ARTICLE

"Watching and waiting" and "much ado about nothing"? Making sense of the Israeli response to the Arab uprisings

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ABSTRACT   This article covers Israel's response to the Arab uprisings. The analysis deals with the issue of both material and immaterial political actions of the Israeli political leadership. A theoretical approach based on "thin rationalism"—actors pursue strategies based on their preferences—encompassing orthodox and heterodox schools of thought of International Relations (Neo-Realism, Institutionalism, Liberalism and a Copenhagen School-inspired concept of international securitization) is developed and applied to the case. The article contributes to the solution of a research puzzle. On the one hand, Israel's material political action followed a watching-and-waiting approach, as Israel refrained from actively interfering in the domestic affairs of Arab countries highly affected by the Arab uprisings. On the other hand, in terms of political communication, major executive branches of the Israeli state pursued a harsh policy: the "Arab Spring" was presented to the global public as a dangerous threat to Israel's security. Major results at the empirical level are that Israel—seen through the spectacles of the three orthodox schools of thought—was never seriously threatened by the Arab uprisings, which contributes to explaining why Israel's material policy was rather equanimous. At the same time, the harsh Israeli policy at the level of political communication is made sense of as a policy that added to Israel's attempts to legitimize its occupation of Palestine toward the (Western-dominated) international community. At the theoretical level, further application of the securitization approach aimed at the international level is encouraged. This article is published as part of a collection on analyzing security complexes in a changing Middle East.

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Introduction

There can be hardly any doubt that Israel, as a state situated in a predominantly Arab environment, was deeply affected in its regional relations by the "Arab Spring."[1] However, as will be discussed later in further detail, close to six years after the beginning of the Arab uprisings, it seems safe to state that at no point in history did these events and their repercussions pose any severe threat to Israel. In particular, the Israeli relationship with Jordan remained stable; the Palestinians were hardly mobilized by the "Arab Spring", and insofar as they were, the protests were directed primarily against the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, respectively, rather than Israel (Pace, 2013; Leech, 2015: 1022–1023);[2] although cooperation between the Israeli and Egyptian governments became less intense in the period of Muhamad Mursi's presidency, close Israeli—Egyptian military cooperation remained functional under his reign and intensified under the leadership of his successor, Abdul Fatah al-Sisi; the peace treaty between the two countries was never at stake; and the turmoil in Syria and Iraq proved to be very inner-Arab, Arab—Kurdish, and Turkish—Kurdish oriented. At the same time, major events with higher relevance for Israel's security—such as the escalation of the conflict between Hamas and Israel in 2014 and the interrelated suspension of flights to Ben Gurion Airport by several major airlines (Pfeffer, 2014)—have no links to the Arab uprisings.

Against this background, the complexity of the initial response of the Israeli government headed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the Arab uprisings appears to be at first glance surprisingly contradictory. On the one hand, Israel's material political action followed the pattern of a watching-and-waiting approach—that is, Israel did not make any attempts to actively interfere politically or militarily in the domestic affairs of Arab countries highly affected by the Arab uprisings (Heller, 2014). On the other hand, in terms of political communication, major executive branches of the Israeli state pursued an alarmist policy: The "Arab Spring" was presented to the global public as a dangerous threat to Israel's security.

In terms of the dimension of material political action, the Israeli security policy responding to the Arab uprisings must be analyzed and assessed against the background of the information and knowledge the government could possibly have had in 2010 and thereafter—and not on the data and information available today. Thus, firstly, the question of why Israel reacted with a defensive watch-and-wait policy in the face of quite some regional turmoil must be addressed seriously. Secondly, the question arises as to what motivation Israel had to present the "Arab Spring" in its political communication as a serious threat to its security interests, although its "real" policy did not follow an alarmist approach at all. Finally, how can the combination of these seemingly heterogeneous policies be made sense of?

The research problem, whose empirical basis is to be described in a survey-like manner in the next section, is to be addressed in the light of two theoretical concepts: classic or orthodox subjective rationalism and heterodox rationalism inspired by the Copenhagen School. Then, in the frame of the analysis of orthodox rationalism, this article will analyze whether and to what degree (Neo-)Realism, Institutionalism, and Liberalism as schools of thought of International Relations are capable of making plausible the response of the Israeli government. These schools of thought shed some light on the case, particularly on Israeli material political action in response to the Arab uprisings, but no fully satisfactory explanation is produced in regard to the Israeli response on the level of political communication. The heterodox concept to be applied embeds the idea of securitization in a rationalist approach that claims that Israel as an occupational power in the twenty-first century (with its postcolonial norms) is in constant need of legitimizing an extraordinary measure—occupation of Palestine—by securitizing its regional status. In this way, Israel was able to politically convert the complexities triggered by the Arab uprisings into a securitization policy that primarily targeted the (Western-dominated) international community. Thus, the current article also develops a theoretical perspective by applying the idea of securitization, which is commonly used for the analysis of domestic politics, to the international level. As the theoretical bridge between the two Israeli policies is subjective rationalism, the empirical nexus between them is occupation, as is to be elaborated in the concluding section.

Israeli responses to the Arab uprisings: an overview

In terms of political communication, the Israeli response to the Arab uprisings was rather harsh. In February 2011, it was leaked that Israeli officials warned of a situation similar to "Tehran 1979" rather than "Berlin 1989" (Magen, 2015: 117). This view clearly contradicted the general positive Western view on the "Arab Spring" in those days, both among leading politicians—such as US President Barack Obama (2011) and EU Commission President José Manuel Baroso (2011)—and scholars who discussed the "Arab Spring" as a process of fundamental transition to profoundly more liberal if not democratic political systems (Roy, 2012). The metaphor of Berlin 1989 was then very much in vogue indeed (Head, 2011).

As is well documented by Lehrs (2012), from the very beginning of the Arab uprisings in Egypt, Netanyahu expressed major reservations toward and mistrust of the potential of the "Arab Spring". In a conspicuous speech to the Israeli parliament held on 23 November 2011, Netanyahu portrayed the "Arab Spring" as a major threat to the West in general and Israel in particular by portraying it as an "Islamic, anti-Western, anti-liberal, anti-Israeli and anti-democratic wave" (quoted after Ravid, 2011). This statement became the quasi-official guideline for Israel's policy toward the "Arab Spring" in terms of political communication (Jones and Milton-Edwards, 2013: 400–401). The significantly more nuanced views of other prominent Israeli politicians—such as then President Shimon Peres and Deputy Prime Minister Natan Sharansky—did not have a major impact on the Israeli political arena (Magen, 2015: 118). Also, the civil society of Israel, whose population had more nuanced attitudes toward the Arab uprisings than often portrayed (Pratto et al., 2014: 88), had trouble shaping the public discourse (Zisser, 2016). This also applies to scholarly attempts to take the "Arab Spring" as a chance for getting engaged in the Middle East rather than perceiving it as a threat (Podeh and Goren, 2013).

The alarmist Israeli speech acts could hardly contrast more with the response in terms of material political action. In the short period in which the "Arab Spring" seemed to be a local Tunisian phenomenon, it had little effect on the Israeli political class and the top decision-makers of Israel were not dealing with the issue in person. However, when the wave spilled over to Egypt and decade-long major ally of Israel, President Hosni Mubarak, was forced to step down, Prime Minister Netanyahu, most prominent heads of Israeli security-related institutions, and the closest of his advisors got involved in the decision-making process (Magen, 2015: 115). At the same time, Israel's concerns about potentially threatening developments related to the Arab uprisings and its "pessimistic view of the Arab Spring" (Byman, 2011: 123–124) notwithstanding, its decision-making policy followed a pattern of "wait and see," as Magen (2015: 117) puts it, or watch and wait: It is clear that Israel refrained from responding to the Arab uprisings by taking any strong material political action; at the same time, there are strong indicators that Israel's political leadership was on the qui vive of regional

developments ever since Egypt had been caught by the "Arab Spring." How can the co-existence of Israel's equanimous watch-and-wait policy and its harsh response on the level of political communication be made sense of?

Orthodox and heterodox rationalism

This article attempts to contribute to an explanation of two seemingly contradictory aspects of the Israeli response to the Arab uprisings in 2010/2011: a watch-and-wait policy on the level of "material" political action on the one hand and a "much-ado-about-nothing" policy in terms of "immaterial" political action, that is, the presentation of the Arab uprisings as a major security threat to Israel on the level of political communication, on the other. Note that the differentiation between material and immaterial political action should not be confused with more conventional polar opposites such as *realpolitik* versus rhetoric. Apart from the fact that the term *realpolitik* is commonly associated with one particular school of thought of International Relations—(Neo-)Realism—it is to be underlined that political communication is a genuine and often far-reaching *activity*. One of the major achievements of speech act theory is that it transcends the conventional wisdom of the dichotomy between words and deeds, as comes across in the proverb "An ounce of performance is worth pounds of promises". Rather, as a promise is a performance, the collection of lecture series by the inventor of speech act theory, Austin (1975) was wisely titled "How to do things with words".

Thus, adequate methodological and theoretical tools are needed to embark on this endeavor. The demanding challenge in this respect is how to identify Israeli (perceptions of) threats and how to make sense of them. It is highly contested among scholars whether "threats"—or any other abstract terms used by scholars and political leaderships, respectively, to explain and legitimize political actions—are basically objectively given or genuinely dependent on perception (and thus in one way or the other subjectively constructed). There are basically three methodological ways to cope with this challenge, all of which have their strengths, but also limitations. The first one is to follow an inductive approach and to reconstruct threat perceptions of decision-makers by interviewing them (or, in practice, very often those who advise them), exploring archive material, and studying speeches of leading politicians and other forms of their publicly accessible utterances. This manner of addressing the methodological challenge posed above has the advantage of catching the ideas of decision-makers more or less directly. Thus, it will be incorporated into the present article in the form of the Copenhagen School-inspired approach. At the same time, this way of dealing with the methodological challenge is not to be considered a silver bullet, at least not for the purpose of the present article, mainly for the reason that it cannot be excluded—and it is even rather likely in cases of security-sensitive cases of "high politics"—that political elites are less committed to "truth" and "honesty" than to strategic and/or ideological convictions. In other words, decision makers (and their advisors) may tell us the absolute truth about the threats they perceive—or they may be not. Although scholars may have some means of examining whether statements and speeches reflect genuine beliefs, there is no way to systematically extinguish errors.

The other two methodological ways are deductive, that is, they use general ideas, which often qualify as sophisticated theories, to inform about threats and threat perceptions. One deductive way is to apply theories that outline the (threat) perceptions of a given actor. Sophisticated versions of conceptualizing (mis)perceptions, which in security studies in general was initiated by Jervis (1976), borrow heavily from psychological concepts, for instance the

syndrome of a "people-apart" as developed by Arian (1989) and the "bunker mentality" as presented by Krebs (2011). The concept of bunker mentality has been further elaborated on *inter alia* by Marzano (2013: 107–109) and applied to the "Arab Spring" by Klein (2012): "the Arab Spring pushes Israel into a self-defensive bunker mentality, which perceives events as existential threats". Analyses based on these psychological concepts are certainly enriching. However, the validities of these studies highly depend on the appropriateness and "truth" of the underlying concept and their far-reaching psychological assumptions.

As the two methodological ways outlined above are enriching but not fully convincing, the present article aims to follow another path of deductive analysis. In the following, I will outline well-established theories of International Relations and thereafter apply them to the present case study, thus contributing to explaining Israel's response to the "Arab Spring". As theories of International Relations have developed sophisticated concepts of threats and threat perceptions, the methodological path chosen promises to shed light on the research issue. The advantage of the chosen approach *vis-à-vis* the inductive method is that it does not have to bother with (mis)believing political leaderships. In comparison to the bunker mentality approach, the one chosen benefits from two facts: first, theories of International Relations are more elaborate und thus suffer less from the potential flaws of an ad-hoc theory. Second, there is no need to make far-reaching assumptions of irrationality. Yet, it is frankly admitted that the method chosen also has its limitations: As theories will be applied, the validity of the results depends on the quality of the theory. To minimize the potential flaws from this limitation, the analysis starts with classic or orthodox rationalism, which, in the discipline of International Relations, developed three main schools of thought: (Neo-)Realism, Institutionalism (often labeled Neo-Liberalism), and Liberalism. In other words, it is essential for the present approach not to choose one theory from the very beginning. Rather, all three major schools of thought of orthodox rationalism must have a say, as all of them survived intense debate in International Relations and should therefore not be eliminated before checking their potential benefit for the empirical analysis of the present case.

Here is not the place to discuss whether a deductive or inductive approach is more suitable in social sciences in general. Yet, as far as the present issue is concerned, the deductive approach outlined appears to be particularly promising. As the "Arab Spring" triggered many new rapid developments in a rather short period of time, the regional political environment of Israel was in extremely high flux. Therefore, if the research approach in the present case were based on an inductive concept, the danger would be that the researcher would have trouble overcoming an agnostic position: Due to the impact of many new variables to be examined, one could be stuck with a line of argument according to which the actors simply could not understand what was going on and what would come next. The approach outlined above, however, gives us the chance to see further as we stand on the shoulders of giants. Admittedly, intellectual giants like the schools of thought used for the present analysis may also fail, yet this danger is minimized in the present analysis by taking seriously all major rationalist schools of thought of International Relations.

Since the application of these three schools of thought produces, on the one hand, some rich insights in terms of answering the research question, but, on the other, also leaves some questions unanswered, an alternative school of thought is then to be applied: a securitization approach inspired by the Constructivist concept of the Copenhagen School. The Copenhagen securitization approach qualifies best among other

Constructivist approaches for the purpose of the present article, as it meets the following two essential criteria: First, as the aim is not to play the different schools of thought off against each other, but to "peacefully" use the potentials of all of them for a more comprehensive explanation of the research question,[3] the approach must be designed in a way that its epistemological basis is compatible with the three orthodox rationalist schools of thought. In other words, post-structuralist approaches are not suitable for the present analysis (cf. Hasenclever et al., 2000). Second, as the function of the heterodox approach for the present analysis is mainly to catch the dimension of the political communication of Israel's response to the Arab uprisings, a school of thought focussing on speech acts rather than on empirical developments is preferable. Thus, the valid aspects of criticism on the narrowness of the Copenhagen School from the theoretical perspective of developing a comprehensive approach notwithstanding (McDonald, 2008: 564, 570), for the present analysis both factors discussed clearly favor the Copenhagen school over alternatives such as the Paris School or a discourse analysis as developed by Hansen (2006: Part I).

From an epistemological point of view, (Neo-)Realism, Institutionalism, Liberalism, and the Copenhagen School as designed in the present article are all based on "thin" (as opposed to "thick) rationalism (Little, 1991: Chapter 3). Rationalism assumes that actors have aims based on preferences and are capable of identifying the most suitable strategy on how to successfully pursue them. However, thin rationalism does not claim that the actors' preferences are (necessarily) a result of rational reasoning. Rather, they are taken as a given: All four schools of thought dealt with in the present article define them on the basis of particular world views associated with them. In other words, actors' preferences are considered a result of specific factors constraining and providing opportunities. In the case of the three orthodox rationalist schools of thought, the preferences are very much determined by structures—and are thus effectively "objective"—whereas in the case of the Copenhagen School, which heavily relies on Constructivist insights, security threats are not fully determined by structures but are determined by the ways the actors interpret them, i.e. they are "constructed" by speech acts (Wendt, 1987). At the same time, all four schools of thought are epistemologically connected through "subjective" rationalism: States have aims and are capable of developing strategies, yet they act under the condition of imperfect information, limited capabilities, and uncertainty of the actions of others (Elster, 1985).

(Neo-)Realism, Institutionalism, and Liberalism on Israel's response to the Arab uprisings

In the following, the three orthodox rationalist schools of thought are briefly presented, focusing on two potential issues for Israeli security concerns for each of them. In each case, the short theoretical presentation is followed by an empirical application.

(Neo-)Realism on Israel's response to the Arab uprisings
Security threats through shifts in regional power dispersion?
According to (Neo-)Realism, relative power capabilities are crucial (Grieco et al., 2003): States cannot afford to focus on absolute gains since the degree to which they are beneficial to them depends on whether they may possibly be overpowered by the capabilities of other actors. Therefore, security threats are very often the result of shifts in the distribution of power capabilities on a global or regional scale. In the case of the Arab uprisings, some scholars convincingly argue that the wave of revolts and regime transformations brought along significant changes in the regional power system. Particularly in the immediate aftermath of

the downfall of Mubarak, according to Realist logic, due to the anarchic Middle Eastern state system Israel was potentially unsettled and concerned about potential power shifts (Amour, 2016: 4–6).

At the same time, with the exception of its foreign policy toward Lebanon[4] —which is a case of low relevance for the present article, as the "Arab Spring" did not unsettle the Lebanese political system—Israel has appeared as a "status quo power" since 1967,[5] when it managed to significantly expand the territory controlled by its government and military and establish an occupational regime on Palestine that, according to Israel's self-concept, includes the dynamic expansion of Jewish settlements. In that sense, however, as a contemporarily defensive power, Israel could always rely on its superior capabilities toward other potential regional powers in the Middle East (Byman, 2011: 129; Inbar, 2013: 150ff; Magen, 2015: 128).

What power shifts materialized as an outcome of the Arab uprisings and how did they affect Israel? Among the big five in the Middle East—besides Israel, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey—some shifts relevant to Israel did indeed occur (Sandler, 2013: 133–134). As Egypt's role as a potential regional power was weakened because of its ongoing economic and political crisis, the immediate effect for Israel was instead positive, since any government in Cairo had a strong incentive not to lose its only remaining foreign policy asset from a Western point of view: the peace treaty with Israel. Thus, as early as February 2011, Israel got reassurance from the top of the Egyptian military that the peace treaty between the two countries would be maintained (Berti, 2013). However, some other Middle Eastern actors gained relative power: Turkey (Altunışık, 2014), Iran (Fürtig, 2014), Saudi Arabia (Al Tamamy, 2014), and also Qatar (Machowski, 2011), as well as the newly emerged Islamic State (Inbar, 2016).

Turkey, whose relations with Israel had cooled down in the years before the Arab uprisings, was strengthened particularly in the period between the first elections of an Islamist government in 2011 in Tunisia and the usurpation of power by the Egyptian military in July 2013, as Ankara then enjoyed leverage based on the political ideology of moderate Islamism. Yet, although Turkey's ambition particularly in the Flotilla incident was to pillory Israeli occupation policy, contrary to Iran's foreign policy, that of Turkey was never driven by a strong anti-Zionist stance (Mor, 2014). Arguably, the Arab Spring even provided Israel with opportunities to improve bilateral relations (Goren, 2012), as later materialized in the reconciliation agreement in June 2016 (Times of Israel, 2016). To what degree did Iran gain relative power as a result of the Arab uprisings? The Iranian power gains were rather limited insofar as the relative rise of Saudi Arabia, which due to Egypt's weakness has been able to unfold its potentials as an Arab hegemon (Beck, 2015), and its increasingly active role in the region served as a significant compensation, despite the Wahhabi regime not having diplomatic relations with Israel. Riyadh's foreign policy since 1979 has been to balance Iran and at the latest since 1967 to moderate tensions between the Arab world and Israel. Moreover, although Egyptian—Iranian relations of course improved with the shift of presidency from Mubarak to Mursi, they remained much more distant than generally expected (Aran, 2012: 57), as Egypt under Mursi distracted the hopes of Teheran to "re-unite" Islamic forces by overcoming the Sunni—Shia rift and refused to fight in Syria side-by-side with Iran (George and Awad, 2012; Klein, 2014). Also Qatar gained some relative power with the Arab uprisings, at least until the 2013 military coup in Egypt. However, the effects for Israel were very limited: relations between Qatar and Israel had arguably been Israel's warmest with an Arab state in the two decades prior to the Arab uprisings. Yet, heavy Qatari criticism of Israel's Gaza war 2008/2009 cooled relations down, and Qatari attempts to resume closer ties were

disapproved of by the Israeli government (Ulrichsen, 2012). Finally, the Islamic State emerged as a new power center in the Middle East. However, its territorial expansion took place away from the borders of Israel and inhibited adversaries of Israel, particularly Iran, from unfolding their power capabilities in the region. Accordingly, Inbar (2016) denominates the destruction of the Islamic State as a strategic mistake because a rather weak Islamic State is functional in curtailing Iranian influence in the Levant.

Regional power shifts as triggered by the Arab uprisings had mixed effects on Israel in terms of relative gains. At the same time, it is safe to say that the Arab uprisings did not trigger major changes in Israel's power position in the Middle East. Thus, Israel was at no point in the recent history of the Arab uprisings seriously challenged by shifts in regional power dispersion. Amour (2016: 14) goes so far as to state that Israel "remains the top regional superpower".

Security threats caused by failed states? Another Realist potential security threat triggered by the Arab uprisings is caused by effects of the failed-state syndrome. Before the Arab uprisings, in many respects weak Arab states neighbouring Israel were rather strong insofar as they controlled a monopoly of force in the sense of Max Weber (cf. Ayubi, 1995). However, the most sensitive borders and demarcation lines of Israel—the border to Jordan as by far the longest and the boundaries to the Palestinian territories as by far the most politically contested—were not affected by the "Arab Spring", simply because both the Hashemite Kingdom (Aran, 2012: 59) and the Palestinian Authority (Al-Omari, 2015) did not face major upheavals during the Arab uprisings and continued their effective security cooperation with Israel. However, Syria (Rotberg, 2014), and, albeit to a much lesser degree, the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula (Jacoby, 2013: 32) have been showing signs of failing as states and state territories, respectively, since the early days of the "Arab Spring". Indeed Israel faced some border incidents (Eglash, 2015). However, some severe events such as an attack on 18 August 2011, implemented by militants infiltrating Israel through the Sinai Peninsula, which caused eight Israeli death casualties (Jacoby, 2013: 32)—notwithstanding, Israel was not exposed to a systematic, large-scale terrorist threat from Egyptian and Syrian territory (Sandler, 2013: 132). Violent conflict in Syria had reached a high level of turmoil and certainly exceeded the limits of a domestic civil war, particularly toward Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, and to a certain degree Jordan—but not toward Israel. Particularly remarkable is the fact that the highly violent and oppressive policy of the Islamic State toward different Muslim groups, Christians, Yazidis, and Kurds *inter alia* did not include Jewish Israel and there are no strong indicators that this could change in the foreseeable future.

Institutionalism on Israel's response to the Arab uprisings. Contrary to (Neo-)Realism, Institutionalism portrays (international) institutions as (often) influential structures and/or actors that (sometimes) enjoy a life of their own (Keohane, 1989), which may facilitate, but sometimes also hinder, cooperation. The Middle East stands out as a world region with a rather low degree of regional cooperation—and Israel's integration into regional organizations and agreements is particularly underdeveloped (Beck, 2015). Yet, the Israeli—Egyptian peace treaty that was negotiated, concluded, and finally signed under American patronage in 1979 arguably had a significant impact on Israeli-Egyptian inter-governmental relations and on regional affairs. At the same time, it never became a "warm" peace accepted and vitalized by the respective civil societies—particularly Egyptian society has always remained very reserved (Bar-Siman-Tov,

2000). Thus, on the eve of the "Arab Spring", institutions had a double impact on Israeli-Egyptian relations. On the one hand, the treaty created a state of affairs that fostered cooperation on the governmental level in several realms, of which security is of high relevance for the purpose of the present article, and facilitated Israel's ability to maintain occupation of the Palestinian territories conquered in 1967, as the "Arab front" against Israel and its occupation policy had lost its most powerful member. On the other hand, the weakness of Egyptian civil-society-dominated organizations, as caused by Cairo's authoritarianism, prevented potential "spoilers" of the cold peace on the societal level from going through with their agenda.

When Egypt cancelled a 20-year-old gas contract with Israel in 2012, some Israeli politicians reacted with disgruntlement. Yet foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman explicitly refrained from taking the Egyptian decision as an issue of "high politics": "I think that to turn a business dispute into a diplomatic dispute would be a mistake" (quoted after Sherwood, 2012). Not least due to discoveries in their own gas fields, Israeli proved to be invulnerable to the termination of the Egyptian deliveries (Jewish Virtual Library, 2016).

The second Arab country with which Israel enjoys the benefits of a formal peace treaty is Jordan. In Jordan, however, the level of protests in 2011 was incomparably lower than in Egypt and never reached the momentum of seriously challenging the Hashemite regime in Amman (Beck and Hüser, 2015). Thus, at no point in recent history has Israel had to be seriously concerned about the stability of its effective security cooperation with Jordan (Schenker, 2014).

Security threats because of weakened inter-state institutions? One of the immediate concerns of the Israeli political elite after the downfall of Mubarak was that new governments that arose as a result of the Arab uprisings could terminate the Camp David peace treaty because of its unpopularity (Asseburg, 2012: 84; Federman and Barzak, 2012). However, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which took over power after the downfall of Mubarak, unsurprisingly maintained its well-coordinated relations with Israel. Yet, the Islamist government headed by President Mursi also left no doubt that it would stick to the basics of the peace treaty (Sobczak, 2012; Katz, 2014: 79). As the Egyptian military, in compliance with Western interests, managed to dominate national security affairs even in the heyday of Mursi's presidency, there was no moment in history when Israel was seriously challenged by undermined Camp David peace accords.

Security threats because of strengthened anti-Israeli institutions? As a result of the Arab uprisings, national institutions, particularly parliaments, that had been marginalized under the old regimes were (re)vitalized as an outcome of fair and free elections (Völkel, 2014). In Egypt, the first elections after the downfall of Mubarak resulted in clear victories for Islamist political parties, whose ideological leaders came from the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi movements. Thus, at first glance it seems that from an Israeli viewpoint there was a potentially challenging development unfolding: institutions, particularly the parliament, many deputies of which were actually or potentially critical of the peace treaty with Israel in particular and Zionism in general, apparently gained room to manoeuvre. However, the new constitution that Mursi pushed through with a hastily arranged referendum did not touch the political prerogatives of the pro-Israeli Egyptian military (Ottaway, 2013). On the level of ideology, the Muslim Brotherhood oriented itself much more toward moderate Islamist Turkey than toward the Iranian model

(Kassem, 2013). When a mob looted the Israeli embassy in Cairo in September 2011, it failed to receive support from the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood and the army did not hesitate to contain the attack. Moreover, by declaring a state of alert, the military signalled its readiness to actively defend the good relations with Israel on the state level (Fahmy, 2011). Seventy-six persons were convicted by Egyptian courts for their participation in the incident (Times of Israel, 2012). Therefore, from the perspective of Institutionalism it was always visible to Israel that the strengthened role of actors from "below" did not constitute a severe security threat. After the downfall of Mursi, Israeli-Egyptian relations became even more effective than in the era of Mubarak, particularly since al-Sisi who took power in July 2013, shared a hostile stance toward Hamas and was subsequently ready to squeeze Hamas in cooperation with Israel (Magen, 2015: 120).

Liberalism on Israel's response to the Arab uprisings
Transition processes as a threat? At first glance, the Arab uprisings did not constitute any potential challenge for Israel from a Liberalist perspective. One of the main contributions to International Relations of Liberalism, which emphasizes the role of societal forces in international politics (Moravcsik, 1997), is the democratic peace theorem: democracies refrain from waging wars against one another (Brown et al., 1996). Therefore, if as a long-term result of the Arab uprisings one or several Arab democracies should emerge, Israel's security situation would significantly improve. However, the teleological transition paradigm as developed in the late twentieth century, according to which the emergence of fully fledged democracies is the quasi-natural outcome of transformation processes triggered by the downfall of authoritarian regimes, has been proven highly problematic (Carothers, 2002). Yet, even if democracies emerge, this outcome is inherently preceded by transition processes during which regimes often resort to aggressive foreign policies (Norlén, 2012), since this enables them to distract from deficits of their performance in domestic politics.[6] Owing to widespread anti-Zionist sentiment in the Arab world, democratization could convert into governmental policies threatening Israel (Bresheeth, 2012).

However, at the latest in 2012 it was rather obvious that the Arab uprisings had not triggered a smooth transition to democracy, particularly not in Egypt (Stepan and Linz, 2013). The only exception might be Tunisia, whose limited power capabilities and geographic distance prevent it, however, from being a threat to Israel's security. In general, because of the superiority of Israel in terms of military, economic, and political power, Israel was in a position of strength, which is built on a knowledge-based high-tech economy, whereas the neighbouring developing countries have been in decline for decades. One of the many indicators for Israel's superiority vis-à-vis its neighbouring countries is its comparatively high level of foreign currency reserves (Levitt, 2013). Israel also enjoys one of the most sophisticated armies on a global scale, which would be capable of countering any military attack from its neighbouring countries. Last but not least, Israel maintains a "special relationship" with the United States, which from a Liberalist perspective, is particularly stable, as it is strongly backed by the most powerful political actors in American domestic politics (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007; Cavari and Nyer, 2016).

Threats through Islamism? As Liberalists put emphasis on the role of social groups in influencing and even enacting foreign policies, their perspective poses the question of whether Israel might have feared, as a threat to its security, the growing role of the Islamist groups which were empowered as a result of regime changes in Egypt and Syria (as well as Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and other countries affected by the "Arab Spring", all of which are, however, geographically too distant to create a (potential) threat to Israel). Many of the rank and file in Islamist organizations in Egypt were ideologically clearly distant to Israel (as many other political movements in the nationalist and leftist camps). Yet, the mass basis of Islamist organizations prioritized changes and reforms in domestic politics and took a moderate stance in foreign affairs toward Israel (Hamid, 2011). The leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood refrained from altering Egypt's foreign policy, which continued to be controlled by the military to a high degree (Shama, 2014: Chapter 5). This included active reassurance that Egypt would stick to the peace treaty with Israel. President Mursi even pressured Hamas to moderate and reconcile with Fatah, thereby mitigating Israeli security threats from the Gaza Strip (Berti, 2013: 143; Dickstein, 2014/15).

Contrary to the main Islamist groups in Egypt, those that took over power in parts of Syria were extremists in the sense of decisive hostility toward other religious groups in the Middle East: The Islamic State declared a caliphate and established a regime that acted aggressively toward the opposition and groups whose religious affiliation was considered hostile. Thus, the Islamic State was also very much preoccupied with domestic affairs (Bundel, 2015). It is remarkable that all Islamist groups that were (temporarily) strengthened by the Arab uprisings in Arab countries neighbouring Israel had a foreign policy agenda that was significantly less hostile toward Israel than the Egyptian and Syrian regimes in the 1950s and 1960s, when under the regional leadership of Egyptian President Gamal Nasir anti-Zionist pan-Arabism served as the ideological guideline for Middle Eastern regional affairs (Abou-El-Fadl, 2015).

Much ado about nothing and/or securitization policy?
According to analyses based on criteria for security threats from different rationalist schools of thought, Israel's security was at no point in the contemporary history of the Arab uprisings and its aftermath "objectively" challenged. This preliminary finding of the present article is confirmed by all rationalist perspectives applied to potential Israeli concerns. Based on the assumption that Israel has been a status quo power since 1967, this political scientific finding harmonizes with Israel's material policy during the Arab uprisings and its aftermath: a watchful but equanimous wait-and-see policy out of a position of strength (Magen, 2015: 117; Zisser, 2015).

However, as clear as the findings of the orthodox rationalist analysis are in terms of Israel's material policy, the more puzzled the observer is left in terms of the harsh political communication of Israel toward the "Arab Spring". This central aspect of Israeli policy can hardly be made sense of from the perspective of orthodox rationalism: The analysis produced no significant indicator that Israel could possibly have perceived a serious threat to its security from neighbouring countries. Thus, the contribution of orthodox rationalism to the Israeli political communication concerning the Arab uprising would be confined to assessing it as a much-ado-about-nothing policy without providing any substantial explanation for it.

This, however, does not mean that scholars committed to rationalism should give up finding a comprehensive explanation for the Israeli policy toward the Arab uprisings. Rather, it appears promising to apply a heterodox approach inspired by the Copenhagen School. The basic idea of the Copenhagen School is that political actors, governments, or social groups mostly acting through government, are able to legitimize extraordinary measures when they successfully securitize a political issue. Securitization is thus an extreme form of politicizing a social issue

(Buzan *et al.*, 1998: 23). Contrary to orthodox rationalism, (security) policy is not (primarily) taken as a result of structural factors. Rather, whether an issue is considered relevant to security is determined by perlocutionary speech acts as outlined in the Constructivist speech act theory elaborated by Searle (1969). Therefore, social issues that are "objectively"—for instance measured by the number of death casualties—less significant, may still be perceived as major security issues. For instance, although it appears contestable whether it is more harmful to oneself and others to consume cannabis (or dog meat) than alcohol (or beef), respectively, the commercial production and sale of the former but not the latter have become criminalized in many Western societies. In a similar way, it is striking that in European societies a ban of the burqa has recently been intensively debated, in some cases even enacted, whereas hiding one's face in the frame of carnival rituals has not been addressed, although in Europe much more severe cases of crimes such as rape have been committed under the cover of the anonymity provided by carnival costumes than burqas.

The concept outlined borrows heavily from social constructivism. Yet, in the approach developed in this article, the constitutive element of social constructivism has been embedded in the concept of thin rationalism: securitization as outlined in the present article is a deliberate policy of strategic actors to justify policies that otherwise would be difficult to legitimize. This embedment of the Copenhagen School-inspired approach in rationalism is essential for the argument of the present article, as the insights of the analysis based on orthodox rationalism are then a valid part of the overall analysis.

Another crucial element of the heterodox rationalist approach as sketched in the present article is that, contrary to the approach of the mainstream Copenhagen School, it does not focus on the national level of the political system. It has already been shown that the basic idea of the Copenhagen School can also be expanded to other levels beyond national politics (Zwitter and de Wilde, 2010). The present approach is an attempt to expand the idea of the Copenhagen approach to the international level. The primary target audience of a securitization policy may be the "international community" (cf. Bliesemann de Guevara and Kühn, 2009). This is so for two interconnected reasons. First, in contrast to a global great power or superpower, the room Israel has for manoeuvre as a middle power on a global scale and its positioning in the international system depends to a higher degree on the support of more powerful actors in the international system, particularly the United States and the leading members of the European Union (cf. Nolte, 2010). Second, under "normal" conditions, embeddedness in the (Western-dominated) international community requires the compliance of norms such as respecting international law and human rights. Although many states, among them Israel, are much too strong to become the "victim" of humanitarian intervention (cf. Finnemore, 1996), their identity often does not allow them to more or less bluntly stand by norm violations. As states have an incentive to be considered integral members of the "civilized world", they need to find ways to justify norm violations. Securitization is a powerful means to acquire legitimacy for "extraordinary policies"—that is, foreign policies that exceed the limits of generally accepted political activities—on the international level.

Israel is under constant diplomatic pressure to legitimize the occupation of the Palestinian territories conquered in 1967. In contrast to the territories that Israel controlled after the first Israeli—Arab war in 1948/49, the international community never recognized the Palestinian territories as a legitimate part of the state of Israel. Even Israel's main ally, the United States, has refrained from moving its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, notwithstanding that the Knesset in 1980 declared in a basic law that "Jerusalem, complete and united, is the capital of Israel" (Knesset, 2009). Many actors in the international system, including the European Union, consider the settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, which are host to over half a million Israeli Jews, as illegal. Recently, Palestine obtained a clear majority for upgrade to being a non-member observer state in the United Nations (Beck, 2016). According to global polls, Israel's reputation beyond the United States is rather negative (Jones and Milton-Edwards, 2013: 407). In 2014, the British, French, and Irish parliaments opted for full recognition of Palestine as a state, in Sweden this was even granted by the government. In the light of all that, Israel has been portrayed more and more as a colonizing state which constantly violates basic human rights prescriptions that have guided normative principles of international relations since the end of the era of colonization (cf. Finnemore, 1996).

At the same time, Israel has a strong interest in being embraced as a member of the "civilized" international community. A good indicator for Israel's eagerness to maintain its status as a respected part of the "civilized" world is its partly fearful response to the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement: A rather irrelevant actor in terms of hard power is perceived by significant members of the Israeli political class as a real threat due to its strong soft power capabilities (Shalev, 2015). The reason is that actors such as the BDS are indeed capable of performing speech acts with the potential of shaping a discourse that cannot be easily countered by Israel without violating anticolonial norms and principles of human rights.

Internationally securitizing events and developments—for instance, by portraying the Arab uprisings as a security threat to Israel—is the most effective tool available to Israel to counter debates in which the state of Israel appears to be a deliberate colonial power constantly violating post colonial values. For the Israeli political leadership the "Islamic Winter" served as justification for prolonged occupation. Netanyahu justified military presence in the West Bank by referring to the potential take-over of Palestine by Iranian forces (Sandler, 2013: 132). Through securitization policies, a new normative light is shed on Israel's attitude toward the occupation of Palestine: first, despite extensive settlement of Palestine, occupation, albeit in principle undesirable, appears to be a policy that is hard to avoid—as long as Israel is surrounded by "enemies" that are already controlling major parts of Palestine and just waiting to bring in Palestine once it should acquire independence. In his speech delivered at the "Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations" in February 2014, Netanyahu took a gloomy view in reference to the situation in the Middle East and the strategic implications for an agreement with the Palestinians: "The whole land is convulsing, there are earthquakes everywhere you go. And how are we to be sure that areas that we cede to the Palestinians will not be taken over by Hamas and Hezbollah and Al-Queda and Salafis" (quoted after Prime Minister's Office, 2014).

Second, despite occupation having endured for nearly 50 years, securitization policies make it appear to be a temporary measure that would be reconsidered as soon as context conditions improved (cf. Sandler, 2013: 132–140). Moreover, part of Israel's securitization policy concerning the Arab uprisings was that Iran could be portrayed as a new strongman in the Middle East as Egypt was weakened by the Arab uprisings, although a sober analysis based on insights of orthodox rationalist thinking, as presented above, reveals that Iran's relative gains in the Arab Spring were—at least partially—countered by those of its major foe Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the gap between the power capabilities of Israel on the one hand and those of other Middle Eastern powers on the other was so huge that Israel could not be seriously challenged. The Israeli policy concerning the "Arab

Spring" and how it is linked to Iran is one of rather complex securitization—not just a simple policy of "distraction" from occupation of Palestine (cf. Watad, 2015).

Conclusion

The present article has attempted to grasp an at first sight very heterogeneous, if not contradictory, policy in that sense that Israel followed both a policy of "watching and waiting" in terms of material political action and a "much-ado-about-nothing" policy in terms of immaterial political action. Israel reacted to the Arab uprisings on the level of its "factual" policy with a watchful but equanimous policy, whereas in the imagery of its political communication, it pursued a harsh policy, portraying the Arab uprisings as a serious threat to Israel's security interests. It has been shown that the dual strategy of Israel can be made sense of when applying a thin rationalist approach drawing on orthodox and heterodox theoretical insights. The analyses based on the major orthodox rationalist schools of thought of International Relations—(Neo-)Realism, Institutionalism, and Liberalism—all confirm that the Israeli watch-and-wait policy was the best available strategy given the fact that—with the exception of Lebanon—Israel has acted as a status quo-oriented power since the occupation of Palestine in 1967. At no point of history was Israel "objectively" threatened by the Arab uprisings and its immediate repercussions.

In the present case, the "concept" of occupation is crucial to connecting orthodox and heterodox ideas of subjective rationalism in a meaningful way. It provides, at the same time, the empirical link that helps to comprehend a crucial aspect of Israel's response to the Arab uprisings: securitizing the "Arab Spring" contributed to Israel's ability to maintain its position as an integral member of the "civilized" (Western) community. Israel's sophisticated approach contributed to legitimizing the extraordinary measure of occupation, which under "normal" circumstances would be difficult to justify in the light of postcolonial norms.

On the level of material policies, occupation caused Israel to become a status-quo oriented power with capabilities so much superior to all other potential Middle Eastern regional powers that in the face of the Arab uprisings it was most rational to pursue a watch- and-wait policy. Similarly, due to its occupation of Palestine, Israel, being constantly under normative pressure, had a strong incentive to securitize the Arab uprisings which it did with much ado on the level of political communication.

Thus, the added value of the present article consists in contributing to dissolving the puzzle of a seemingly contradictory policy with the help of theoretical tools, whereas an inductive approach would in the present case have trouble overcoming an agnostic position. Of course, whether the present article may claim a gain in insights vis-à-vis post-structuralist approaches depends to a high degree on the issue whether the attempt to explain human behavior and basic categories constitutive for thin rationalism are accepted as meaningful from an epistemological and ontological perspective. It is to be admitted that the approach applied in the present article implies some far-reaching assumptions such as that actors have preferences and that their intentions play a role in shaping their material and immaterial actions. However, in comparison to approaches that heavily borrow from insights of the discipline of psychology—such as the concepts of bunker mentality and the people-apart syndrome—the present analysis approximates the ideal of epistemological parsimony to a higher degree. Moreover, the two psychological concepts, which were originally developed to grasp particular mentalities of (major segments of) the Israeli society, appear more plausible when analyzing the behavior of the Israeli society as a

more or less coherent collective unity. However, this article has focused on the Israeli political leadership, thereby following the principle that we should try hard to make sense of a behavior as strategic factor before giving in by adding far-reaching psychological factors. The claim is not that this method will always succeed; however, the response of the Israeli political leadership toward the Arab uprisings could be made sense of without relying on psychological categories.

The idea that securitization aims not only at the domestic, but sometimes also at the international level, deserves more attention. The present article has dealt with a case in which an actor turns to a securitization policy toward the international community in order to legitimize a policy that massively violates basic human rights. Certainly, Israel is not the only state that attempts to legitimize the massive constraints of the rights of other peoples by securitization policies targeting the international community. Comparative studies could shed some light on this phenomenon and thereby identify success conditions: Why is Israel quite effective in maintaining its position as an integral part of the "civilized" international community—and this despite significant resistance from quite a number of states of the Global South and considerable segments of civil movements not only in the Arab world, but also in Europe and the United States? This also touches the issue of imposing or not imposing sanction regimes on states in the Middle East and beyond. Furthermore, the question arises to what degree securitization toward the international community is an outcome of intentional (or strategic) policy and/or of identity features. How are identities prone to securitization toward the international community developed? This also leads to the question why and how "objectively" limited potential threats are magnified as essential and even presented as "existential threats." Last but not least, the idea of securitization toward the international community may also be applied to policy responses of Western states (and non-Western-like states like Russia and Saudi Arabia) to terror threats and attacks, which in some cases triggered highly discriminatory securitization policies particularly toward Middle Eastern actors.

Notes

1 The effects on Israeli domestic affairs—the summer protests of 2011 being partially inspired by the "Arab Spring" (Wallach, 2013)—are beyond the scope of the present article.

2 In their painstaking analysis of the Arab uprisings and their impact on Palestinian violence directed against Israel in Israel and occupied Palestine, Bhavnani and Donnay (2012: 129) come to the conclusion that the link is insignificant. Although his perspective might be overly optimistic, it is worth mentioning that Davis (2014) believes that the "Arab Spring" created new potentials for Israeli—Palestinian cooperation through non-governmental partnerships.

3 For a critical assessment of the International Relations paradigm change from the period of theoretical warfare, in which scholars sent out different schools of thought like battleships, to theoretical peace and the acknowledgement of pluralism, see Dunne et al. (2013).

4 Both in 1982 and 2006 Israel waged war with Lebanon in order to significantly weaken, if not destroy, adversaries: the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Hizbollah, respectively.

5 Among other scholars Shlaim (2000) presents strong arguments that Israel historically acted as an offensive power.

6 A similar scholarly argument has been used to rationalize Israeli reluctance to accept the establishment of a Palestinian state (Inbar and Sandler, 1997).

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Additional information