens alerts us that normative power – and its associated norms and values – is projected through the articulation and communication of a broader story that involves “a rendering of events, actions, and characters in a certain way for a certain purpose” (Maan 2015, p. 1). The argument that EU's normative power is articulated in form of a narrative is not trivial, not least as it has been argued that narrative communication – as opposed to non-narrative forms of communication – is often especially persuasive in influencing social norms (e.g. Moran *et al.* 2013). This suggests that successfully projecting normative power is not only about the attraction of the EU's “normative model”, but also about the broader story through which this model is articulated and promoted.

To explore key elements of the EU's normative power narrative in peacebuilding we draw on key insights from the concept of “strategic narratives” (Miskimmon *et al.* 2014,

p. 2). Strategic narratives can be understood in terms of narrative construction, projection and reception. They serve as “a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics in an effort to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors” (Miskimmon *et al.* 2014, p. 2). Moreover, narratives are “put together in a plot in which there are causal relations between events” (Banerjee 1998, p. 193). Importantly, strategic narrative theory distinguishes between narratives about the international system, identity narratives, and issue narratives.

Narratives about the “international system” tell a story about how narrators view the constitution of the world of international politics (Miskimmon *et al.* 2014, p. 7). These narratives relate to the EU’s normative power discourse insofar as they portray the international environment in which normative power operates and the international conditions under which it can be successful. As we shall see below, the EU’s normative power narrative portrays an international system governed by a liberal order that is by and large conducive to the influence of the EU’s normative power. Identity narratives, in turn, are concerned with identities of actors in international affairs that are in a process of constant negotiation and contestation. As discussed above, the EU’s identity narratives are at the heart of the EU’s discursive self-construction as a normative power and its underlying norms and values. Conversely, “issue narratives” are used by political actors to influence specific issues. Here, the EU’s normative power discourse aims at facilitating shared meanings on key issues pertaining to a conflict and at normalising certain political positions by recourse to EU norms and values (see Persson 2017).

The narrative lens is also sensitive to the view that the EU’s normative power evolves in interaction with others, who receive and interpreted it through their own cultural filters (Kinnvall 1995; Manners 2002, Gordon and Pardo 2015, p. 416, Chaban *et al.* 2017, p. 1274, Malone *et al.* 2017). As observers have noted, European narratives are created, reproduced, upheld, justified and legitimised (Manners 2013, pp. 312–314, Manners and Murray 2016, p. 187) and become far more meaningful insofar as they are visible and corroborated “by their recipients both within the EU and in an international context” (Manners and Murray 2016, p. 199). From a narrative perspective, the success of the EU’s normative power not only depends on the way it is discursively constructed and projected, but also on how key components of the EU’s peacebuilding narrative are interpreted, shared, recognised or contested by the parties to a conflict (Todorov 1971, p. 39).

In terms of narrative reception, we consider key elements of local narratives of Israel and the Palestinians to function as important prisms through which the disputants view their conflict as well as the EU’s peacebuilding efforts. Focusing on local narratives of Israel and the Palestinians also shifts attention to the world views and realities of others, which have received insufficient attention in scholarship on EU foreign policy (Keukeleire and Lecoq 2018). Local narratives serve as vehicles through which the conflict parties’ respective versions of events, values, beliefs and positions on peacebuilding are produced, reproduced and transformed. They offer the conflict-parties’ own accounts of peace and security, which may compete with the peacebuilding models articulated by external actors (Khalidi and Samour 2011, Musliu and Orbie 2016). Simultaneously, local narratives interact with external peacebuilding narratives and scholars of conflict resolution consider efforts on the part of external actors to facilitate change in conflict stories – which often reveal deep-seated fears, perceived threats and past grievances that drive conflicts – as a way to shift relationships between the conflict-parties

(Ross 2002). In this view, the projection of the EU's normative power in peacebuilding also involves an effort to open up new opportunities for peace by persuading the conflict parties about the legitimacy and utility of the EU's peacebuilding model.

External perceptions of the EU and its peacebuilding narrative can be of considerable relevance for the EU's effectiveness in conflict resolution. If third countries disagree with core elements of the EU's peacebuilding narrative, it will be difficult for the EU to build the necessary trust and credibility that is understood as crucial for effective mediation (Kydd 2006). Yet, external perceptions of the EU are not static and may change over time. If successful, the projection of the EU's peacebuilding narrative can result in the construction of shared meaning and even in the transformation of local narratives, including in a greater alignment with the EU's peacebuilding narrative. Still, reconciling the EU's peacebuilding narrative with the narratives of conflict parties can be challenging, with conflicting narratives resulting in ignorance, refashioning rejection or resistance (see Campbell 1998, Musliu and Orbie 2016, Khalidi and Samour 2011). What is more, critical scholars of peacebuilding have warned that imposing international peacebuilding narratives in a top-down fashion may lead to the suppression of local voices and needs, which can have detrimental consequences for peacebuilding (e.g. Mac Ginty and Fircchow 2016).

To assess the reception of the EU's normative power narrative in peacebuilding empirically, we rely on interviews with Israeli and Palestinian elites. Elite perceptions have previously been employed as a useful technique to explore the "basis for external recognition", which serves as an important indicator for the EU's global influence (Elgström 2007, Chaban *et al.* 2017, p. 1274). Perception is understood here as the "result of the subjective or psychological cognition of the observer rather than the objective that is being observed" (Shiming 2010, p. 269) and they often trigger categorizations, with the focus here being on external images of the EU (Chaban and Holland 2014). We expect that inconsistent or conflicting narratives between the EU and the parties to the conflict can cause significant tensions, facilitating critical images of the EU as a normative power. Conversely, high alignment of local narratives – i.e. situations where key elements of the EU's peacebuilding narrative and its underlying assumptions, norms and principles are shared to a large degree by local narratives – can be expected to give rise to more positive images of the EU.

3. Normative power Europe: the EU's liberal peacebuilding narrative

Through its normative power narrative, the EU offers its own vision on how peace can be achieved and how the world can be made more prosperous and secure, informed by its history and understanding of international politics, and its role and identity as a foreign policy actor. The EU's normative power narrative on peacebuilding shows a high level of consistency between the different narrative components related to the international system, the EU's identity as a normative power and its narrative on specific conflict issues. At the level of the "international system", the EU's normative power narrative portrays the EU as a peacebuilder in a global environment in which multi-lateral cooperation, international institution like the United Nations (UN), and the respect for international law play a central role in facilitating cooperation and resolving conflicts in an increasingly connected, contested, and complex world (European Union 2016). The EU's strategic documents and communications frequently encourage cooperation within the UN system to

safeguard global public goods and address challenges that transcend national borders (e.g. European Union 2016, p. 8). Highlighting the interdependence among international actors, the success of the European integration project is understood to depend on a rule based global order, which is considered to be in the EU's own best interest as well as in the best interest of its international partners.

Simultaneously, the EU's system narrative also demonstrates a growing awareness that the EU's international and regional environments have changed since the 1990s and early 2000s. The EU's 2003 Security Strategy still formulated a bold transformative vision, most notably the ambition to promote a "ring of well governed countries" in the EU's Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods (European Council 2003). Conversely, the 2016 Global Strategy states that the European project is being questioned (European Union 2016, p. 7), both externally as well as internally through events like Brexit. And with respect to the European neighbourhood it highlights the need for "principled pragmatism" when it comes to projecting the EU's normative power in a region that is marked by considerable instability, the fragmentation of authority, and the proliferation of hard security crisis.

The EU's "identity narrative" portrays the EU as an actor united behind a common vision for peacebuilding, who should meet new global realities with confidence (European Union 2016, p. 5). The EU's identity narrative makes a strong point that core EU interests can only be served if it stands and acts together, united by a shared normative vision. EU unity – and the consistency of its policies – is considered to be crucial for preserving the enduring power of attraction of the EU's international identity (European Union 2016, p. 10). Simultaneously the EU is portrayed as a successful integration project (European Union 2016, p. 7) whose own experience of institutional cooperation and the peaceful resolution of conflicts is understood to serve also as an inspiration for peace, democracy and socio-economic development in other parts of the world (EEAS 2017). In peacebuilding, the EU's normative power narrative emphasises core liberal norms, such as liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law as well as general peacebuilding goals such as facilitating the construction of the liberal state, human security and prosperity as a way of building peace (e.g. Tocci, 2008, Council of the EU 2009, Richmond *et al.* 2011, Wagner, 2017). Key norms and peacebuilding objectives are often conceived as being positively related, or mutually reinforcing, as exemplified by the so-called "security-development" nexus (e.g. European Council 2003).

At the level of specific conflict issues, the EU's narrative promotes positions that build on its support for international law and multilateral institutions, good governance and socio-economic development (see also Khalidi and Samour 2011). The EU developed its position on the key issues pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a series of landmark declarations (see e.g. Müller 2013, Pardo and Peters 2012), based on the objective being a two-state solution with an independent, viable and contiguous Palestinian state living side-by-side with Israel. Favours a negotiated settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, the EU's positions on Israel's borders, the status of Jerusalem and Israel's settlements have been developed with close reference to international law, including UNSC Resolutions 242, 338, 1397 and 1515. In particular, the EU calls for Israel's withdrawal from the territory occupied in 1967 (with the possibility of minor modifications mutually agreed by the parties); considers Israel's settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem illegal under international law, and – including with regards to East Jerusalem – does not recognise any changes to the pre-1967 borders (EEAS 2018).

4. Normative power and local narratives: the reception of the EU's peacebuilding narrative in Israel and Palestine

Through its normative power narrative the EU projects its own vision of peacebuilding. Yet, conflicts such as the dispute between Israel and the Palestinians constitute contested arenas, marked by contradictory ideologies and narratives, as well as by ongoing power struggles among different international, regional and domestic players. This section establishes key elements of the local narratives of Israel and the Palestinians, which evolved over time and often in close interaction with key conflict dynamics; and it explores how these local narratives relate to the EU's peacebuilding narrative in terms of system narrative, identity narrative, and issue narrative. To be sure, among Israelis and Palestinians not everybody shares the same story and there is not one written history. This, however, does not mean that there is not a dominant story, or "master narrative" (Zerubavel 1995, p. 6) of the conflict, which will be delineated here in a basic form. Subsequently, this section explores how the EU's normative power narrative is perceived and interpreted by Israel and Palestinians in light of their individual local narratives.

4.1. Israel and the EU's normative power in peacebuilding

Israel's national narrative has developed through different stages since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. It is firmly embedded in a "Zionist narrative" that defines Israel as a Jewish state, emphasising religious and ethnic links between ancient Israelites and modern Israelis (Scham *et al.* 2013). At the centre of the Zionist narrative is the story of the return of the Jews to their historical homeland after 2000 years of exile, providing historical, theological, political as well as existential justifications related to pogroms and the experience of the Shoah for exclusive Jewish rights over the land (Vered and Bar-Tal 2016). Whilst important elements of the Zionist narrative are widely shared among Israel's political elite, there are also important differences between a more "hawkish" narrative traditionally embraced by Israel's political right and a distinct, thought partly overlapping, narrative embraced by Israel's left that is frequently described as "dovish".

At the "system level", Israel's national narrative depicts a small state, with limited resources, that since its establishment has been developing under constant threat, fighting several wars with hostile Arab neighbours. Israel's national narrative, which emphasises hard security issues, self-help, and power politics, differs notably from the EU's narrative of the international system that highlights the importance of multi-lateral institutions, international law, and cooperative solutions for the provision of common goods. In particular, safeguarding Israel's security and survival as a Jewish state in an adverse geopolitical environment is viewed to demand military strength, building coalitions with powerful military actors like the US and the internal mobilisation of the Jewish majority (Smootha 2002, p. 479). The nature of perceived security threats has changed over time, with Islamist extremisms, militant movements, terrorism and Iran's nuclear programme figuring prominently in Israel's contemporary security discourse. Conversely, global rules and multilateral institutions like the UN often enjoy little trust and are frequently portrayed as biased against Israel. While Israel's security-minded narrative portrays the international system as a place of power politics and conflict, the end of the Cold War and the launch of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process (1993–2000) have also given

rise to an alternative narrative mostly promoted especially by proponents of Israel's left-wing political leadership at that time. This narrative expressed a desire for greater Israeli integration in an expanding liberal world order as well as a vision for a peaceful Middle East based on regional integration (Peres 1993, Oren 2010, p. 201), displaying considerable proximity to the EU's narrative of international politics. Yet, since the crises of the peace process in 2000 this facet of Israel's narrative has significantly weakened.

At the level of identity, central challenges in the development of the Zionist narrative have been to reconcile Israel's constitution as both a Jewish state and a liberal democracy and to define Israel's territorial purpose (see Smoocha 2002, Oren 2010). These sensitive matters have been subject to considerable political and ideological contestation among Israel's political elite. Moreover, particularly key elements of the narrative of Israel's political right that dominates Israel's politics today – which traditionally embraces ethno-national views – also produced significant tensions with the EU narrative. Portraying Israel as a state for the Jews (e.g. when it comes to citizen rights of minorities), this narrative presents Israel with growing confidence as a politically and economically successful ethnocratic model (Horowitz 2017, p. 3). By contrast, the narrative of the Israeli left traditionally gives greater importance to humanistic, civil democratic values and Israel's status as a liberal democracy (Oren 2010, p. 193).

The narratives of Israel's political left and of the Israeli right also diverge with respect to key conflict issues, such as borders and the status of Jerusalem. The narrative of Israel's left has distanced itself from the claim to the whole of the historic land of Israel (including the territories occupied in 1967), accepting the "land for peace" formula established during the Oslo process and criticism related to post-1967 Israel. The early years of the Oslo process thus marked an era of considerable narrative alignment between Israel's left-wing political leadership at that time and positions embraced by the EU and other international actors, which also found expression in Israel's (implicit) acceptance of a negotiated two-state settlement as the preferable option for peace. The narrative of Israel's political right, in turn, traditionally promotes a territorial purpose that aims at renewing Israel's sovereignty over all the historic land of Israel, though during the early period of the Oslo peace process there have been short lived calls for territorial compromises.³ Simultaneously, Israel's political right promotes a narrative on Jerusalem that emphasises its character as the eternal, undivided capital of Israel.

This brief depiction of core elements of Israel's local narrative indicates important tensions and frictions with the EU's peacebuilding narrative, which intensified with the rise of the political right in Israeli politics. The considerable degree of narrative divergence also feeds back into Israeli elite perception of the EU as a normative power. Mirroring diverging narratives on the "international system", the EU's peacebuilding narrative is frequently perceived by Israel's political elite as being rooted in an overly optimistic view of the world that overstates the role of multilateral institutions and international law for dealing with conflict and crises. This translates in the image of the EU as a somewhat naïve, idealistic actor that fails to comprehend Israel's challenging security environment (politician).

Particular among the current political elite there is a strong sense of inconsistency between what is viewed as the EU's idealised image of the world and Israel's security environment. Against this backdrop, the legitimacy and relevance of the EU's normative power in peacebuilding is widely viewed skeptical, with the EU being described as an actor to "whom we [the Israelis] do not listen" (politician) or even as a "hostile body"

(politician). At the same time, intra-EU crises – such as Brexit or the rise of right-wing populism – are considered as symptomatic of a broader global trend marked by the resurgence of nationalism and a greater emphasis on state sovereignty. In this view, the EU's aspiration for a world order based on multilateral cooperation, cosmopolitanism, universal rights, and integration is in demise. Simultaneously, security related issues facing the EU – such as the terror attacks in Europe – nourish the hope that the EU would now begin to see the world more like Israel, or even come to see Israel more as a partner in fighting similar security challenges (politician).

Not only do Israeli elite perceptions testify of divergent views of the international system, they also reveal important disagreement with identity-based elements of the EU's normative power narrative and core norms the EU projects. Israel's political turn to the right – with its emphasis on ethno-national views and far reaching territorial claims – also becomes apparent in Israeli elite views that express strong disagreement with the EU model. For instance, a political representative stated that the EU, with its emphasis on liberal, civic democratic values, post-nationalism, open attitude to receive migrants from the Middle East does not fit "Israel's doctrine" (politician). In this view, the EU appears as an inward-looking actor that is fixated on its own model, whilst it lacks the capacity to understand the political realities of a country like Israel (politician).

Representatives of Israel's political elite also hold critical views concerning the EU's positions on specific issues of the conflict like borders and Jerusalem, with several interviewees expressing the view that the EU is biased towards the Palestinians. Moreover, there is a concern that the EU is too much focused on Israel's conflict with the Palestinians when it comes to the development of its bilateral relations with Israel. For instance, a political representative stated that "(...) the EU sees its relationship with Israel through the aspect of the conflict with the Palestinians (...). Everything is about the conflict, which causes a hostile opinion towards the EU" (politician). Simultaneously, in the eyes of representatives from Israel's political elite the EU's moral authority is also compromised by Europe's history of anti-Semitism and perceived double standards – with the EU being viewed to judge Israel more critically than other countries – with a political representative stating that the EU's involvement causes "disgust" among Israelis (politician). There is also a sense that the EU finds it increasingly difficult to meet its self-stated commitment to a value led foreign policy when dealing with critical challenges like the so-called migration crisis, with a representative noting that "it is comfortable to be noble when everything is good, but now there is a crisis" (politician).

Moreover, representatives of Israel's elite frequently contest the EU's self-representation as an actor unified by a coherent international identity and a common normative vision for peacebuilding. Members from Israel's elite across all the examined domains (politics, business, culture, media and civil society) frequently differentiated between the EU and its member states. EU member states are frequently differentiated in terms of being "pro-Israeli" or "pro-Palestinian". Moreover, political representatives often point to the rise of far-right parties in certain members states as a factor that demonstrates a lack of internal coherence between supranational EU institutions and individual member states. In conjunction with other developments like Brexit, this has repeatedly been interpreted as an indication for the weakening of the EU's liberal model and a return to nationalism in EU member states. As stated by a political representative, with the rise of right-wing populism in EU member states "nationalism is becoming more popular and human

rights are being shoved into a corner” (politician). Though there are important concerns about the rise of right-wing movements in the EU – especially about their anti-Semitic views and implications for Jewish communities in Europe – there is a perception that this development may also open up new possibilities for better mutual understanding and cooperation. Prominent views of right-wing parties in countries like the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland – some of which embrace strong ethno-nationalist views, including on issues like migration and the fight against (Islamist) terrorism, and are often critical of liberal EU institutions, norms and values – resonate with views embraced in the narrative of Israel’s political right. Israel’s ideological turn to the right – with its emphasis on ethno-national views and far reaching territorial claims – also becomes apparent in Israeli elite views that express strong disagreement with the EU model.

Conversely, more positive perceptions of the EU are found among representatives of Israel’s civil society and cultural elites and certain media outlets. Here, perceptions of the EU often express affinity with important elements of Israel’s left-wing narrative, which gives great importance to Israel’s constitution as a liberal democracy and the universal character of core values embraced by the EU. Expressing cultural proximity and common history, the EU is frequently identified as a positive normative model for conflict resolution as well as an integral part of a rule-based, liberal global order. In the words of a representative from civil society “the EU is the largest body that I feel that I share the same values. If we look today at the international trends, we can see that the EU remains the only body that has universal values” (civil society representative). Simultaneously, several members of civil society and the cultural elite expressed concerns about key challenges faced by the EU from within – including the rise of far-right populism, Brexit, and conflicts over immigration. In this view, these developments risk to further weaken the EU’s unity and undermine the influence of its model for conflict resolution that serves as a reference point for Israeli actors that share its underpinning liberal values.

4.2. Palestine and the EU’s normative power in peacebuilding

In important ways, the Palestinian narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been structured opposite to Israel’s Zionist narrative, emphasising the Palestinians’ continued historic presence in the land of Palestine.⁴ This historic continuity has been challenged by the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 – known among Palestinians as “Al Nakba” (disaster, catastrophe) – as well as the 1967 war that resulted in Israel’s occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. The Palestinian national narrative is marked by an ambiguous relation with the international community. Palestinians have a long history of being subject to foreign domination and international power politics, marked by the British mandate (1920–48), events like the 1947 UN partition plan for Palestine, and later domination by Israel. Yet, after the Arab defeat in the 1967 war, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) increasingly considered engagement with the international community an important element of the struggle for Palestinian liberation.

Early examples of internationalising the Palestinian struggle include former PLO chairman Yasser Arafat’s first address to the UN General Assembly in 1974, the placement of the Palestinian question on the agenda of the UN General Assembly the same year, and the UN General Assembly’s recognition of the PLO as the legitimate representative of all Palestinian people in 1975. These events paved the way for the emergence of a Palestinian

narrative that increasingly portrayed multilateral institutions like the UN and international law as important mechanisms in the strife for liberation, as exemplified more recently by the Palestinian 2012 bid for UN membership (Burgis-Kasthala 2014).

The internationalisation of the Palestinian struggle and its recourse to international institutions and international law moved the Palestinian national narrative closer to the EU's peacebuilding narrative. This process of narrative alignment was also visible with respect to the identity dimension of the EU's normative power narrative, as well as with respect to specific conflict issues. Whilst the Palestinian narrative of national liberation initially promoted the liberation of all of the land of historic Palestine, it experienced a notable transformation during the Middle East peace process. In the framework of the 1993 Oslo accords, the PLO recognised Israel's right to exist in peace and security; whilst it gained Israel's recognition as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people in return. Henceforth, the Palestinian narrative shifted towards a an internationally accepted narrative on state sovereignty (Khalili 2007) that emphasised territorial separation – on the basis of the pre-1967 borders and a negotiated solution to the question of Jerusalem – as a central condition for the realisation of the Palestinians' national ambitions. The PLO's recognition of Israel on the basis of its 1948–67 borders – despite the historic injustice the 1948 war implied for the Palestinians – was incorporated in the Palestinian narrative as a “historical compromise” that implied significant identity costs (Scham *et al.* 2013, p. 9).

Simultaneously, the Palestinian narrative has shown a progressive alignment with liberal peacebuilding doctrines, which were heavily incentivized by the international donor community. Following the launch of the Oslo peace process, the newly established Palestinian Authority (PA) increasingly incorporated liberal peacebuilding principles such as good governance, economic reform, and a rule of law discourse in its official narrative and policies (Müller and Zahda 2018). This development reached a peak with the PA's reform policy of “Fayyadism” (2007–13), which aimed at promoting Palestinian statehood through a liberal reform programme (Danin 2011, p. 94; Khalidi and Samour 2011; Müller and Zahda 2018). Whilst over recent years the Palestinian narrative of gaining statehood through liberal institution building has been challenged by the stalled peace process and democratic backsliding in the PA, it has remained a prominent theme in the PA's public elite discourse.

The narrative of the Palestinian Authority – which since the launch of the Oslo peace process has been heavily dependent on the resources and support of international donors – displays a strong degree of alignment with the EU's peacebuilding narrative. This high degree of narrative alignment is also reflected in Palestinian elite perceptions of the EU as a normative power. In terms of the EU's system narrative, Palestinians elites from all studied domains (politics, business, media, culture, and civil society) generally relate positively to the Union's emphasis on multi-lateral institutions and international law as key mechanisms for conflict resolution. For many interviewees, the EU's vision of a rule based international order provides an important counter balance to the power politics of influential external players like the US – who are considered a close ally of Israel. Moreover, the EU's peacebuilding model is frequently considered to provide a framework for protecting the rights and aspirations of the Palestinians as the weaker party in a conflict with Israel that is marked by a stark asymmetry in power. Simultaneously, there is a widespread concern that the liberal, rule based global order promoted by the EU is weakening,

which is frequently attributed to events emerging powers like China as well to crises within the EU. Moreover, Palestinian elite perceptions reveal a gap between the support for a rule-based, multilateral international order that is promoted by the EU, on the one hand, and an international political reality that is characterised by the primacy of national sovereignty and crude power politics, on the other hand. For instance, while many Palestinian elite representatives stated their aspiration that state sovereignty should be exercised under universal principles like human rights and the respect of international law, it has also been noted that in reality “Israel’s sovereignty is much more considered than the human rights of Palestinians” (civil society representative).⁵

Their high degree of alignment with the EU’s liberal peacebuilding paradigm is, furthermore, reflected in the perceptions of Palestinian elites on core issues related to the EU’s identity as a normative power. In the domain of peacebuilding, the EU is widely associated with positive values such as diversity, openness, democracy, and human rights. And many interviewees consider it as a legitimate model for conflict resolution and for defending Palestinian rights. For instance, representatives from the different domains of the Palestinian elite frequently expressed their hope for a strong EU involvement in conflict resolution, especially in terms of upholding international law and protecting Palestinian rights. Moreover, the EU is appreciated for the position it takes on specific conflict issues, including its respect for pertinent UN resolutions, positively noting that the EU “pioneered” the two-state solution and that it “pushed for it since the Venice declaration” (politician). The EU’s peacebuilding narrative clearly raises high hopes and expectations among Palestinian elites, who express their desire for a decisive, more far reaching EU involvement, including efforts to prevent Israel from building settlements, the decision to recognise a Palestinian state, or steps to hold Israel accountable for violations of human rights.⁶

At the same time, the hopes and aspirations generated by the EU’s peacebuilding narrative give rise to a profound sense of frustration about what is viewed as a lack of moral courage, or willingness, on the part of the EU to live up its peacebuilding rhetoric. Whilst particular political representatives also show a certain understanding of political constraints faced by the EU, many members of Palestinian civil society and cultural institutions consider the EU’s normative power rhetoric as a central yardstick according to which they judge its performance in peacebuilding. Hence, there is a widespread tendency to contrast the high aspirations associated with the EU’s peacebuilding rhetoric with the daily realities of Israel’s occupation as it is experienced by the Palestinians on the ground. Consequently, the EU appears as an “underutilized power” (politician) or even hypocritical actor that merely talks about democratic principles, human rights and the respect for international law, whilst it then fails to take meaningful action to defend the rights of Palestinians. As a Palestinian business representative stated, in the EU “there is good statements, but we are fed up with these statements, we need actions on the ground” (business representative). The contrast between the EU’s potential as a major economic player and large political bloc, on the one hand, and the perceived weakness of its actual policy conduct, on the other hand, has been described with the metaphor of an “elephant on chicken legs” (civil society representative). Critical perceptions of the EU are further nourished by cases where the EU is viewed to act inconsistent with its own principles and values. The EU’s decision to boycott the Hamas-led government that emerged from the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections is a frequently stated example, even among some of the interviewed

members of the Fatah dominated PA that competes with Hamas in a domestic struggle for power. For instance, a PA representative described the EU's decision to boycott Hamas as "short sighted", arguing that it led to a significant worsening of the situation in Palestine (politician). Moreover, there is also criticism about the way individual EU member states have responded to the refugee crises, which is seen as further evidence for a failure to live up to EU values and international commitments.

Evidently, the EU's normative power narrative evokes great expectations, not least as the promise of liberal peacebuilding has also been amplified by the narrative of the Palestinian leadership. This has resulted in a certain sense of betrayal, where the Palestinians show a great readiness to buy into the EU's peacebuilding model, but are subsequently let down by an EU that fails to act upon its own principles and values. The EU's perceived inability to live-up to its normative power image also reinforces negative perceptions of the EU's coherence as a normative power. Rather than portraying the EU as a unified actor driven by a joint normative vision for peacebuilding, the EU is frequently considered as a complex, composite actor in which EU institutions and different EU member states pursue their own agendas. At the level of EU member states, frequent distinctions are made between EU countries that, for political and historic reasons, are biased towards Israel and countries that are more willing to defend European values and Palestinian rights. At the same time, there is a considerable concern that the proponents of a normative power EU – which is committed to the respect for international law and the protection of Palestinian (human) rights – are being weakened within the EU. Events like Brexit, the rise of the far-right or political contestation surrounding the EU's management of the financial crisis and the migration crisis not only feed into the image of the EU as a disaggregated actor. They also give rise to real concerns that a politically more divided EU will become even less committed to its normative vision. In particular, there is a strong concern that the rise of far-right parties in EU countries – which are often viewed as close ideological allies of Israel – will further weaken the EU's commitment to its normative power approach in peacebuilding.

5. Conclusion

Exploring the EU's normative power through a narrative perspective shifts attention to the broader discursive context in which normative power operates. As this article has shown, external perceptions of the EU's image in peacebuilding significantly depend on the local resonance of the EU's broader normative power narrative. Local elite narratives function as cultural filters that shape perceptions of the EU's normative power in significant ways. Core elements of the EU's normative power narrative – related to the international system, the EU's identity as a peacemaker, and key conflict issues – are interpreted differently by Israel and Palestinian representatives, whose local narratives are aligned to diverging degrees with the EU's peacebuilding narrative.

A high degree of alignment between core aspects of the local and EU narratives are often giving rise to positive perceptions of the EU. This has been the case for important perceptions held by Palestinian elites about the EU's peacebuilding model, but also for perceptions of representatives from Israeli civil society and culture that frequently identify with narrative positions of the Israeli left. Conversely, diverging narratives have frequently given rise to critical perceptions of the EU's normative power, which has been particularly pronounced with respect to the narrative of Israel's political right. Though Israel is widely

seen as a Western democracy that is democratic and liberal within its borders (despite recent concerns about democratic backsliding), Israel's political right disagrees with core aspects of the EU's peacebuilding model and often does not consider the EU as a credible, successful and legitimate model for peacebuilding.

However, close alignment with the EU's normative power narrative in peacebuilding is not a guarantee for a positive perception of the EU's role in peacebuilding. As the case of Palestine shows, the EU's self-promotion as a normative power in peacebuilding can raise high hopes and expectations that the EU subsequently finds difficult to meet. Whilst members of the Palestinian elite generally view the EU's peacebuilding model in positive terms, there is considerable disappointment with the EU's foreign policy behaviour that often lacks behind expectations. Finally, this article also points to perceptions both within Israel and Palestine of significant challenges to the EU's normative power narrative in peacebuilding, which is being tested both by internal developments like Brexit and illiberal tendencies in some member states as well as externally by a liberal order that has increasingly come under strain.

Notes

1. Following Mills elites are understood as members of society who are "in positions to make decisions having major consequence" (Mills 1956, p. 3). In Israel the interviews involved representatives of politics (5), business (5), media (5), culture (5), and civil society (5). In Palestine it involved representatives of politics (5), business (4), media (2), culture (5), and civil society (5). The interviews are cited with reference to the domain an interviewee represents.
2. An early exception has been a chapter by Martin (2011) focusing on the EU's normative power narrative in the domain of human security.
3. During the Oslo peace process (1993–2000) Israel's right-wing Likud party moderated its territorial claims. Yet, with the crisis of the peace process it later returned to its original position insisting on the right of the Jewish people to the "whole land of Israel" (Shlaim 2015).
4. The Palestinian narrative portrayed here relates to the discourse of the PLO and the PA. Conversely, narratives of the Islamist Hamas movement – whose discourse traditionally centres on an Islamic national concept and the armed struggle for liberation (e.g. Sadiki 2010) – are not subject of this inquiry.
5. Among representatives from civil society there is also a concern that international attention for Palestine is decreasing, not least due to the proliferation of other pressing humanitarian crises.
6. At times, the desire for a greater EU involvement is also justified in terms of history, arguing that key European powers played a role in the creation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, resulting in a historic responsibility for contributing to its resolution.

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