



The role of arms trade in bilateral and multilateral ties with Libya and its implications

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Weapons and military-technology transfers are seen by states as economic and political transactions. Beyond the economic profit they generate for the suppliers, and the correlations they illustrate between economic and political networks on both ends, the arms trade is seen as a strong instrument to achieve foreign policy goals for both supplier and recipient states. It is also considered to play a central role in the core of security.

However, the correlation between arms sales and security may often be more counterproductive than portrayed in the arguments or wishful thinking of their promoters. This is what was for instance underlined by Amnesty International, noting that the rise of the Islamic State was closely linked to “decades of reckless arms trading” with Iraq.¹ More broadly, irresponsible arms trade has fueled political conflict and violence on numerous occasions, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region – regardless of how relevant the economic, political, or strategic rationale they relied upon may have seemed in the first place.

The case of Libya, explored in this article, very much like the case of Iraq, adequately exemplifies these trends. Going through the dynamics of the arms trade to Libya during the Qaddafi period and looking into the interests that led foreign powers to send arms to Libya in the post-2011 era, the article interrogates how they have directly/indirectly impacted the security of the MENA region and Europe.

Qaddafi period (1969-2011): Migration as a leverage for the purchase of arms

Under Qaddafi, Libya had supported terrorism and pursued a clandestine nuclear weapon program and weapon of mass destruction program (WMD). Consequently, the international community notably banned arms exports to the country (the United States as early as 1979 and the UN Security Council from 1992). In 1996, the US Congress passed the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA), which was the first set of sanctions against the regime through nonproliferation goals. The ILSA accelerated socioeconomic problems in Libya, increasing the cost of pursuing WMD programs, thus forcing the Qaddafi regime to cooperate with the West. In addition to these domestic effects, the 2003 invasion of Iraq became a turning point and compelled the regime to compromise with the US due to the fear of any US attack against Libya.²

¹ Will Chim, “Conventional Weapons are a Serious Threat to International Security,” *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, 3 May 2010 (<https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2018/05/03/conventional-weapons-are-a-serious-threat-to-international-security/> accessed 20 April 2023).

² M. Barnum and B. L. Fearey, “Sanctions as a Nonproliferation Tool: Lessons from Libya,” *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2016, 234-245.



It is in this context that, in December 2003, the Qaddafi regime announced an end to its WMD program. In response to this, all the economic and diplomatic sanctions were lifted. Just after the UN arms embargo came to end, Qaddafi expressed his desire to modernize his country's military arsenal and to improve relations with Europe. Libya then became a promising market for the major arms suppliers of the West,³ with trade of military equipment rapidly increasing after the 2003 lifting of the UN sanctions.

Between 2007 and 2010, Libya signed arms transfer agreements worth \$900m with the four major European suppliers (France, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Germany).⁴ Firstly, Libya became a market for the French arms industry – and even one of its biggest clients. In August 2007, France notably signed arms deals worth \$405m with the Qaddafi regime.⁵ Secondly, Italy also developed close relations with Libya due to its geographic position. Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi agreed with Europe on toughening security measures through Italian shores to cease the flow of illegal migrants to Europe. Accordingly, Rome made a “friendship agreement” with Qaddafi to prevent the number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean into Europe from Libya. In return, Italy not only paid \$5bn to the Qaddafi regime, but also sent €276m in arms, meanwhile also benefiting from Libyan energy resources.⁶ Thirdly, the British government sold €119m arms to the Libyan regime between 2007 and 2009. Fourthly, Germany's arms exports to Libya were worth €53 million in 2009. In total, the European Union countries sent arms worth €834m to Libya between 2005 and 2009. These arms transfers were made under the EU's Code of Conduct on Arms Exports and national export control laws, in the name of improving Libya's capacity to patrol its maritime borders and to stop migration to Europe from North Africa, which was a great concern to the European states.⁷ Qaddafi used energy and migration as trump cards to purchase weapons from Europe. In return for oil and stopping migrants, he continued to purchase arms from France, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Germany.

In some cases, EU countries denied the delivery of arms and ammunition to Libya. During 2005-2010, despite being one of the world's largest producers and exporters of small arms, Germany did not license the exports of small arms to Libya. Likewise, the UK in 2007 denied four licences for large-calibre ammunition, electronic equipment, and dual-use items. In December 2008, the UK also denied the transfer of 130,000 assault rifles. These came with too many risks; the weapons could be directly used for both domestic repressions, and/or in wars with its neighbors, they could be re-exported or fall into the

3 Francesco Strazzari, “Libyan Arms and Regional Instability,” *The International Spectator*, Vol. 49, No. 3, 55.

4 Congressional Research Service, *Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2007-2014*, Washington, DC: CRS, December 2015, p. 37.

5 Guma El-Gamaty, “Italy and France are playing a dangerous game in Libya,” *Aljazeera*, 21 August 2017 (<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/8/21/italy-and-france-are-playing-a-dangerous-game-in-libya>), accessed 2 March 2023)

6 “Gaddafi offers Italy privileges”, *France 24*, 1 September 2008 (<https://www.france24.com/en/20080901-gaddafi-offers-italy-privileges-italy-libya>) accessed 2 March 2023)

7 Guma El-Gamaty, *Ibid.*, Andrew Feinstein, “Where is Gaddafi's vast arms stockpile,” *Guardian*, 26 October 2011 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/26/gadaffis-arms-stockpile>) accessed 2 March 2023), Von David Böcking, “Libyan Arms Deals Come Back to Haunt Europe,” *Spiegel International*, 24 February 2011 (<https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/guns-to-gadhafi-libyan-arms-deals-come-back-to-haunt-europe-a-747440.html>) accessed 2 March 2023) and Felix Shihundu, “Libya: Arms Proliferation and Armed Groups. The Libyan Conflict Revisited,” *Conflict Studies Quarterly*, Issue 38, January 2022, 64.



hands of non-state groups in Africa.⁸ The EU countries have not had a common policy about arms exporting to Libya. One of the drivers of the country's arms exporting to Libya was to generate profit as well as the fears about migration.⁹

Europe's arms and security industries highly profited from massive contracts of arms sale to Qaddafi's Libya. These contracts long helped the regime consolidate power and keep refugees out of Europe.¹⁰

More Western weapons to Libya in the post-2011 era: Counterterrorism effect

At the outset of the Arab Spring, the pattern of the arms transfers from the West to Libya evolved. France, Italy and the United Kingdom participated in the military campaign against Qaddafi. During the uprisings, they also supplied weapons to rebels.¹¹ This later contributed to one of the many dimensions of insecurity in and from Libya. By the fall of the Qaddafi regime, the migration flow from Libya to Europe had dramatically increased. Moreover, the 40 tons of light arms and ammunition sent to fighters paved the way for arms smuggling across the Libyan border. At the same time, amidst instability, terrorist groups such as ISIS appeared in Libya, which meant a growing terror threat for Europe, notably for France.¹²

Due to the ISIS attacks in Europe, notably in France, the UK, Germany, and Belgium, the French and British government sought to find a solution to the Libyan crisis. Thus, in 2016, France gave military support to Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) as part of counterterrorism efforts.¹³ In 2018, France again exported weapons worth €295 million directly to Haftar. As well as France's security concern, France sought to secure its economic and strategic interest in Libya and the Sahel region.¹⁴ The European countries also realized that ISIS was using migrant smugglers as a systematic route to Europe.¹⁵ Accordingly, Rome, Paris, and London demanded Libya establish peace and stability in the country and regain control over illegal migration. In addition to Italy and France, the US government saw Libya as a key country to prevent terrorism and the influx of migrants.

8 Susanne Therese Hansen and Nicholas Marsh, "Normative power and organized hypocrisy: European Union member states' arms export to Libya," *European Security*, Vol. 24, No.2, 247, 277.

9 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/> accessed 2 March 2023)

10 Martin Lemberg-Pedersen, "Making Money from EU's migration policies in Libya," Aljazeera, 2 June 2018 (<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/1/2/making-money-from-eus-migration-policies-in-libya> accessed 2 March 2023)

11 "Libya conflict: France air-dropped arms to rebels," BBC News, 29 June 2011 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13955751> accessed 5 March 2023)

12 Guma El-Gamaty, *Ibid.*

13 Azeem Ibrahim, "Rise and Fall? The Rise and Fall of ISIS in Libya", US Army War College, Monographs, Book, and Publications, August 2020, 46

14 Essam AbdelShafy, "Map of Goals and Interests: What Does France Want from Libya?," Egyptian Institute for Studies, 4 August 2020 (<https://en.eipss-eg.org/map-of-goals-and-interests-what-does-france-want-from-libya/> accessed 5 March 2023)

15 Inga Kristina Trauthing, "Assessing the Islamic State in Libya: The Current Situation in Libya and Its Implication for Terrorism Threat in Europe," Europol Public Information Paper, 9-10 April 2019 (https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/inga_trauthig_islamic_state_libya.pdf accessed 7 March 2023)



Both were seen as the direct threats to US national security. Under the Obama and Trump administration, the US sought other actors, such as European allies and regional partners, to eliminate jihadism in Libya.

In addition to the migration problem, the West faced a new challenge in Libya. To handle this new challenge, the West continued to arm Libya. The intervention and the Libyan revolution of 2011 directly resulted in a massively increased proliferation of arms and ammunition in Libya. The sharp rise in the flow of arms to Libya appeared in both the quantity of arms and spreading speed of arms. The resurgence of illicit arms and black market of arms has expanded.¹⁶ As a result, the counterterrorism strategy of the West in Libya failed and raised serious concerns. The increase of arms trafficking paved the way for the rising of terrorism.

On this point, Iain Overton, specialist on armed violence, claimed that the Pentagon lost millions of dollars' worth of guns in Libya. "And then we wonder how Islamic extremist militant groups are so heavily armed." Likewise, Andrew Feinstein, Executive Director of Shadow World Investigations, underlined that the West had armed Qaddafi, and the huge number of surplus weapons flowed to the black market in the region.¹⁷

The military involvement of the MENA powers: Ideological, economic and security reasons

By the outset of the Arab Spring, some regional powers became more involved in the Libyan crisis. Following the elections of 2014 in Libya, Qatar and Turkey, who support the GNA (Government of National Accord) in Tripoli, and the UAE and Egypt, who back the LNA (Libyan National Army) in Haftar, pursue various interests in Libya. These interests gave rise to more arms in Libya.

Firstly, Qatar has trained the Libyan military, collected weapons, and integrated rebel units into the established military during the Arab Spring. Doha also gave \$400m and supplied anti-tank weapons to the Libyan rebels.¹⁸ These arms and ammunition later ended up in the hands of the fighters in Libya's Western Mountains via Tunisia.¹⁹ Qatar has also provided financial support for the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamist movements in Libya since building on its long relationship with the Libyan Islamists. Doha continued to send weapons to Libya after the elections.²⁰ The Qataris continued to fund Islamist groups in Libya due to ideological and pragmatic reasons.²¹

16 Ibid. 25, 26.

17 Julian Pecquet, "Arms sales to Libya draw congressional skepticism," Al-Monitor, 17 May 2016 (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/05/arms-sales-libya-congress-skepticism-washington-embargo.html#ixzz7ute33MH3> accessed 5 March 2023)

18 Ian Black, "Qatar admits sending hundreds of troops to support Libya rebels," The Guardian, 26 October 2011 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/26/qatar-troops-libya-rebels-support> a, accessed 25 April 2023) and I. Black, "Libyan rebels receiving anti-tanks weapons from Qatar," The Guardian, 14 April 2011 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/14/libya-rebels-weapons-qatar>, accessed 25 April 2023)

19 Matt Robinson, "Qatari weapons reaching rebels in Libyan mountains," Reuters, 31 May 2011 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-weapons-idUSTRE74U3C520110531>, accessed 25 April 2023)

20 Lina Khatib, "Qatar's involvement in Libya: A delicate balance," World Peace Foundation, 7 January 2013 (<https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2013/01/07/qatars-involvement-in-libya-a-delicate-balance/>, accessed 25 April 2023)

21 Azeem Ibrahim, Ibid., 41-57.



Secondly, Ankara has had strong political and military presence in Libya and has given strong military support to the GNA. It sent several hundred soldiers to Libya as well as at least 10 types of sophisticated military equipment, including anti-tank missiles, anti-air missiles, assault rifles, and ammunition. Turkey has also financed the smuggling of Islamic Syrian fighters, fighting against the LNA in Libya. Besides, Ankara sought to redefine the maritime borders of the two states, with the potential of natural gas, to the detriment of Cyprus and Greece. The Turkish companies have been still working to rebuild the infrastructure of Libya.²² Turkey has been in Libya for economic gains and ideological reasons. Ankara, pursuing a strongly Islamist-motivated policy, also has ideological links with the branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Libyan government.²³

To the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, lastly, both regularly provided military equipment to Libya. The UAE deployed warplanes, manufactured in the US, in Libya despite the UN arms embargo in 2017.²⁴ Afterwards, Libya received 3000 tons of military equipment from the UAE.²⁵

The UAE continued to send more weapons to the LNA between January and April in 2020.²⁶ Egypt offered to train the Libyan rebels in the Arab Spring.²⁷ Cairo continued to send troops and arms, and anti-aircraft systems to Libya by the beginning of 2020.²⁸ In addition, the US and German governments also authorized massive amounts of arms sales to the UAE and Egypt between 2014 and 2021, and these weapons and military equipment were sent to the parties in the Libyan conflict.²⁹

22 Constantine Ionita, “The Libya Situation and Its Impact on Regional and European Security,” *Strategic Impact*, No.4, 2020, 51-57.

23 Günter Seufert, “Turkey shifts the focus of its foreign policy: From Syria to the eastern Mediterranean and Libya,” *SWP Berlin Comment*, No.6, 2020, Aya Burweila, “Turkey’s support to Libya’s outlaw militias and the threat to Europe’s southern flank,” *Research Institute for European and American Studies*, Policy Brief, 2019 and Aude Thomas, “Islamisme, livraison d’armes, et désinformations: le rôle des puissances régionales dans le conflit libyen,” *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique*, Vol. 20, No. 43, 26 May 2020 (<https://www.frstrategie.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/notes/2020/202043.pdf> accessed 8 March 2023)

24 Jared Malsin, “USA-Made Airplanes Deployed in Libya’s Civil War, in Defiance of UN,” *Time*, 9 May 2017 (<https://time.com/4746914/libya-civil-war-airplanes-haftar-uae/> , accessed 28 April 2023)

25 Safa alharaty, “French sources: UAE sent 3000 tons of military support to Haftar,” *The Libya Observer*, 1st February 2020, (<https://libyaobserver.ly/news/french-sources-uae-sent-3000-tons-military-support-haftar> , accessed 28 April 2023)

26 “UAE delivered weapons to Libya’s Haftar despite UN embargo,” *Middle East Eye*, 30 September 2020 (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uae-libya-arms-deliveries-haftar-un-embargo> , accessed 28 April 2023)

27 “Egypt offers military training to Libya, cites Islamic State threats,” *Reuters*, 1st October 2014 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-egypt-libya/egypt-offers-military-training-to-libya-cites-islamic-state-threat-idUKKCNoHQ2Z220141001?edition-redirect=uk> , accessed 28 April 2023)

28 “Libya sees arrival of Egypt military supplies to Tobruk,” *Middle East Monitor*, 16 July 2020 (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200716-libya-sees-arrival-of-egypt-military-supplies-to-tobruk/> , accessed 28 April 2023) and Abdulkader Assad, “Egypt, Russia deploy anti-aircraft systems in Libya to support Haftar,” *The Libya Observer*, 8 August 2020 (<https://libyaobserver.ly/news/egypt-russia-deploy-anti-aircraft-systems-libya-support-haftar> accessed 28 April 2023)

29 S. Wisotzki and M. M. Mutschler, “The Libyan civil war: shining a spotlight on a problematic arms export policy,” *Bonn: Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC)*, 14 July 2020 and Patricia Zengerle, “Biden administration proceeding with \$ 23 billion weapons sales to UAE,” *Reuters*, 14 April 2021 (<https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/exclusive-biden-administration-proceeding-with-23-billion-weapon-sales-uae-2021-04-13/> accessed 8 March 2023)



Abu Dhabi has viewed Libya as a central battleground to relieve Islamist parties, like the Muslim Brotherhood, of governance of Libya.³⁰ Egypt has long struggled with a rapidly rising rate of terrorist attacks in its own territory. Hence, it has supported the LNA, battling against Islamists in Libya. The Islamists are seen by Abu Dhabi and Cairo as an existential threat to national security and stability. General Sisi aggressively supported and armed the LNA to ensure border security, prevent smuggling of weapons and the jihadists since illegal weapons and militants have flowed from Libya to the Sinai Peninsula. Economic factors also play a central role in Egypt's interests to send arms to Libya: Egypt's dependence on Libya's oil and the presence of Egyptian workers in Libya.³¹

Conclusion

The arms trade between the West and Libya long worked for the regime's continuity and helped keep refugees out of Europe. However, this relationship ultimately fueled a huge flow of weapons to terrorist groups in the region. In addition to the arms sales from the West, MENA powers also accelerated the flow of arms into and around Libya.

Along with these foreign actors, the running battle in the state-building process also created a chaos and networks of arms that go beyond Libya's borders connecting the Sahara with North Africa. All these arms and ammunition, looted from military stockpiles in Libya, turned into a problem of multidimensional arms trafficking and terrorism to nearby conflict areas such as Mali, Algeria, Gaza, Sinai, and Syria.³² According to a UNSC report³³, in the era of the Arab Spring, Libya has given militant groups in the Sahel region such as Boko Haram and al Qaeda access to large weapons caches. In that period, the Libyan conflict and the flow of arms aggravated the security situation in North Africa, which led to the increase of the number of refugees illegally arriving in Southern Europe, which is often seen by European governments through the lens of an increased risk of terrorism and extremist actions on their soil.

In a nutshell, irresponsible arms transfers can destabilize any region enabling breaches of international law as well as human right abuses. The poorly regulated or illegal arms trade can fuel instability in which terrorist groups can proliferate and which an ever-increasing

30 Emadeddin Badi, "The UAE is making a precarious shift in its Libya policy. Here's why," MENA Source, Atlantic Council, 27 October 2022, (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-uae-is-making-a-precarious-shift-in-its-libya-policy-heres-why/> accessed 8 March 2023)

31 Tarek Megerisi, "Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia: Neighboring States-Diverging Approaches," in *Foreign Actors in Libya's Crisis*, Ed. Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli, Atlantic Council-ISPI, July 2017, 25, M. Arafa and M. Boduszynski, "Understanding Egyptian Policy Toward Libya," *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*, 28 March 2017 (<https://timep.org/2017/03/28/understanding-egyptian-policy-toward-libya/> accessed 8 March 2023), and Giuseppe Dentice, "Egypt's Security and Haftar: Al-Sisi's Strategy in Libya," ISPI, 1 February 2017 (<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/egypts-security-and-haftar-al-sisis-strategy-libya-16284> accessed 8 March 2023)

32 Simone Wisotzki, "Efforts to curb the proliferation of small arms and light weapons: from persistent crisis to norm failure?," *Z Friedens und Konfliktforsch* 10, 2021, 254 and Nicholas Marsh, "Brothers Came Back with Weapons: The Effects of Arms Proliferation from Libya," *Prism: National Defense University*, Vol.6, No.4, 16 May 2017 (<https://cco.ndu.edu/News/Article/1171858/brothers-came-back-with-weapons-the-effects-of-arms-proliferation-from-libya/> accessed 12 March 2023)

33 Louis Charbonneau, "Arms from Libya could reach Boko Haram, al Qaeda: UN," *Reuters*, 26 January 2012 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-un-arms-idUSTRE80P1QS20120126> accessed 10 March 2023) and "Investigating Cross-Border Weapon Transfers in the Sahel," *Conflict Armament Research Reports*, November 2016 (<https://www.conflictarm.com/reports/investigating-cross-border-weapon-transfers-in-the-sahel/> accessed 10 March 2023)



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number of people will try to escape from, forcing them to migrate. As can be seen from the case of Libya, the flow of arms from the West as well as MENA suppliers did not ensure security and even worsened the situation.



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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.