



PRISME

July 2023

# What is the role of the arms trade between Europe & North America and the MENA region?

Revitalizing the Debate on the Global Arms Trade

By Emma Soubrier

WORLD PEACE  
FOUNDATION

**LF** FLETCHER

*The graduate school  
of global affairs  
at Tufts University*



**Cover photo:** An air-to-air view of two U.S. Air Force F-15C Eagle fighter aircraft from the 33rd Tactical Fighter Wing, Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., and a Royal Saudi Air Force F-5E Tiger II fighter aircraft during a mission in support of Operation Desert Storm. The aircraft are armed with AIM-9 Sidewinder air-to-air missiles, US Airforce, US Government Work

# ABOUT

---

**Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive Security in the Middle East (PRISME)** aims to re-define the conception of “security” in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), 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.

PRISME’s first project, **Sustaining Alternative Links beyond Arms and the Military (SALAM)**, proposes to rethink the centrality of the arms trade in international relations with and among MENA countries. It seeks to foster meaningful discussions and debates among scholars and foreign policy experts on several interconnected topics. By approaching these complex issues from different angles, the goal is to systematically unpack and examine commonly held assumptions surrounding the arms trade.

The PRISME Initiative and the SALAM project are supported by the **World Peace Foundation** at The Fletcher School, Tufts University as part of the research, policy and activism project, “Revitalizing Debate on the Global Arms Trade”, made possible by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York.

# AUTHOR

---

**Dr. Emma Soubrier** is Director of the PRISME initiative. She is also an Associate Researcher with the Institute for Peace and Development at the Université Côte d'Azur's LADIE International and European Law Department (Nice, France) and an Associate Researcher with the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (Boston, U.S.A). For over a decade, her research has focused on the security strategies and foreign policies of the Gulf countries as well as the political economy of the global arms trade. Emma is an expert with the Forum on Arms Trade and a Non-Resident Fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW). Her work promotes a renewed approach to security in the Middle East that no longer focuses merely on political and military aspects but includes a broader look at people-centered dimensions of security (human security, particularly societal security and environmental security). She has published widely on Gulf security issues.

Previously, she was professorial lecturer and a visiting scholar at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs on two occasions, a visiting scholar at AGSIW for two years, and a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre Michel de l'Hospital, Université Clermont Auvergne (France). She worked for three and a half years at the French Ministry of Defense and for three years at Airbus Defence and Space. She received her PhD in political science from the Université Clermont Auvergne in 2017 and holds an MA in international relations from the Sorbonne University (Paris, France).

# SALAM debate #1

---

## Synthesis paper

The inaugural workshop of the SALAM project asked: [What is the role of the arms trade between Europe & North America and the MENA region, especially Gulf Cooperation Council countries?](#) Participants explored the economic, political, and strategic roles that the arms trade is commonly said to play in bilateral and multilateral ties between countries in North America, Europe and the MENA region. They also questioned whether the arms trade delivers on these propositions. Discussions probed whether the trade successfully ensures security in the MENA region, is an efficient diplomatic tool to exert influence over partners, and/or helps improve collaboration among regional actors. Exploring these propositions from different viewpoints and through various case studies, participants highlighted the nuances within conventional narratives, debated whether they ever captured the role of the trade, and questioned if evolving conditions today require new analytical models altogether.

### What are conventional propositions/narratives about the role of the arms trade between countries in North America, Europe, and the MENA region, both for producing countries & for purchasing countries?

Participants noted that a basic proposition held by many supporters of the trade is that it offers **economic value**, creating a financial incentive for producing countries. Many participants contested this idea. We note that the role of arms sales in economic growth is a topic which will be directly addressed in the PRISME/SALAM debate #2.

Other common assumptions within policy communities (defense and foreign affairs) in North America, Europe, and the MENA region, include that the trade plays a constructive role in national, bilateral and multilateral security needs, bolsters political influence and cements strategic interests between states through defense diplomacy.

Government representatives in North America and Europe often claim that arms sales strengthen **security and stability** in the MENA region by increasing regional partners' military capabilities and deterring their adversaries. This idea of a simple one to one relationship between weapons sales and strategic support is shared by many regional regimes. Inversely, reductions in sales are taken as an indication that a trade partner no longer supports regime security. Shady Mansour's analysis provides an example: the Saudi leadership reads U.S. discussions of curtailing its arms exports as a signal that the U.S. is decreasingly committed to Riyadh's security.<sup>1</sup>

From the exporters' perspective, arms sales are also deemed to guarantee their own secu-

---

<sup>1</sup> Shady Mansour, "Diversifying Saudi's security: Would the US security architecture in the Middle East be threatened?", *PRISME Initiative*, June 5, 2023, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/diversifying-saudi-security-would-the-us-security-architecture-in-the-middle-east-be-threatened/>

rity agendas, as Esra Serim demonstrates through the example of Libya. Under Qaddafi, Libya could procure arms from France, Italy, the United Kingdom and Germany in return for supporting the European agenda of stopping migrants, who are viewed “through the lens of an increased risk of terrorism and extremist actions on their soil.”<sup>2</sup> In this way both sides viewed their security interests as advanced in a *quid pro quo* agreement.

In addition to these direct exchanges, advocates for arms sales also argue that they enable the seller to exert **influence** over the behavior and foreign policies of purchasing nations. This argument is commonly advanced in the relation to the U.S. and, to a lesser extent, middle powers such as European countries and Canada. Arms trade is seen as an efficient and privileged diplomatic tool to nudge or coerce partners in a preferred direction. This positioning opens the door to fears that “if we don’t sell,” then somebody else would, and they would gain the policy influence. As stated by Elias Yousif in the context of U.S. sales to the region: “If security cooperation with MENA partners is curtailed, so the argument goes, so too will the fundamental means of American influence, providing an opportunity for competing powers to draw the region into their orbits.”<sup>3</sup>

Another common assumption in support of continued flow of arms to the MENA region is that it can help build regional and international cooperation and safeguard both selling and purchasing countries’ **strategic interests** through defense diplomacy. The idea, as Lucie Béraud-Sudreau puts it, is that the trade serves “to generate trust between armed forces of different countries.”<sup>4</sup>

As noted by one participant during the workshop, together these narratives show that suppliers and recipients have both assigned a positive social value (in terms of global status and bilateral relations) to the arms trade that exceeds any military use-value of weapons. One consequence is that altering arms sales policies is exceptionally difficult.

## Are the conventional narratives accurate?

### ***Unpacking the idea that the arms trade successfully ensures security:***

How one defines security depends on one’s perspective. This workshop addressed differences between views from policymakers in Washington or European capitals, versus from those from within the Middle East, as well as differences between the state and the population. Likewise, the debate acknowledged that there is a myriad of perceptions of security within the community of scholars and practitioners concerned with the MENA region.

Participants noted that the U.S. approach often treats arms sales as part of the *status quo*, without assessing specific potential outcomes or engaging the question of what

---

2 Esra Serim, “The Role of Arms Trade in Bilateral and Multilateral Ties with Libya and its Implications”, *PRISME Initiative*, June 8, 2023, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/the-role-of-arms-trade-in-ties-with-libya-serim/>

3 Elias Yousif, “The Fear of Missing Out – Reconsidering Assumptions in US Arms Transfers to the Middle East”, *PRISME Initiative*, May 23, 2023, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/fear-of-missing-out-elias-yousif/>

4 Lucie Béraud-Sudreau, “The Role of the Arms Trade in Bilateral and Multilateral Ties with the MENA Region: A Franco-German perspective”, *PRISME Initiative*, June 2, 2023, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/the-role-of-the-arms-trade-in-ties-with-mena-a-franco-german-perspective-beraud-sudreau/>



would genuinely enhance security in the region. As a result, the trade becomes part of a goodwill-based system of relationships that is detached from even conventional understandings of security in the region. This arrangement allows top-heavy regional governments, along with the U.S., to shape security according to at best, their perceived narrow interests, and at worst, mere inertia. But underneath the longstanding patterns of continued sales, it is not clear that definitions of security and stability from the U.S. and from various regional capitals are aligned.

For both producers and purchasers, the “security” ensured by the arms trade is almost invariably defined in terms of regime security, especially following the Arab Spring. For MENA clients, it generally means regime protection, including when it implies turning their military arsenals against their own and/or neighboring civilian populations. And while Western governments frequently issue statements in the name of human rights and regional stability that oppose such policies, as was the case in Libya, Syria, or Yemen, participants noted that even these cases the referent object of “security” is often not civilian populations of the MENA region, but their own security. It is, for example, dangerous and problematic to argue that the U.S. should stop selling arms because it’s

---

**For governments in the MENA region, security invariably means regime protection; for outside actors it is often either unexamined or narrowly defined in relation to discrete policy preferences.**

---

not in its interest to embolden authoritarian regimes that crack down on their people, thereby increasing the risk of a refugee crisis. This perpetuates a presentation of MENA populations as a problem or a potential threat that needs to be contained.

Most participants in the workshop underlined the necessity to work with an understanding of security that is focused on the people living in the region, and not the security of the region’s autocrats. Continued, unregulated arms transfers to regimes that remain mostly concerned with their self-protection are bound to work against long-term regional stability. Tariq Dana analyzes the Abraham Accords as an example of this troubling dynamic. While the U.S.-sponsored Accords were celebrated for their apparent goal of establishing collective security, Dana argues that they rather increased the likelihood of regional conflict and instability, because they were solely premised on “a convergence of interests

between Israel and Arab autocracies, which have previously engaged in discreet cooperation within the ‘counterrevolutionary bloc.’”<sup>5</sup>

The idea of security as it relates to the arms trade between Europe and North America and MENA countries largely operates to obscure competing interests. For governments in the MENA region, security invariably means regime protection; for outside actors it is often either unexamined or narrowly defined in relation to discrete policy preferences. It rarely, if ever, is addressed in terms of long-term policy goals or in the name of the well-being and rights of the broader civilian populations. When it is, efforts to reform arms transfers and/or military aid are generally focused on a single country. However, such selectivity is impractical, as Nancy Okail states, “given the complex interrelations, mutual support among strongmen in the region, and their involvement in corrupt arms deals.”<sup>6</sup> These remarks go hand in hand with a shared assessment among most partici-

---

5 Tariq Dana, “The Geopolitics of the Abraham Accords: A Critical View on Militarization”, *PRISME Initiative*, June 16, 2023, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/abraham-accords-tariq-dana/>

6 Nancy Okail, “Rethinking Arms Transfers: Navigating the Complexities of U.S. Military Aid to the Middle East and Its Implications for Regional Stability and Human Rights”, *PRISME Initiative*, May 25, 2023,

pants that countries in North America and Europe have much less power and influence in the MENA region than they seem to think. And that whatever authority they have certainly do not come from the arms trade.

### ***Is the arms trade an efficient tool to exert foreign policy influence?***

At the most basic level, arms transfers are understood in terms of how they can tilt the scale in favor of one side in a conflict. However, the proliferation of proxy warfare in the MENA region over the past few decades has largely nullified this assumption. The conflicts in the region are largely internationalized, meaning that multiple third-party actors are involved in supporting combatants. These MENA-region internationalized internal armed conflicts generally last longer and are more violent than non-internationalized conflicts, in line with statistical findings for such conflicts.<sup>7</sup> In the resulting generalized instability, many countries have also seen the rise of terrorist groups. Backlash is the more likely outcome of foreign engagement than is influence. Serim's study of Libya exemplifies the point, as regional powers (Qatar and Turkey on one hand, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt on the other hand) supported different parties with arms after the 2014 elections, which largely contributed to escalate the situation out of the control of any of the sides' patrons.

Even at a less volatile and controversial level, the use of arms embargoes raises questions about how much foreign policy influence can be exerted through the arms trade. Kelsey Gallagher shows how national arms embargoes imposed against Turkey did nothing to change its involvement in Northern Syria, and eventually ended when a bigger security threat, the Russian invasion into Ukraine, arose. Western efforts to change Turkey's behavior by denying the country access to weaponry not only failed to produce the desired effects but also demonstrated Turkey's leverage. Turkey was able to demand that the embargoes be lifted as a condition for throwing its support to NATO enlargement and consolidation<sup>8</sup>.

During the workshop, it was noted that middle powers often find themselves caught in procurement deals where they go to great lengths to accommodate Middle Eastern partners, even in cases where these partners have pursued policies deemed frustrating or embarrassing to the selling countries. In such cases, fear of negative economic consequences often overrides decisions to discontinue exports. This raises the issue of transfer dependencies. If we assume that military exports indeed have a positive impact on the military industrial base of a particular exporting country, then middle powers engaging in these relationships can become reliant on the importing countries. When this happens, the purchasing country gains more ("reverse"<sup>9</sup>) influence than does the seller.

---

<https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/rethinking-arms-transfers-to-mena-nancy-okail/>

7 Sebastian von Einsiedel, "Civil War Trends and the Changing Nature of Armed Conflict", *United Nations University Centre for Policy Research*, Occasional Paper 10, Tokyo: United Nations University, March 2017, <https://cpr.unu.edu/research/projects/civil-war-trends-and-the-changing-nature-of-armed-conflict.html>

8 Kelsey Gallagher, "National Arms Embargoes against Türkiye since Operation Peace Spring", *PRISME Initiative*, May 31, 2023, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/national-arms-embargoes-against-turkiye-kelsey-gallagher/>

9 Emma Soubrier, "The weaponized Gulf riyal politik(s) and shifting dynamics of the global arms trade", *Economics of Peace and Security Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1, April 2020, pp. 49-57, <https://www.epsjournal.org.uk/index.php/EPSJ/article/view/331>



This is true for European countries as well as for Canada, and, perhaps surprisingly, also for the United States.

In the case of the U.S., there are two foundational ideas in the context of arms transfers: the notion that if the U.S. doesn't sell arms to a particular country, someone else will, and the belief that arms sales can be a valuable source of influence. However, Yousif notes that these are countervailing arguments. If it were truly easy for a partner to switch from one primary supplier to an alternative one seamlessly, it would not make sense for the importer to compromise or comply with the demands of a specific exporter solely to maintain an otherwise fungible security cooperation relationship. For the U.S. and other Western suppliers, the absence of influence through arms sales is reinforced by fear-based behaviors. Their belief that if they refuse to sell another nation will step in has created a genuine apprehension about imposing conditions or exercising restraint in arms transfers. Importer states understand this hesitancy and recognize that they do not need to abide by the suggested conditions or implicit requirements associated with these transfers.

Participants underlined that in the U.S. policy community there is both (a) an argument that arms trade could provide leverage, but we are still locked into a logic where we do not use it anyway for fear that countries will shift purchases; and (b) a failure to realize that whatever limits to our leverage might exist, it would be the same for any other selling country as well. As Yousif points out, the proposition that "if we don't sell, others will" assumes a maximality of the supposed influence that others could sway through increased arms trade, compared to the known volatility and unpredictability of the influence of the original exporter.

---

**Any political leverage countries can exert on each other is not tied to transactional arms deals, but to larger regional security and political dynamics.**

---

***Unpacking the idea that the arms trade supports better strategic cooperation:***

Any political leverage countries can exert on each other is not tied to transactional arms deals, but to larger regional security and political dynamics. It is peculiar to assume that such a narrow aspect of a relationship, focused solely on arms transfers, could generate enough influence to coerce or persuade a partner into acting against their own interests, without other substantial pillars of that relationship.

In this respect, the idea that selling weapons reinforces such bilateral or multilateral strategic ties is equally flawed. It has become critical to shine light on this because the assumption that the arms trade strengthens strategic relations continue to underpin many policy debates about the relevance of selling weapons to MENA countries, including in contexts that would otherwise not pass the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) risk assessment.<sup>10</sup> This common narrative has for instance been recently disproved by the failure of

---

<sup>10</sup> Paul Beijer, *Taking Stock of the Arms Trade Treaty: Application of the Risk-assessment Criteria*, Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, August 2021, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2021/other-publications/taking-stock-arms-trade-treaty-application-risk-assessment-criteria>

U.S. President Biden (and European leaders) to convince Gulf countries and particularly the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to adopt policies that would be aligned with theirs on the War in Ukraine and increase oil production to affect Russia's economy.

In fact, it is not certain that there is a strategic objective beyond the economic incentive in the first place. In the case of European middle powers, it is not necessarily evident, and in any case challenging to determine. As Béraud-Sudreau notes, assessing the actual objectives and impacts of arms deals within broader relationships and doing so based on publicly available information is not an easy task. Her study of France's sale of combat aircraft to Qatar and Germany's sale of submarines to Egypt shows that it is difficult to trace the link between these and any benefit for the supplier's foreign policy and diplomatic interests. It is thus possible to challenge the idea that there is any real strategic cooperation between Western suppliers and their MENA clients that is substantially supported by the arms trade.

There are also at least two reasons to doubt the common proposal that the arms trade, by ensuring interoperability of forces between MENA countries and Western exporters as well as among themselves, can help bring Middle Eastern partners to form an alliance against a credible threat. The first one is the recent and increasing propension or temptation of regional actors to turn to other suppliers. The second one is that the so-called 'credible threats' that would need countering seem to be diminishing. Muhammad Alaraby observes the recent de-escalation in the region, notably linked to "exhausted conflicts" in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq, and the regional reconciliations they may have contributed to, both within the Gulf Cooperation Council (Al-Ula Summit in January 2021) and between the two shores of the Gulf (the Chinese-brokered agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023). Amidst these "seeds of a demilitarized MENA region"<sup>11</sup>, one may indeed question the purpose of continually supplying more arms to these states.

At the same time, participants noted that there has been another new trend consisting in intra-regional arms trade often made in the name of similar arguments purporting to support strengthened regional collaboration. This does, however, not bode well for future strategic cooperation towards security and stability because it reproduces the same patterns of threat-ism and polarization that have been encouraged by Western exporters.

## The arms trade reflects and fuels transactional and militarized diplomacy

Participants have emphasized that the arms trade between North America, Europe and the MENA region has been but a symptom of a more insidious trend: transactional diplomacy that goes well beyond the Middle East. This trend is particularly notable within U.S. foreign policy, and it rests on a myth. Relations between states and towards a broader region do not today take shape, nor have they ever, as the desired and contended *quid pro quo*. This comes as no surprise, given that security relationships cannot and should not be reduced to mere transactions. In the meantime, attempting to do so through the arms trade has only served to bolster militarized foreign policy, from both arms exporting and importing countries.

---

<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Alaraby, "Prospects of Demilitarization in the MENA region", *PRISME Initiative*, June 13, 2023, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/prospects-of-demilitarization-in-the-mena-region-muhammad-alaraby/>

Today, many of the diplomatic “solutions” pushed by the U.S., in conjunction with regional actors, are perpetuating an overreliance or hyperfocus on weaponry as security. Arms trade has provided a key transactional language in which militarized foreign policy is expressed. Okail emphasizes that, whether arms sales are used in foreign policy as reward or punishment, this reinforces the idea that they are a key component of a relation. As noted throughout the discussions and in this summary, this only serves to cloud discussions about how to achieve long-standing security. Further, Okail argues, it has repeatedly proven ineffective, notably because of the complex interrelations between regional actors themselves.

It was observed during the workshop that the arms trade has fueled, yet not created conflict dynamics in the MENA region. As explored by Alaraby, these have been more broadly linked to the prevailing militarization of regional actors over decades, referring to “the growing influence of the military in governmental practices, ... a preparation of society and an accumulation of resources towards war”. But participants noted that Western arms providers have still played a role in this militarization of the region, by centralizing militaristic tools and security-related points of discussion in their bilateral and multilateral cooperation with MENA actors.

---

**There are intricate and intrinsic patterns of corruption and vested interests between parties across borders and sectors.**

---

The role of the arms industry in these trends was also highlighted. The difference between governmental versus industrial relations theoretically is the investment in outcomes (policy v. trade itself). But when policy takes a back seat, transactional logic overwhelms. Participants noted that when security is narrowly defined in terms of regime protection, not civilian population’s interests, advantage is also given to industrial companies who pursue their own interests, which are separate (and sometimes possibly opposed) from those of their home-country governments or MENA regimes. The necessity to acknowledge this responsibility of private or semi-private actors requires understanding them not as mere benign actors. There are intricate and

intrinsic patterns of corruption and vested interests between parties across borders and sectors.

One of the most compelling recent illustrations of these trends, with a regionalization of the same patterns, is the Abraham Accords, which, according to Dana, signals a shift in the regional arms trade market and marks a turn where even “peace” increases militarization. The Accords are compared to little more than an arms deal, with potentially dramatic consequences for the security and stability of the MENA region. On the one hand, they deviated from traditional requests conditioning normalization with Israel to political settlement with the Palestinians (condition for long-lasting peace and security for populations), at a moment when the Israeli far right has pushed for more violence. This could further aggravate the gap between MENA regimes and their populations, largely supportive of the Palestinian cause. On the other hand, they also bear risks of leading to regional deflagration. They notably fuel an arms race between Morocco and Algeria. They also entail a risk of getting its signatories into confrontation with Iran, disrupting other efforts to deescalate tensions between the two shores of the Gulf. Israel has thus been a regional illustration of increased militarization through arms sales as diplomacy. Today, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates as well as Saudi Arabia are following in the same footsteps, using arms production as a means of autonomy and arms

exports along transactional diplomacy logics. This may further fuel conflict dynamics in the region and beyond.

### **How are conditions changing, making the misalignments between narratives and reality more pronounced/less credible?**

Today, amidst a shift in the way outside powers engage in and interact with the MENA region, there is an increasing gap in diplomatic capacity from the U.S. and European countries on the one hand, and new partners such as China and Russia on the other hand, in which the overreliance of the West on the arms trade plays a detrimental role.

As noted by both Mansour and Alaraby, regional actors have voiced concerns about what they perceive as a U.S. withdrawal from the region, particularly since 2011. The evolving U.S. posture towards the region can be more accurately described as disengagement, coupled with a consolidation of an involvement in the region that is excessively centered on arms. Participants noted the existence of a vicious cycle as the U.S. and some European actors seek to decrease their engagement on a broader set of Middle East issues, and are leaning more heavily on arms trade, as compensation.

This sole focus of Western countries on weaponry as security is not only bolstering militarized foreign policy, but also opening space for other actors with a more nuanced and longer-term strategic approach to bi- and multilateral relationships. By treating arms trade as sacred, producing countries miss opportunities to creatively engage with actors in the region on a much broader range of bilateral and multilateral concerns. Against the backdrop of global multipolarization, the advantage is accruing to those who find new creative ways to pursue regional engagement. This was illustrated in March 2023 by the Chinese-brokered deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran that restored their diplomatic ties, which had been cut in January 2016.

Participants underlined that it is quite remarkable to see the great ambitions and ideas attached to such a tenuous part of Western countries' relationship to the region, while they neglect alternative avenues. Some in Washington, D.C. even perceive the Chinese-facilitated efforts for Saudi Arabia and Iran to reconcile as a consequence of U.S. restrictions on arms transfers to the Middle East. In fact, the U.S. may have lacked the ingenuity to pursue such initiatives precisely due to a constant focus on the region in terms of threats it poses, polarization and responding through military means.

As outside powers appear to be disengaging, MENA countries, and particularly in the Gulf, are endeavoring to reshape their "arms transfer dependency." In part because of their perceptions of regional threats against which the U.S. failed to protect them, they have decided to increase domestic weapons production capacity. MENA regimes' frustration and discontent with the Western approach to security cooperation is driving nationalization and supply diversification. This point is tempered, however, by limits that countries face in their ability to quickly change weapon systems and trade partners. These current trends of nationalization and diversification should therefore not discourage U.S. and European efforts to reinforce weapons sales' conditionality.

Further challenging the assumption that the arms trade provides political influence for the exporters, MENA countries have also deployed efforts to have a more independent

and assertive foreign policy, affirming their own interests that sometimes go against their Western partners. This has been particularly on display in relation to the war in Ukraine. Gulf countries were not willing to increase oil production; rather they adopted policies that benefitted Russia. Leaked U.S. intelligence documents also revealed that Egypt's al-Sisi secretly planned to supply rockets to Moscow, before backing away from this project and arming Ukraine instead. Turkey's Operation Peace Spring on Northern Syria (addressed by Gallagher) was also a potent illustration of these new conditions.

Recent tentative openings for peace in the region, added to a combination of the emergence of more pressing human security challenges and domestic economic pressures, should also encourage countries in Europe and North America to move away from the centrality of the arms trade in their involvement in and relations with the MENA region. Participants noted that the arms trade is by design a tool of foreign policy to reinforce the national security of a state, or a regime, and that it does not have to be used in a way that jeopardizes the security of populations or creates conflict. It could therefore still be part of more pacified and cooperative dynamics, but only if it was part of a regional security architecture that aimed towards de-escalation of tensions.

## **What is needed? A Franker Assessment of the Arms Trade and More Robust Policy Alternatives**

The workshop aimed to delve into thought-provoking questions that challenge commonly held assumptions regarding the benefits of the arms trade for all actors involved in it. Participants, through their essays and in the discussion, effectively contested these narratives by examining them from the perspectives of both exporters and importers. They presented compelling case studies and empirical evidence to unpack these assumptions. However, these deeply ingrained beliefs persist in the policy realm, making them difficult to overcome.

One important point here is that many scholars and activists work on the presumption that governments don't know the extent of the gap between what they are trying to achieve through the arms trade (beyond its mere military value), and the reality. Policy analysts thus frequently adopt the posture that we need to provide evidence of what is really happening. However, as shown by the leaks on Egypt manufacturing missiles for Russia, Western governments understand that the status quo does not work.

Policy analysts have a role to play in fostering a franker conversation about the role of weapons sales. Doing so can help restore agency to both exporters and importers, enabling them to thoughtfully evaluate arms trade decisions and comprehend the implications they hold for their overall relationships. As it is, conversations within both importer and exporter policy communities remain driven by conventional narratives about sales that are utterly disconnected from reality.

This requires re-considering the strategies and perspectives of some of the main actors who shape and sustain the status quo, including the industrial companies. They and many stakeholders in exporting countries are convinced of the overwhelmingly positive externalities of arms exports. While it may be challenging, participants noted that it was not impossible to identify a constructive role for the arms trade in fostering collabo-

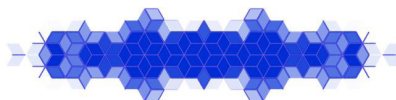


ration among Middle Eastern actors and enhancing regional security. The integration of other major industries has set the groundwork for the arms industry to potentially contribute positively, like the example of the European coal and steel community. The case of European security collaboration also points to the role arms procurement can have in promoting security cooperation. It is thus worth contemplating how the arms trade could also have a positive role to play in and with the MENA region. But this is only possible if the starting point is an honest conversation and a broader regional security framework in which weapons trade might play a subordinate role.

In the same vein, an important question posed in the workshop was that of balancing “traditional military security” with “human security.” Can both be achieved simultaneously? Assuming that arms exports have some legitimacy, must they inevitably undermine human security? This raises the concept of a responsible arms trade, as promoted by the ATT. Anna Stavrianakis has however explored how, rather than signaling the victory of human security, even this effort might be “better understood as facilitating the mobilisation of legitimacy for contemporary liberal forms of war fighting and war preparation” (sic).<sup>12</sup> Middle Eastern leaders, in the UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, are also arguably attempting to reconcile these two objectives, emerging as arms producers and exporters while advocating for human security notably through the hosting of the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27 in Cairo and COP28 in Dubai),<sup>13</sup> although the latter largely has a performative value and is still garnered towards regime security.

Overreliance on the arms trade and military cooperation as the main pillar of strategic partnerships has prevented Western countries from finding alternative (creative and constructive) solutions towards genuine and sustainable security in the MENA region. Even as transactions have not produced the desired leverage, continuously pretending otherwise distorts the overall conversation. The still prevailing notion that “if we don’t sell, others will” has contributed to a disconnected approach to U.S. security cooperation in the region. This approach primarily revolves around an ambiguous notion of influence rather than being aligned with clear strategic objectives and tangible goals. Consequently, it has hindered the development of non-securitized approaches to the region.

Meanwhile, participants argued, a more inclusive and cooperative security framework in the MENA region – or at minimum a regional approach to challenges, is possible. This implies that policy experts on and within the region need to foreground the question of how to address the root causes of conflict. Doing so requires a more comprehensive and holistic approach that would notably consider the economic and social factors. Were this to happen, scholars and analysts working towards sustainable MENA security could help policymakers to see the relevance of further investing in areas such as education, health care, infrastructure, and job creation, which can help to address economic inequalities and promote stability. This may be accompanied by broader demilitarization or not, given the reproduction of patterns of threat-ism and polarization pushed by and amidst MENA countries today.



<sup>12</sup> Anna Stavrianakis, “Legitimizing liberal militarism: politics, law and war in the Arms Trade Treaty”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 5, May 2016, pp. 840-865.

<sup>13</sup> Achref Chibani, “COP27 and the MENA Region: Can Climate Change Pledges Result in Action?”, Arab Center Washington DC, October 27, 2022, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/cop27-and-the-mena-region-can-climate-change-pledges-result-in-action/>





**WORLD  
PEACE**  
FOUNDATION

World Peace Foundation  
at The Fletcher School

Tufts University  
169 Holland Street, Suite 209  
Somerville, Massachusetts 02144 USA  
ph +1.617.627.2255  
fx +1.617-627-3178  
[www.worldpeacefoundation.org](http://www.worldpeacefoundation.org)