

# An Evaluation within the Context of the European Union Foreign Policy: Special Case of the Arab-Israeli Conflict

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## Abstract

The EU's foreign policy in the Middle East is characterized by regional cooperation and partnerships. Given the strategic importance of the Middle East, the EU has paid particular attention to Arab-Israeli conflict. The formulation of the EU's foreign policy in the Middle East began in the 1970s and has evolved to emphasize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In its security strategies, EU has identified the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a strategic priority for the Union and has committed to allocating resources to help achieve this solution. Following the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the EU launched its first joint actions and statements in the region and has since sought to play an active role in the Middle East Peace Process, issuing numerous declarations and statements. In the context of ongoing conflict in the Middle East, the European Union has advocated a two-state solution as a mechanism to promote peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In its efforts to promote stability and peace in the region, the EU has supported the Palestinian right to self-determination, provided financial assistance to Palestinian people, and sought to maintain balanced relations with other Middle Eastern countries, particularly through commercial cooperation. The EU has sought to present itself as a normative force in its foreign policy, aiming to position itself as a catalyst for conflict resolution through its advocacy of democracy, human rights, and rule of law. On the other hand, the EU has also sought to ensure stability in the Middle East and address the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts in order to protect its own interests and reduce threats to migration, border security, energy, and market opportunities. As a result, EU appears to be in an interest-norm dilemma regarding the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, which constitute the focal point of its foreign policy in the region.

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## Keywords

Middle East, Foreign Policy, EU, Israel, Palestine

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## 1. Introduction

The geographic area of the Middle East holds significant importance in the foreign policy of the European Union (EU), owing to its strategic location, closeness to the European continent, and abundant energy resources. Since the 1970s, the EU has pursued the establishment of bilateral relations and dialogues with the nations in this region, particularly following the formation of the European Political Cooperation, and has sought to define these relationships through the commercial agreements it has entered into.

As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict emerged from the broader turmoil in the Middle East, it became evident that the European Union's engagement in the region also concentrated on these disputes. Since its inception, the EU has championed the principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, specifically seeking to integrate these values within the context of the conflicts affecting the area. In pursuit of this objective, the EU has identified its ultimate aim as the establishment of these principles on a firm foundation, emphasizing the importance of its economic and commercial relationships with Middle Eastern nations. Furthermore, the EU perceives its own norms and values as instrumental in fostering stability throughout the region (Orhan, 2018).

The European Union aims to bring an end to the Arab-Israeli conflicts, internal strife, and active hostilities in the Middle East, particularly within the Israeli-Palestinian context, by fostering peace in the region and addressing the threats it perceives. Among the primary concerns are the potential disruption of economic and commercial relations, the jeopardy to crucial energy supplies, the risk of losing access to the Middle Eastern market, the possibility of internal unrest and chaos in Europe resulting from regional instabilities and uprisings, the influx of migrants to the continent, and the consequent threats to border security (Orhan, 2018).

The aim of this research is to uncover the pragmatic interests of the European Union by examining the geography of the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli Wars through the lens of its established principles and norms. This study endeavors to elucidate the "principled pragmatic" behaviors exhibited by the EU in its foreign policy concerning the Middle East. In articulating the principled pragmatic stance of the EU's foreign policy in this region, which constitutes the central thesis of the study, the arguments presented will draw upon both realist and idealist theories, while also employing the English School Theory as a means of reconciliation.

In the study, it was examined which of the realist and idealist theories would explain the EU's Middle East foreign policy better, and as a result of seeing that these theories were inadequate in explaining the EU's Middle East foreign policy,

the English School theory was used as a conciliatory perspective. The fact that the realist theory focused only on interests and pragmatic concerns, and the idealist theory focused only on norms, ethics and moral values, showed that these two basic international relations theories were inadequate in explaining the EU's Middle East foreign policy. The English School Theory, on the other hand, is a middle-ground approach between realism and idealism, and therefore presents a conciliatory perspective on the subject.

The initial section of the study will elucidate key concepts pertinent to the European Union's Middle East policy, including foreign policy, normative power, pragmatism, and principled pragmatism, which serves as the central thesis of this research and is integral to the EU's global strategy. Furthermore, an analysis of the EU's foreign policy within the region will underscore the significance of principled pragmatism, bolstered by the theoretical frameworks of realism and idealism in international relations.

In the second part of the study, the EU's foreign policy will be evaluated and the Union's approaches to the Middle East will be examined. In this part, while discussing the EU's foreign policy, its norms and values will be mentioned, and it will be conveyed that the EU tries to form its foreign policy in the region by instrumentalizing its own principles. In the EU's relations with the Middle Eastern countries, the declarations it has published, the peace processes it has been involved in, the European Neighborhood Policy and the Union for the Mediterranean will be discussed. In addition, this section will address the Arab-Israeli issue in a historical context.

In this introductory section of the study, it is useful to briefly touch on the history of the Arab-Israeli conflicts, the state of the international conjuncture in the mentioned period, and the process of the Middle East's inclusion in the EU's foreign policy. With its collapse, the Ottoman Empire lost its sovereignty over the Palestinian territories, and Palestine came under the mandate and protection of Britain. Israel was established in 1948 as a result of the Balfour Declaration, which was made upon the advice of the British government in 1917, and it was decided that a Jewish state should be established in the Palestinian territories. The Arab-Israeli Wars began with the establishment of the State of Israel in the Palestinian territories, which are important for the three Abrahamic religions and have a deep culture and history. Four major wars took place between Arab countries and Israel in 1947, 1956, 1967, and 1973, and these wars did not remain at the regional level and over time turned into an international crisis (Ediz, 2021). The Arab-Israeli Wars, which took place during the Cold War, became a global crisis and were intensified by the bipolar structure that existed in the international conjuncture. In the world order, where the USA and the USSR were the representatives of this bipolar system, the parties pursued policies supporting Arab countries and Israel and caused events that would change the course of the conflicts (Ediz, 2021).

Conversely, the European Union, initially established through economic integration, has evolved into a significant participant in the unrest affecting the Mid-

dle East, with its structure progressively shifting towards political integration. Prior to the oil crises of the 1970s, the involvement of EU member states in the Arab-Israeli Wars was noted, albeit not collectively but rather within a limited scope. For instance, in 1956, Israel regarded the Soviet Union's military support for Egypt as a direct threat, leading it to declare war on Egypt with backing from England and France, culminating in the Suez Crisis. Until the 1970s, the EU lacked a comprehensive foreign policy concerning the Middle East; however, from that point onward, it sought to formulate a unified foreign policy in the region and endeavored to engage in the peace process through various declarations and statements. Thus, it can be concluded that the Middle East began to occupy a prominent position within the framework of the common foreign policy that the EU was attempting to establish during this era.

The initiation of this common foreign policy marked a significant advancement in the European Union's relations with Arab nations and Israel, particularly within the commercial sphere. The third and final section of this study will address the EU's commercial interactions with both Arab countries and Israel, alongside its stance on Palestine and its policies regarding the region. The EU has established robust commercial ties with countries in the region, particularly concerning energy supply and the Middle Eastern market, which holds considerable importance for the continent, while also focusing on pragmatic interests. Relations between the EU and Palestine have been influenced by the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts and the two-state solution framework promoted by the EU. Humanitarian aid has been the foundation of the EU's relations with Palestine, as it has sought to enhance its position on Middle Eastern policies and the Arab-Israeli conflicts by demonstrating its principled approach and reflecting its own norms and values.

The examination of the European Union's approaches to the Arab-Israeli conflict will be conducted through the lenses of realism and idealism, both of which are significant theories within the field of international relations. This analysis, which will be presented in the concluding section of the study, aims to illustrate that the EU engages in foreign policy within this region in a manner that balances principled ideals with pragmatic concerns, utilizing the tenets of realism and idealism. Furthermore, the final section will introduce the English School, which selectively integrates beneficial elements from both realist and idealist theories. This approach will outline a new trajectory for the study of the EU's foreign policy, employing an eclectic framework that draws upon these two contrasting paradigms and presenting it as a conciliatory strategy.

From a pragmatic standpoint, the EU's strategy regarding the conflict region is designed to prioritize its own interests, particularly in relation to energy, the market dynamics of the Middle East, trade relations, partnerships, migration, and border security. Conversely, while the EU formulates its foreign policy in the region by considering factors such as energy, market power, partnerships, trade relations, migration, and border security, it is also evident that its approach is shaped by its

own principles and norms, which are influenced by idealistic indicators. These principles and norms primarily encompass the recognition of Palestine's right to self-determination, the provision of financial assistance to Palestinians, and a central role in the Middle East Peace Process that arose from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and within the framework of the Middle East Quartet (European Union External Action, 2021).

## 2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Conceptual Framework

In the analysis of the EU's foreign policy concerning the Arab-Israeli Wars, it is essential to elucidate three specific concepts. These concepts will facilitate an examination of the EU's policies in the region through both realist and idealist lenses: foreign policy, normative power, and pragmatism.

In addition, since it is argued in the study that the EU has an interest-norm dilemma in its Middle East foreign policy and in the specific example of the Arab-Israeli conflicts, it was necessary to explain the concept of principled pragmatism that depicts this dilemma.

#### 2.1.1. Foreign Policy

Foreign policy, as articulated in Christopher Hill's seminal definition, encompasses the entirety of attitudes exhibited by participants within the international system during official interactions. Nevertheless, the notion of foreign policy is predominantly applied within the framework of inter-state relations. George Modelski characterizes foreign policy as "a system of activities developed by communities to alter the conduct of other states and to adjust their own actions to the international context.

Another classical definition of foreign policy was put forward by Walter Carlsnaes. According to Carlsnaes, foreign policy is the directing of actions expressed in the form of clearly stated goals to targets, conditions and actors—state or non-state—that are beyond the legitimacy that is desired to be influenced. With the increase of globalization, the facts that limit the state have also increased. However, people have also started to expect the state to reduce the effects of globalization. Therefore, while the parties that strengthen the state's position as the main actor in the eyes of the public have emerged with globalization and interdependence, on the other hand, the freedom of the state to act as it wishes has been restricted, and its structure and functioning have become more questionable. In this new international order, the fact that governments see other actors as threats not only causes insecurity for the state in question, but also creates an effect for other actors in the international system. The conclusion to be drawn from here is that actors who act like states but have a supranational structure outside of states in the international order also have foreign policies and have serious effects on each other. This situation brings to light the fact that the concept of foreign policy can be applied to non-state actors (Sönmezoğlu & Erler Bayır, 2014).

While seeking answers to the questions of what the concept of foreign policy is, who implements it and how it is implemented, it needs to be explained based on empirical examples. Following the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in May 2021, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell called for an end to the escalation of tensions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the deaths of civilians, but stated that the authority to put pressure on Israel lies with the US. Following this statement by Borrell, questions arise regarding the EU and its foreign policy. What is the EU's stance in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? What does the High Representative represent? Do the High Representative's statements provide clues about the Union's foreign policy? Does the emphasis on human rights in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the statement that the authority to "pressure", which can also be perceived as hard power, lies with the US indicate that the EU stands in a balance of normative power and pragmatic stance in its foreign policy? Such critical questions are a tool for generating inferences about what foreign policy is, who makes it, and how it is implemented.

### **2.1.2. Normative Power**

Each issue that is tried to be explained with normative values deals with the ethical dimension of international relations and tries to explain the discipline with broader meanings and interpretations. Normative theorists think that all political and social problems should be solved by associating them with values. In fact, the essence of normativity is to seek answers to the questions of "what should be-what should be done" rather than "what is happening-what is being done". In other words, normativity focuses on ideals rather than realities.

The most important phenomenon underlying the emergence of the discipline of international relations has been war. Particularly, war situations in which human values and universal norms are disregarded are among the fundamental issues that normative thought focuses on. The reasons for the emergence of wars, what their consequences will be, the moral dimensions of the state's inclusion of its citizens in war, the right of individuals and even a nation to self-determination, and many other issues contain normative concerns.

Manners' famous article from 2002 has significantly influenced the discussions on the role of the EU in international politics (Diez, 2013). The normative power status mentioned here is a point that focuses on universal values such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law, separate from economic and military hard power policies. According to Manners, one of the important points to consider is that the EU cannot be a military or civilian power only because it has a different structure from other actors. According to him, this intellectual and abstract power should be explained through values, actions, effects and results (Diez, 2013).

Manners identifies normative power with its principles and values, in addition to having the same values as the UN system, and being based on fundamental texts such as the Helsinki Final Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which are specific to Europe. An actor with normative power must be persuasive against other actors by reinforcing his own norms and values with actions.

However, the mechanism of normative power requires carrying out these actions diplomatically without resorting to coercive means. In other words, being a normative power requires creating a concrete effect and awareness without remaining solely on a bureaucratic basis. Arguing that normative power should be holistic, Manners' arguments have brought to the agenda the discussions of the 'security-democracy dilemma' in which the EU is a normative power as well as the EU's status as a normative power.

In addition to the ideas that argue that the normative aspect of the EU is dominant, as in Manners's thoughts, there are also pragmatic approaches that prioritize actors defending their own interests, even at a minimum level, due to the anarchic structure of the international system. In order to make sense of the EU's pragmatic attitudes, the concept of pragmatism needs to be clarified after the concept of normative power.

### 2.1.3. Pragmatism

Pragmatism is a philosophical tradition that, in a very broad sense, reveals that knowing the world cannot be separated from action within it ([Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2021](#)). According to this definition, which clearly reveals a realistic perspective, it is argued that no fact or event in the world can be considered separate from a concrete action. William James, one of the important representatives of pragmatism, states that a pragmatist is "a person who moves away from fixed principles, closed systems, and so-called absolutes and origins, and turns towards concreteness and adequacy, facts, action and power." This general idea has become open to remarkably rich and sometimes contradictory interpretations.

According to pragmatism, it is argued that all philosophical concepts should be tested with scientific experiments, and that a claim is true if and only if it is useful ([Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2021](#)). Pragmatism is focused on the fruits and facts given at the end rather than the beginnings and principles. In pragmatism, the goal is based on the necessity of what has occurred, is found or will be found to be connected to reality. Therefore, in pragmatism, ideas, concepts or philosophical thoughts are considered in terms of their usable results rather than their internal consistency. When taking a subject into consideration, pragmatism examines which situations are useful for guiding people and which ones are best suited to every part of human life ([Karadaş, 2020](#)).

In order to make the situation here more understandable, it would be appropriate to refer to Kenneth Waltz, an important representative of neo-realism. Waltz, who talks about the wisdom of anarchy at length in his work *Theory of International Politics*, argues that the primary goal of all actors in the international system is to maintain their own existence ([Waltz, 2015](#)). The situation of non-state actors in particular here makes Waltz's claim even more meaningful. According to Waltz, international organizations serve two basic purposes: the first is to work towards their founding purposes, and the second is to survive in an anarchic system. The first purpose always serves the second purpose ([Waltz, 2015](#)). These findings, put forward by Waltz, show that the prerequisite for any actor or



individual who emerges as a normative power to use this power effectively is to be able to continue to exist. One of the prerequisites for continuing to exist is not to stray from pragmatism.

Although the EU is shown as an example of an idealistic view and has international norms and values in its founding philosophy, the realistic side of the coin is that the EU consists of nation-states that will not want to compromise their national interests. This situation determines the EU as a force that pushes it towards an interest-norm balance in its foreign policy. This situation is extremely important, especially in terms of foreign policy stance. The interest-norm balance covers the paths that the EU walks with thorny covers in order to be present in various regions and to be effective in those regions. Making the EU a playmaker actor in foreign policy without compromising on EU values is probably a situation that the realist school, which insists on hard power and the ongoing insecurity in the international system, will see as a dream.

The concept of pragmatism, in addition to having quite deep meanings philosophically, will be tried to be detailed in this study within the framework of the specific example determined, the EU's foreign policy, due to this interest-norm balance mentioned above, within the framework of "principled pragmatism" (Cebeci, 2018), which is the EU's strategy. An actor's pragmatic behavior and at the same time the desire to act principled has become a situation that needs to be discussed specifically in the EU, together with the interest-norm balance mentioned. The EU's principled pragmatism approach has come into being before, but its most obvious example was in its global strategy published in June 2016. This document mentions a principled pragmatism that has spread to the EU's foreign policy in the following years (Shared Vision Common Action: A Stronger Europe, 2016).

#### **2.1.4. Principled Pragmatism**

Principled pragmatism is a philosophical type of pragmatism. This approach adopts the basic principles of pragmatism while also emphasizing the importance of certain principles in ethical and moral evaluations (Colombo, 2021). When making an assessment of the correctness of an action or thought, principled pragmatism focuses on the basic idea of pragmatism, that is, the usefulness, utility and practical consequences of an idea or behavior. While focusing on these consequences, it makes progress by taking ethical values into account (Colombo, 2021).

In principled pragmatism, in addition to utilitarianism, that is, practical benefits, basic moral values such as honesty, fair behavior, and respect are also taken into account. In other words, it is important to consider whether an action or thought is in accordance with ethical values as well as whether it provides benefits. In this respect, principled pragmatism differentiates pragmatism from being an approach focused solely on functionality (Colombo, 2021). Principled pragmatism represents a form of pragmatism combined with utilitarianism (utilitarian ethics) or other moral approaches. It aims to provide a balance by prioritizing both practical benefits and giving importance to moral principles.



The European Union's security and foreign policy is fundamentally shaped by a non-traditional understanding of threats, distinguishing it from more militarized global actors. Rather than prioritizing conventional military aggression, the EU identifies regional instability—particularly in its southern and eastern peripheries—as the primary challenge to its security. Such instability often generates irregular migration flows, energy insecurity, terrorism, and organized crime, all of which are perceived as threats to the Union's internal cohesion and normative order. This perspective is reflected in key strategic documents such as the European Security Strategy (2003) and the EU Global Strategy (2016), both of which stress the importance of addressing fragile states and regional crises as security priorities. A concrete example of this approach is the EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2023, which links €1 billion in EU financial assistance to cooperation on curbing irregular migration, while also including provisions for economic support, renewable energy partnerships, and civil society development. This agreement illustrates the EU's dual strategy: securing pragmatic interests such as border management and regional stability, while upholding normative commitments to economic development, democratic governance, and regional partnership. However, this approach is often complicated by divergent national interests within the EU. Member states vary significantly in how they prioritize threats, with some emphasizing securitized approaches focused on deterrence and containment, while others advocate for a more holistic, values-driven engagement. This divergence influences the coherence and consistency of EU external action, often resulting in a fragmented or reactive policy posture.

In this study, the EU's foreign policy approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict was examined through realist and idealist theories, and the result showed that the EU displayed a pragmatic attitude supporting the arguments of realist theory and a principled attitude supporting the arguments of idealism, and drew a foreign policy framework in this vein. After the Cold War, the EU gained new momentum in international relations and initiated the Barcelona Process, making efforts to establish a security community in the Mediterranean region. In the early 2000s, it developed the European Neighborhood Policy in response to both its expansion to the East and the new security problems that emerged in the form of terrorism or irregular migration. The outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011 was a turning point in terms of political and security dynamics in the region. However, despite the magnitude and unprecedented nature of the changes that occurred in almost every country in the region, the EU's response remained more modest compared to other global actors (Colombo, 2021).

While the EU is trying to strengthen stability in the Middle East, it has ultimately aimed to support states and societies in starting socio-economic and political reform processes to counteract the crises that are being experienced. In other words, the EU is trying to get rid of the dilemmas between democracy and stability that hinder its external approaches to the region. On the other hand, the fact that the cooperation efforts with the countries in the region have not been fully sup-

ported by values has also revealed that there is a gap between values and principles. Therefore, the principled pragmatic stance emphasized by the EU in its global strategy has been shaped more around pragmatic concerns.

This principled pragmatic stance, while drawing a framework focused primarily on security against irregular migration, terrorism and instability spreading from the Middle East region, has created a tension between theory and practice, and the reconciliation of the EU's interests and values has not been fully achieved. The main problems in this failure to achieve reconciliation stem from the EU's inability to move forward with a single voice, and even more importantly, its inability to act with unity, integrity and determination. On the one hand, the multilateral nature of the EU's foreign policy and, on the other hand, the separate attitudes of its member states create inconsistency and lack of coordination.

### **3. EU's Foreign Policy and Approach to the Middle East**

#### **3.1. Foreign Policy of the EU**

The distinctive structure of the EU encourages discussions about the character of its foreign policy. Member states frequently struggle to separate their domestic priorities and are often reluctant to achieve agreement on issues related to their sovereignty, making it difficult to formulate a cohesive policy. However, this intricacy stimulates a deeper examination into the viability of a common foreign policy within the EU, rather than simply addressing whether any foreign policy exists. The efforts made by the EU since its establishment to cultivate a unified foreign policy have resulted in evaluations of its effectiveness, which are grounded in the cooperative actions of its member states.

The examination of cohesive and directive stances within the EU concerning particular policies represents a facet of its foreign policy. Indeed, even the exploration of the EU's role as an international actor, along with the extent to which it can exhibit a consolidated foreign and security policy, highlights the reality of the EU's foreign policy. However, the efficacy of this foreign policy continues to be a topic of discussion, much like that of any international organization.

The idea remains that every EU member state, functioning as a sovereign entity, may place its own national interests and sovereignty at the forefront. Nevertheless, the ability and willingness of these states to cooperate contribute to the formation of a union. Therefore, the answer to the question of whether the EU possesses a foreign policy is in the affirmative; it does indeed have one, which cannot be considered separately from the foreign policies of its individual member states. The EU's foreign policy surpasses the simplistic lowest common denominator of its members, signifying a relationship that is mutually advantageous between the EU and its member states in matters of foreign policy.

The European Union's foreign and security policy primarily aims to promote peace, enhance international security, encourage global cooperation, and strengthen democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and fundamental freedoms. According to Karen A. Smith, the EU seeks to fulfill five essential objectives in its external

relations within the international context. These objectives include “developing regional cooperation”, “defending human rights”, “ensuring democracy and good governance”, “preventing conflicts”, and “combating international crime”. The essential goals outlined by Smith illustrate the EU’s ambition to operate as a normative power on the international stage.

The European Union faces challenges in achieving complete integration in certain areas while striving to develop a unified foreign policy on specific issues, which hinders its ability to act as a coherent entity. As a result, the validity of the EU’s foreign policy is called into question, and the effectiveness of its initiatives across various domains continues to be debated. An examination of the EU’s policies in the Middle East—an area outside its own continent—reveals that its member states possess differing viewpoints. However, there are also occasions when the EU operates in a unified manner within the same geographical region. The collective issues addressed by the EU in the Middle East highlight its normative inclinations, whereas instances where individual member states prioritize their national interests underscore a more pragmatic and interest-driven approach.

### **3.2. The EU’s Approach to the Middle East**

The issue of the division of the Palestinian territories between Arabs and Jews after the British protectorate, which has not lost its importance throughout history, has been the main reason for the chaos experienced in the Middle East even today. Four major wars have occurred after the establishment of Israel in 1948 for the sovereignty of the Palestinian territories and the status of Jerusalem, which is considered sacred by the three major religions.

The EU did not initially develop a clear policy against these chaos and wars, but since the member countries began to be affected by the oil crises in the 1970s, it has attempted to take an active role in the developments in this region. On the other hand, the establishment of the European Political Cooperation, which aimed to direct the Union’s foreign policy during this period, brought with it the desire to pursue a more effective policy in the Middle East.

## **4. Evaluation of EU’s Relations with Relations with Regional Countries and Approaches to the Israel-Palestine Conflict from Realist and Idealist Perspectives**

The relationship between the European Union and the Middle East has its roots in the relatively recent past. Numerous initiatives have been undertaken by the EU to enhance trade relations with nations in the region, as well as to foster opportunities for collaboration. Prior to the Arab Spring, a significant turning point for the Middle East, the EU maintained reciprocal relations with regional countries, primarily focusing on securing energy supply and establishing cost-effective market opportunities. However, the challenges faced by Arab nations following the Arab Spring, coupled with the rise of authoritarian regimes in certain areas, and raised concerns for the EU regarding border security, particularly after its

territorial expansion in 2004. In response to these apprehensions, the EU has sought to address them by bolstering mutual cooperation and reinforcing trade ties. While efforts continue to maintain cooperation and trade relations with regional countries within the context of these security concerns, agreements driven by political aspirations, such as the European Neighborhood Policy, have also begun to emerge, as previously noted.

Over time, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become the center of the EU's Middle East policies, and throughout this conflict, the EU has been one of the most important actors providing humanitarian aid to Palestine and defending the rights of Palestinian citizens. On the other hand, although the EU has engaged in many activities within the scope of its aid policies to Palestine, its commercial relations with Israel have also continued without interruption.

The EU's relations with regional actors, including Arab countries, Palestine and Israel, have existed since the 1970s. As mentioned above, in summary, the main reason why the EU wants to continue its cooperation with regional countries is that these countries are important energy suppliers and markets. In addition, the Union wants to continue this cooperation despite the possibility that any conflict or chaos in the region could threaten its own border security. The aim is to ensure stability and peace in the region by continuing mutual cooperation. Therefore, the EU is trying to carry out these trade relations and cooperation by supporting them with certain principles and norms, but how successful and balanced all of these are is a matter of debate.

While the EU displays an idealistic and principled stance in terms of trying to stop the instabilities in the region, it also displays a very realistic and pragmatic stance in terms of wanting to stop these instabilities and eliminate any threat to its own continent. Although the EU's founding principles and reason for existence are to bring order, the existence of realistic policies is an undeniable fact, especially in the Middle East region and the conflicts in the region.

#### **4.1. EU-Israel Relations**

In order to understand EU-Israel relations, it is necessary to first analyze the Middle East's approach to the EU and the EU's approach to the Middle East with the Cold War process, which was the beginning of the relations. During the Cold War, Israel did not approach the EU in a very moderate manner like Arab countries. During this process, Israel anxiously faced the interventions of European states in the Middle East geography, thinking that anti-Semitic feelings had not ended. In addition, another reason for Israel's lack of trust in European states is that Jews living in the USA are more influential than those living in Europe. Therefore, Israel has presented a political profile closer to the USA, believing that the USA can continue the influence of Jews more strongly. Israel's negative perspective on European countries was also reinforced by the 1956 Suez War. The failure of Israel's attack on Egypt with the support of France and England in the Suez War reduced the prestige of European states in Israel's eyes. Especially after this war, Israel ac-

cepted the presence of the United States as its greatest supporter in its attitude towards the Arabs.

After the Cold War ended with the emergence of the US as a hegemonic power, there were no major changes in Israel's perspective on European states with pro-Arab policies. Indeed, the Arab world's idea that the US, the winner of the Cold War, could only be balanced by European states paved the way for closer relations with Europe. For example, following US President Clinton's pro-Israeli stance during the talks on the future of Jerusalem at the Camp David Summit in 2000, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat visited European countries and established warm contacts.

Due to the problems experienced in the Middle East, the commercial and cultural ties between the EU and Israel have not been damaged, and Israel has always had close commercial relations with the EU. In addition, although Israel is frequently criticized by the EU due to the attacks it has carried out on Palestine, there are also high-level politicians in the EU who demand more than Israel being a partner (Çakır, 2016). In addition, it is seen that the EU approaches Israel with a sense of moral responsibility due to the anti-Semitic approaches that have existed in Europe in the past. It can be said that this moral responsibility has a small share in the EU's inability to take a tough stance against Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Geçeci, 2022).

When looking at EU-Israel relations in general, it can be seen that the priority is on commercial ties and mutual benefits. On the other hand, although Israel seems to feel more support from the US, its relations with the EU are not only based on commercial relations. The EU also feels close to Israel in sociological, social and cultural terms and strives to ensure that it is in harmony with the Union in these matters.

EU-Israel relations have shown a tendency to develop without regressing in almost every period. Especially with the Israel Action Plan, which was created in the context of the 2004 European Neighborhood Policy, the main objectives were to ensure complete integration in EU-Israel relations, especially in economic terms, to ensure Israel's adaptation to EU values, principles and system in political terms, to establish cooperation in the fight against terrorism and to solve the problems experienced by Israel in the region. During this process, EU-Israel relations have developed both economically and socially.

## 4.2. EU Relations with Palestine

An examination of the European Union's policies regarding Palestine reveals that these policies cannot be considered independent of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The EU's approach to Palestine and its citizens is fundamentally intertwined with the ongoing conflict with Israel, which remains central to these policies.

The Venice Declaration, released on June 13, 1980, stands as the most essential and unequivocal reflection of the European Union's stance on Palestine, particularly in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While this declaration provides

a framework for the EU's perspective on the broader Arab-Israeli War, it fundamentally articulates the EU's position on Palestine. The specific articles pertaining to Palestine within the Venice Declaration are as follows:

- Recognizing the right of Palestinians to self-determination;
- Calling for Israel to end the occupation;
- Criticizing Jewish settlers in the occupied territories and viewing Israel's unilateral determination of Jerusalem's status as an illegal attempt;
- Ensuring the participation of the Palestine Liberation Organization in the peace process.

The Seville Declaration touched upon the issue of finding an inclusive and fair solution to the Jerusalem and refugee problem. The Seville Declaration is also important in that it emphasizes that Israel is the party disrupting the peace process and mentions refugees and settlers.

Since 1971, the Union has been extending financial aid to the region, marking the beginning of its policy formulation concerning Palestine. OECD data reveal that from 1994 to 2000, the EU and its member states allocated financial support amounting to 2 billion dollars to the West Bank and Gaza, areas where conflicts between the involved parties are particularly severe. This assistance increased to 3.7 billion dollars from 2001 to 2007 and further escalated to 7.9 billion dollars between 2008 and 2016. Notably, European nations contributed 45% of the total funds transferred to Palestine during the period from 2012 to 2016. Furthermore, the Union supplied an additional 8 billion euros to Palestinian citizens impacted by Israeli assaults during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in May 2021.

In addition, the EU has principles such as complying with the Oslo Accords and UN Security Council resolutions, not resorting to armed conflict, and abandoning unilateral initiatives. Although these are principles that support peace in the region rather than the Palestinian people, it can be said that the EU directly struggles for Palestinian women and children to live in a more prosperous geography. Therefore, the EU's Palestine policies have been tried to be carried out within the framework of humanitarian aid, remaining loyal to its normative values. On the other hand, these approaches and policies take shape according to changing situations in the region, and it is also observed that political pressures can have a greater importance than these normative values.

The European Union is perceived as a formidable economic entity for Palestine; however, this strength has not translated into effectiveness within the political or diplomatic spheres. Although the EU has made principled attempts to establish a peaceful resolution for Palestine, it has encountered difficulties in translating these principles into action. A major factor contributing to this predicament is the institutional obstacles that hinder the EU's ability to present a cohesive foreign policy and security approach, further exacerbated by the significant influence of the United States in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 2017, the EU condemned President Donald Trump's decision to transfer the US Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem ([Proclamation 9683 of December 6, 2017](#)); nevertheless, achiev-

ing a consensus proved elusive due to the differing positions held by the member states of the Union. During the UN General Assembly vote, Croatia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Latvia opted to abstain, while the other EU member states, including Germany, France, and Italy, voiced their support for the US decision.

However, the implementation of such a strategy is often complicated by divergent national priorities among member states. For example, Hungary and the Czech Republic, shaped by relatively homogenous societies and historical experiences with limited immigration, tend to adopt securitized, protectionist stances on migration and border control, often resisting broader EU solidarity mechanisms such as refugee quotas. In contrast, France, with its historical role in North Africa, and Ireland, which emphasizes multilateralism and human rights in its foreign policy, generally support more comprehensive, values-based approaches to external engagement. These divergences reflect each state's unique geopolitical sensitivities, domestic political landscapes, and historical legacies—ultimately challenging the EU's efforts to present a unified and coherent external security posture.

Federica Mogherini, who held the position of EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy at that time, stated that Donald Trump's remarks would negatively impact the peace process in the region. She emphasized the necessity of considering the aspirations of both parties and maintained that the designation of Jerusalem as the capital could only be realized through a mutual agreement. Although the EU member states did not present a cohesive position during the UN General Assembly vote concerning the status of Jerusalem, Mogherini cited UN General Assembly resolution 478 to highlight that the EU and its member states would not recognize Jerusalem through unilateral measures and reiterated their commitment to the two-state solution (*European Union External Action*, 2019).

Following the Israeli attacks on Gaza in May 2021, in which 248 Palestinian citizens, including women and children, lost their lives, the EU and its member states stated in their statements that Hamas was a terrorist organization and that civilian casualties caused by Israel should be prevented. Following these attacks, while member states of the Union Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg and Malta argued that more support should be given to the Palestinian people, countries such as Austria, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary and Slovenia reiterated that the actions carried out by Hamas were terrorist acts and stated that they supported Israel. On the other hand, it was observed that an ambivalent policy was followed in some statements made after the attacks. These ambivalent policies were a reflection of the principled pragmatic stance of the EU, which was mentioned earlier. While EU member states argued that diplomacy should be used to solve the problem, they also sent messages of support to Israel after the conflicts.

A similar situation was seen after the attacks that started on October 7, 2023,



when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict escalated again. The EU reiterated that it considered Hamas a terrorist organization and also stated that the attacks on Gaza should be stopped. In addition, after these attacks, supportive statements were made towards Israel and it moved away from showing a neutral stance and being a power that builds peace.

On the other hand, the EU's failure to follow a common stance in foreign and security policies and its overshadowing by the US in terms of being an effective political actor in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have caused it to be unable to gain influence in the Palestinian region. In short, for many years, the EU's relations with Palestine have not been able to go beyond financial support, which has been attempted to be carried out on a principled basis, focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The biggest security threat that the EU sees in the international system, both for its own continent and for all actors, is terrorism. It has seen the fight against terrorism as a mission in light of its own norms and values. After these recent conflicts, it does not seem likely that the EU's perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will shift to a different stance as long as Hamas exists. In fact, the increasing Islamophobia and the rise of the far right in Europe will not create an environment that will allow support for radical Islamist organizations like Hamas.

#### **4.3. Evaluating the EU's Approach to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict from a Realist Perspective**

The characteristics of the European Union do not align with those that realist theory can adequately account for, primarily due to its structural composition. The EU has successfully fostered a high degree of integration among its member states, even amidst the anarchic nature of the international system, owing to its supranational framework. This organization possesses a foreign policy, and the concerted efforts of its member countries to unify under a single entity in order to present a cohesive stance in this policy are indicative of the aforementioned supranational structure. Conversely, despite the EU's advanced cooperation and a structure that realism fails to fully explain, there exist specific policies and regions where it operates with realistic motivations. The EU, which seeks to establish an order in its very existence, demonstrates realistic reflexes in certain contexts and behaves in a manner akin to a realist actor.

The European Union's strategy regarding the Middle East and its position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are influenced by its own interests. For instance, the EU's political and commercial relationships with countries in the region have been molded by matters it has categorized as security concerns. In the context of its foreign policy towards the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the domains in which the EU has demonstrated pragmatic responses primarily include energy, trade, migration, and border security. The principles of realist theory relevant to these topics in this analysis are as follows:

- Security dilemma.

- Threat perception.
- Power.
- Interest.

The security dilemma, as explained by realist theory, is defined as a system in which states are at the center, in which one side takes defensive steps with the uncertainty of the bad intentions of the other side, and this situation continues indefinitely in a cycle. However, the same situation is not the case for the EU.

The EU feels a security dilemma in the Middle East and particularly in the Arab-Israeli conflicts, but this dilemma does not arise from a defensive or military threat perception. The EU is in a security paradox due to the uncertainty of the chaos experienced in the Middle East. The EU believes that any conflict or chaos experienced in the region will trigger other security problems on its own continent. It takes action to resolve the conflicts in order to eliminate these problems. Therefore, one of the biggest reasons why the EU conducts mutual dialogue and cooperation with Middle Eastern countries and places this dialogue and cooperation as the basis of relations is the perception of threat it feels for its security. In other words, the EU's method of dealing with these threats is not to use hard policy elements and take defensive steps, but rather to use soft policy instruments such as sanctions or trade barriers.

International terrorism has also begun to be seen as the most important threat to security for the EU, especially after the 9/11 attacks and the Arab Uprisings, when the instability of Arab countries became more apparent. Therefore, the fact that Hamas, which represents Palestine, was on the EU's terror list after 2006 has added the terror dimension to the security dilemma that the EU feels in the region and increased the severity of this dilemma.

In addition to the security concerns the EU has in the region due to instability, conflicts and terrorist incidents, the EU has also begun to see the political environment that has emerged following the serious problems and conflicts in the region, such as changing administrations, radicalizing Islamic groups or power vacuums, as a threat. In particular, the possible wave of migration that may follow this chaos and conflict environment has also become one of the most important issues that the EU perceives as a threat. As a result, the EU has started to act as a realistic actor and take measures to control border security in the face of increasing migration and security threats.

The EU, which aims to control the threats and security concerns it feels from the region on the basis of establishing bilateral dialogues and cooperation with the Middle Eastern countries, is also trying to maximize its power, especially economically, in the region and while doing so, it puts its own interests at the center. While the EU is trying to be a powerful actor in the region, it aims to be a power that can affect both economically and against conflicts. Indeed, the possibilities at the disposal of the EU, as mentioned before, are more of a soft power dependent on sanctions rather than a military power. The EU does not have the instruments of the known classical definition-based concept of power, but it can be said that it

has a soft power due to its transformative effect. In addition to the transformative effect of the EU, it also has an economic power with a deterrent effect and a stronger sanction in the international system. Therefore, while the EU is trying to create a transformative effect in the Middle East with its own norms and values, it is also trying to support this transformative effect with economic power in the form of a soft power. Although power, one of the most important concepts of realism, has undergone a change at this point, in fact, an actor that tries to maximize its power, that is, acts with realistic reflexes, stands out in the EU's approach to the region.

The European Union's security and foreign policy is fundamentally shaped by a non-traditional understanding of threats, which sets it apart from more militarized global actors. Rather than perceiving conventional military aggression as the foremost danger, the EU identifies regional instability—particularly in its southern and eastern neighborhoods—as the principal challenge to its security. This instability often gives rise to irregular migration, energy supply disruptions, terrorism, and organized crime, all of which are viewed as direct threats to internal cohesion and socio-political stability within member states. The EU's strategic documents, including the European Security Strategy (2003) and the Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy (2016), consistently emphasize that “fragile states” and “conflict beyond Europe's borders” pose more pressing risks than large-scale military confrontation. Consequently, the EU has developed a comprehensive security approach centered on conflict prevention, crisis management, development cooperation, and promotion of good governance. This security orientation reflects the Union's normative foundations and its preference for civilian instruments of power, multilateral engagement, and regional stabilization over hard military responses. By addressing the root causes of instability in neighboring regions, the EU seeks to protect its own security and promote long-term resilience at both the domestic and international levels.

#### **4.4. Evaluating the EU's Approach to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict from an Idealist Perspective**

The European Union, which was formed through the process of economic integration, has expanded its scope beyond mere economic collaboration to include significant institutional advancements in the political sphere. A key political development within the EU is the creation of a unified foreign policy among its member states, grounded in the principles of human rights, the rule of law, and democratic development. This commitment is most clearly articulated in Article 21 of the Lisbon Treaty, one of the foundational treaties of the Union. The language of this article underscores the high regard the Union holds for the values of human rights, the rule of law, and democracy.

It is also stated in this article that the Union strives to develop its relations with third countries or global organizations that progress with the basic principles it has set and share these principles. In order for the Union to achieve high-level

cooperation with any actor;

- Protecting the values, interests, independence and integrity of the Union;
- Protecting and strengthening democracy, the rule of law, human rights and international law;
- Preserving peace and preventing conflicts;
- Supporting social and environmental development in order to end poverty;
- Eliminating problems that hinder the integration of international trade;
- Supporting sustainable development;
- Supporting and assisting societies and individuals exposed to natural disasters;
- Supporting global governance through multilateral cooperation has been set out as objectives.

From the establishment of European Political Cooperation until the 1990s, four notable declarations were issued by the EU, as previously mentioned. These are the Brussels Declaration of 1973, the London Declaration of 1977, the Venice Declaration of 1980, and the Berlin Declaration of 1999. These declarations are essential in highlighting the significance of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in the EU's approach to the Middle East, acting as emblems of the EU's foreign policy in this context. As Manners observes, particularly throughout the 1970s to the 1990s, the EU aimed to assert a normative stance by persistently advocating its own norms and values through the policies enacted in the region.

Through these declarations, the EU expressed its endorsement of a comprehensive, fair, and lasting resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflicts, which includes the PLO. Moreover, the EU denounced land occupations, the use of force, and unilateral actions within the region, while emphasizing the significance of human rights, promoting amicable relations among neighboring states, and complying with existing agreements. Additionally, the EU highlighted the imperative of settling disputes in alignment with UN Security Council resolutions and international law.

The European Union has called upon Israel to recognize the right to self-determination, which includes the establishment of an autonomous Palestinian state. Additionally, it has denounced Israel's settlement activities in the occupied territories and asserted that any unilateral measures concerning the status of Jerusalem should be eschewed. In conclusion, through these unified declarations, the EU sought to express that a democratic, independent, peaceful, and sovereign Palestine, based on mutual agreements, would provide the most reliable guarantee of security within the region.

Upon examining the content of published declarations, statements, and the actions and discourses of the EU, it becomes evident that subheadings outlining the framework of the EU's foreign policy in the Middle East and defining the roles of this policy have been identified. These idealist subheadings are:

- A power for good.
- A power for international peace, security and stability.
- A power that builds effective partnerships.
- A provider of development assistance.

## 5. A Conciliatory Perspective

The European Union's strategy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict exemplifies the importance of integrating the Union's human and moral values as a key analytical element, in conjunction with its pragmatic goals and interest-based policies. Through the establishment of shared institutions, the EU has brought together a collective of states that acknowledge particular common interests and values, thereby feeling an obligation to comply with mutual regulations in their dealings. Member states, therefore, participate not merely at a superficial level but are embedded within a deeper network of relationships. For the EU, this interconnect-edness is understood solely through the framework of shared interests and values. This resultant structure is maintained and governed by collective institutions and regulations.

Simultaneously, the European Union prioritizes the safeguarding of security and stability for its member states. Consequently, it actively engages in crisis management, peacekeeping missions, and counter-terrorism efforts. Beyond these security-focused policies, the EU also underscores the significance of shared values, ethical standards, collaboration, and dialogue. Furthermore, the EU's foreign policy highlights the critical role of international cooperation and institutions, as noted by the English School. Through its involvement in the Middle East Quartet, the EU promotes multilateral diplomacy by partnering with international organizations, seeks solutions to global challenges, and fosters cooperation among member states by creating institutional frameworks within itself.

The English School presents an argument asserting that economic integration can lead to both peace and prosperity, a notion evident in the European Union's (EU) promotion of trade liberalization among its member nations and the establishment of cohesive foreign and trade policies. Moreover, the theory of the English School highlights the importance of normative powers and international norms. The EU's foreign policy is fundamentally based on universal tenets such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. In addition, the EU has dedicated itself to proactive participation in the global system to defend and advance these principles. Finally, the EU's utilization of soft power strategies to bolster its influence in Middle Eastern foreign policy corresponds with the English School's claim that diplomatic efforts, economic support, and global involvement should take precedence over more forceful policy actions.

Rooted in the understanding that change is the sole constant, and acknowledging that neither realism nor idealism can fully explain every circumstance and occurrence, the utilization of the English School in examining the European Union's foreign policy in the Middle East offers a method to merge both viewpoints. Proponents of the English School have recognized the explanatory advantages of these two theoretical approaches and have presented their discussions regarding the interaction between them. The choice to adopt the English School as a harmonizing framework in this analysis stems from the intention to clarify the complexities involved in the EU's foreign policy toward the Middle East by drawing on both

realist and idealist theories.

A conciliatory perspective on EU foreign and security policy can be deepened through the lens of the English School of International Relations, particularly its concept of international society. Unlike realism, which focuses narrowly on power and national interest, and idealism, which emphasizes normative aspirations and moral progress, the English School bridges these traditions by viewing states as part of a society governed by shared norms, rules, and institutions. The European Union, in this context, is best understood not simply as a strategic actor or a norm entrepreneur, but as a custodian of international society, actively seeking to preserve order and legitimacy in its external relations. Its foreign policy behaviors—such as its promotion of multilateralism, legalism, regional integration, and human rights—are closely aligned with what the English School identifies as primary institutions of international society. For example, the EU's support for diplomatic dialogue, international law, and conflict resolution mechanisms reveals a deep commitment to the maintenance of a rule-based order, rather than the pursuit of hegemonic dominance or purely normative transformation. This framework helps explain why the EU often acts as a stabilizing force in volatile regions, not purely out of strategic calculation or idealistic projection, but because it sees itself as responsible for upholding the institutional fabric of the international community. Thus, the English School offers a uniquely integrative account of EU behavior—one that neither realism nor idealism, taken in isolation, can fully capture.

## 6. Conclusion

As the EU endeavors to establish itself as a significant player in this region, it has sought to engage with countries by grounding its foreign policy in its own norms and values. Over time, the Arab-Israeli conflicts have transformed into issues surrounding the status of Jerusalem and the Israeli-Palestinian disputes, stemming from the historical challenges faced by the Palestinian territories. It has been noted that the EU maintained a more objective stance from the onset of these conflicts, particularly until the rise of Hamas in 2006, positioning itself as an advocate for Palestinian rights and assuming the role of a defender of human rights (Özer, 2023).

The European Union's principal focus on the Middle East primarily revolves around the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts; however, the Union has persistently aimed to foster bilateral cooperation, dialogue, and commercial activities with the countries in the region. In addition, the EU has launched considerable political initiatives, including the Union for the Mediterranean and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, to create economic and commercial structures.

The European Union advocated for a comprehensive and multilateral resolution by convening an international conference that included all relevant parties within the international system, aiming to resolve the conflicts in the region and foster peace. In this regard, the EU endorsed the multilateral initiatives of the United Nations aimed at achieving a peaceful resolution and extended financial

assistance to the humanitarian aid and development efforts conducted by UNRWA under the auspices of the UN.

Although the EU seems to have taken a principled and idealistic stance with these actions in the region, it has not been able to break away from its pragmatic impulses. The EU has displayed realistic reflexes due to migration and border security, energy supply and trade relations, and has shaped its trade and political relations with the countries in the region around its own interests, through issues it has securitized. These issues are explained in the study by correlating them with the concepts of security dilemma, threat perception, power and interest of realist theory. In the study, the EU's Middle East foreign policy has been tried to be explained with the arguments of realist and idealist theories, especially in the Arab-Israeli conflicts, but the English School theory, which is fed by both theories, has been presented as a middle-ground approach. The belief that the English School, which creates a middle ground between the two theories, can create a compromise between interests and values or between realism and idealism, has been the main reason for choosing it as a conciliatory path. In fact, the English School writers, while skillfully using certain elements of the two paradigms in question, also keep their distance from these two paradigms; that is, they proceed in the middle path by creating a unique area without providing a complete compromise.

Although the EU tries to purify itself from the dilemmas that hinder its external approaches to the region by balancing its principles and interests between democracy and stability, the fact that the cooperation efforts with the countries in the region have not been fully supported by values has revealed that there is a gap between its values and principles. Therefore, the principled pragmatic stance emphasized by the EU in its global strategy has been shaped more around pragmatic concerns.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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