



# Arms trade; lost opportunity for climate solutions

Wendela de Vries

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Arms trade between the European Union (EU) and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) not only follows demand, but it is also driven by the requirement of the suppliers. The European military industry can only be economically viable by substantial sales volumes, and European countries cannot absorb these volumes on their own; they need export. The European Commission tries to improve the position of the EU military industry on the international arms market by taking over part of the research and development (R&D) costs and by relaxing the arms export regime. The EU, however, should be careful in granting export licences to MENA countries. The MENA region is extremely vulnerable to the climate crisis, and this might increase migration, social unrest, and regional conflict. Past experiences, e.g. during the 2011 Arab Spring, where European weapons, such as armoured vehicles and small arms, were used to violently suppress civil protest, show that arms can be used in ways that are not aligned with the EU arms export policy.<sup>1</sup> Both EU and MENA countries should reconsider their concept of security, as the climate crisis is a threat that is already hitting hard on its populations. Military security and arms do not protect from climate disaster, and funds spent on weapons cannot be spent on climate adaptation and mitigation.

## EU arms export drive

Although the war in Ukraine creates a temporary production capacity problem for some military goods (notably ammunition), in general, the European military industry is producing more than European countries can absorb. Modern weapon systems are complex high-tech products, which require huge investments in R&D. To earn back these investments, substantial sales volumes are essential, and as customers for conventional weapons are primarily governments, the potential market is limited. Contrary to the military industry in the United States, the European military industry cannot prosper on national demand only. EU armed forces do not have the procurement budget to keep a commercial defence industry alive. In 2021, the EU divided a defence expenditure of €214 billion over 26 member states, of which €43 billion was spent on equipment procurement.<sup>2</sup> Although budgets have been constantly growing over the last seven years, and this growth is accelerating (due to the war in Ukraine), these figures do not even come near the massive Pentagon budget of \$783 billion (Fiscal Year 2022) in one single country.<sup>3</sup> The demand for European-made military equipment continues to be under strain as EU armed forces often prefer US-made military systems over European ones. See, for example, US fighter jets outcompeting EU jet types.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, EU institutions have made efforts to actively help this sector.

1 Vranckx, A. et.al., 'Lessons from MENA: appraising EU transfers of military and security equipment to the Middle East and North Africa: a contribution to the review of the EU common position', Academia Press, Ghent, 2011

2 European Defence Agency, 'Defence data 2020-2021 / Key findings and analysis', 8 December 2022, <https://eda.europa.eu/docs/default-source/brochures/eda---defence-data-2021---web---final.pdf>

3 Friends Committee on National Legislation, 'Pentagon Spending', retrieved 28 Augustus 2023, <https://www.fcnl.org/issues/us-wars-militarism/pentagon-spending>

4 Stop Wapenhandel, 'Fighter jet programs in Europe', 9 January 2019, <https://stopwapenhandel.org/fighter-jet-programs-in-europe/>



## Support for the military industry

By taking over part of the investment costs of industries, the European Commission wants to support the economic viability of the military sector. This has led to an exponential militarization of the EU budget. Starting with the 2017–2019 Preparatory Action for Defence Research (PADR, €90 million) and the 2019–2020 European Defence Industrial Development Programme (EDIDP, €500 million)<sup>5</sup>, the EU established a €8 billion budget European Defence Fund (EDF 2021–2027) on top of the national military spending of member states. In addition to funding military R&D projects through the EDF, to develop the next generation of weaponry and boost the global competitiveness of the European arms industry, the EU also helps military industries' access to most of the European structural funds, like the LIFE environmental programme to develop 'green weapons'.<sup>6</sup>

This process is industry-driven and led by the commissioner in charge of internal market and industry, which illustrates that it is first and foremost about supporting the competitiveness of the industry, including internationally.<sup>7</sup> The Commission is speeding up a process to militarize the once-civil EU (notably since the United Kingdom decided to leave in 2016). What started with funds for military companies for 'security research' has gradually turned into direct funding for the arms industry from the EU budget. Economic arguments to legitimize this vary from the creation of jobs to strengthening the EU technological base. On the military side, there is the argument that the EU should develop 'strategic autonomy' in defence, recently supplemented by the all-overruling argument that the EU must militarize to withstand the Russian threat; a threat added at the very last moment to the EU's Strategic Compass when the document was to be published just after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.<sup>8</sup>

Recently, the EU initiated the ASAP fund, providing a €500 million subsidy to boost production of ammunition as an answer to urgent ammunition shortage in Ukraine. This contribution to a structural increase in EU arms production ignores that the infusion of Western arms in Ukraine is an exceptional situation and may lead to overproduction capacity once the war ends. This will result in a search for new export markets as happened after the decrease of demand at the end of the Cold War.<sup>9</sup> New capabilities may be hard to create, but even harder to reduce.<sup>10</sup> Moves towards a 'war economy' are dangerous in the long term as it contributes to a supply-driven dissemination of

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5 Akkerman, M. et.al., 'Fanning the flames. How the European Union is fuelling a new arms race.' ENAAT/Stop Wapenhandel/TNI, March 2022, [https://stopwapenhandel.org/app/uploads/2022/03/fanning\\_the\\_flames\\_report-tni-web\\_new.pdf](https://stopwapenhandel.org/app/uploads/2022/03/fanning_the_flames_report-tni-web_new.pdf)

6 Sédou, L., 'Is European military spending in the interests of humanity?' Brussels Morning, 4 August 2023, <https://brusselsmorning.com/is-european-military-spending-in-the-interests-of-humanity/33638/>

7 Ruiz, A., et.al., 'A militarised Union, understanding and confronting the militarisation of the European Union' ENAAT/Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, July 2021, <https://enaat.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/A-militarised-Union-FULL.pdf>

8 Brzozowski, A., 'Leak: Russia's war on Ukraine rewrites EU's upcoming military strategy' EURACTIV, 6 March 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/leak-russias-war-on-ukraine-rewrites-eus-upcoming-military-strategy/>

9 Klare, M.T., 'The arms trade in the 1990s: changing patterns, rising dangers.' Third World Quarterly, Vol. 17, 1996, pp. 857- 874.

10 Broek, M., 'Up in arms; disarmament was yesterday?', Stop Wapenhandel Blog, 10 January 2023, <https://stopwapenhandel.org/up-in-arms-disarmament-was-yesterday/>



arms over the world. However, to keep demand up, arms companies are busy lobbying their interests and successfully pressing for long-time contracts from European governments.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, the EU is eroding its arms export control regime, the centrepiece of which is the 2008 Common Position for Control of Exports of Military Technology and Equipment (Common Position).<sup>12</sup> Under this Common Position, EU countries demand export licences for all individual exports of military goods and technology. Licence applications are assessed against a number of criteria, including whether there is a risk of the goods exacerbating international tension or conflict, and whether there is a risk of the goods being used in human rights violations or repression of civilians. This helps to prevent the riskiest exports to the most sensitive destinations, although the regime is deliberately developed to leave room for flexible interpretation.<sup>13</sup>

For the benefit of industrial efficiency, the control regime is now slowly but surely eroding. It is notably being replaced with global and general licences for complete companies or destination, making it more difficult to change policies when circumstances change (e.g. by a coup or a violent act of repression against civilians), and by the Treaty on Export Control in Defence (Aachen Treaty) of major arms producers France and Germany to which Spain also became a partner.<sup>14</sup> This Treaty leaves the intercompany trade of components uncontrolled, making it easier for companies to export from the country with the weakest arms export policy.

## Climate crisis and migration

The MENA region is an attractive market for European military companies. Seven of the global top 25 arms-importing states in the period 2017-2021 were in the Middle East (Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, UAE) while in North Africa, Algeria and Morocco were the main importers (11th and 25th largest recipients respectively).<sup>15</sup> During the last three years, the EU exported €27 billion worth of arms and military equipment to the MENA region.<sup>16</sup> MENA delegations visited arms fairs in Europe, such as London's DSEI (Defence & Security Equipment International), while European delegations showed their presence at fairs such as IDEX (International Defence Exhibition & Conference) in Abu Dhabi.

11 Akkerman, M., et al., 'Climate crossfire – How NATO's 2% military spending targets contribute to climate breakdown' TNI, Stop Wapenhandel, TPNS, October 2023, [https://stopwapenhandel.org/app/uploads/2023/10/NATOs\\_Climate\\_Crossfire.pdf](https://stopwapenhandel.org/app/uploads/2023/10/NATOs_Climate_Crossfire.pdf)

12 European Union (EU), 'Consolidated text: Council Common Position 2008/944/CFSP of 8 December 2008 defining common rules governing control of exports of military technology and equipment', EU Document 02008E0944-20190917, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A02008E0944-20190917>

13 Rather than limiting the arms trade, regulatory regimes such as the Common Position and the similar UN Arms Trade Treaty are facilitation and legitimizing arms exports. See Stavrianakis, A., 'Legitimizing Liberal Militarism: Politics, Law and War in the Arms Trade Treaty', *Third World Quarterly*, 2016, Vol. 37, 2016, pp. 840-865.

14 Stop Wapenhandel, 'Who should control EU arms export?', Stop Wapenhandel Position paper, September 2021, <https://stopwapenhandel.org/app/uploads/2021/09/Position-EU-exports-control.pdf>

15 Wezeman, P.D. et al., 'Trends in international arms transfers 2021' SIPRI Fact sheet, March 2022, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/fs\\_2203\\_at\\_2021.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/fs_2203_at_2021.pdf)

16 European Network Against Arms Trade, EU Export Data Browser, 28 Augustus 2023, <https://enaat.org/eu-export-browser>



Military build-ups have had negative impacts on security in the MENA region, as more resources are allocated for defence 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>17</sup> These funds could also be used to address the non-military, but most urgent security threat of the climate crisis, which is highly endangering the lives and well-being of many people in the region. Nowhere will the impact of climate change be felt as strongly as in the Middle East, which is warming up twice as fast as the rest of the world.<sup>18</sup> Between 1980 and 2022, temperatures across the MENA region increased well above the world average. Precipitation patterns have also changed significantly, aggravating existing water scarcity in some countries, with droughts in Morocco in 2022 and Tunisia in 2023, while causing intense floods in 2022 in the UAE, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and Yemen.<sup>19</sup> This year's heatwave has seen several Mediterranean countries break temperature records and contributed to the extremity of Algerian wildfires.<sup>20</sup> The climate in countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia are projected to warm by about 5 degrees Celsius by the end of the century.

Such a rapid increase affects vegetation and freshwater resources, and it makes food production more difficult. Already the impacts of climate change are undermining the economic position and food security of many people in the region, notably marginalized and poor people. Small-scale farmers, agro-pastoralists, and fisherfolk are being forced off their lands due to droughts, winter storms, the growth of deserts, and rises in sea levels.<sup>21</sup> This will lead to an increase in migration from rural to urban areas, whether internally or across borders.<sup>22</sup>

Although the relative importance of climate effects on migration remains to be seen, over the last decade, weather-related crises have created twice as much displacement as conflict.<sup>23</sup> This displacement of people disrupts communities and leads to instability and conflict over ever-scarcer resources, both between states and between a population and its rulers.<sup>24</sup> There is a serious risk this will lead to violent response from authoritarian elites. Many regimes already impose arbitrary arrests and detentions and harass people for expressing critical views, participating in peaceful protests, and engaging in political

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17 Alaraby, M., 'Prospects of Demilitarization in the MENA region', PRISME Initiative, Spring 2023, <https://prismeinitiative.org/app/uploads/2023/06/alaraby-prospects-demilitarization-mena.pdf>

18 Tsui, K., 'The Middle East is warming up twice as fast as the rest of the world', Washington Post, 7 September 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/09/07/middle-east-mediterranean-climate-change/>

19 Lim, J., et al., 'Climate resilience is key to energy transitions in the Middle East and North Africa', IEA Commentary, 3 July 2023, <https://www.iea.org/commentaries/climate-resilience-is-key-to-energy-transitions-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>

20 'Wildfires in Algeria kill dozens, force hundreds to flee homes', Al Jazeera, 24 Jul 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/24/deadly-algeria-wildfires-amid-extreme-heat-high-winds>

21 Hamouchene, H., 'The energy transition in North Africa. Neocolonialism again!' Transnational Institute, October 2022, <https://longreads.tni.org/the-energy-transition-in-north-africa-neocolonialism-again>

22 Zittis, G., et al., 'Climate Change and Weather Extremes in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East', *Reviews of Geophysics*, Vol. 60, September 2022, <https://agupubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1029/2021RG000762>

23 United Nations (UN), 'Climate change link to displacement of most vulnerable is clear: UNHCR', UN News, 22 April 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/04/1090432>

24 Hugh, B, Sikorsky, E., 'Moving towards security: preparing NATO for climate-related migration', NATO Review, 19 May 2022, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2022/05/19/moving-towards-security-preparing-nato-for-climate-related-migration/index.html>



activism. The rights of refugees, migrants, and internally displaced people are even more inadequately protected. Authorities continued to arrest and arbitrarily detain refugees and migrants and subject them to refoulement and mass expulsions.<sup>25</sup> And EU countries are militarizing their borders to keep refugees out, while the military industry is profiting from this ‘border securitization’.<sup>26</sup>

## Climate crisis, political activism, and conflict

Further environmental activism is urgently needed as emissions in the region are growing rapidly, although most MENA countries have committed to the Paris climate agreement. Some Gulf countries, such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, have asserted their commitment to a net zero-emission goal by 2050, but this does not resolve concerns about their role as leading fossil fuel exporters. For example, shortly before the Saudi government updated its emissions pledge, the national oil company Aramco announced it would aim to increase oil production capacity during this decade.<sup>27</sup> In other countries, such as Egypt, a picture is beginning to emerge of green growth led by a political and sometimes military elite with little regard for how projects will impact ordinary citizens. For example, ambitious plans to intervene in Egypt’s ecosystems, and ‘regreen’ the Sinai desert by large scale reforestation, will have to count with the Egyptian military that has been fighting an insurgency in the Sinai since 2011, and involves a high risk for further evictions of local communities.<sup>28</sup>

Increasing scarcity of essential resources such as fresh water and arable land will also lead to increased interstate tension with a potential for armed confrontation. It is difficult to divorce the climate crisis from other causal factors leading to armed conflict, as conflicts are layered and have many intertwined causes. In its 2022 Strategic Concept, the NATO military alliance calls climate change in Africa and the Middle East a “threat multiplier that can exacerbate conflict, fragility and geopolitical competition”.<sup>29</sup> However, whether conflicting interests over resources will escalate in armed confrontations depends a lot on how scarcity conflicts are managed.<sup>30</sup> We should also be careful with labelling conflicts as ‘climate conflicts’ because there is evidence that reinforcing a climate–conflict paradigm may increase the likelihood of conflict. It helps fuel arms races, distracts from other causal

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25 Amnesty International, ‘Middle East And North Africa 2022’, retrieved 28 Augustus 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/report-middle-east-and-north-africa/>

26 Akkerman M., ‘Financing border wars; The border industry, its financiers and human rights.’, Transnational Institute and Stop Wapenhandel, March 2021, [https://stopwapenhandel.org/app/uploads/2021/10/financingborderwars-report-tni\\_2.pdf](https://stopwapenhandel.org/app/uploads/2021/10/financingborderwars-report-tni_2.pdf)

27 Climate Action Tracker on Saudi Arabia, retrieved 03 October 2023, <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/saudi-arabia/>

28 Chibani, A., ‘COP27 and the MENA Region: Can Climate Change Pledges Result in Action?’ Arab Centre, 27 October 2022, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/cop27-and-the-mena-region-can-climate-change-pledges-result-in-action/>

29 NATO Strategic Concept 2022. Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid.

30 Selby, J. & Hoffmann, C., ‘Rethinking Climate Change, Conflict and Security’, *Geopolitics*, Vol. 19, 2014, pp. 747-756.





factors leading to conflict, and undermines other approaches to conflict resolution.<sup>31</sup> However, the situation might lead to an increased demand for arms.

Climate commitments on paper do not automatically lead to fair and green policies. It is thus critical for populations to keep petitioning their governments for more adequate actions. How this will work out in MENA countries, where many governments have a history of repressing social protest, cannot be predicted. Even during the 27th Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP27) in Egypt, the al-Sisi government turned against political activism.<sup>32</sup> During the 2019 social uprisings in the region, there was widespread violence by security forces also in countries receiving EU military goods.<sup>33</sup> And in the 2011 Arab Spring, European arms were deployed to repress the demands of the population.<sup>34</sup> EU countries should be very careful in exporting arms to the region if they want to prevent complicity in the repression of social protest and increased regional tension.

## Conclusion

The European arms export control system, whereby military industrial companies should not be granted export licences for military goods “which might be used for internal repression or international aggression or contribute to regional instability”, is unfortunately eroding. While already the implementation of EU export control policies is failing on numerous occasions and arms are sold to countries accused of human rights violation and repression, such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, Egypt, Iraq, and Israel.<sup>35</sup>

The same is true for the increased risk of regional instability. Although so-called ‘climate conflicts’ are in essence distribution conflicts (over water, over arable land, and in the future possibly also over places with liveable temperatures), they can indeed be expected to increase in frequency and intensity due to the climate crisis.

In light of the rapidly aggravating climate situation and the social and interstate disruption this might reinforce, EU countries should be extra careful when licencing exports of military equipment to countries in the MENA region if they are serious about human rights and peace.

While the richest countries are spending 30 times as much on the military as on climate finance for the world’s most vulnerable countries, opportunities seem to be lost.<sup>36</sup> EU and MENA governments could both benefit from reconsidering their concept of security. Arms

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31 Buxton, N., ‘The dangers of militarising the climate crisis. A primer on climate security’, Transnational Institute, 2021

32 Human Rights Watch, ‘Egypt: Government Undermining Environmental Groups. COP27 Countries Should Press Cairo to End Restrictions, Enable Participation’, September 12, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/12/egypt-government-undermining-environmental-groups>

33 Amnesty International, ‘Human rights in the Middle East and North Africa, Review of 2019’, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde01/1357/2020/en/>

34 Vranckx, A. et.al., ‘Lessons from MENA’, op. cit.

35 González, R., ‘Concerns over human rights fail to curb Europe’s lucrative arms trade with the Middle East’, Equal Times, 14 February 2022, <https://www.equaltimes.org/concerns-over-human-rights-fail-to>

36 Akkerman, M. et.al., ‘Climate collateral. How military spending accelerates climate breakdown’, Transnational Institute, Stop Wapenhandel, Tipping Point North South, Global Campaign on Military Spending, November 2022, <https://stopwapenhandel.org/app/uploads/2022/11/Climate-Collateral-Report-TNI-final-web-1.pdf>



# PRISME

Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive  
Security in the Middle East

trade is part of a specific, narrow concept of security, that of military security. When the most acute threat to a region is an accelerating climate crisis, investments in climate mitigation and adaptation is a more efficient contributing to security than investment in military capacities.



# PRISME

Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive  
Security in the Middle East



## Wendela de Vries

Wendela de Vries is researcher/activist at Stop Wapenhandel, an independent peace organisation in the Netherlands of which she is also co-founder. She is member of the Steering Committee of the European Network Against Arms Trade and coordinates the international working group on Arms, Militarisation and Climate Crisis. Ms. de Vries studied International Relations at the University of Amsterdam. Research interests include EU military industry and Relation between climate crisis and militarisation. Contributions to publications and books including “Locked-in Emissions: The Climate Change Arms Trade” (Cairo Review of Global Affairs 2021) and “Climate Collateral, How military spending accelerates climate breakdown” (TNI, Stop Wapenhandel and TPNS 2022).





# 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.