



# Industries and Identities of War: Militarism, Nationalism, and Arab-Israeli Normalization

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## Normalization and defense

The year 2022 marked a new peak in Israeli defense exports. Although the country has already established itself as a hub for a global military industry since the late 1980s and has consistently expanded since then,<sup>1</sup> the industry has recently reached new heights. In 2022, the industry's value was around \$12.5 billion, having doubled in less than a decade and increased by 50% in 3 years.<sup>2</sup> This trend has notably been supported by a new regional order in the Middle East with unprecedented levels of engagement with, and acceptance of, Israel following the 2020 Abraham Accords, normalizing Israel's relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Morocco. In 2022, almost one-quarter of Israeli arms exports, \$3 billion, was with Arab states.<sup>3</sup> In the previous year, the UAE and Bahrain alone accounted for \$853 million of Israel's \$11.4 billion military export industry.<sup>4</sup> These figures signal enthusiasm by Arab states who recently normalized relations with Israel to purchase weapons and other military technology.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to representing new diplomatic alliances, these developments indicate an intensification of militarism in the Middle East. This memo focuses on the securitized relations that have formed the basis of this new regional order, suggesting that they need to be analyzed within the framework of militarism and militarization, which include both internal and external processes. These terms can be defined, according to one scholar, as "an extension of military influence to civilian spheres, including economy and socio-political life."<sup>6</sup> This paper will accordingly focus on militarism at the nexus of domestic and foreign policies.

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1 Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Israel's role in the Third World: exporting West Bank expertise," *Race and Class* 26: 3 (1985), 9-30; Neve Gordon, 'Israel's emergence as a homeland security capital', in Elia Zureik et al., eds. *Surveillance and Control in Israel/Palestine: Population, Territory, and Power* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 157; Sheila Ryan, 'US military contractors in Israel', *Middle East Report* 144, (1987), 17-22; Tariq Dana, "A cruel innovation: Israeli experiments on Gaza's Great March of Return," *Sociology of Islam* 8: 2 (2020), 188.

2 Israeli Government Press Office, "Ministry of Defense Spokesperson's Statement: Israel Sets New Record in Defense Exports: Over \$12.5 Billion in 2022", 14 June 2023, <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/esibat>.

3 Rina Bassist, "Arab states make up 24% of Israel's 2022 arms exports including drones," *Al-Monitor*, 14 June 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/06/arab-states-make-24-israels-2022-arms-exports-including-drones#ixzz8CosIcO2W>.

4 Bassist, "Arab states make up 24% of Israel's 2022 arms exports."

5 Tariq Dana, "The Geopolitics of the Abraham Accords: A Critical View on Militarization," *Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive Security in the Middle East* (PRISME) Initiative, Spring 2023, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/abraham-accords-tariq-dana/>.

6 Marek Thee, "Militarism and Militarization in Contemporary International Relations," *Bulletin of Peace Proposals* 8: 4 (1977), 296.



Blurring the boundaries between the supposedly distinct spheres of the international and the national, militarism has become a key tool for projecting power both internally and externally. Israel's relations with Arab states, in other words, must be understood as part of an attempt to develop militarized foreign policies as well as militarized national subjects across the region. States in the Middle East have increasingly sought to project power through militaries, both at home and abroad, which has driven the embrace of militarized relations. Resources invested into the arms trade are not only a diversion in terms of social and public welfare, but they also represent a crafting of a particular political future that centers and elevates the military in everyday life.

These relations, furthermore, appear to represent the ultimate culmination of the doctrine of economic peace that has structured discussions on Arab-Israeli peacemaking.<sup>7</sup> While the premise of a 'new Middle East' was initially billed throughout the 1990s, as being a process that can reduce armament and militarization, it has developed and become accepted as part of a military build-up.<sup>8</sup> Paradoxically, warmer relations and decreased tensions between Israel and Arab states have emerged alongside increased militarization. States in the Middle East have continued to expand their militaries and procure new weapons even as these new diplomatic arrangements have emerged. This suggests that ideas of defense and security – and the arms trade itself – have become part of national identities and internal politics as well. Indeed, these dynamics demonstrate that Israeli colonialism is not only profitable in terms of the country's own economic and political goals but that it also adapts to and justifies itself via new geostrategic arrangements and logics of warfare in the post-War on Terror era.<sup>9</sup>

## Militarized relations between Israel and Arab states

In a now famous speech in 1996, Ehud Barak, then foreign minister of Israel, declared that Israel was a "modern and prosperous villa in the middle of the jungle."<sup>10</sup> Twenty years later, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would double down on this statement, declaring:

At the end, in the State of Israel, as I see it, there will be a fence that spans it all. I'll be told, 'this is what you want, to protect the villa?' The answer is yes. Will we surround all of the State of Israel with fences and barriers? The answer is yes. In the area that we live in, we must defend ourselves against the wild beasts.<sup>11</sup>

These two statements have become iconic of how settler colonialism operates – through processes of racialization, dehumanization, and securitization. Yet, a notable change has

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7 Sanam Vakil and Neil Quilliam, "The Abraham Accords and Israel-UAE normalization: Shaping a new Middle East," Chatham House, March 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/03/abraham-accords-and-israel-uae-normalization>.

8 Shimon Peres and Arye Naor, *The New Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 1993), Chapter 6: "From an economy of strife to an economy of peace."

9 See Joseph F. Getzoff, "Start-up nationalism: The rationalities of neoliberal Zionism," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38: 5 (2020), 811-828; Gadi Algazi, "Offshore Zionism," *New Left Review* (2006), 27-37.

10 Address by Foreign Minister Ehud Barak To the Annual Plenary Session of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council February 11, 1996.

11 Jack Moore, "Netanyahu: We Will Surround Israel With Walls 'To Defend Against Wild Beasts'," *Newsweek*, February 9, 2016, <https://www.newsweek.com/netanyahu-we-will-surround-israel-walls-defend-against-wild-beasts-424566>.



occurred, even as Israel continues to invest in fencing itself in. The Middle East, described by Israeli leaders as a hostile space for the state, appears to have become more welcoming, as these new diplomatic arrangements suggest. Israel has effectively built weaponized bridges with other proponents of militarism in the Middle East. Policy circles attribute this change exclusively to an alliance forming against Iran, overlooking the extent to which it demonstrates a mutual embrace of a culture of militarization.<sup>12</sup>

The integration of Israel within the Middle East did not begin with the Abraham Accords but it was tacit before, as the countries in question had started developing informal relations with Israel. Its formalization in 2020 has already proven to be a gold mine for the military industry. As suggested above, in the short period following the signing of the Abraham Accords, Israel developed close cooperation with the UAE and Bahrain on intelligence and defense technology. Normalization between Arab states and Israel has been linked to a desire for military technology and hardware – whether via imports from Israel, or by aiming to convince the United States (US) to provide them with new military technology, such as the now well-known case of the UAE F-35 jet deal, which is still being discussed.

Meanwhile, a request by the UAE to buy Israeli air defense systems – SPYDER mobile interceptors made by Rafael – was approved in September 2022.<sup>13</sup> Bahrain, similarly, expanded military cooperation with Israel. In February 2022, Israel's then defense minister Benny Gantz signed an agreement of security cooperation with Abdullah Bin Hassan Al Nuaimi in Manama, which mentions intelligence, military-to-military, and industrial collaboration.<sup>14</sup> According to a senior Bahraini official, Bahrain was purchasing unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and anti-drone systems from Israel, and its personnel are reportedly receiving training from the Mossad.<sup>15</sup> Morocco also recently completed a deal to purchase Israeli UAVs, estimated to be worth \$22 million.<sup>16</sup>

Arab states tend to look at the case of Egypt, which became the second largest recipient of US military aid after signing a peace treaty with Israel.<sup>17</sup> While there may be no analogous need, particularly by oil-exporting Gulf states, for aid, they have sought new military technology as part of a more assertive regional foreign policy. The UAE, for example, has been engaged in military operations in Yemen, Libya, and elsewhere, while expanding and

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12 For a critique of this narrative, see Tariq Dana, “The New (Dis)Order: The Evolving UAE-Israel Security Alliance,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 52: 3 (2023), 62-68.

13 Alexander Cornwell and John Irish, “Exclusive: Israel to sell air defence system to United Arab Emirates,” *Reuters*, 23 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/exclusive-israel-sell-air-defence-system-united-arab-emirates-sources-say-2022-09-22/>.

14 “Israel defence minister signs security agreement with Bahrain,” *Reuters*, 3 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-defence-minister-visits-us-navy-base-bahrain-2022-02-03/>.

15 Dion Nissembaum and Dov Lieber, “Biden Presses for Israeli-Arab Security Ties to Come Out From the Shadows,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 July 2022, [https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-presses-for-israeli-arab-security-ties-to-come-out-from-the-shadows-11657650256?mod=latest\\_headlines](https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-presses-for-israeli-arab-security-ties-to-come-out-from-the-shadows-11657650256?mod=latest_headlines).

16 Chaim Levinson, “Israel Aerospace Industries Got \$22m From Morocco, Reportedly for Kamikaze Drones,” *Haaretz*, 30 November 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2021-11-30/ty-article/.highlight/israel-aerospace-industries-got-22m-from-morocco-reportedly-for-kamikaze-drones/0000017f-e2ba-df7c-a5ff-e2fa7d4c0000>.

17 Omar Rahman, “The emergence of GCC-Israel relations in a changing Middle East,” *Brookings*, 28 July 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-emergence-of-gcc-israel-relations-in-a-changing-middle-east/>.



modernizing its military. In November 2021, the UAE and Bahrain participated in a joint military exercise with Israel, coordinated by the US navy.<sup>18</sup> Less than six months later, in March 2022, the Negev Security Summit, hosted by Israel's then foreign minister, brought together representatives from the US, Bahrain, Morocco, the UAE, and Egypt. The objective of the summit was to strengthen ties between these actors, and to cement a recurring forum for regional cooperation. A photograph from the summit, showing these men joining hands, was seen as symbolizing this new normal, going against the previous model of 'cold peace' with Israel, which was previously embraced by Egypt and Jordan. Since then, diplomats, policymakers, and defense experts have pushed for additional integration, such as the recurring fantasy of a NATO-style response force, integrated air and missile defense systems, and so on.<sup>19</sup>

Israel, meanwhile, has lobbied the administration of Joe Biden to sell F-15 fighter jets to Egypt. The US has been reluctant to do so due to widespread violations of human rights since the coup d'état by Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, which has resulted in attempts to condition military assistance. This highlights the extent to which the alliance between Israel and Egypt has evolved past the framework of a 'cold peace'. Indeed, Israel played a key role in reintegrating Egypt in international political spaces after the coup.<sup>20</sup> These alliances have reached a level where they surpass the need for mediation or involvement from the US. Israel's close military coordination with Egypt has been well-documented, particularly since Sisi's rise to power, after which there were reports of Israeli drone strikes being carried out in the Sinai Peninsula in Egyptian territory.<sup>21</sup> This comes alongside other economic interests: Israel and Egypt signed an agreement with the European Union (EU) to export Israeli gas via Egyptian facilities.

As Shana Marshall argues, "Access to the physical means of repression—weapons and related military technology—remains central to the foreign policies of MENA states."<sup>22</sup> The millions spent in investments in militaries are central for foreign policy projections, as Marshall and others demonstrate, yet they are also relevant for articulating national subjectivities.<sup>23</sup> For example, Morocco's recent military conscription bill has been described as seeking to address youth dissatisfaction, using the military as a vehicle to strengthen national identity and socialize youth into military spaces.<sup>24</sup> Egypt's military, meanwhile, has its hands in nearly every aspect of everyday life, ranging from the economy

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18 Frank Gardner, "First joint naval exercise by Israel and Gulf states signals Iran worries," BBC News, 15 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-59289341>.

19 Sam Mundy, "Gulf States and Israel Should Form a Rapid Response Force," Foreign Policy, 5 September 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/05/israel-gcc-uae-gulf-arab-states-iran-rapid-response-force-military-defense-nato-security/>, Alex Elnagdy, "US missile defense can put a stop to the Middle East arms race," Atlantic Council, 20 October 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/us-missile-defense-can-put-a-stop-to-the-middle-east-arms-race/>. For a critique of the NATO-style fantasy, see Jean-Loup Samaan, "The Limitations of a NATO-Middle East Military Cooperation," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 7, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/81740>.

20 Barak Ravid, "Israel urges Biden administration to sell F-15 fighter jets to Egypt," Axios, 23 March 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/03/23/israel-urges-biden-administration-sell-f-15-egypt>.

21 David D. Kirkpatrick, "Secret Alliance: Israel Carries Out Airstrikes in Egypt, With Cairo's O.K.," The New York Times, 3 February 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/03/world/middleeast/israel-airstrikes-sinai-egypt.html>.

22 Shana Marshall, "Regional militaries and the global military-industrial complex," in *A Critical Political Economy of the Middle East and North Africa*, edited by Joel Beinin et al. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2021), 85.



to the media, and militarism is publicized in both exceptional and mundane ways. In addition to a pole cadet graduation video featuring shirtless men doing tricks, which went viral, public space contains small reminders of the military's glory.<sup>25</sup> The UAE has invested extensively in defense and has plans to further expand military funding, while also emphasizing military-adjacent projects like space exploration.<sup>26</sup> Militarization, as analysts have noted, has become a way for Gulf monarchies to strengthen their rule and develop a post-rentier state identity—this includes not only conscription but also displays around national identity, whether in public exhibitions, educational curricula, or other top-down projections.<sup>27</sup> While these dynamics are hardly new, their amplification and spread have been overlooked from political analysis, especially when it comes to the arms trade. More research is needed into how militarism features distinctively in different national identities across the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia has not yet signed a peace agreement with Israel, but it is expected to do so in the near future, with actors increasingly describing the deal as inevitable and/or imminent. As the largest defense spender in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia will likely continue the same patterns of importing military hardware from Israel for its increasingly adventurous foreign policy endeavors, but also using the military as a key instrument in domestic policy.<sup>28</sup> While Israel and Saudi Arabia have already engaged in secretive relations,<sup>29</sup> many actors suggest that the outbreak of violence in Israel/Palestine in October 2023 has rendered a Saudi-Israeli peace deal no longer politically viable. On the other hand, the UAE's trade minister Thani al Zeyoudi argued that the country “does not mix trade with

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- 23 Haya al-Noaimi, “Militarism and the Bedouin: Intersections of colonialism, gender, and race in the Arab Gulf,” *Security Dialogue* 52: 6 (2021), 529-545; Rafeef Ziadeh, “Circulating Power: Humanitarian Logistics, Militarism, and the United Arab Emirates,” *Antipode* 51: 5 (2019): 1684-1702; Uri Ben-Eliezer, *War over Peace: One Hundred Years of Israel's Militaristic Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019); Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca L. Stein, *Digital Militarism: Israel's Occupation in the Social Media Age* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2015).
- 24 Smail Hamoudi, “Morocco's Return to Compulsory Military Service: Reasons and Challenges,” MIPA, <https://mipa.institute/en/6451>.
- 25 Yezid Sayigh, “Owners of the Republic: An Anatomy of Egypt's Military Economy,” Carnegie Middle East Center, 18 November 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/11/18/owners-of-republic-anatomy-of-egypt-s-military-economy-pub-80325>; “Bizarre Egyptian police cadet graduation goes viral,” CNN, 21 October 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2020/10/21/egyptian-police-cadet-graduation-ceremony-news-source-orig-vpx.cnn>; Ramy M. K. Aly, “Producing men, the nation, and commodities: the cultural political economy of militarism in Egypt,” in *Militarism and International Relations: Political Economy, Security and Theory*, edited by Anna Stavrianakis and Jan Selby (London: Routledge, 2013), 147-163; Sara Tonsy, “The Egyptian army in the political and economic fields since 2013: a neo-military society,” *Confluences Méditerranée* 2022/3 (N° 122), 129-142.
- 26 Deena Kamel, “Mena defence budget to rise 3.3% in 2023 on higher oil revenue, report says,” *The National*, 28 February 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2023/03/01/mena-defence-budget-to-rise-33-in-2023-on-higher-oil-revenue-report-says/>; “UAE space sector enhances global competitiveness, contributes to diversifying economy,” *Wam*, 4 September 2023, <https://wam.ae/en/details/1395303192802>.
- 27 Eleonora Ardemagni, “Gulf Monarchies' Militarized Nationalism,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 28, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78472>.
- 28 Ayman al-Yassini, “Saudi Arabia: The Role of the Military in Politics,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, 17 December 2020.
- 29 Bruce Riedel, “How to understand Israel and Saudi Arabia's secretive relationship,” *Brookings*, July 11, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-to-understand-israel-and-saudi-arabias-secretive-relationship/>.



politics,” in reference to the recent war, suggesting that the country is determined to maintain economic collaboration with Israel.<sup>30</sup>

It is worth noting that these relations have not been affected by the designation of Israel as an apartheid state by human rights groups, academics, and many other actors, which has gained traction in the past couple of years.<sup>31</sup> Rather, the arms trade between Israel and other countries in the Middle East seeks to hamper any attempts to isolate Israel and/or pursue strategies analogous to those taken against apartheid South Africa. These transactions have also been deeply disconnected from the human rights records of states in the Middle East and North Africa.

## Israel’s military industry and Palestinian experiences of war

The regional enthusiasm for Israel’s military industry suggests a tacit approval of violence against Palestinians, as some have highlighted, as well as a degree of complicity in making war more profitable. Political actors continue to refer to the need to create a Palestinian state – as a kind of mantra – yet they continue to embrace the same model, which entrenches, expands, and intensifies patterns of militarism and violence in the Middle East. While the arms trade is seen as part of security policies pursued by these countries, it reflects the extent to which the boundary between peace and war has become increasingly and deliberately fuzzy – a process that is global and can be discerned in other militarist projects, such as the US-led global ‘War on Terror’. Indeed, contemporary warfare is conducted through globalized and interconnected infrastructures and institutions; it is made and remade through everyday practices, values, and cultures, which challenge the distinction between the national and international spheres. Military practices are not merely encroaching upon civilian life, but there has been a blurring, or even erasure, between the two spaces.

While there is a temptation to disconnect Israel’s bilateral relations with Arab states from the ongoing and escalating violence against Palestinians, Israeli military exports are made possible by this routinized violence.<sup>32</sup> Not only does this dynamic suggest that war itself can be profitable, but it also highlights how these regional actors enable the making of Palestinians into unwilling recruits for the Israeli military industry. Their experiences of settler-colonialism and occupation are transformed into marketable commodities, made generic and turned into stock images for the Israeli military industry, which are then consumed internationally.<sup>33</sup>

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30 Rachna Uppal, “UAE, after Israel-Gaza conflict, says it does not mix trade with politics,” Reuters, October 10, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-after-israel-gaza-conflict-says-it-does-not-mix-trade-with-politics-2023-10-10/>.

31 For example, see Human Rights Watch, “A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution,” 27 April 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution>.

32 Antony Loewenstein, *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World* (London: Verso, 2023).

33 Shimrit Lee, “Simulating the Contact Zone: Corporate Mediations of (Less-Lethal) Violence in Israel, Palestine, and Beyond,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 75 (2018): 24-47. While the metaphor of a laboratory aims to highlight the profitability of the industry, it does not suggest that Palestinians are passive participants in this process. See Rhys Machold, “Reconsidering the laboratory thesis: Palestine/Israel and the geopolitics of representation,” *Political Geography* 65 (2018): 88-97.



# PRISME

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In analyzing these dynamics, I do not intend to suggest that the people are to blame for militarism – or that authoritarian states are fulfilling the wishes of the people. Rather, I aim to highlight that authoritarian states are crafting national identities that value and emphasize militarism. If we are to think of demilitarization as a viable option for the future, which is currently dismissed as an impossibility, we must begin by disentangling militarism and national belonging from one another.



# PRISME

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## Heba Taha

Dr. Heba Taha is a scholar of Politics and International Relations. Her work lies at the intersection of political economy and security in the modern Middle East, particularly Israel/Palestine. Her doctoral work analyzes the role of Palestinians in Israeli capitalism, focusing on everyday encounters and non-conventional sites of contestation, such as high-tech firms and shopping centers. More recently, she is also researching nuclear histories and technologies in the Middle East, some of which has been published in *Third World Quarterly*, *International Affairs*, and *Global Affairs*. Her article on gender and visualization of the nuclear age in Egypt won the 2023 International Affairs Early Career Prize. She is currently based in Binghamton University and is also an Affiliated Scholar at the Center for International Studies (CERI) at Sciences Po, where she collaborates with the Nuclear Knowledges research collective.





# PRISME

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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.