



# Prospects of Demilitarization in the MENA region

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*Published as part of debate #1 of the SALAM project, Spring 2023*

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is undergoing several geopolitical and security shifts, including the overlapping dynamics of militarization and demilitarization. This article seeks to explore the possible scenarios of both dynamics, and their respective implications for the role of Western powers in the region. It argues that while arms transfers to the region have been a major indicator of militarization of the region in the last decades, particularly since 2011, other recent dynamics may constitute weak signals of a current change and may be major drivers for stabilization in the foreseen future. As primary suppliers of arms to the region, Western states will retain their sway in the region, although the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) may recalibrate their engagement to address the changing parameters of the MENA regional security.

## Prevailing Militarization in the MENA

Originally used to describe trends at the level of domestic politics, militarization refers to the growing influence of the military in governmental practices, leading to a preparation of society and an accumulation of resources towards war, as regimes tend to adopt aggressive foreign policy. It is rooted in militarism and war proneness<sup>1</sup>. On a regional level, militarization is mainly defined by mutual threat perceptions among neighboring states. It can be understood as both a cause and a result of conflict and regional insecurity as arms build-ups become necessary for defense and enough reason for adversaries to wage wars<sup>2</sup>. It has also compounded conflicts abroad and severe power competitions<sup>3</sup>.

Since the 1970s, the MENA region has been one of the most militarized areas in the world. Regional states have resorted to accumulating greater levels of armaments to mitigate growing security threats, and to maintain an often-fragile balance of power with their rivals<sup>4</sup>. In some cases, greater militarization has been accompanied by a greater propensity for intervention in regional conflicts. An exemplary case of this cyclical relation between militarization and intervention was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 that was preceded by a militarized decade of full-fledged and costly war between Iraq and Iran. The miscalculation of the Iraqi leadership of Saddam Hussein led to a decision that durably transformed the regional security architecture, creating more chaos in the region, and

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1 Julian Schofield, *Militarization and War*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007 p. 1-2

2 Richard Tanter, *Intelligence Agencies and Third World Militarization: A Case Study of Indonesia, 1966-1989, with Special Reference to South Korea, 1961-1989*, PhD dissertation, Department of Politics, Faculty of Economic and Politics, Monash University, February 1991. P. 23.

3 For a classic view on the relations between militarism and militarization, see Marek Thee, "Militarism and Militarization in Contemporary International Relations", *Bulletin of Peace Proposal*, Volume 8 Issue 4, October 1977

4 James Paul & Joe Stork, "Arms Sales and the Militarization of the Middle East", *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)* 112 (February 1983), <https://merip.org/1983/02/arms-sales-and-the-militarization-of-the-middle-east/>



thereby more militarization. According to Stork, Desert Storm transformed the region, especially the Gulf, into an “arms bazaar”<sup>5</sup>.

The 2003 US invasion of Iraq was caused by miscalculation, misperception and imperial overconfidence, and its regional aftermath introduced a new era of militarization over the following two decades. The security havoc, caused by the direct foreign military intervention and forced regime change, deepened the regional insecurity, polarized the regional powers, and gave a rise to militant groups, including Al-Qaeda and later ISIS<sup>6</sup>. All together, these factors, and others, deepened the regional insecurity, induced regional actors to enhance their arms arsenal.

The turmoil created by the Arab uprisings across the region in 2011, particularly in Libya, Yemen and Syria deepened militarization, and even militarism<sup>7</sup>, across the region. The Western intervention, endorsed by regional powers, to topple Gadhafi regime in Libya helped in disintegrating the state and turned it into a stronghold for illicit arms transfer<sup>8</sup>. Responding to violent strife between the Yemeni government and Houthis on its southern borders, Saudi Arabia opted for military means and launched a war in Yemen that still lingers on. Mobilizing proxies, by providing arms and funding, has become a new approach to intervention in the region<sup>9</sup>. Syria has been the exemplary case for this. Syria, on the brink of total disintegration, has become an attractive landscape for regional and international military intervention, security contractors, and armed and terrorist groups.

This military build-up has had negative impacts on security in the MENA region, as more resources are allocated for defense at the expense of human development. Arms purchases divert substantial resources that might otherwise be spent on fundamental social needs, including education and health<sup>10</sup>. Spending among MENA countries on health care, for example, tends to be about three percent of GDP, considerably less than the percentage of GDP spent on arms imports. At the same time, most countries in the region continue to run structural budget deficits, a situation made worse by the soaring stagflation, food, and energy crisis due to the consequences of Covid-19 and the Russian-Ukrainian war.

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5 Joe Stork, “The Middle East Arms Bazaar After the Gulf War”, MERIP, November 1995. <https://merip.org/1995/11/the-middle-east-arms-bazaar-after-the-gulf-war/>

6 Rami Khouri, “Foreign Militarism Promotes More Turmoil Than Stability in the Middle East”, Responsible Statecraft, 6 December 2019, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2019/12/06/foreign-militarism-promotes-more-turmoil-than-stability-in-the-middle-east/>

7 Egypt, since 2011 and Sudan, since 2019, armed forces have become involved in post-popular uprisings. In other cases, countries ridden with civil wars, national armies either disintegrated or worked with militias or paramilitary armed groups. Meanwhile, traditional monarchies tended to promote militaristic approach to remodel its national armed forces, adopting more proactive, even interventionist, regional policies. See Eleonora Ardemagni. “Gulf Monarchies’ Militarized Nationalism” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 February 2019 <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78472>

8 Muhammad Alaraby & Alexander Müller, “Countering illicit arms transfer in the MENA region: The case of Yemen and Libya”, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, October 2020, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/16657.pdf>

9 Jonas Ecke, “Whatever happened to peace? Arms, oil and war by proxy”, Open Democracy, 19 May 2017 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/whatever-happened-peace-arms-oil-war-proxy-syria-middle-east-military-industrial/>

10 Charles W. Dunne, “The Arms Trade in the MENA Region: Drivers and Dangers”, Arab Center Washington DC, 17 June 2020, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-arms-trade-in-the-mena-region-drivers-and-dangers/>



Militarization has also defined most of the region's security dynamics and relations to global powers, as arms deals have become an indicator of the change and continuity of its relations to international powers. By far, arms sales have been a substantial component of the US-MENA ties, as US roughly exported 41% of its arms to the region between 2018 and 2022<sup>11</sup>. Supplying arms is a mechanism of creating allies and maintaining alliances, often acting as US policy towards the region. Besides financial benefits, exporting arms to the region, according to the policy advocates in Washington and major European capitals, such as policy makers and arms manufacturers, is meant to professionalize local armies, moderate influence and enhance allies' capabilities for potential joint missions<sup>12</sup>.

Nevertheless, this strategy has proved to be counterproductive, destabilizing the region and failing to contain adversaries, namely Iran and its proxies. At times, pouring arms into conflict zones<sup>13</sup> has in fact invited counter measures by adversaries. In Syria, for example, Iran and Russia provided more decisive support to the Syrian Army and the Assad regime, which kept it afloat, leaving aside the strategic implications of Russian and Iranian military presence in Syria<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, using arms sales as a means of influence onto recipient countries has proved to be less effective, as major countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, tend to act more independently, seeking to enforce their respective visions regarding regional security.

## Seeds of a Demilitarized MENA region?

The trends mentioned above have dominated the geopolitical landscape of the region in the last decades. Nevertheless, the region has recently undergone changes that may introduce a new phase of demilitarization to the region. These changes include de-escalation in regional conflicts, a regional rapprochement, the pressure of domestic economic conditions and the rise of non-military threats. Addressing nontraditional threats, such as climate change, Arab states may cease to focus their resources on war, financing conflicts or importing more weaponry that exceeds their real security needs. In the same vein, the regional players may pursue more non-military means to advance their interests. This is not to say that the region will be conflict-free. On the contrary, several conflicts in the region will remain unfolding, notably the occupation of Palestine, but increasingly, resolving these conflicts may require new tools and means that go beyond arms sales and acquisition.

## Exhausted conflicts

One change that may indicate a new phase of demilitarization is the de-escalation of ongoing conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq. While Iraq has a relatively stable

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11 Pieter d. Wezeman, Justine Gadon and Siemon t. Wezeman, "Trends In International Arms Transfers, 2022" Stockholm Institute for International Peace, SIPRI, March 2023 [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/2303\\_at\\_fact\\_sheet\\_2022\\_v2.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/2303_at_fact_sheet_2022_v2.pdf)

12 A. Trevor Thrall and Caroline Dorminey, "The Role of Arms Sales in U.S. Foreign Policy", CATO Institute, March 2018 <https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa-836.pdf>

13 Mark Mazetti & Ali Youness, "C.I.A. Arms for Syrian Rebels Supplied Black Market, Officials Say", the New York Times, 26 June 2016 <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/27/world/middleeast/cia-arms-for-syrian-rebels-supplied-black-market-officials-say.html>

14 Perry Cammack & Michelle Dunne, "Fueling Middle East Conflicts or Dousing Flames", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/23/fueling-middle-east-conflicts-or-dousing-flames-pub-77548>



political process, despite the growing influence of the Iranian-backed militias, other regional conflicts have entered a moment of de-escalation<sup>15</sup>. For example, Syria is gradually being reintegrated into the Arab world after a decade of isolation imposed by other Arab countries and the Western powers<sup>16</sup>.

Another example: the truce in Yemen has been effective since April 2022, and in Libya since October 2020. Despite the absence of great military escalation between the warring parties, both conflicts are far from resolved. Since neither of these parties can impose its will with military tools, they have become more willing to welcome regional initiatives to de-escalate<sup>17</sup>. Although these developments are taking place in the context of a fragile security environment<sup>18</sup>, they might lead to an inclusive and robust framework for stabilization as long as it is supported by a minimal regional and international consensus.

## Regional rapprochement

Another change that may indicate a new phase of demilitarization is that regional rivalries are cooling down. The first breakthrough in this regard was the Al-Ula GCC summit in January 2021, ending Qatar's blockade and the rift that had taken place since 2017 between Qatar and the 'Arab Quartet' (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain). Turkey, a major ally of Qatar, has recently taken serious steps for openness towards other regional Arab rivals, the UAE and Egypt in particular.

Yet, the most surprising breakthrough with regards to regional stabilization has been the Chinese-brokered agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023, renewing the diplomatic ties that had been cut in January 2016. Sidelining the US, and its role as a major power broker in the region, this agreement renewed hopes for overall regional stabilization. It also renewed the hopes of ending conflicts in Yemen and Syria and ensuring further agreement between the regional powers on reconstruction in Syria, arrangement energy security in the Gulf and maritime security in Arabian sea and the Gulf of Eden<sup>19</sup>.

## Pressing non-military threats

A third way that may shift the militarization of the region is the climate crisis, as a transnational and trans-border issue. Arab countries seem to be focusing a lot of effort on addressing the climate crisis. The Arab region is one of the most resource-stressed areas in the world. Water scarcity continues to be a major issue in the area that is exacerbated by

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15 Ali Bakir, the 2021-2022 "De-escalation Moment" in the Middle East: a Net Assessment", Insight Turkey, Spring 2022 <https://www.insightturkey.com/file/1465/the-2021-2022-de-escalation-moment-in-the-middle-east-a-net-assessment>

16 Hussien Haridy, "the Reintegration of Syria", Ahram Online, 3 April 2023, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/50/494161/AlAhram-Weekly/The--reintegration-of-Syria.aspx>

17 The United Nation, "Despite Ongoing Challenges, Parties to Yemen Conflict Showing Willingness to Make Progress on Ceasefire, Political Talks, Top Official Tells Security Council" UN Press Coverage, 17 May 2023 <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15284.doc.htm>

18 Consider for example the deteriorating security situation and unfolding armed conflict in other states like Sudan.

19 International Crisis Group, "the Impact of Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement on the Middle East Conflicts", International Crisis Group, 19 April 2023 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran-saudi-arabia/impact-saudi-iranian>



climate change. The nexus of energy-food-water is at the heart of the climate change implications<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, sustainability has become a key ingredient in the declared developmental Arab policies, particularly in the oil producing GCC countries. Some countries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have asserted their commitment to net zero-emission goal by 2050<sup>21</sup>. In addition to its significance for economic planning and business, it contributes a lot to its public diplomacy.

In terms of regional security, climate change can induce conditions for conflict and cooperation alike. The pressure of water, food and energy crises can push the region towards more cooperation, stabilization and allocating more resources to bolster more resilient development schemes. Regional cooperation and climate governance is still confined to the areas of policy coordination, technical assistance and knowledge sharing through existing bodies such as the Arab League and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)<sup>22</sup>. Yet, a multiplication of collective cooperative approaches is probable as the issue becomes one of survival for most of the region<sup>23</sup>. Accordingly, less resources will be allocated for arms purchases or deploying military means for their regional policies.

## Economic pressures

Economic pressures and the need for economic reforms in several MENA countries may push for further stabilization, and thereby put limitations on militarized policies, including arms sales. Indeed, most of the recent regional rapprochement can be explained by domestic economic pressures. For example, Turkey's openness to its Arab neighbors, Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular, is motivated by the need to revitalize the foreign investments in the country.

Iran is another example. Seeking to ease the pressures posed by the US-led sanctions and eroded domestic economic situation, the Iranian regime opted for reconciliation with Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, Riyadh has found that easing the regional tensions has forwarded its ambitious developmental plans. Its rapprochement with Tehran may pave the way for a pathway forward in Yemen<sup>24</sup>.

China views this reconciliation as a major landmark for achieving its approach of economic peace in the region in order to sustain its energy imports from the region and secure its access to the commercial waterways in the Western Indian Ocean. Unlike Western powers,

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20 Anders Jagerskog, "Water, food, and energy in the Arab World: A collective challenge", the World Bank Blogs, 20 November 2018 <https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/water-food-and-energy-arab-world-collective-challenge>

21 Campbell Gray, "the race to Net Zero in the GCC", SNC LAVALIN, 7 July 2022, <https://www.snclavalin.com/en/beyond-engineering/the-race-to-net-zero-in-the-gcc>

22 Aisha Al Sarihi & Mari Loumi, "Climate Change Governance and Cooperation in the Arab Region", Emirates Diplomatic Academy, July 2019 [https://www.agda.ac.ae/docs/default-source/Publications/eda-insight\\_gear-i\\_climate-change\\_en\\_web-v2.pdf](https://www.agda.ac.ae/docs/default-source/Publications/eda-insight_gear-i_climate-change_en_web-v2.pdf)

23 Olivia Lazard, "Climate Change in the Arab World Requires More Holistic Reforms" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 3 May 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/05/03/climate-change-in-arab-world-requires-more-holistic-reforms-pub-89519>

24 Ibrahim Jalal, "China and Saudi Iranian reproachment: implications for Yemen", the Middle East Institute, 5 April 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/china-and-saudi-iran-rapprochement-implications-yemen>

it does not seem to consider supplying arms or fueling rivalries as the best ways to advance its future presence in the region.

## Reversed Patterns of Militarization?

According to SIPRI's 2023 report, the world arms trade is undergoing major shifts<sup>25</sup>. The Russo-Ukrainian war fueled the European demands for arms imports, largely from the US, as they increased their imports of major arms by 47 percent between 2018 and 2022. Meanwhile, India remains the world largest arms importer, replacing Saudi Arabia that dominated this position in 2020 and 2021. Although the region is still a major importer of arms, as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Egypt are among the world largest importers (respectively representing 9.6%, 6.4% and 4.5% of the global total), the region has decreased arms imports. At large, arms import by states in the Middle East were 8.8 per cent lower in 2018–2022 than in 2013-2017.

By no means will the regional powers cease to import arms or to upgrade their stockpiles to meet their security needs. To achieve more independent regional foreign policies, certain actors, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are in fact poised to develop their own defense industries<sup>26</sup>. Yet, it may take decades and substantial resources to achieve arms independency.

Nevertheless, this dynamic will be shaped by the ongoing shifts in the broader security architecture of the region and its relation to the changing world order. The region, therefore, will remain entangled in overlapping militarization and demilitarization dynamics for a while, until a robust regional security architecture is founded on a new basis of collective and cooperative security<sup>27</sup>. Furthermore, external actors, especially the EU and the US shall reconfigure their relations with the region based on cooperation and stabilization.

## Beyond Arms: A New Role for the West in MENA?

Arms sales will continue to remain a substantial component in the MENA region's relations with Western capitals, particularly Washington, for the foreseeable future. Yet, these relations will be affected by the emerging needs for cooperative and non-militarized regional security. On one hand, the US shall be prepared for the regional powers to be less dependent on the US, and on the other NATO members' sales in devising their defense strategies. In terms of market dynamics, regional actors are now prone to collaborate with other sellers; Russia already has a significant share in arms exports to the region while

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25 Siemon T. Wezeman, Pieter D. Wezeman and Justine Gadon, "Trends in International Arms Transfer in 2022", SIPRI, March 2023, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/2303\\_at\\_fact\\_sheet\\_2022\\_v2.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/2303_at_fact_sheet_2022_v2.pdf)

26 Zoltan Barany, "Indigenous Defense Industry in the Gulf", Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 24 April 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/indigenous-defense-industries-gulf>

27 Eman Ragab, "An Alternative Approach to Regional Security in the Middle East", The Cairo Review of Global Affairs, 2 April 2020 <https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/an-alternative-approach-to-regional-security-in-the-middle-east/>



China has increasing arms deals with Saudi Arabia<sup>28</sup>. Added to that, some MENA countries are seriously looking for opportunities to further develop their own defense industries.

Western allies still hold strategic and economic sway over the region that can contribute to demilitarization conditions. As most of these conditions are falling in the hands of the indigenous powers of the region, Western allies can secure their strategic objectives through cooperative initiatives that focus on:

1. **Human security**<sup>29</sup> focused of the region's people, particularly those who are suffering the dire consequences of conflicts and wars in Yemen, Syria and now Sudan.
2. **Mitigating and adapting** to climate change that has already affected the region and will have worsening consequences in the coming decades. Western powers can assist regional actors in climate building capacities needed for energy transition and economic diversification. Even building new capacities for armed forces to adapt to new climate conditions will be needed. Pursuing such capacities can develop a human security role for Arab militaries.
3. **Supporting** the ongoing rapprochement between regional powers and assisting further in the international and regional endeavors for conflict resolution.
4. **Regulating conventional arms flows** for the region, which may refer to creating mechanisms to prevent conventional arms to be diverted to terrorist groups, organized crime groups or to be used in harming local populations in illegal wars<sup>30</sup>.

To conclude, these broad policy lines are subjects to non-ending debates in Western decision-making circles, largely influenced by the pressures of defense giants, as well as arms buyers in many cases, and strategic considerations. Nevertheless, any progress in this regard will be mutually beneficial for all parties in the long run. These policy ideas need not be exclusive of continued arms sales as an important commercial and strategic dimension in the MENA-Western relations. However, they are meant to develop these relations in new ways, addressing deadly mistakes and perceptions that dominated the Western foreign policy toward the region for decades.

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28 Kawala Xie, "Why is Saudi Arabia is looking for China to buy weapons after years of arms deals with the US?" South China Morning Post, 8 December 2022 <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3202245/why-saudi-arabia-looking-china-buy-weapons-after-years-arms-deals-us>

29 Human security has been long propagated as pressing demand for any new US-Middle East new relations, see Paul Salem, "As Biden and Mideast meet in Jeddah, human security should be urgently on the agenda", the Middle East Institute, 15 July 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/biden-and-mideast-leaders-meet-jeddah-human-security-should-be-urgently-agenda>

30 Rachel Stohl & Ryan Fletcher, "Opportunities to regulate conventional arms in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa", Manara Magazine, 16 March 2021, <https://manaramagazine.org/2021/03/opportunities-to-regulate-conventional-arms-in-the-middle-east-and-horn-of-africa/>



# PRISME

Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive  
Security in the Middle East



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# PRISME

Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive  
Security in the Middle East

## PRISME Initiative

PRISME aims to redefine the conception of “security” in the Middle East and North Africa, as the starting point for strategic relations between MENA countries and their European and North American partners. It does so in pursuit of effective, collaborative approaches to ensuring a more peaceful and stable future. To this end, PRISME sponsors dialogue and debate between foreign policy professionals across diverse backgrounds and perspectives. These include individuals in governments, thinktanks and academic institutions located in the MENA region, Europe and North America, with a specific focus on engaging young and emerging thinkers and practitioners. Its goal is to re-define security in the Middle East, broadening the definitions of what it looks like, for whom, how it can be achieved, and how outside actors can contribute to it.

## SALAM Project

SALAM (Sustaining Alternative Links beyond Arms and the Military) proposes to rethink the centrality of the arms trade in international relations with and among Middle East & North Africa (MENA) countries.

It fosters and amplifies ideas from a network of scholars and practitioners working in and with the Middle East. Issues they will address include the arms trade’s advertised role in cementing bilateral and multilateral ties between North America, Europe and the MENA region; the opportunity costs of over- or sole reliance on weaponry as security; and alternative modes of engagement that might redefine a shared strategic agenda.