

Who Cares: Why the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict Matters (More) to Some EU Member States

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Abstract

What drives the salience of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict amongst EU member states? This article employs domestic foreign policy theories to explain the factors underlying variation in salience, estimated analysing all country statements made at the United Nations General Assembly between 1993 and 2017. Our findings suggest that there is a U-shaped relationship between government ideology and attention for the Israeli–Palestinian conflict: governments at ideological extremes tend to devote more attention than centrist ones. Moreover, we find that member states with higher trade exposure to the region demonstrate greater attention to the conflict. Additionally, we find that member states with larger Muslim populations tend to attach more salience to the topic. Through the use of such a relevant and divisive case, our study contributes to the understanding of foreign policy co-operation amongst EU member states and its impact on European integration.

Keywords: European Union; foreign policy; Israel; member states; minorities; Palestine

Introduction

In this article, we study the salience of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in the national foreign policies of the European Union (EU) member states. Issue salience has been recognised by scholars of European integration as one of the key elements undermining European integration. In public opinion, the rise of the salience of divisive issues (such as immigration or unemployment) fuels the rise of anti-integrationist tendencies (Dennison, 2020; Dennison and Kriesi, 2023; Braun et al., 2016). In fact, a whole post-functional theory of European integration rests on the assumption that the challenges to European integration emerged as its salience increased (Hooghe and Marks, 2009).

Just as the EU integrated in other policy areas, the EU has aspired to show convergence in foreign policy too, ever since the onset of the European Political Cooperation in the 1970s. In successive treaties, the EU member states maintained that foreign policy remained a national competence but expressed the desire to work together. This has given rise to a full body of work on the EU's ability to act with a single voice (da Conceição-Heldt and Meunier, 2014).

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict has long held a prominent place on the agenda of the EU and its predecessor, the European Community (EC), remaining one of the most contentious and politically charged foreign policy issues – both within institutional debates and in the public sphere. Amongst EC/EU member states, divergent views on the conflict have often led to decision-making based on the ‘lowest common denominator’. Whilst EU member states formally share key objectives – chiefly support for a two-state solution – their differing perceptions of the conflict have led to divergent policy approaches.

Even to a casual observer, these differences were visible in the aftermath of the 7 October 2023 Hamas-led attacks on Israeli civilians and Israel's subsequent military response, which resulted in the deaths of nearly 70,000 Gazans, most of them civilians, and widespread destruction across the Gaza Strip. Although EU governments uniformly condemned the brutality of the Hamas attacks, their responses to the scale and conduct of Israel's subsequent military offensive have differed considerably. One factor contributing to this divergence is the varying degree of salience of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict within the foreign policy agendas of individual member states, which precedes the current war. In some countries, such as Germany and Czechia, relations with Israel are seen as strategically or historically significant, which often shapes their diplomatic stance. Germany considers Israel a strategic partner, grounded in its historical responsibility and commitment to Israel's security, and whilst it generally aligns with the EU consensus, it has consistently emphasised Israel's right to self-defence and maintained close bilateral co-operation even during periods of regional tension. The Czechia has consistently supported Israel as a strategic partner (Czech MFA, 2015), despite changes in government or regional tensions, and has often diverged from the EU consensus, as seen in its UN votes in 2012, 2017 and 2023. Others, like Ireland and Spain, tend to align more closely with the Palestinian cause and have taken a more critical view of Israeli actions. At the same time, there are EU members – such as Croatia or Slovakia – for whom the conflict registers only marginally on the foreign policy agenda, leading to limited engagement.

What explains this varying salience amongst the member states? In this article, we seek to understand which countries prioritise the conflict in their foreign policy, building on the growing recognition of the significant impact that domestic factors wield over the formulation and execution of foreign policy (Kaarbo, 2015). We analyse 28 member states (including the United Kingdom) and offer three possible explanations grounded in the domestic theories of foreign policy, examining how partisanship, trade and demographics shape policy. To do so, we analyse speeches made at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), relying on a new corpus of speeches (Turco, 2024). By using latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA), a widely popular unsupervised topic model, we are able to estimate a reliable and valid measure of EU member states' attention to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict since 1993. We then use this measure as a dependent variable in regression models to test our hypotheses about the impact of three key domestic factors – partisan ideology, trade with Israel and other regional powers, and the demographic composition. We show that governments with strong ideological leanings (whether left or right) find the conflict more salient as compared to the centrists. We also demonstrate that countries trading with the region (both Israel and the Middle East and North African [MENA] region) pay more attention to the conflict. Finally, we highlight how the conflict is more salient in the foreign policies of countries with a larger share of the Muslim population.

I. EU and the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

Since the European Political Cooperation began in 1970, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been central to EU foreign policy (Persson, 2020). Despite member states' disagreements, the EU's official stance on the conflict has remained relatively consistent since the 1980s, upholding Israel's right to exist in security and advocating for a two-state solution

to ensure Palestinian self-determination. This commitment has resulted in strong EU–Israel ties, including several formal agreements like the Free Trade Agreement (1975), the Association Agreement (1995) and the Open Skies Agreement (2012), which link the two economically, scientifically, culturally and politically (Dyduch, 2021b, pp. 2–6). These agreements grant Israel access to the EU on favourable terms, exceeding those offered to any other non-member state (Greene and Rynhold, 2018).

However, whilst maintaining these connections, the EU has also adopted policies criticising Israel's occupation of territories beyond the Green Line,¹ viewing settlement activity there as a violation of international law (Del Sarto, 2019). In 2013, the EU further reinforced this stance by issuing guidelines that excluded entities in these occupied territories from EU funding, effectively differentiating between Israeli territories on either side of the Green Line (Bicchi and Voltolini, 2018). Since the 1980s, EU member states have also led international recognition of Palestinian self-determination, with the European Council in 1999 declaring that 'the creation of a democratic, viable, and peaceful sovereign Palestinian State would be the best guarantee of Israel's security' (European Commission, 1999, pp. 21–22).² By the late 1990s, EU member states had accepted the two-state solution as policy.

Yet, whilst EU member states agree on the goal of a two-state solution, they disagree significantly on how to achieve it. Observers note that the EU is divided into at least three groups regarding this conflict. One group, including Sweden, Ireland, Belgium, France and Spain, has consistently criticised Israel for its military occupation of Palestinian territories and the settlement expansion (Asseburg and Goren, 2019; Dyduch, 2021b). Frustration with the EU's inability to advance the two-state solution led Sweden to become the first EU country to unilaterally recognise Palestine in 2014.³ More recently, Ireland, Slovenia and Spain recognised Palestinian statehood in 2024, while Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, and the UK did so in 2025.

Another group, including Austria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia or the Baltic states, tends to support Israel. Their motivations vary: the legacy of the rich and long history of Jewish communities who perished during the Holocaust, the experience with antisemitic and anti-Zionist positions of the communist regimes, Atlanticist orientation, the lack of the legacy of colonialism and the presence of only small and usually well-integrated Muslim communities contribute to more favourable positions (Dyduch, 2021a; Gazdik and Rózsa, 2013; Kalhousová, 2024).

Third, countries like Germany and the Netherlands often sought to balance between pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian views. They combined pro-Israeli views with strong support (often financial) for Palestine. This reflects both transatlantic commitments and a strong post-Holocaust resolve to prevent future atrocities, balanced against a critical view of Israel's policies in the West Bank and concerns over far-right policies within Israel

¹The demarcation line set out after the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, which served as the de facto borders of Israel till 1967, when Israel conquered, amongst others, the West Bank (incl. East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip – the two territories the State of Palestine should comprise, according to the EU.

²In June 1980, the EC member states formulated the Venice Declaration, in which they expressed a joint position on the Israeli–Arab conflict. It recognised the right to existence and to security of all the states in the region, including Israel, and acknowledged the right to self-determination for the Palestinian people (EC, 1980).

³In 1988, following the Palestinian Declaration of Independence made in Algiers by the Palestine Liberation Organization, most countries of the Soviet bloc, including many that are now members of the European Union, recognised the State of Palestine. Amongst those countries were Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia (Czechia and Slovakia), Hungary, Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia (Slovenia and Croatia). None of these recognitions has been revoked.

itself (Berenskötter and Mitrani, 2022; Dachs, 2024). For example, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz issued a rare public rebuke of Israel's offensive in Gaza but opposed the re-examination of the EU's Association Agreement with Israel (POLITICO, 2025a, 2025b).

This lack of a unified position is also evident in the voting patterns of EU member states at the United Nations, where they often fail to act as a cohesive bloc, particularly on key resolutions concerning the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Kalhousová and Rubínová, 2020). In 2012, when the UN voted to upgrade Palestine's status to a non-member state, 14 Western European countries voted in favour, whilst most CEE countries, along with Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, abstained and the Czechia voted against. A similar pattern emerged in 2017, when the majority of EU countries voted to condemn the US decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital, whilst six Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, including the Czechia, abstained. In May 2024, Austria and the Czechia were the only EU countries to oppose a resolution granting Palestine new rights, further illustrating the EU's lack of a unified position on the issue (UNGA, 2012, 2017, 2024).

Whilst existing research offers important insights into the EU's collective position on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and highlights instances of intra-European divergence, it tends to focus on policy outputs or normative orientations rather than examining how much the conflict actually matters to individual member states. Yet, as literature in foreign policy analysis shows, salience is an important factor in shaping political priorities, alliance-building and decision-making. This study addresses this overlooked dimension by introducing a conceptual framework for analysing salience in EU foreign policy and by proposing a novel empirical measure that captures the degree to which the Israeli–Palestinian conflict matters to individual EU members. By doing so, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of why the EU struggles to act coherently in this domain, not merely because of normative or ideological disagreements, but because the conflict holds different strategic and political weight across member states.

II. Explaining Salience

Foreign policy analysis is a home ground for linking domestic politics and foreign policy. Numerous approaches have been developed to explain what Kenneth Waltz famously called 'what state X did last Tuesday' (Waltz, 1979, p. 121). Systemic theories of international relations could explain certain general patterns in states' behaviour. Peculiarities of individual countries are best explained by more historical case study approaches. However, to explain actions of a large group of countries over a longer period of time, we resort to theories which find roots of states' foreign policy in their domestic politics. In particular, we look into partisanship, trade and demography as three possible sources of explanation, which broadly reflect three ideas broadly represented in IR scholarship – ideology, material interests and public preferences.

Partisanship

Political scientists and international relations scholars have in recent years paid growing attention to the importance of political parties in the formation of national foreign policy

(Hofmann and Martill, 2021; Kaarbo, 2015; Rathbun, 2004; Wagner, 2020). In democracies, political parties are often seen as the vehicle for the realisation of such social values. Whilst partisan cleavages could often be traced to distributional conflicts, they have numerous implications for foreign policy as well. One of the consistent findings in this scholarship is that the party contestation over foreign policy runs along the left–right axis (Wagner, 2020; Wagner et al., 2018). As Noël and Thérien (2023) recently wrote, the left–right axis remains surprisingly good in capturing cleavages on numerous issues in global politics even today.

There are good reasons to believe that the views on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict run along this axis too. To begin with, some of the fundamental issues at stake in the conflict can be very well mapped to the left–right axis. As Noël and Thérien (1995) argued, parties on the left, which tend to care about the welfare of the less fortunate citizens at home, tend to also be more generous in their foreign aid abroad. Left-wing politicians also tend to believe that violence breeds violence (Rathbun, 2004) and, therefore, are more likely to support peace negotiations and reject Israeli politics seen as an epitome of muscular security policy. Politicians from the far-left of the political spectrum tend to show anti-Zionist tendencies by seeing Israel as an illegitimate colonial project protected by imperial powers, the United Kingdom in the past and the United States today, which oppresses the indigenous Palestinian population. As Haugbolle and Olsen (2023) recently argued, the Palestinian cause has, over time, become a rallying cause of the global left.

By contrast, for the right-leaning politicians, security tends to come through strength (Rathbun, 2004), which in turn means that they can more likely see Israel as doing only what is necessary to protect itself. With a growing polarisation and the growing appeal of the far-right and populist parties in Europe, which feature a number of characteristics relevant for their views on the conflict (Asseburg and Goren, 2019; Dyduch and Müller, 2021; Greene and Rynhold, 2018; Pardo and Gordon, 2018), the right-wing views of the conflict become increasingly salient too. These parties often favour the idea of ‘nationalist Europe’ (Risse, 2010) and want to protect Western/Christian civilisation and culture. As part of this view, they often desire to stop emigration from Muslim countries. For far-right and populist parties, Israel is often seen as a model ethnocracy that is on the frontline of the fight against Islamist fundamentalism. Additionally, they share ideological affinities with Israel’s right-wing parties, particularly *Likud* led by Benjamin Netanyahu. Importantly, however, cultivating strong ties with the Jewish state allows those right-wing populists to deflect accusations of antisemitism and revisionism. Hungary’s *Fidesz* under Viktor Orbán, Austrian *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, Italy’s *Lega Nord* or Swedish *Democrats* contributed to the shift of their countries closer to the pro-Israeli camp. Also, Germany’s *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and *Partij voor de Vrijheid* of Geert Wilders show a strong pro-Israeli inclination. For instance, AfD went in May 2025 as far as to argue that ‘Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East and has the inalienable right to self-defense — particularly against the terrorism of Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank. Those who turn their backs on Israel in such a critical phase indirectly strengthen Islamist forces and endanger [...] the stability of the entire region [...]’ (Wolf, 2025).

Therefore, we hypothesise that partisanship influences the salience of the conflict. We think that because of the special position of the conflict for left and right, they will be more likely to see the conflict as salient too.

H1 The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is more salient to (relatively more) left-wing and right-wing governments compared to centrist governments.

Trade

One of the most distinguished streams of theorising in international relations has argued that trade between states diminishes the potential for conflict between states. Indeed, a substantive body of scholarship has shown that trade decreased the incidence of interstate conflict (Gelpi and Grieco, 2003; Mansfield and Pollins, 2003; Oneal et al., 1996; Russett et al., 2001). The basic idea behind this mechanism is somewhat simple – the voters are sensitive to the diminishing welfare as a result of trade disruption, and therefore, leaders are careful to avoid it.

Results have been decidedly mixed on whether trade also inhibits other forms of confrontation. Gartzke and Westerwinter (2016) argued that trade, especially the asymmetric one, can even exacerbate conflicts short of war, in line with the traditional realist view on the link between war and conflict (Copeland, 2014). For example, Wagner and Onderco (2014) do not find that the economic partners of Iran were more accommodationist towards the country over its nuclear programme. Similarly, Farzanegan and Gholipour (2023) do not find an effect of bilateral trade on the condemnation of Russia at the UN.

However, there is somewhat more solid evidence by now that not all goods are created equal and that some goods matter more than others. Especially, the so-called ‘strategic goods’ are seen as more critical for the security of the state and, therefore, are more relevant for the shaping of geopolitical relations between the supplier and the customer. Energy or arms are often seen as the paradigmatic strategic goods (Blanchard and Ripsman, 1996; Goenner, 2010). There is now growing evidence that such goods do indeed have an effect on relations between states, making states more accommodationist towards one another (Terman and Voeten, 2018; Wagner and Onderco, 2014). Area studies scholars, for example, linked the shift of Greece and Cyprus from a pro-Palestinian to a more pro-Israeli position to the discovery of the natural gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean in 2009, which led to the growing co-operation between those two countries and Israel (Mazis and Sotiropoulos, 2016; Tsakiris, 2018).

Building on these insights, we hypothesise that trade also matters for how salient a conflict is. The more countries are exposed to the region in terms of trade, the more salient the conflict becomes as its development has the potential to affect the profits from trade. When states consider how salient the Israeli–Palestinian conflict for them is, they have to think about two fundamental trade relations: one with Israel and one with the broader Middle East. This trade-off goes to the very heart of the thinking about trade and peace – countries need to frequently consider the potential trade-offs and dependencies when deciding whether to let trade influence their political choices (Gartzke and Westerwinter, 2016). Whilst, in recent years, states have not faced trade restrictions from the Middle Eastern countries because of their views on the Middle East, half a century ago, that was the case during the Oil Crisis. Next to the material motivation, there is also a political one – for Israel, the trade relations with European countries have been highly political, which in turn means that increasing trade ties between Europe and Israel have a political dimension (see, for instance, Heiman and Herman, 2019).

We expect that these mechanisms influence the salience of the conflict, as states are more likely to follow developments in regions where they hold significant economic interests.

H2 The more a country trades with Israel, the higher the salience of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

H3 The more a country trades with Muslim-majority MENA countries, the higher the salience of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

H4 The larger the country's dependence on oil from Muslim-majority MENA countries, the higher the salience of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Intra-Muslim Solidarity

When it comes to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, we argue that there are special interests related to the conflict linked to the strong feelings of solidarity with Palestinians held by European Muslims.

The foundation of social solidarity is the feeling of cultural closeness. Individuals feel closer to those that they can identify with (in-groups) rather than those they do not identify with (out-groups). Hurwitz and Peffley (1987) in their seminal study argued that group preferences are powerful in shaping individual views on numerous policy issues but are generally irrelevant when it comes to foreign policy. Yet, this view has since been contested. Scholarly work in public opinion and public attitudes has linked in-group perceptions to more lenient and more supportive views of other parties in various settings (O'Brien et al., 2017; Rathbun et al., 2016). Work on economic sanctions, for instance, shows that in-group members are treated more favourably compared to out-group members, both at the level of states (Hellquist, 2019) and at the individual level (Pospieszna et al., 2024).

With relation to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, we argue that the feeling of solidarity is strongest amongst the European Muslims. The conflict has been, for a long time, a relevant rallying cause amongst the Muslims globally (Hegghammer, 2010, 2013). Muslim communities around the world have almost universal solidarity with the Palestinian cause, at least on paper (Hegghammer, 2010). Whilst they are obviously not the only ones who express solidarity with the Palestinian cause (Tabar, 2017), they are the ones who can be considered to hold these views more strongly in the Western communities. Yet, such expressions of solidarity do not necessarily translate into support for violent actions or extremist tactics. Solidarity with Palestinians was not found to be linked to approval of terrorist attacks (Zhirkov et al., 2014).

The existing evidence on the relevance of Palestine for various policy outcomes is mixed. A study conducted in Belgium has indicated that flare-ups in violence in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict led to an increase in antisemitic incidents in Europe and the West in general (Jacobs et al., 2011). Jews living in countries with higher Muslim populations are also more likely to be victimised in antisemitic attacks (Enstad, 2025). This trend became even more obvious following 7 October 2023, when antisemitic incidents skyrocketed in many countries, including France, Germany, the United Kingdom and

the United States (CBSnews, 2023; DW.com, 2024; Le Monde, 2023; The Guardian, 2024).⁴

The changing demography matters. As the number of Muslims in European countries increased, one could expect that their preferences would increasingly influence the national foreign policy. Whilst migrants, including those with a Muslim background, still face difficulties in being properly represented in the national policy processes, we do expect that the demographic changes in Europe *influenced* how the governments approach and consider the Middle East conflict. In particular, we expect that the increasing share of Muslims in European countries influenced the salience of the conflict.

Therefore, we hypothesise:

H5 The higher the share of Muslims in the national population, the higher the salience of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

III. Estimating Salience of the Israel–Palestine Conflict at the UNGA

The UNGA represents an ideal forum for EU member states to show how much they care about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and which stance they take on it. In fact, it provides regularly occurring opportunities for states to express themselves on this issue, but without an obligation to do so.

Speeches at the UNGA are more suitable than European Parliament debates for examining national foreign policy salience because they are delivered by official state representatives articulating their government's positions. By contrast, Members of the European Parliament predominantly align along transnational party groups rather than national lines, making EP debates an inappropriate source for studying national foreign policy priorities (see Otjes et al., 2023; Raunio and Wagner, 2020).

However, the level of co-ordination across EU member states at the United Nations tends to be very high, masking potential disagreements between them. This is true not just for the votes on the UNGA resolutions but for the debates as well. In particular, in most cases, only the state holding the rotating presidency of the Council takes the word on behalf of all the EU to express a common position during the meetings dedicated to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, usually one per UNGA session. The remaining member states participating in the meeting rarely express dissenting opinions. This admittedly leaves us with limited data for a systematic cross-time analysis of variation in EU member states' positions about the conflict. In fact, as we will show, a member state may talk very little, if nothing, about this issue during an entire session. Considering the relevance of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in the context of the UNGA, we find the individual member states' decision to ever mention the conflict puzzling. This is even more puzzling since EU member states' representatives are often asked to deal with this issue in other venues, such as public speeches and interviews, and sometimes are eager to do so, emphatically articulating their own positions. As we will demonstrate, some states that do not hold the rotating presidency of the Council actually use more of their speaking time at the

⁴It is important to underscore that the vast majority of antisemitic crimes are perpetrated by the right-wing perpetrators. See European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2023).

UNGA to talk about the conflict, thereby displaying a stronger sensitivity to the issue that overcomes the barrier of internal co-ordination.

Given such a premise, we have to take into account all the speeches made during each UNGA session and not just selected ones. For this reason, we relied on a recently released corpus containing all speeches made by states at the UNGA between sessions 48 (1993–1994) and 72 (2017–2018) (Turco, 2024).⁵ Notably, session 48 corresponded to the first session after the crucial Oslo Accords, and session 48 came in the context of the Israeli rejection of the Arab Peace Initiative. We preferred this corpus over the more established and popular UN General Debate Corpus (UNGDC) (Baturu et al., 2017). The UNGDC covers a longer time period (all the sessions since 1970) and potentially offers a complete and comparable series of documents containing state policy priorities across years. However, due to its focus on the General Debate, the first of each session, it neglects specific meetings about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as well as other ones in which states may mention the conflict. To sum up, we expect the issue to be considerably less debated amongst member states during the General Debate.

As standard practice in text-as-data approaches, we performed a series of pre-processing steps to these data before analysing them. First, we aggregated the over 32,000 country-meeting-level speeches into roughly 4.5 thousand country-session-speeches, to increase the likelihood of finding references to the conflict in a given document and to match our independent variables that are measured on a yearly basis. The resulting documents have an average length of about 7000 words. Second, we removed punctuation, symbols, numbers and separators. Third, we merged multiple word expressions that are extremely common at the UNGA or in the context of debates about the Middle East into single tokens, including names of states (e.g., ‘United States’, ‘United Kingdom’), international organisations (e.g., ‘United Nations’, ‘European Union’), regions (‘Middle East’), general expressions across debates (‘Human Rights’, ‘Development Goals’) and more specific ones about our topic of interest (e.g., ‘Two State Solutions’, ‘Palestinian Cause’). This step, that was both machine and theory driven, is essential to distinguish the use of these expressions from that of the words that are contained in them. Finally, we removed those relatively infrequent words or expressions that do not occur in at least 5% of the documents to focus only on key dimensions of conflict at the UNGA and reduce the computational effort in the application of statistical models to the data.

We employ LDA, the most basic and widely used topic model, to extract a measure of salience for the Israeli–Palestinian conflict from UNGA (Blei et al., 2003). Topic models are parametric models describing the relationship between clusters of co-occurring words representing ‘topics’ and their relationship to documents which contain them in relative proportions. To put it simply, these models allow us to estimate the proportion of attention devoted by the author of a text to a set of topics. However, the machine-generated topics are unlabelled, and it is the responsibility of the researcher to attribute a meaning to them by interpreting words most associated with each topic. Topic models are considered an unsupervised method as the researcher’s input is very limited. The most crucial form of input consists of setting the number of topics. In our case, the optimal number of topics

⁵UNGA sessions span between autumn of each year and spring of the following year. However, most debates and votes take place at the beginning of each session. Hence, in order to match our measure of salience with year-level data and improve interpretability of our graphics, we approximated each session with the starting year of it. Therefore, we consistently refer to 1993 and 2017 as starting and endpoints of our analysis, respectively.

turned out to be 12.⁶ All topics and their respective clusters of words could be more or less straightforwardly associated with one fundamental global issue.⁷ Topic 3 is the only one that is clearly related to the Middle East and, in particular, to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Topic 3 is the seventh most used topic, with an average salience of 6.8%. Topic 3 is also the most salient topic in 323 documents, 7% of the total.⁸

Figure 1 shows the average salience of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, amongst all states and, specifically, amongst EU member states.⁹ It is evident how the average salience is much lower for EU member states than for the whole UNGA. During many sessions, EU member states have devoted less than 5% of their speeches on average to the conflict. However, whilst salience is relatively stable in general across years, it seems to have slightly increased for EU member states. In Figure 1, we observe two peaks of the conflict's salience for the EU – one is related to the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative and the other to the 2012 UNGA Resolution on the Upgrade of the Status of Palestine. Both initiatives were important for the EU; especially the latter, where the UN vote revealed internal divisions, as the majority of the EU member states voted in favour (14), or abstained (12), whilst the Czechia voted against. These factors, inherent to the dynamics of the UNGA process itself, influence large year-to-year variations in the salience scores. Besides Israel and Palestine themselves, the countries that prioritise the Israeli–Palestinian conflict are fellow Middle Eastern and Northern African countries including Iran, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria.

Figure 2 enables us to have a closer look at how much states talk about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict at the UNGA.¹⁰ Palestine is understandably the state that devotes the largest extent of relative salience to this topic across a number of UNGA sessions. In some cases, up to 75% of its speeches aggregated by year revolves around the conflict. Israel, for one, spends large portions of its speeches focusing on the conflict too, albeit it also focuses on other issues. In total, between one quarter to one half of Israel's session-level speeches are about the conflict. Besides Israel and Palestine themselves, some of the countries that prioritise the Israeli–Palestinian conflict the most are fellow Middle Eastern countries including Iran, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. The topic is considerably less salient for EU member states. That does not mean that they totally ignore it. In

⁶Following standard practice, we chose the number of topics that maximises both topic coherence (the same words are the most associated with a given topic across documents) and topic exclusivity (the words that are most associated with one topic are not associated with another topic), with a preference for the second dimension over the first to more accurately extract a topic completely devoted to the Middle East. For the coherence-exclusivity curve, see Figure A1.

⁷Table A1 summarises the Top 20 words by relevance in determining each topic and the consequent ex post topic labelling by the authors.

⁸For the summary of topics' proportions means and number of documents in which any topic is the most prevalent, see Table A2.

⁹We consider states as EU member states only in the period when they are actually members (and not before), thereby taking into account changes in EU membership across the years. As accession dates always preceded the beginning of the UNGA session, we start considering a state as an EU member from the session corresponding to the accession year. For instance, Austria became an official member of the European Union on 1 January 1995, and we consider it as such from UNGA Session 50, beginning in September of the same year. The United Kingdom is considered as an EU member state for the entire period under analysis in spite of the result of the referendum to leave the EU taking place in 2016, as the official withdrawal occurred only in 2020.

¹⁰Due to the lack of available data in the corpus, we do not have measures of salience for the following EU member states in the respective years: Bulgaria 2014, Finland 2001, Ireland 2001, Latvia 2010, Latvia 2012 and Portugal 2001. We must presume that these states did not take the word in any instance during these sessions outside of the General Debate.

FIGURE 1: Average Percentage Saliency Across Time Amongst All States and Only in EU Member States. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.70058)]

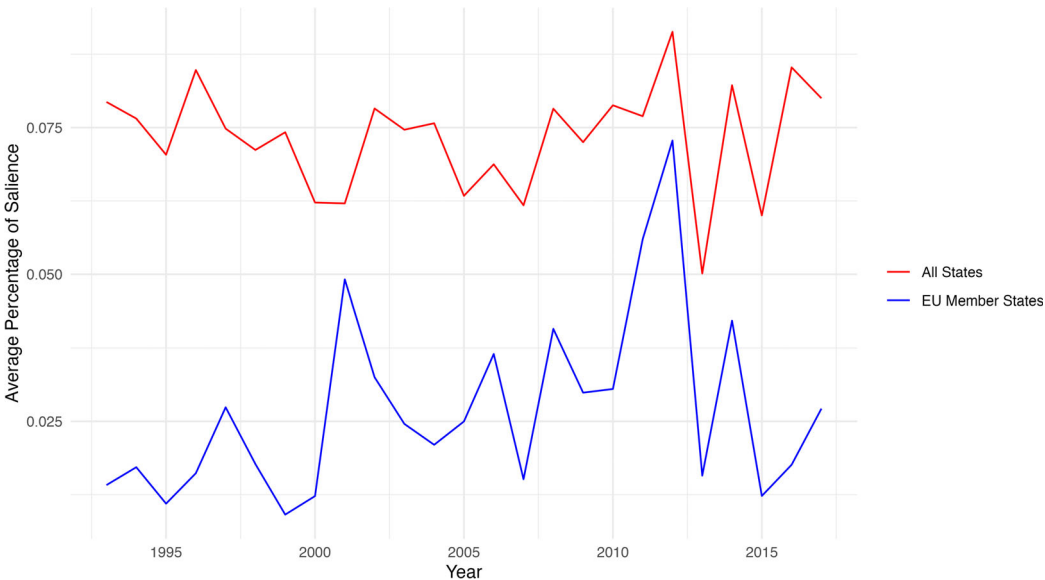


FIGURE 2: Saliency of Israeli–Palestinian Conflict Across Time Among All States at the UNGA. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.70058)]

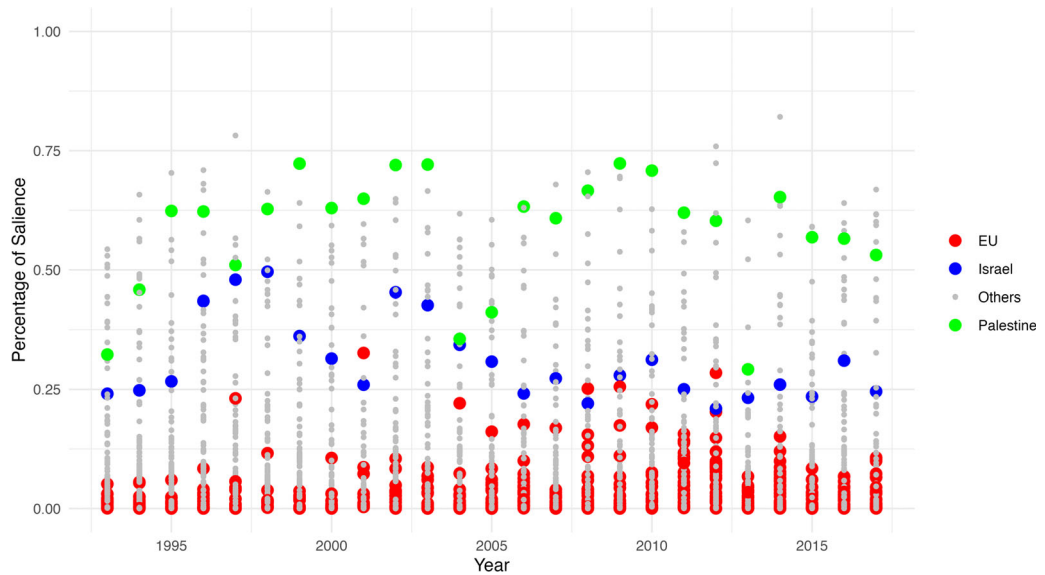
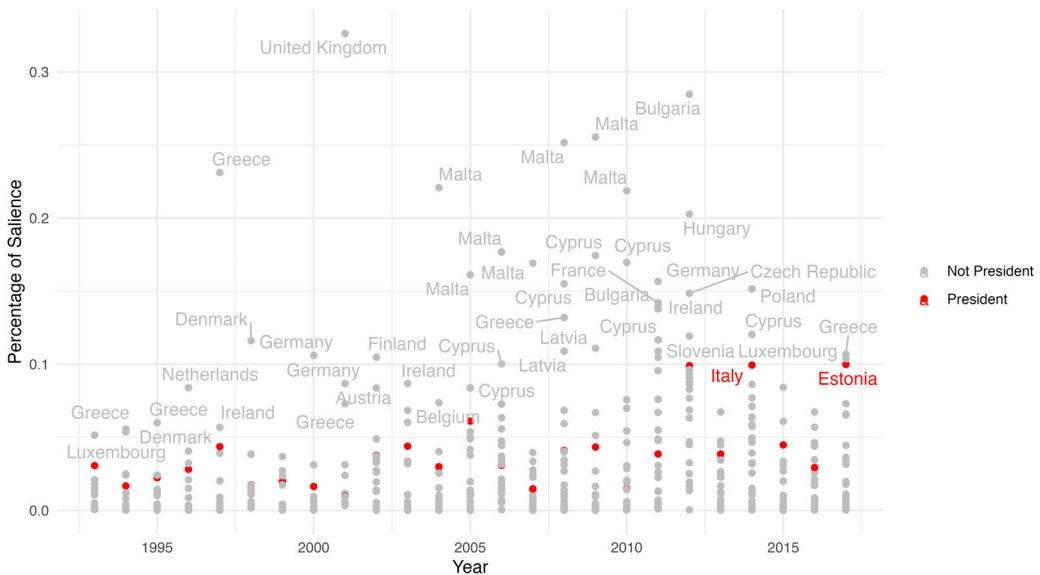


FIGURE 3: Salience of Israeli–Palestinian Conflict Across Time Among EU Member States at the UNGA (Country Labels Are Assigned as to Avoid Overlapping). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.70059)]



several instances, they spent more than 10% of their speaking time to talk about it; in a few cases even more than 25%.

Given our previous discussion about EU co-ordination during specific meetings about the situation in the Middle East, one might expect to find that EU member states that attribute relatively more salience to the topic are the ones holding the Council presidency. Figure 3 contradicts such an assumption as it highlights that the member state holding the rotating presidency is seldom the one that talks the most about the Middle East. The plot clearly shows some country patterns: three Mediterranean countries – Malta, Cyprus and Greece – have often been the ones attributing more salience to this issue.¹¹ A considerable extent of cross-national variance is equally evident, though.

We performed various robustness checks and validation tests on our measure of salience. First of all, we replicated the estimation employing different thresholds for words/expressions exclusion (presence in at least 10% and 20% of the total documents) and a different number of topics (8). The distributions of the topic related to the Middle East across these replications and in our own measure are nearly identical ($r = 0.99$, 0.97 , 0.97 , respectively). We further replicated the estimation using the structural topic model, a variant of LDA that allows taking the impact of covariates and topic co-occurrence into account (Roberts et al., 2014). We included session and year as co-variables in the model. Again, the distribution of topic proportions is basically the same ($r = 0.99$).

¹¹For the average topic proportions by EU member state in descending order, see Table A3.

Moreover, a research assistant manually coded the presence of the topic sentence by sentence amongst 20 randomly chosen documents amongst four subgroups: non-EU/EU states with above/below the average salience according to the estimates produced by LDA. Correlation with our measure was again very strong ($r = 0.94$). Interestingly, across the 17 documents for which our coder found at least one sentence about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the correlation with pro-Palestinian statements and anti-Israeli statements was strongly positive and significant ($r = 0.63$ and 0.84 , respectively).¹² Relatedly, we matched our own measure with ideal points derived from state votes on UNGA resolutions on the Middle East (Bailey et al., 2017), attributing smaller scores to more pro-Palestine states and larger scores to more pro-Israel states, and found a negative and significant correlation ($r = -0.27$ across all states at the UNGA, including Israel, and $r = -0.29$ across EU member states only). Therefore, it seems that states attributing more salience to the issue are more pro-Palestine too. Such a finding is not entirely surprising given that most of the resolutions revolve around the human rights situation in Palestinian territories under Israeli occupation: if a state is concerned about such issues, it also speaks about them; if it sees them as less of a problem within the context of the conflict in the Middle East, it probably prefers to stay silent. In any case, we do not want to go as far as claiming that salience might be a reliable proxy for position.

IV. Results

In order to test our hypotheses about the domestic determinants of EU member states' attention for the Israeli–Palestinian conflict at the UNGA, we employ our measure of salience as a dependent variable and investigate the effect of a series of independent variables on it, against various controlling variables. We relied on multiple existing sources for our independent variables. First, we extracted from the Comparative Political Dataset a five-value discrete measure of government ideology, ranging from the hegemony of left-wing parties to the hegemony of right-wing parties, based on the percentage of portfolios controlled by left-wing parties in the cabinet (Armingeon et al., 2023).¹³ Second, using World Bank data, we measured the trade relationship of EU member states with Israel in a given year as the average between the percentage of imports from the country out of the total imports and the percentage of the total exports to the country out of the total exports.¹⁴ We computed a further measure of the trade relationship with Muslim-majority MENA countries in the same manner. Furthermore, we calculated EU member states' dependence on fuel imported from these countries by value out of the total fuel imports in a given year. Finally, we relied on the World Religion Database (WRD) to measure the percentage of Muslims living in each EU member state. WRD has a single datapoint for the 1990s and 5-year datapoints from 2000 onwards.¹⁵

¹²For a visualisation of such correlation with measures extracted through manual coding, see Figure A2.

¹³We prefer this expert survey-based measure of government ideology over one derived from Comparative Manifesto Project scores as we are not interested in comparing government ideology across countries.

¹⁴Ideally, one would want to separate the trade between Israel proper and the Israeli settlements in the analysis. Sadly, the EU has introduced a separate customs code for Israeli settlements only in 2023. We are grateful to Reviewer 1 for this suggestion.

¹⁵All the trade variables and the Muslim population variables have been multiplied by 100 for better interpretability. For a frequency distribution of independent variables, see Figure A3.

Additionally, we introduce a number of control variables to account for potential confounding state-level factors. First, we examine the relationship with the United States. We posit that states with strong transatlantic ties are likely to hold a more pro-Israel stance, given the consistent support Israel receives from the United States at the UN. We gauge proximity to the United States by employing ideal point distance on important votes at the UNGA. We then consider the historical impact of the Holocaust. We suggest that nations where a larger proportion of Jews perished during the Shoah are inclined to be more sensitive to the issue. To measure this variable, we relied on data from the US Holocaust Museum. In addition, acknowledging that attention for the Israeli–Palestinian conflict may arise from a shared perception of threat from Islamist terrorism, we measure the number of terrorist attacks made by Islamist groups against each EU member state, using data from the Global Terrorism Database. Moreover, we account for EU member states' economic size and wealth using GDP and GDP per capita as proxies. In light of the previous discussion, we further incorporate the presidency of the EU Council into our analysis through a dichotomous variable. Finally, through a further dichotomous variable, we take into account NATO membership as a factor that might significantly influence EU member states' foreign policy preferences.¹⁶

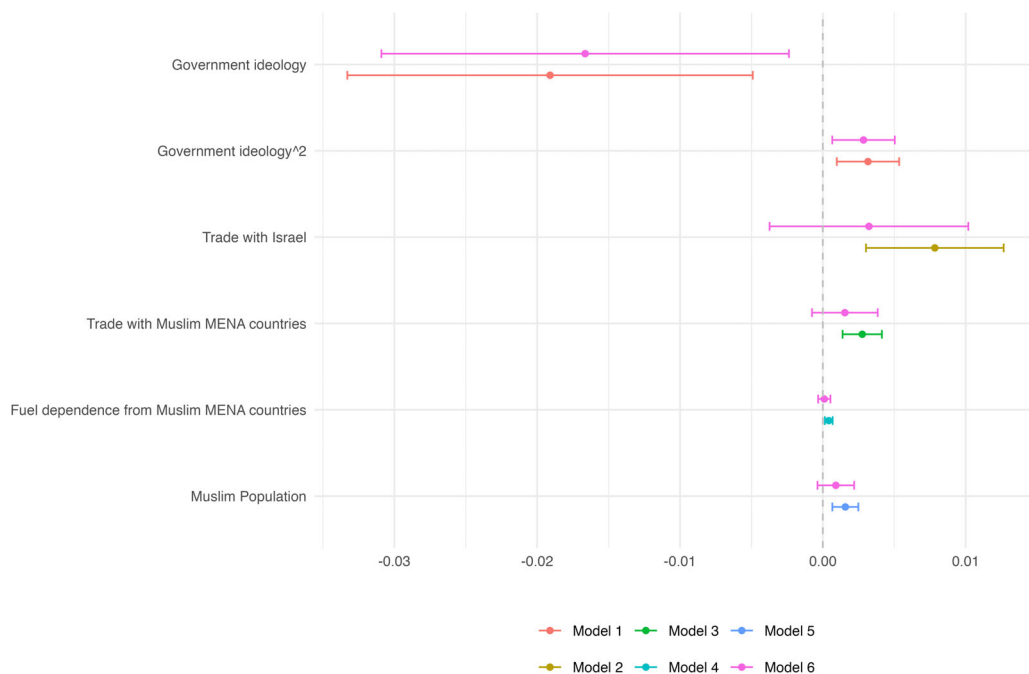
Figure 4 presents the coefficients for our independent variables from six Ordinary Least Square (OLS) linear regression models with year fixed effects to control for cross time variation in UNGA debates and developments in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict: five to test the effect of each of our independent variables on the dependent variable plus a last one in which we include all the independent variables. Control variables are included in all models.¹⁷ Models 1 to 5 confirm all our hypotheses. The coefficient for the quadratic term is positive and significant, suggesting a U-shaped relationship between government ideology and salience for Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In other words, it seems that government of EU member states either dominated by left-wing and right-wing parties talk more than their relatively more centrist counterparts. All coefficients associated with our trade variables are positive and significant. Therefore, an increase in trade with Israel or Muslim-majority MENA countries leads to an increase in salience for Israeli–Palestinian conflict at the UNGA. Moreover, the more an EU member state depends on Muslim-majority MENA countries for its fuel, the more it is interested in the issue. The coefficient for percentage of Muslim population is positive and significant too. That means that the larger the fraction of Muslim people living in an EU member state, the more that state will talk about the conflict in Middle East at the UNGA.

In Model 6, the effect of government ideology is still significant, whilst the impact of all the other variables turns non-significant. This may suggest that the effect of partisanship is stronger compared to the share of the Muslim population and trade-related variables. The fact that the standardised coefficients for the quadratic term of government ideology is larger than those for the other variables included in Model 6 confirms this intuition (0.58 against 0.08 for the Muslim population and 0.06, 0.10 and 0.03 for the

¹⁶For a statistical summary of all the variables, see Table A4. For the averages of trade associated variables and share of Muslim population across EU member states in the period, see Table A5.

¹⁷For the full regression models, see Table A6. We conducted two robustness checks on these models. First, we replicated the models using clustered standard errors for country to control for within-cluster correlation. Second, we replicated the models by adding the lagged dependent variable as an independent variable to control for autocorrelation. Results are robust across these replications. For the robustness checks, see Tables A7 and A8.

FIGURE 4: Effect of Partisanship, Trade and Muslim Population on Salience for the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict Among EU Member States 1993–2017 (OLS Linear Regression, Year Fixed Effects). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.70058)]

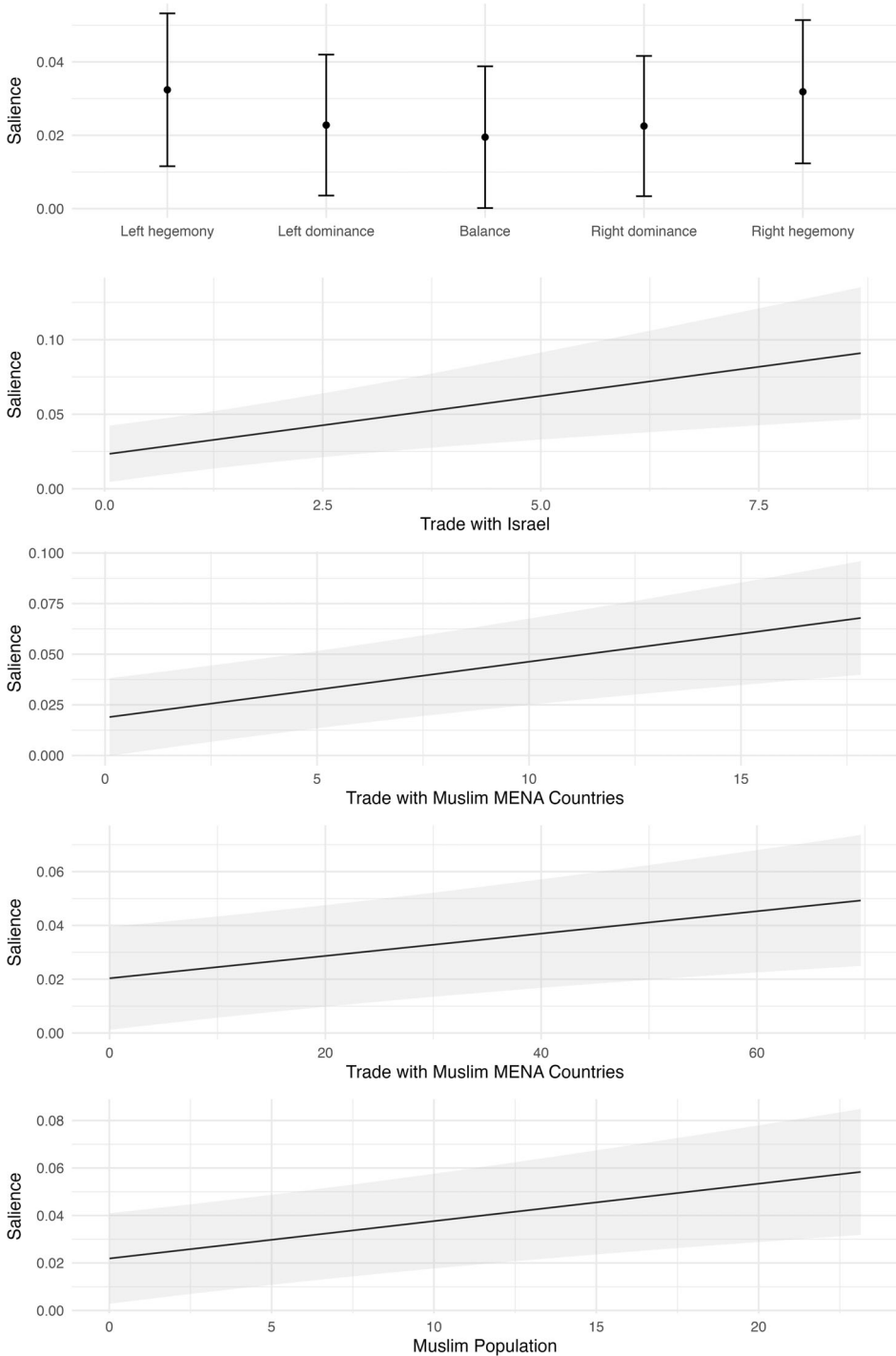


three trade-related variables, respectively). To put it bluntly, it seems that partisanship is much more relevant than trade and religious cleavages in determining how much EU member states talk about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict at the UNGA.

Figure 5 shows the estimated average predicted values of salience attributed by EU member states across for different values of our independent variables.¹⁸ The first plot suggests that strongly left-wing and right-wing governments devote on average more than 3% of their speeches at the UNGA to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, whilst centrist government less than 2%. In Italy, a country that experienced multiple transitions of cabinets with different ideological leaning in the period, relatively more right-wing and left-wing cabinets, such as the second and the third Berlusconi’s governments (2001–2006, 2008–2011) and the second Prodi governments (2006–2008), respectively, gave more salience to the topic compared to centrist coalitions and technocratic governments, such as the Letta (2013) or Dini (1996) cabinets, respectively. The second plot indicates that, whilst member states with a very minimal relationship with Israel (less than 2.5% of imports and exports) use about 4% of their speaking time to talk about this issue, member states with a stronger relationship (7.5% of import and exports) attach around twice the salience to it. The third plot shows that member states with very strong trade ties with MENA countries (average 15% of imports and exports) spend more than 5% of their yearly

¹⁸The plots are based on Models 1 and 5, respectively.

FIGURE 5: Predicted Values of Saliency for Our Independent Variables With 95% Confidence Intervals.



speeches at the UNGA to talk about the conflict, twice the amount of member states with small ties (5% of import and exports). Many EU member states significantly increased the share of import and exports from MENA countries in this period, but Spain did it more than most of its peers, moving from 4.5% to 9.9%. Correspondingly, Spain raised its voice about the conflict, dedicating up to 10% of its speeches in 2011 and 2012.

The fourth plot indicates instead that a country whose 20% of oil comes from these countries has a value salience of 3% and that a country with twice the dependence has a value of almost 4. Baltic countries have generally small commercial ties with Israel and MENA countries and tend to attribute lower salience to the issue. Finally, as suggested by the fifth plot, it seems that only countries with more than 10% of Muslims dedicate almost 4% of their speeches at the UN to talk about the conflict in the Middle East, twice as much as the salience dedicated by countries with a negligible amount of Muslim population. The strong salience attributed by Bulgaria towards the topic (reaching up to 28% in 2012) cannot explain without taking into account the relatively large Muslim minority in the country. In Slovakia, where the Muslim population is very low (less than 1%), interest for the topic is instead very small.

To probe whether our findings hold beyond 2017, we manually coded 2024 UN General Debate statements from selected European countries, identifying references to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. As speaking time is limited, states must prioritise topics. In 2024, Spain, led by a left-wing government, devoted the most attention to the conflict (14.46%), followed by Germany (10%), then under a centre-left government with a sizable Muslim population and regional trade ties. In contrast, countries with minimal trade ties such as Hungary (0%) and Estonia (5%) gave it minimal attention. Whilst not a comprehensive extension, this probe suggests our findings remain relevant post-2017.

Conclusion

In this article, we explored variation in the salience attributed by EU member states to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict at the United Nations. As to measure salience, we applied a topic model on a brand new corpus consisting of all the state speeches at the UNGA between 1993 and 2017 (Turco, 2024). We then used this measure as a dependent variable in a regression analysis to investigate the determinants of variation in member states' attention to the conflict.

In particular, we were interested in the effect of domestic factors, such as ideology, trade and demographics. Our findings indicate that these factors are important in explaining the salience of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. We find that governments with strong right- or left-wing ideological leanings find the conflict more salient, whilst those that are more centrist tend to find it less so. The finding that the salience follows a U-shaped curve follows other findings in the study of the politics of foreign policy where similar U-shaped curves were found to be applicable (Wagner, 2020). Our findings, therefore, confirm the emerging wisdom in foreign policy analysis that government ideology matters for many foreign policy outcomes, such as aid (Noël and Thérien, 1995), military spending (Wenzelburger and Böller, 2020) or use of force abroad (Wagner, 2020). We find that rather than the concrete left or right position, it is whether the party is a centrist or more extreme that matters, adding a further nuance to the existing scholarship. We also find that countries trading with the region (both Israel and the MENA region, in both

general and strategic goods) pay more attention to the conflict. This indicates that in line with the intuitive logic of trade dependence, states with higher trade exposure to the region pay higher attention to the dynamics there.

We also find that countries with a larger Muslim population do pay more attention to the region, though this finding is not substantively very large, and its statistical significance varies. Yet, it is not entirely surprising. During the Cold War, there was a substantive body of scholarship that has consistently found that migrants from Central and Eastern Europe to the West influenced the foreign policy of Western countries towards their countries of origin (Münz and Weiner, 1997). Similarly, there is some work in the study of international aid that argues that migrants consistently lobby for increasing aid payments to their home countries (Bermeo and Leblang, 2015). Combined with the diasporas and foreign policies (Shain and Barth, 2003), our findings extend the existing work into a new area. As we show, feelings of connection can bridge over transnational causes. Our findings indicate that co-religionists elevate salience; however, further research is necessary to understand their impact on positions more thoroughly.

Next to such substantive contribution, we also provide a methodological contribution, estimating salience for the Israeli–Palestinian conflict at the UNGA through a topic model. We demonstrate how unsupervised Text as Data methods enable us to retrieve replicable, reliable and valid measures of what states talk about in this forum. The analysis of our estimates confirms that the conflict in the Middle East is a prominent issue at the UNGA and points to considerable variations in states' attention to it. We nevertheless encourage further research investigating country positions on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict using text as data.

By conducting this analysis, we also contribute to the active research field studying the role of the EU at the United Nations (Jin and Hosli, 2013; Jørgensen, 2009; Young and Rees, 2005). In particular, we show how, in the face of a significant degree of coordination, EU member states still find ways to differentiate themselves. We extend this scholarship by looking not only at the positioning of the member states (Blavoukos and Galariotis, 2025) but also taking the relative salience of the issue into consideration. We think that the choice of taking the word and talk about a foreign policy issue is an interesting phenomenon by itself, especially if the issue is sensitive and divisive as in this case. It should then come as no surprise that we found a significant correlation between salience and pro-Palestinian sentiments.

Last but not least, our findings carry relevance for the understanding of European integration. As we argued at the start of the article, the growing salience of an issue creates a potential to undermine EU integration. This potentially applies to the domain of foreign policy as well. Our article underscores why different EU member states 'care' more about this issue compared to other states, uncovering the heterogeneity amongst the EU member states vis-à-vis the two parties in the conflict, which in turn makes finding a consensus at the European level more challenging. As European societies are becoming more diverse and societal polarisation increases, also provoking the rise to power of extreme parties across several member states, it is likely that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict will remain and even increase in salience on the European political agenda. This trend might indeed negatively affect foreign policy co-operation amongst EU member states on this issue and have spillover effects on other issues, within and even outside the context of foreign policy. In the light of our results, the increase in pro-Palestinian activism in Europe is

particularly interesting. Scholars will need to pay more attention to why such activism emerges and how it seeks to influence the policy.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Data S1. Supporting information