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Article Three: The Diplomatic Role of the European Parliament's Political Groups in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict¹

Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a highly salient and emblematic issue of international relations that regularly appears on the political agenda of the EU (Newman and Yacobi 2008; Del Sarto 2015; Voltolini 2016). The EU's approach towards this question has remained fairly consistent during the past few decades: the recognition of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people to fully exercise their right to self-determination; support for a negotiated peace settlement in the Middle East on the basis of relevant United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolutions, mainly nos. 242 and 338; and the creation of an independent, democratic, contiguous, sovereign and viable state of Palestine through negotiations in the framework of the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP).² However, there is a tension between the EU's normative political stance on this issue and its close trade relations with the state of Israel (Cronin 2011, Gordon and Pardo 2013).

As an international parliamentary institution (Cofelice and Stavridis 2014), the European Parliament (EP) is trying to have its own say on the question of Israel-Palestine. While the EP fully endorses the EU's general approach towards Palestinian statehood, it also pushes the Commission and the Council to play a more active role in the MEPP and take a more critical stance towards the Israeli Government's policies in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) (Gianniou 2015). Furthermore, in the past, the EP called to suspend the EU-Israel Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement due to violations of human rights and international law by the state of Israel³ and delayed for two years the ratification of the EU-Israel Agreement on Conformity Assessment and Acceptance (ACAA) for industrial products (see Hessel and De Keyser 2013: 209-226). Furthermore, the EP called to implement the recommendations of the so-called 'Goldstone report' of the UN's fact-finding mission on the Gaza conflict of December 2008-January 2009,⁴ which was led by a former South African judge Richard Goldstone.

These matters are regular subjects of debates in the EP's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET), its Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI) and the Committee on Development (DEVE). The EP also has two related permanent delegations: the Delegation for Relations with Israel (D-IL)

1 The article is in print in a volume edited by Stelios Stavridis and Davor Jančić, *Parliamentary Diplomacy in European and Global Governance*, forthcoming, 2016 from Brill publishers.

2 See, for example, the Venice Declaration of 13 June 1980 of the nine member states of the European Community; the Berlin European Council conclusions of 25 March 1999; EU Council conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process of 15 June 2009; EU Council conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process of 20 July 2015.

3 European Parliament resolution of 10 April 2002 on the Middle East (2002), OJ C 127E/584.

4 European Parliament resolution of 10 March 2010 on implementation of the Goldstone recommendations on Israel/Palestine (2010), OJ C 349E/34.

and the Delegation for Relations with Palestine (DPLC).⁵ In addition to the work done in the specialised committees, the situation in Israel-Palestine regularly arises as a subject of lively plenary debates and resolutions. For instance, during the years 2014 and 2015 alone, the EP adopted four resolutions on the topic.⁶ The EP plenary debates on the issue often feature in statements of the EU High Representative, Federica Mogherini, who has invested a lot of work into the MEPP since she assumed office in November 2014.

Scholars have shown that the European Commission's position on Israel-Palestine was influenced by the pressure coming from Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), who, in turn, were influenced by their national constituencies in the EU member states (Gordon and Pardo, 2015). For instance, the Commission's guidelines on the eligibility of Israeli settlements in the OPT for EU grants, prizes and financial instruments,⁷ issued in 2013, were actually an initiative of the EP that was later adopted by the Commission. Hence, this conflict is a topic that is particularly well-suited for evaluating the nature of parliamentary diplomacy at the EU level and the role of the EP as a diplomatic actor.

This chapter explores the distinctive nature of the European Parliament's political groups (EP groups) as diplomatic actors. The lion's share of the diplomatic activities conducted by EP groups is rather informal and is conducted through emails, telephone calls and meetings. Institutional procedures – such as producing minutes of meetings, follow-up or reporting – scarcely apply. Moreover, many of these activities are of an *ad hoc* nature, with limited continuity over time, and dependent on the personal contacts of a small number of individuals.

The informal nature of the EP groups' diplomacy poses two methodological challenges. First, collecting empirical data can be difficult, considering that many of these informal activities are ill-suited to traditional methods of analysis in diplomatic studies, often based on official documents and formal institutional procedures. The EP resolutions are only the last and the most visible stage in a long process of negotiations between EP groups as well as between delegations of national parties within EP groups. This entire process of negotiations is rather invisible to scholars of international relations.

Second, it is difficult to disentangle the EP groups' autonomous diplomatic activities from those conducted by formal EP institutional bodies, such as standing committees and delegations.

5 Previously called the Delegation for Relations with the Palestinian Legislative Council (DPLC), the delegation changed its name in 2015 as a symbolic step in the aftermath of the EP Resolution of 17 December 2014 on recognition of Palestine statehood.

6 See European Parliament resolutions of 17 July 2014 on the escalation of violence between Israel and Palestine (2014), OJ C 167/24; of 18 September 2014 on Israel-Palestine after the Gaza war and the role of the EU (2014), OJ C 184/70; of 17 December 2014 on recognition of Palestine statehood (2014), P8_TA (2014)0103; of 10 September 2015 on the EU's role in the Middle East peace process (2015). P8_TA -PROV(2015)0318. The two most recent EP resolutions have not been published yet in the OJ due to technical problems (last checked in April 2016).

7 European Commission, Guidelines on the eligibility of Israeli entities and their activities in the territories occupied by Israel since June 1967 for grants, prizes and financial instruments funded by the EU from 2014 onwards (2013), OJ C 205/05.

Therefore, the chapter explores the nature of EP groups as diplomatic actors by relying on qualitative social science research methods, mainly in-depth interviews. The goal is to gather empirical evidence on the diplomacy of left-wing EP groups on the issue of Israel-Palestine: the Social Democrats (S&D), the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) and the far left Confederal Group of the European United Left–Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL). Left-wing EP groups have been selected because they are particularly engaged on this topic and because they do so in a way that challenges the conventional diplomatic channels of the EU. Between the years 2010 and 2015, I conducted 20 in-depth interviews and engaged in numerous discussions with a variety of actors from these three EP groups: MEPs, parliamentary assistants, the groups' political advisors, as well as with officials of human rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs) based in Brussels and in Israel and the Palestinian territories. These sociological research methods were combined with the consultation of EP resolutions and EP groups' motions for resolutions, press releases, conferences, hearings and visits to Israel and the Palestinian territories during this time period, in addition to activities of the relevant EP committees, delegations, and EP plenary debates on the topic.

The chapter proceeds as follows. It first provides a short presentation of the relatively limited scholarly interest in the EP groups' role in EU external policy. It then analyzes the distinctive nature of EP groups as diplomatic actors, highlighting their relatively high level of coordination with civil society actors in third countries as well as their often substantive internal divisions on foreign policy. An empirical section provides evidence of the diplomatic actorness of the EP groups selected on the issue of Israel-Palestine. This is followed by the conclusion that EP groups are emerging diplomatic actors that play a complementary role in EU external relations while maintaining close links with civil society actors beyond the EU.

The Significance of the European Parliament's Political Groups in EU External Action

Over the past few decades, the EP has progressively been transformed from a consultative body into a powerful co-legislator in the EU's political system (Costa and Magette 2003, Rittberger 2005, 2012). The EP has obtained new formal and informal powers, including in policy areas that used to be largely dominated by intergovernmental dynamics, and this process was further and significantly facilitated by informal empowerment (Crum 2006). The EP's growing influence in EU external relations has also been documented, especially in the area of international trade (Van den Putte et al. 2015; Meissner 2016). Since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the EP has acted not only as a veto player (Monar 2010), but also as an agenda setter and policy maker in EU external relations (Ripoll Servent 2014).

However, scholars tend to analyze the EP as a monolithic actor and underestimate the dynamics of party politics, particularly transnational dynamics between different EP groups, which are outlined in Table 3.1 (Bardi 1996; Raunio 1997; Bell and Lord 1998; Bressanelli 2013). The EP is not a unitary actor. Instead, it is becoming a ‘real parliament’, internally divided into political groups with different ideological lines, primarily along the left/right cleavage, similar to political dynamics observed in national parliaments (Hix et al. 2005).

Table 3.1: EP groups by number of seats in the 2014-2019 legislature

Political Group	No. of MEPs	Full name of the political group
EPP	217	European People’s Party (Christian Democrats)
S&D	190	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats
ECR	74	European Conservatives and Reformists
ALDE	70	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats
GUE/NGL	52	Confederal Group of the European United Left – Nordic Green Left
Greens/EFA	50	Greens/European Free Alliance
EFDD	45	Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy
ENF	39	Europe of Nations and Freedom
NI	14	Non-attached Members
Total	751	

Source: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu> (accessed 18 February 2016).

Research on voting patterns in roll call votes in the plenary indicate that EP groups are rather coherent actors despite their heterogeneous composition and the EU enlargement in 2004 (Bressanelli 2014a). In fact, the level of EP groups' incoherence in plenary votes is estimated at an average of only 5-10 per cent of all roll call votes (Hix 2013). Some scholars even claim that EP groups are genuine European political parties in the making within an emerging transnational party system at the EU level (Hix et al. 2003; Bardi et al. 2010). However, these groups are composed of delegations of national political parties, coming from various EU member states. The real scope for internal divisions within EP groups is not fully demonstrated by the studies of roll call votes (Priestly 2010), making it necessary to complement their results with those obtained through the use of other methods, such as detailed case studies and process tracing of specific policies (Kulahci 2010).

The bulk of the EP groups’ activity in the EU’s international affairs takes place through inter-group negotiations aimed at influencing the overall institutional position of the EP towards the

Council and the Commission. However, EP groups are not solely a part of the EP institutional environment; they are also developing autonomous diplomatic actorness in their own right. So far, EP groups have seldom been studied as diplomatic actors (but see Fiott 2015), so studying them from this perspective helps uncover the manner in which the diplomatic role of EP groups differs from that played by the EP as a whole.

The European Parliament's Political Groups as Diplomatic Actors

Reflecting the nature of parliamentary diplomacy in general (Costa et al. 2013; Jančić 2015), EP groups are new international actors with independent actorness, which benefit from much leeway to conduct their own diplomatic activities. Although they are components of the EP's institutional environment, EP groups are bound neither by the positions taken by the EP nor by those taken by the EU executive – the European Council, the European External Action Service (EEAS), and the European Commission.

A first characteristic of EP groups as diplomatic actors is the scarcity of resources. Unlike states, EP groups do not have embassies and political personnel around the world but only a small pool of staffers based in Brussels, who are kept extremely busy with the day-to-day work of scrutiny of EU legislation, in addition to tasks related to the MEPs' constituencies (Busby 2013). Parliamentarians' international activities require heavy investment of all kinds of resources, beginning with time, in order to obtain a sufficient level of expertise, information and knowledge (Crum and Fossum 2013). However, MEPs only have very few incentives to invest their already limited resources in costly diplomatic activities across borders, as these activities only marginally impact their chances of being re-elected or pursuing their political career at the national level (Neunreiter 2005).

EP groups compensate their resource scarcity by a relatively high level of coordination with civil society actors in third countries, such as human rights NGOs, advocacy networks, think tanks, social movements, academics, artists, intellectuals, etc. Coordinating with NGOs in third countries allows EP groups to obtain accurate information and expert knowledge on the situation on the ground in these countries, which are vital resources for the conduct of any sort of diplomatic activity. The overall result seems to be that EP groups are to a large extent dependent on the information provided to them by their contacts in third countries. The EP groups' dependence on information provided by third-country NGOs is similar to the overall dependence of the EU on NGOs as the primary sources of information for assessing the situation on the ground in third countries (Steinberg 2016; Voltolini 2016).

Another resource that civil society actors in third countries may offer EP groups is close

coordination of approaches to contentious issues, the sharing of first-hand information and knowledge, and mutual support for joint action on matters of common concern (for a discussion on political legitimacy in EU politics from a sociological perspective see Kauppi 2005). When closely coordinated with civil society actors in third countries, EP groups may claim to be not only the representatives of EU citizens (Fiott 2011), but also those of a foreign country. EP groups transmit to the EU level claims from third-country civil society organisations, whereby the latter try to bypass their own national governments and challenge traditional state diplomacy (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Sikkink 2005). In fact, EP groups not only passively *receive* information from these civil society actors, they also actively *provide* them with resources of their own: international legitimacy and recognition, as well as information from Brussels on EU institutional developments, which is of utmost importance for NGOs' efforts to lobby the EU more efficiently.

The second characteristic of EP groups as diplomatic actors is their internal divisions. This relates to the fact that MEPs primarily render account to their national political parties (Navarro 2010) and not to a pan-European party organisation. In the EU's multilevel system of governance political will-formation still occurs mainly in the national political arena and not at the EU level (Crum 2012). EP groups are composed of delegations of national political parties, which are deeply entrenched in domestic political spheres. Each national party tries to upload its policy preferences to its EP group with degrees of success varying mainly depending on the size of its delegation (Klüver and Rodon 2013). In foreign affairs in particular, there are often substantive differences between national parties affiliated with the same political group in the EP. As an EP group's policy advisor puts it, 'foreign policy is national policy'.⁸

As a result of these divisions within EP groups, there is some incoherence in the groups' diplomatic stances, reflecting internal compromises between different national delegations within these groups around the lowest common denominator. Also, informal EP delegations of national parties, as well as individual MEPs, tend to conduct their own diplomatic activities in parallel to those of their affiliated EP group, not necessarily following the EP group's official position. This may weaken the capacity of the EP group concerned to act as a coherent diplomatic actor. The EP groups' internal divisions on international politics thus prevent these emerging diplomatic actors from fulfilling their full potential as democratically elected representatives. All of these dynamics are illustrated below with empirical examples of the left-wing EP political groups' activism on the issue of Israel-Palestine.

Left-Wing European Parliament Groups' Activism on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

⁸ Eduard Gaudot, Greens/EFA Strategic Unit, interview, 27 October 2015, Strasbourg (French. Translated by the author).

There is a very intensive activity of pro-Palestinian NGOs in Brussels, working with the European Parliament [...]. Some Israeli NGO, some Palestinian NGOs, some European NGOs, which work here directly, very intensively, especially with the left-wing parties here, and they always engage in activities in order to challenge Israel.⁹

This observation, made by an Israeli Embassy official, who spent a few years lobbying the EP, is an example of actors from third countries acknowledging the political divisions within the EP on international political issues. This Israeli diplomat did not simply complain about the intensive activities of pro-Palestinian NGOs in the EP in general; she clearly noticed the close ties of these NGOs with left-wing EP groups – S&D, Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL – which are particularly active on the issue of Israel-Palestine. For example, both Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL are critical of the EU-Israel Association Agreement. Yet while GUE/NGL's position is that this agreement should be suspended, the Greens claim it should merely be 'revisited'.

The next section provides empirical data on the diplomatic role of left-wing EP groups on the question of Israel-Palestine by conducting four case studies: the first two cases are directly concerned with the situation in the West Bank and Gaza, while the other two cases deal with issues beyond these territories. It follows a chronological order: the aftermath of the Gaza war in the summer of 2014, the recognition of Palestinian statehood in December 2014, the status of the Palestinian minority in Israel in September and October 2015, and the Israeli Knesset's 'NGO Transparency Act' of 11 July 2016.

Case Study I: The Gaza War of Summer 2014

The Position of GUE/NGL

After the Gaza war of July-August 2014, the EP expressed its condolences 'to all victims of the armed conflict and to their families, strongly condemned the violations of human rights and international humanitarian law and urged the EU to participate effectively in the urgent humanitarian aid effort and in the reconstruction of Gaza'.¹⁰ This resolution was adopted by a large majority of 447 MEPs with 143 voting against and 41 abstaining. The radical left EP group, GUE/NGL, which voted against the text, proposed its own resolution in which it called to establish a fact-finding mission to Gaza 'to witness first-hand the dimensions of the destruction, the needs of

⁹ Galit Peleg, Israeli Foreign Ministry official in charge of relations with the EP, interview, 18 January 2011, Strasbourg (Hebrew. Translated by the author).

¹⁰ See European Parliament resolution of 18 September 2014 on Israel-Palestine after the Gaza war and the role of the EU, OJ C 184/85.

the population as regard humanitarian aid, water and electricity, and the situation of the hospitals, schools and infrastructure'.¹¹ However, the group's motion for resolution was overwhelmingly defeated in the EP plenary with only 55 MEPs voting in favour, 512 against and 71 abstaining. The group's separate amendment on the fact-finding mission to Gaza was also rejected in the plenary, so the mission never took place.

Instead, GUE/NGL sent its own fact-finding mission to Gaza on 4-7 September 2014 in the form of a relatively large delegation of 13 MEPs from six countries and eight national delegations. Since the Israeli Government refused to let the delegation enter the Gaza strip, they were unable to assess the situation on the ground for themselves. However, the delegation members travelled to the West Bank and met with the director of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), Salvatore Lombardo, and visited the Palestinian Red Crescent headquarters in Ramallah and the Makassed Islamic hospital in East Jerusalem.

In addition to appraising the humanitarian situation in Gaza, GUE/NGL MEPs were received by the Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah and by Palestinian ministers and parliamentarians. These included Khalida Jarrar, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), who had refused to obey an Israeli expulsion order from Ramallah to Jericho and was later arrested by Israel. In East Jerusalem, the delegation also met with the family of the Palestinian 17-year-old Mohammed Abu Khdeir, who had been killed by Israeli civilians. Finally, GUE/NGL also had a 'hugely constructive meeting'¹² with Omar Barghouti, the co-founder of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. GUE/NGL had relatively few meetings with Israeli parliamentarians. They met three MPs from three political parties: the Labour Party, currently the largest opposition party in the Knesset; Meretz, a small progressive party; and the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality, which is an Arab-Jewish party. The delegation also sat down with representatives of several Israeli NGOs and activists: Rabbis for Human Rights, the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel (PCATI), Combatants for Peace, and Amira Haas, a journalist for the Israeli main broadsheet newspaper Ha'aretz. The list of meetings reflects GUE/NGL's straightforward pro-Palestinian political agenda.

It is worth noting that the GUE/NGL delegation was not representative of the entire EP group. While the Irish *Sinn Féin* and the Spanish *Podemos* were over-represented with three MEPs each, the German *Die Linke* had no representative in the group's delegation, arguably avoiding taking part in a delegation that has a clearly pro-Palestinian agenda. The visit also had a clear communication purpose: it was documented in press releases, a special booklet with numerous

11 GUE/NGL, Amendment 9, Motion for a resolution of 18 September 2014 on Israel-Palestine after the Gaza war and the role of the EU.

12 The group's visit was publicly reported in a special booklet that included photographs. See: 'Israel-Palestine after the 2014 war in Gaza, GUE/NGL Delegation visit to Palestine 4-7 September 2014', http://www.guengl.eu/uploads/publications-documents/Palestine_booklet_web.pdf (last accessed 25 April 2016).

photos taken during the visit, as well as a special press conference in the EP on 9 September 2014, shortly after the delegation's return to Brussels. GUE/NGL's clear pro-Palestinian agenda and its emphasis on communication contrasts with the Greens' visit to the Palestinian territories, which took place less than a year later.

The Position of the Greens/EFA

The Greens group in the EP sent a seven-member delegation to Israel and the Palestinian territories on 20-23 July 2015, a year after the war in Gaza. They planned this trip as an internal study tour designed to better understand the situation on the ground and to be better informed, with a view to working towards a more coherent common political position on the question of Israel-Palestine.¹³ The Greens in the EP are bitterly divided on the issue, and there have been some heated debates in the group's meetings.¹⁴ The main dividing line is between the German delegation and the rest of the group. The latter are very critical towards Israel and call for the suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement,¹⁵ while the German Greens are very concerned with ensuring Israel's security because of Germany's history.¹⁶ In fact, the main idea behind the Greens' visit was to try and bring German MEPs to the delegation as a way of convincing them to take a more critical stance towards the Israeli Government:

We have many problems of political coherence on the Israeli-Palestinian question, to say the least. And to follow up on the debate we had on the question of the recognition of Palestine, we decided to bring a group delegation, especially with Germans, and to change the debate's focus from security issues to ecological issues so that the Germans, who are the most complicated in the group on this question, can no longer use the argument of Israel's right to defend itself.¹⁷

The Greens' delegation started its visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories with a dinner with two former Israeli diplomats, Alon Liel, former Director General in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ilan Baruch, former Israeli ambassador to South Africa, who later became the Chair of the Policy Committee of the Israeli-Palestinian 'Peace NGOs Forum', a coalition of around 80 Israeli and Palestinian NGOs. The visit also included meetings with Palestinian Authority officials and with NGOs, such as Machsom Watch, Breaking the Silence, Peace Now, Mossawa Center, Al

13 Greens/EFA MEP, interview by phone, 13 July 2015.

14 Greens/EFA Parliamentary assistant, informal discussion, 5 October 2015, Strasbourg.

15 Greens/EFA MEP, interview, 6 October 2015, Strasbourg.

16 MEP Helga Trüpel (Greens/EFA, Germany), interview, 7 October 2015, Strasbourg.

17 Parliamentary assistant of an MEP of the French Greens, 6 October 2015, Strasbourg.

Haq, and Al-Shabaka—the Palestinian Policy Network. The Greens’ delegation also met with Israeli parliamentarians, notably from the Joint List, which is an electoral alliance of four parties in the Knesset which represent the Palestinian citizens of Israel, and the small progressive party Meretz.

The Greens’ visit had a special focus on environmental issues in the OPT. They met with representatives of the NGO EWASH (Emergency, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene), visited the Jordan Valley in the West Bank to examine water issues, and exchanged views with members of the Arab Climate Youth Movement (ACYM) in Ramallah. Such a focus was not only because of the Greens’ inherent interest in environmental issues; it was considered conducive to convincing the German Greens, who usually refrain from openly criticising Israel’s policies in the West Bank on security grounds.¹⁸ Also due to the Greens’ internal divisions on the issue, the group’s visit was considered an internal group activity and was not made public in any form. While some individual MEPs intensively reported on their visit to the Palestinian territories through their social media networks, others remained completely silent about it.¹⁹ At the level of the EP group, there was no public trace of the group’s visit.

In general terms, the Greens in the EP work on the issue of Israel-Palestine in close contact with several Israeli NGOs, such as B’Tselem, Breaking the Silence, Peace Now, and Physicians for Human Rights–Israel (PHR-I); as well as with Palestinian NGOs, such as Al-Haq, Addameer, and Al-Shabaka,²⁰ which provide the EP group with detailed information on developments on the ground in the West Bank and Gaza, including human rights’ violations and the situation of Palestinian prisoners in Israel. For instance, in a motion for a resolution tabled by Greens/EFA, the group explicitly referred to reports by the Israeli NGO Peace Now on the Israeli Government’s decision to confiscate Palestinian land in the West Bank.²¹

Within the Greens/EFA, the European Free Alliance (EFA) is a small EP group of seven MEPs only. Despite its limited size, the EFA also sent its own small delegation of three MEPs to Israel and the Palestinian territories in June 2015.²² They met with representatives of Israeli NGOs, mainly Peace Now and Breaking the Silence. The trip also included a dinner with the two aforesaid former Israeli diplomats, Alon Liel and Ilan Baruch. However, the EFA as a diplomatic actor suffers from a severe lack of resources. The EFA staffer in charge of the organisation of the visit to the Palestinian territories was not an expert on the issue. Nevertheless, the EFA members invested in the communication aspect of the visit, mainly by producing a short documentary film reporting on

18 MEP Tamas Meszerics (Greens/EFA, Hungary), Greens/EFA spokesperson on foreign affairs, interview, 7 October 2015, Strasbourg.

19 MEP Florent Marcellesi (Greens/EFA, Spain), interview, 5 October 2015, Strasbourg.

20 Greens/EFA policy advisor on human rights, interview, 5 October 2015, Strasbourg.

21 Greens/EFA Motion for a resolution of 16 September 2014 ‘on Israel-Palestine after the Gaza war and the role of the EU’, point P.

22 Email exchange with the EFA advisor on foreign affairs, civil liberties, justice and home affairs, Elisabet Nebreda Vila, 8 October 2015.

it.²³ According to EFA MEPs, their communication activities during the visit, above all through social media channels, were followed by numerous voters and sympathisers.

The Position of the Socialists & Democrats

The S&D group was somewhat silent and vague on the issue of Israel-Palestine in the aftermath of the Gaza war of summer 2014. In fact, during the negotiations between groups on the EP resolutions during the Gaza war in July 2014 and, immediately afterwards, in September 2014, the S&D group's shadow rapporteur, MEP Victor Bostinaru (Romania), was reported straying from his group's stance and aligning himself with the pro-Israeli position advocated by right-wing EP groups.²⁴ At the same time, other S&D MEPs – notably MEPs of the UK Labour Party, including Richard Howitt, S&D coordinator in AFET – took part in a pro-Palestinian demonstration in front of the EP plenary session in Strasbourg on 16 July 2014, joining the MEPs from the GUE/NGL group and the Greens/EFA. It is thus very revealing that S&D press releases on this topic are co-signed by both MEPs Bostinaru and Howitt. The internal divisions within S&D therefore explain why the second largest EP group does not seem to be more engaged in diplomatic activities on this issue.

These divisions within S&D were partly due to the presence of political parties from Central and East European countries. For instance, on 23 October 2012 the EP gave its consent to the EU-Israel ACAA, with 379 MEPs voting in favour, 230 MEPs against and 41 abstaining (Gianniou 2015: 243). Among S&D, the voting cohesion was as low as 58 per cent, since many of the group's MEPs voted in favour of the agreement or abstained, thereby failing to align with the group's decision to reject ACAA on human rights and political grounds related to the MEPP (Hessel and De Keyser 2013). In fact, out of the 190 members of S&D, 46 MEPs were 'rebels': with 33 votes in favour and 13 abstentions. The defection votes came from the delegations from Romania, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Bulgaria.

²³ A joint interview with EFA MEPs Jill Evans (Wales, UK), Jordi Sebastià (Valencia, Spain) and Ernest Maragall (Catalunya, Spain), 7 October 2015, Strasbourg.

²⁴ Email exchanges with the Greens/EFA policy advisor, 17 September 2014; informal discussion with a Brussels-based pro-Palestinian NGO representative, by telephone, July 2014.

Case Study II: The Recognition of Palestinian Statehood

On 17 December 2014 the EP adopted a resolution on recognition of Palestinian statehood with a large majority of 498 in favour, 88 against and 111 abstentions. By doing so, the EP followed a few other national parliaments in the EU, which, following the decision to this effect by the Swedish Parliament and Government, adopted non-binding resolutions urging their governments to recognize the state of Palestine: the UK House of Commons did so on 13 October 2014; the Irish Senate on 22 October 2014; the Spanish *Cortes Generales* on 18 November 2014; the French National Assembly on 2 December 2014; and the Portuguese Assembly on 12 December 2014. The final text adopted by the EP contained a rather weak wording, which was similar to the Spanish resolution: the EP ‘supports in principle recognition of Palestinian statehood and the two state solution, and believes these should go hand in hand with the development of peace talks, which should be advanced’.²⁵

While the official Israeli diplomats were strongly against the resolution, and tried to water it down as much as possible, a few former Israeli diplomats lobbied the EP in favour of an immediate and unconditional recognition of Palestinian statehood, working in close contact particularly with S&D and the Greens.²⁶ In fact, the staff of the Greens/EFA group repeatedly exchanged emails with these former Israeli diplomats, informing their Israeli counterparts in the civil society on the exact deadlines for submitting the resolution and the timing of the plenary vote.

In November 2014, three Israeli citizens – former diplomats Alon Liel and Ilan Baruch, together with Amiram Goldblum, a co-founder of the NGO Peace Now – had launched a public petition in favour of the recognition of Palestinian statehood, which was signed by 1,000 Israeli citizens, including former ministers and prominent Israeli intellectuals. The Israeli petition was handed over to the EP at the crucial moment of discussing the motion for the recognition of Palestinian statehood. Representing the Israeli-Palestinian ‘Peace NGO Forum’, former Israeli ambassador Ilan Baruch even conducted a special diplomatic mission to Brussels,²⁷ where he met with MEPs and policy advisors, pushing for a strong motion for Palestinian statehood without any further conditions or linkages to peace negotiations.

These lobbying efforts were accompanied by an email campaign targeting key MEPs who were directly involved in the decision-making process within their EP group and in the negotiations with other EP groups on the resolution. A special focus was put on S&D and ALDE, two EP groups that were considered as undecided and divided on the question. It is interesting to note that the

²⁵ EP resolution of 17 December 2014 on recognition of Palestine statehood, point 1.

²⁶ Alon Liel, former Secretary-General of Israel’s Foreign Ministry, interview, 10 December 2014, Hod Hasharon (Hebrew).

²⁷ Ilan Baruch and Alon Liel, email exchange, 23 November 2014 (Hebrew).

lobbying efforts focused on MEPs according to their EP group's affiliation instead of on nationality or national party affiliation. This shows that EP transnational political groups are considered key actors within the EP, including when it comes to EU international relations.

While the Israeli Government was strongly against the EP resolution on the recognition of Palestinian statehood, a small but internationally active opposition to the Israeli Government within Israel's civil society provided left-wing EP groups with political support, directly at odds with the lobbying efforts of the Israeli Foreign Ministry. In their justification of why the EP should recognise Palestine's statehood without delay, the Greens/EFA explicitly referred to similar calls being made in the Israeli civil society, noting that 'over 1,000 prominent Israeli public figures, including former ministers, parliamentarians and artists, have recently called on European parliamentarians to formally recognise the State of Palestine'²⁸ and that 'over 100 Israeli retired and reserve generals and senior security officials have signed a plea addressed to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu calling for a regional-based two-state diplomatic solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict'.²⁹ These explicit references indicate the extent to which left-wing EP groups were coordinated with Israeli opposition NGOs on the issue of the recognition of Palestinian statehood.

Case Study III: The Situation of the Palestinian Minority in Israel

An interesting aspect of parliamentary diplomacy as parallel diplomacy is the opportunity for parliamentary actors to engage with representatives of national minorities in third countries, to receive direct information on their particular situation, and to provide these minority groups with international visibility and an access to politics at the international level bypassing their national government. During their visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories in July 2015, the EP Greens' delegation met with Jafar Farah, the director of 'Mossawa Center—the Advocacy Center for Arab Citizens in Israel', an NGO based in Haifa. Following this meeting, in September 2015, the Greens/EFA tabled a motion for a resolution proposing for the EP to 'take note of the efforts of the Palestinian Israelis to coalesce under the Joint List and to secure a strong outcome at the last legislative elections' and to 'call on the EEAS and the European Commission to significantly step up their support to and engagement with minorities in Israel and to support their efforts to achieve better political, economic and social participation'.³⁰

S&D joined that position, stressing 'the potential of Arab citizens of Israel to play an important role in achieving peace between Israelis and Palestinians, while noting the rise of the Joint Arab List as the third political force in the Knesset, with many votes also from Jewish Israeli

28 Greens/EFA, Motion for a resolution of 17 December 2014 on recognition of Palestinian statehood, point I.

29 Idem, point H.

30 Greens/EFA, Motion for a resolution of 7 September 2015, point 21.

citizens'.³¹ Nevertheless, the final EP resolution of 10 September 2015 on the role of the EU in the MEPP – which was adopted with a majority of 525 votes in favour, 70 against and 31 abstentions – did not make any reference to the Arab community in Israel or to the Joint List in the Knesset.

On 14 October 2015, S&D and the Greens/EFA jointly invited Jafar Farah of the Mossawa Center to Brussels. The groups' MEPs and policy advisors discussed with him the possibility of strengthening cooperation with members of the Palestinian minority in Israel. After that meeting, S&D issued a call for enhancing the dialogue with this minority, emphasising that 'Arab citizens of Israel – with the Joint Arab List as the third political force in the Knesset – have a huge potential to play an important role in achieving peace in the Middle East'.³² In particular, S&D encouraged the EP Delegation for Relations with Israel (D-IL) to include meetings with representatives of the Joint List in the schedule of its upcoming visit to the country on 16-18 November 2015³³, and announced its intention to invite Joint List leaders to Brussels. Greens/EFA also issued a press release after the meeting with Farah, calling on the EU to reach out to the Arab minority in Israel, which is 'critical for a peaceful and democratic future for Israel and Palestine', and urging the EU, particularly High Representative Mogherini and the EU special envoy to the MEPP Fernando Gentilini, 'to stop ignoring the Arab community in Israel and to engage with them, notably the Joint List in the Israeli Knesset'.³⁴ Even though Farah mainly seeks to influence the position of the governments of the EU member states and the EEAS, and not particularly the EP, he nevertheless acknowledges that the EP is an important institution that the European Commission cannot simply ignore.³⁵ It seems that this NGO of the Arab minority in Israel is a trustful source of information for the Greens/EFA and S&D, while the latter two in turn represent important channels of international advocacy and an entry point to EU-level politics for this NGO.

Case Study IV: The Knesset's 'NGO Transparency Act'

On 11 July 2016 the Israeli Knesset adopted the 'NGO Transparency Act'³⁶ which imposes particular transparency requirements on non-profit organisations that receive funding from foreign governments, while ignoring private donations coming from abroad. The act was heavily criticised as undemocratic since it discriminates against Israeli human rights and left-wing NGOs, which

31 S&D, Motion for a resolution of 7 September 2015, point 12.

32 'S&D members aim to strengthen dialogue with the Palestinian Arab community in Israel, S&D press release, 13 October 2015.

33 The D-IL delegation indeed met with MP Aida Touma-Sliman (Joint List) on 17 November 2015 in Jerusalem.

34 'Greens/EFA group calls for greater EU engagement with the Arab Community in Israel', press release, 21 October 2015.

35 Jafar Farah, director of the Mossawa Center, interview, 4 January 2016, Haifa.

36 'The Disclosure Obligations of Recipients of Support from Foreign Government Entities Act' (Amendment) (Increased Transparency by Recipients of Support, when the Majority of their Funding is from Donations from Foreign Government Entities).

receive funding from foreign governments, whereas no such requirements apply to Israeli right-wing NGOs, which receive donations from private donors from outside Israel but not from foreign governments. According to the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), the sole purpose of the bill is to harass anyone who expresses strong opposition towards the government's policy as it was especially designed to limit only those NGOs that the government dislikes.³⁷ The controversial bill caused an international outcry,³⁸ including from the United States³⁹ and the EU⁴⁰.

Left-wing EP groups closely followed the legislation process in the Knesset. In November 2015 GUE/NGL proposed discussing this Israeli bill during the human rights debate in the plenary session held that month.⁴¹ However, the EP's Conference of Presidents did not adopt this proposal and the 'NGO Transparency Act' was not officially placed on the EP's agenda. Nevertheless, on 8 February 2016, on the very day when the bill was tabled for adoption in the Knesset in first reading⁴², the S&D group issued a press release expressing its deep concern about the bill.⁴³ These rather formal statements were not covered by the Israeli media and did not elicit any public reactions in the Knesset.

However, on the same day, Julie Ward, an S&D MEP from the UK Labour Party, sent an open letter to all 120 Members of the Knesset (MKs), signed by 50 MEPs (21 MEPs from the Greens/EFA, 18 from GUE/NGL, and only 11 from S&D, including four from the UK Labour Party). The letter called upon them to reject the bill: 'We urge the Israeli government and Members of the Knesset to refrain from legislative measures, or from support of campaigns of incitement that aim to stifle or silence civil society organisations, artists, and public discourse'.⁴⁴ MEPs often sign open letters on various issues, including on that of Israel-Palestine, but these letters are mainly aimed at the European Commission for the purpose of influencing EU policy. Yet this one was sent directly to Israeli parliamentarians and hence can be seen as an informal diplomatic action. Interestingly, this open letter was reported on by several Israeli newspapers as well as by national television, making the general impression that the EP as a whole was against the proposed Knesset legislation,⁴⁵ particularly thanks to comments that 'European parliamentarians urge MKs to vote

37 See: <http://www.acri.org.il/en/2015/12/28/eagerness-to-silence-criticism-is-greater-than-support-for-democracy> (accessed 5 April 2016); <http://www.acri.org.il/en/2016/07/12/acris-response-to-the-passing-of-the-ngo-law/> (accessed 13 July 2016).

38 See for instance: Editorial, 'A Danger to Israeli democracy', *Washington Post*, 2 January 2016.

39 See US Embassy in Israel's press release of 11 January 2016, 'Ambassador Shapiro's Meeting with Justice Minister Shaked', <http://israel.usembassy.gov/press11012016.html> (accessed 18 April 2016); Barak Ravid, 'Ambassador Shapiro Tells Minister Shaked: U.S. Concerned by 'NGO Transparency Bill'', *Ha'aretz*, 11 January 2016.

40 'Statement by the Spokesperson on the passage of the new NGO law in the Israeli Knesset', EEAS press release, 12 July 2016.

41 'GUE/NGL criticises Parliament's refusal to discuss Israeli 'transparency law'', GUE/NGL press release, 19 November 2011.

42 The legislative process in the Knesset requires three readings. Any bill adopted at first reading still requires second and third reading to become an Act.

43 'S&D deeply concerned about the NGO bill discussed in the Israeli Knesset', press release, 9 February 2016.

44 'MEPs send an open letter on Israeli government NGO bill', www.juliewardmep.eu (accessed 14 February 2015).

45 Raphael Ahren, '50 European MPs slam NGO bill as 'inherently discriminatory'', *The Times of Israel*, 9 February,

against measure'.⁴⁶ The letter received harsh criticism in the Knesset. MP Nava Boker of the governing Likud Party, for instance, said:

I was astonished to receive the letter. It seems that these parliamentarians are confused, or they got used to activating their foreign agents here, but I am committed only to the People of Israel. The state of Israel is a sovereign state and we will not tolerate this blatant and audacious foreign intervention. The NGO bill is an excellent bill and the Europeans [had] better understand the hint: leave the state of Israel alone.⁴⁷

As we can see, MEPs' informal diplomatic activities may receive media coverage in third countries and elicit strong reactions in their parliaments⁴⁸. After the final approval of the act, S&D deeply deplored the adoption of the bill and declared: 'The European Socialists Democrats stand firm with the Israeli NGOs targeted by this bill'⁴⁹.

Conclusions

Political groups within parliaments are new international actors with a distinctive role. While these groups are a part of their parliaments' institutional structures and take part in their parliaments' various diplomatic activities, they also develop their own autonomous diplomatic channels. Parliamentary groups enjoy a great deal of autonomy when they act as diplomats in pursuit of their own political ideologies and policy preferences. Parliamentary groups are free to decide their own schedule for diplomatic visits and they can liaise directly with opposition parties in third countries and NGOs' representatives instead of with official state diplomats, thus nurturing parallel diplomatic relations in the form of non-governmental and less traditional diplomacy.

As this chapter illustrates, parliamentary groups foster a relatively high level of coordination with civil society actors in third countries, bypassing foreign governments as a way to compensate for the scarcity of the resources required to conduct autonomous foreign relations. Parliamentary actors' contacts with civil society actors abroad are rather informal, developed through face-to-face meetings and intensive email exchanges, often *ad hoc*, based on personal acquaintances and relationships of trust. Therefore, qualitative social science research methods, such as in-depth interviews, are necessary to understand the scope of these contacts, which constitute important

2015.

46 Lahav Harkov, 'Controversial NGO transparency bill passes first vote', *Jerusalem Post*, 8 February 2015.

47 MP Nava Boker (Likud), quoted in Gideon Alon, 'The Knesset approved the NGO bill in first reading', *Israel Hayom*, 9 February 2015 (Hebrew. Translated by the author).

48 Four parliamentarians of the German-Israeli parliamentary friendship group in the Bundestag had sent a similar letter to Israeli parliamentarians, which was also largely reported in the Israeli mainstream media.

49 'S&D condemns adoption of discriminatory NGO bill in Israeli Knesset'. S&D Press release, 12 July 2016.

sources of information and knowledge for parliamentary groups, which could have a bearing on political legitimacy of the action taken pursuant to such newly acquired data, helping to justify the parliaments' policy positions against official governmental stances.

Both state and non-state actors in third countries recognize the diplomatic role of political groups within parliaments and try to influence their positions. The former actors' lobbying efforts towards parliaments and parliamentary actors need to be analysed further, in particular the role of non-state actors in developing their own relations with foreign parliaments. Furthermore, parliamentary actors do not only passively receive information from civil society actors abroad, but they also actively provide the latter with information on the institutional developments in their polities, which is crucial for the latter actors to be able to lobby foreign parliaments and governments more efficiently. This aspect of the exchange of resources between parliamentary actors and foreign civil society organisations should be further explored in the future.

The chapter also reveals the lack of influence of the parliamentary groups' diplomacy on the parliament's position, let alone on the government's foreign policy. In light of this, further research on parliamentary diplomacy should strive to evaluate the actual influence of parliamentary actors' diplomatic activities beyond symbolic politics and rhetoric. One assumption would be that such activities do have a certain influence on the government positions, but a rather indirect one, which should be assessed from the perspective of a longer period of time, by pushing certain issues of international politics on the global agenda and by framing these issues in ways that correspond to the preferences of the parliamentary actors engaged in international politics.

Finally, internal divisions within parliamentary groups on foreign policy issues prevent them from fulfilling their full potential as public diplomatic actors who can publicly express their criticism of the government's foreign policy and propose alternatives, combining their diplomatic action with a communicative function. Nevertheless, individual parliamentarians do not necessarily need their affiliated political groups to be behind them in order to conduct diplomacy. The highly informal nature of parliamentary diplomacy gives individual parliamentarians much flexibility to launch their own diplomatic initiatives and engage directly with parliamentarians and NGOs in foreign countries. Future research is needed on individual parliamentarians as autonomous diplomats and how their activities may contribute to the responsiveness and the accountability of parliamentary diplomacy.

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