

Exposing the Iceberg: France's Discreet Ties to Israel's Military Sector and Grassroot Activism to Decenter Arms

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Published as part of debate #4 of the SALAM project, Fall 2024

The centrality of arms in Middle East security is, to a large extent, a very visible and tangible reality, particularly in the region's relationship with the West. The Middle East has long been a key recipient of Western arms exports, a trend that has persisted for several decades.¹ A crucial aspect of this heavily militarized relationship is its selectivity: while allies have been abundantly supplied with weapons, others have been denied access and, in some prominent cases, actively disarmed.²

Among Western allies in the Middle East, Israel stands out in many ways.³ It benefits from an unparalleled level of support, has nurtured unquestionable military superiority, and relies on a specific narrative to justify arms transfers, military partnerships, and broader political backing – presenting itself as a democratic state entitled to defend itself by maintaining a qualitative military edge.⁴

Challenging this deeply militarized and exclusive understanding of security, which has been reinforced by unconditional foreign military assistance, a global Stop Arming Israel campaign emerged. This movement followed an urgent global call issued on October 16, 2023 by Palestinian trade unions to “stop arming Israel and end all complicity,”⁵ a week into Israel's devastating military response to the very violent attack of October 7, 2023.

1 The first round of SALAM debates, held in April 2023, was precisely exploring the central role played by the arms trade in bilateral and multilateral ties between countries in North America, Europe, and the MENA region. See <https://prismeinitiative.org/projects/salam/salam-debate-1-the-role-of-the-arms-trade/>.

2 C. Pison Hindawi, “Selective Arms Flows and Arms Control: Producing Insecurity in the Middle East... and Beyond,” in L. Kamel (ed.) *The Middle East: Thinking About and Beyond Security and Stability*, Peter Lang, 2019, pp. 41-64.

3 Accordingly, several essays published by the PRISME Initiative as part of the SALAM project focus on or address Western (and Arab) ties with Israel, notably Tariq Dana, “The Geopolitics of the Abraham Accords: A Critical View on Militarization” and 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” in the first SALAM debate (April 2023), as well as Nico Edwards, “Foreign Policy for Ecological Justice or Ecological Colonialism? Troubling US and German Eco-Militarized Relations with Israel” and Heba Taha, “Industries and Identities of War: Militarism, Nationalism, and Arab-Israeli Normalization” in the second SALAM debate (September 2023).

4 C. Pison Hindawi, “From the Ashes of Europe to the Ashes of Gaza: Searching for the EU in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” forthcoming 2025.

5 The call to action can be found at: <https://www.workersinpalestine.org/the-calls-languages/english>, accessed on 29.10.2024. It should be noted that a ‘Stop Arming Israel’ campaign already existed prior to 2023, notably in the UK, where the campaign was led by Campaign Against the Arms Trade, Palestine Solidarity Campaign and War on Want.



In France, inquiries about the forms and extent of military cooperation with Israel have consistently been met with a systematic response from state representatives: French arms transfers to Israel are said to be quasi-inexistent or negligible. Publicly available figures⁶ seem to corroborate these claims. Despite France's increasingly prominent position as one of the world's largest weapons exporters – becoming the second largest exporter in 2024 – very few of its military exports are directed to Israel. Over the past twenty years, France's most prominent arms trade partners have been India, the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, China, Singapore, Qatar, Greece, Morocco, South Korea, and Brazil.⁷ In late February 2024, French defense minister Sébastien Lecornu felt apparently entitled to assert that “objectively speaking, there is no arms relationship as such with Israel,” adding that France intended to act “beyond reproach” in the supply of components for military equipment.⁸

Do these statements and figures suggest that arms are not central to the French-Israeli relationship, and that scholars and activists should instead focus on the well-identified main arms provider, the United States, or on more significant European trade partners like the United Kingdom or Germany? This paper, drafted almost a year into what the International Court of Justice has already confirmed poses a plausible risk of genocide against Palestinians,⁹ questions what it means to decenter arms when their centrality is not immediately discernable, as in the case of France's relationship with Israel. This specific case study underscores the need for researchers and activists committed to decentering arms to unpack the more subtle yet tangible impacts of dual-use technologies, trade, and research partnerships within the increasingly complex networks that contribute to militarized understandings and practices of security.¹⁰

Stop Arming Israel in France and Western Europe: Much Ado About Nothing?

On October 16, 2023, Palestinian trade unions issued an urgent call to relevant trade unions in arms-exporting countries, urging them to:

“1. Refuse to build weapons destined for Israel.

6 <https://www.sipri.org/databases>, Israeli imports for the 2000- 2023 period. See also P. Bouveret, “Guerre à Gaza. La France complice?,” *Damoclès* 169/70, 2023, pp. 3-6, which provides an excellent summary and analysis of publicly available figures and their limitations.

7 SIPRI arms transfers database for the 2020-2024 period.

8 “Guerre entre Israël et le Hamas : la France se veut “irréprochable” dans les composants militaires qu’elle livre à l’Etat hébreu,” *Francetvinfo.fr*, February 27, 2024, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/proche-orient/israel-palestine/guerre-entre-israel-et-le-hamas-la-france-se-veut-irreprochable-dans-les-composants-militaires-qu-elle-livre-a-l-etat-hebreu_6391993.html.

9 Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel), International Court of Justice, <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/192>, accessed on 18.08.2024.

10 On the increasing role played by new centers of finance capital, see Shana Marshall, “The Role of the Gulf States in Expanded Weapons Production in the Global South,” PRISME Initiative, SALAM Debate #4, Fall 2024, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/role-gulf-states-expanded-weapons-production-global-south-shana-marshall/>.



2. *Refuse to transport weapons to Israel.*
3. *Pass motions in their trade union to this effect.*
4. *Take action against complicit companies involved in implementing Israel's brutal and illegal siege, especially if they have contracts with your institution.*
5. *Pressure governments to stop all military trade with Israel, and in the case of the US, funding to it.*¹¹

Stop Arming Israel France answered the call and, in March 2024, published a booklet addressing French-Israeli military cooperation. While acknowledging that, based on direct sales of strictly military material, Israel is a minor client of the French arms industry, compared to other Middle Eastern countries, the team of volunteer researchers argues that this is only the tip of the iceberg.¹²

Overall, it is remarkable that, as a country whose policies rely so heavily on military power and unconditional support from abroad, Israel is not among the major recipients of Western arms transfers, unlike other Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, or the United Arab Emirates. This is particularly evident when examining arms transfers from Western Europe.¹³ One might thus be tempted to conclude that West European – and particularly French – military partnerships with Israel are of limited impact, perhaps even much ado about nothing, or at least not much, as West European countries, and France in particular, appear to exercise restraint in their material support for the Israeli military.

This might be seen as a sign that arms no longer play a central role in how most West European states, including France, conceive of their support for Israel as a major ally in the Middle East. After all, the limited direct military transfers and France's official discourse on the need for extreme caution and rigor – even when exporting components with potential military applications – align with the evolving normative framework on arms exports. Notably, this includes obligations under the Arms Trade Treaty, which prohibits arms transfers when the exporting country “has knowledge at the time of authorization that the arms or items would be used in the commission of genocide, crimes against humanity, grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 1949, attacks directed against

11 Workers in Palestine, “An Urgent Call from Palestinian Trade Unions: End all Complicity, Stop Arming Israel,” <https://www.workersinpalestine.org/the-calls-languages/english>, accessed on 29.10.2024.

12 Stop Arming Israel France, Guide des entreprises françaises d'armement complices d'Israël, March 2024, p. 5, <https://padlet.com/stoparmingisraelfrance/stop-arming-israel-france-smlj5i3burhikad3/wish/LNV1Q769yRJOamq3>.

13 T. Fortin, “L'Union européenne prêche la paix et vend la guerre: comment l'Europe arme les régimes meurtriers et oppressifs du Moyen-Orient,” FIDH, May 2024, <https://www.obsarm.info/spip.php?article652>, accessed on 18.08.2024. To compare with the specificities of European partnerships with Israel, see C. Pison Hindawi, “From the Ashes of Europe to the Ashes of Gaza: Searching for the EU in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” op. cit.



civilian objects or civilians protected as such [...].”¹⁴ Should researchers and activists not acknowledge this apparent success - or progress - towards the decentering of arms in this specific context and focus their efforts instead on the (US) elephant in the room?

Stop Arming Israel France: “Acting Wherever We Are”

“...in response to the call from the Palestinian trade unions, and as witnesses of the crimes perpetrated against the Palestinian people, we consider it unacceptable that any French equipment be delivered to the State of Israel.”¹⁵

Undeterred by the relatively modest quantities of arms directly transferred to Israel in recent years, activists from Stop Arming Israel France have been organizing research and actions to do their part.

Alongside a handful of MPs, activists from Stop Arming Israel France have been leading efforts to uncover the exact extent of French military support for the Israeli state – a challenging task given the lack of transparency and proper oversight surrounding France’s arms deals.¹⁶ Although the French executive is required to submit an annual report on arms exports to Parliament by June 1, the publication of these reports, along with the newer annual report on the export of dual use items (introduced in 2022) has been consistently delayed. This year was no exception, with both reports quietly released – first by the French independent media Médiapart – in September 2024.

The report on arms exports revealed that France delivered military equipment to Israel amounting to €30 million in 2023. The French executive has insisted that no material likely to be used for ground operations in Gaza has been, or will be, exported. However, it has neither provided evidence to substantiate this claim nor clarified whether these exports occurred before or after October 7, 2023. Moreover, the report disclosed that France authorized 75 export licenses to Israel in 2023, amounting to €176 million.¹⁷

The government continues to assert that its ongoing exports involve purely defensive equipment or materials intended for re-export to third countries. Yet, it has offered no proof to support these claims, whereas investigative journalists have uncovered confidential agreements prohibiting the re-export of certain materials, including components for Hermes 900 drones reportedly used in Gaza. Meanwhile, a complaint

14 Arms Trade Treaty, 2013, Article 6 (3).

15 Stop Arming Israel France, Guide des entreprises françaises d’armement complices d’Israël, op. cit.

16 On the sector’s opacity, and on the substantial gap between France’s narratives around its arms exports and its actual policies, see Emma Soubrier, Weaponized storytelling à la française: Demystifying France’s narratives around its arms export policies, World Peace Foundation, April 2022, <https://worldpeacefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Weaponized-storytelling-a-la-Francaise.pdf>.

17 Justine Brabant, “Opacité sur les millions d’euros d’armes françaises livrées à Israël,” Médiapart, September 3, 2024, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/030924/opacite-sur-les-millions-d-euros-d-armes-francaises-livrees-israel>.



lodged by Amnesty International and other NGOs in April 2024, calling for the suspension of such exports, was dismissed by the Paris administrative court.¹⁸

Such questions surrounding the export of electronic communication equipment for drones exemplify the complexities of dual-use technologies. While not inherently lethal, these technologies are increasingly central to modern warfare, in Palestine and beyond. The 2024 report on the export of dual use items revealed a significant increase in export licenses to Israel in 2023, reaching €192.2 million, compared to €34 million the previous year. These licenses primarily covered electronics, telecommunications equipment, sensors, and lasers.¹⁹

Against this backdrop of official denials and opaque information about actual exports and licenses, Stop Arming Israel France published a report several months into the assault on Gaza. The report compiled available information on French arms exports to Israel in recent years, major Israeli arms industry companies, and key players in the French arms industry (including Airbus, CEA, Dassault, KDNS+ Nexter Defense Systems, MBDA, Safran, and Thales), highlighting their existing collaborations with Israeli partners.²⁰ As seen elsewhere in Europe, French trade union members and syndicates began issuing press statements and organizing actions to raise awareness among workers and unions in the arms and dual-use materials sectors. These efforts focused on the potential military applications of exported goods and collaborations with Israeli partners.

Month after month, the Stop Arming Israel France collective organized actions targeting arms-producing firms with known ties to Israel. These included distributing leaflets to workers, holding sit-ins, strikes, and demonstrations, and organizing phoning campaigns to denounce complicity in ongoing war crimes and genocide. The collective also blocked ships bound for Israel in French ports, hosted conferences and roundtables, and provided resources for those interested in organizing further actions, including an interactive map of French companies involved in military partnerships with Israel.²¹ By mid-2024, one of the collective's most high-profile actions, combining political and legal pressure, achieved the de facto exclusion of Israeli companies from the Eurosatory weapons fair held in Villepinte near Paris in June. At the time of writing, similar phoning, mailing, and legal campaigns were underway to seek the exclusion of Israeli companies from participating in the Euronaval fair scheduled for November 2024.²²

18 Ariane Lavrilleux; Mathias Destal, “[France Equips Israeli Armed Drones as the War Rages in Gaza](https://disclose.ngo/en/article/france-equips-israeli-armed-drones-as-the-war-rages-in-gaza),” Disclose, June 17, 2024, <https://disclose.ngo/en/article/france-equips-israeli-armed-drones-as-the-war-rages-in-gaza>.

19 Justine Brabant, “Opacité sur les millions d’euros d’armes françaises livrées à Israël,” art. cit.

20 Stop Arming Israel France, Guide des entreprises françaises d’armement complices d’Israël, op. cit.

21 Ibid.

22 While the campaign was successful at first, with the organizers of Euronaval announcing mid-October that there would be no Israeli firms exhibiting weapons at the fair, a commercial court later intervened to lift the ban.



Examining the Iceberg's Hidden Layers: Citizen Volunteers Investigating Military Dimensions of Local High-Tech Companies

While actions such as opposing Israeli participation in military fairs, denouncing arms transfers, and engaging with workers in prominent defense companies are relatively straightforward, Stop Arming Israel France has also focused on collecting and sharing information about less visible partnerships. These involve smaller, seemingly harmless high-tech companies engaged in producing dual-use technologies that are not easily identifiable as relevant to the military sector or connected to Israel's war machinery.

In its effort to uncover the military dimensions of small businesses apparently unrelated to the French defense sector, the collective has built on the foundational work of French NGOs and concerned citizen networks. A prominent example is the Lyon-based Observatoire des armements, founded in 1984. This association pursues a dual objective: strengthening oversight of arms transfers and eliminating nuclear weapons. Over the years, it has conducted and published significant research, often in collaboration with Brussels-based GRIP (Groupe de recherche et d'information sur la paix et la sécurité), Amnesty International, the FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights), and, specifically regarding Israeli partnerships, the AFPS (Association France Palestine Solidarité).

The Observatoire des armements has contributed invaluable resources for individuals seeking to better understand the local dimensions of the French military-industrial complex. Notably, the NGO has published two key books detailing decades of partnerships between France and Israel in the military sector.²³ In addition to these, one of its most impactful contributions is a report titled *La guerre se fabrique près de chez nous* (War is Being Manufactured Near Us), published in May 2022. Drawing on publicly available sources, this report highlights the activities of several small and medium-sized companies in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region (South-East of France), which are involved in the production of weapons and military technologies. The reader thus discovers an extensive network of companies producing high-tech electronic components, including those contributing to drone production or drones-related technologies (such as Squadrone System in Grenoble or Elistair near Lyon), developing applications relevant for the military (CS Group in Grenoble) or working in optronics. The report also identifies the countries and regions impacted by these local companies' activities and includes a list of additional firms connected to the military-industrial sector, but for which further investigation is needed. For example, to my surprise, the list revealed that the small town near Grenoble where I live (with fewer than 6,000 inhabitants) hosts at least two small companies involved in the defense sector. One of them develops AI-supported 'decision support systems for combat' and offers 'neuron-based behavior identification' solutions for the military and security sectors.²⁴

²³ P. Bouveret, P. Fenaux, C. Pailhe & C. Poitevin, *Qui arme Israël et la Hamas?* GRIP, 2009 and P. Bouveret, "La coopération militaire et sécuritaire France-Israël," *Les cahiers de l'AFPS*, n° 28, 2017.



As with the booklet published in March 2024 by Stop Arming Israel France, such publications are ‘works in progress,’ aimed at sharing available knowledge and encouraging further research and initiatives. They invite concerned citizens to join the debate and contribute locally to the progressive identification, disarmament, and potential reconversion of enterprises that are currently part of a system that kills and oppresses in Palestine and elsewhere in the world.

In Grenoble, one of the region’s major cities and one of France’s most innovative hubs for applied science, an independent group of researchers, the Groupe Grothendieck,²⁵ recently published a fascinating little book that explores how the city has progressively become a central link in the French military-industrial complex. The book traces the interconnections between civilian research and the military sector, offering a thorough investigation into the intricate relationships that tie ostensibly civilian research and innovation to France’s substantial defense industry (not only in the nuclear domain, but also increasingly in micro- and nanotechnologies).²⁶

In the aftermath of the latest Israeli assault on Gaza and the West Bank, the Groupe Grothendieck, drawing on its expertise of the multifaceted civil-military collusions around Grenoble, highlighted local ties with Israeli partners, many of them connected to the so-called defense sector.²⁷ Their research points to Grenoble’s largest private employer, the microchip giant STMicroelectronics, along with several more modest companies. While none of these firms are officially part of the arms industry, many produce dual-use technologies, and the investigations by Stop Arming Israel France and these other independent researchers have revealed questionable connections.

At STMicroelectronics, these findings have caused growing unease among workers. Members of the trade union CGT STMicroelectronics addressed an open letter to their company’s CEO, Jean-Marc Chery, urging him “to take strong and urgent measures to ensure that our company, STMicroelectronics, plays no part whatsoever in the ongoing massacre in Gaza and in the West Bank, perpetrated by the State of Israel.”²⁸ The union members’ primary demand was expressed in unequivocal terms:

“In order to guarantee our company’s non-participation in the potential genocide of the population of Gaza by the Israeli state, we ask you to immediately suspend all collaboration with companies in the Israeli defense

24 T. Fortin with P. Bouveret, “La guerre se fabrique près de chez nous. Les entreprises d’armement en Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes,” Les Notes de l’Observatoire, n° 6, May 2022.

25 The group was named after Alexandre Grothendieck, a mathematician who ultimately quit research (in the late 1960s, early 1970s) once he understood the inescapable link between mathematics and military research.

26 Groupe GROTHENDIEK, L’université désintégrée. La recherche grenobloise au service du complexe militaro-industriel, Grenoble : Le monde à l’envers, 2020.

27 Groupe GROTHENDIEK, De Grenoble à Tel Aviv. L’innovation de défense au fondement de la start-up nation, leaflet, March 2024.

28 CGT UGICT, “Lettre ouverte à Jean-Marc Chéry, CEO de STMicroelectronics : Stop Arming Israël !” June 3, 2024, <https://cgtstcrolles.fr/lettre-ouverte-a-jean-marc-cher-y-ceo-de-stmicroelectronics-stop-arming-israel>.



sector, including non-weapons companies, until the rights of the Palestinian people are fully respected.”²⁹

At the time of writing, the leadership of STMicroelectronics had yet to provide an adequate response to the union’s demands. Meanwhile, a similar request was made by the same trade union to Thales, one of France’s major defense companies. In a letter firmly rooted in international law and referencing authoritative statements from international courts and organizations about the serious violations of international norms by the Israeli state and the tangible risk of genocide, the union states that it “is not opposed to the arms industry as long as it serves to protect and defend a population, its State, interests and infrastructures against an aggressor.” However, the letter also acknowledges that “Military material is not merchandise like any other.” Given Thales’ role in the conception and production of arms, the CGT argues that the company bears a specific responsibility. In light of the current context, and building on investigative reports uncovering questionable exports of Thales material to Israel, the union calls for Thales to cease not only its arms trade but also any trade or collaboration with the State of Israel as long as the current conflict continues and as long as Israel fails to abide by international law.³⁰

Notably, one of the union’s additional requests is for Thales to reorient a larger share of its activities toward civilian purposes rather than military production...

Conclusion – Decentering Arms You Do Not Even See...

Decentering arms in major arms-exporting countries like France involves pointing out the obvious (the counterproductive impact of such transfers) repeatedly, relentlessly, and unapologetically. But it does not stop there. Decentering arms in the context of increasingly porous civil-military relationships also requires looking beyond direct arms transfers to uncover the military dimensions of seemingly benign high-tech businesses that are integral to the deeply militarized conceptions of security that continue to plague relationships between the Middle East and the most prominent Western arms producers and exporters.

Investigating these less obvious connections, particularly in the realm of dual-use technologies, is a task that may appear daunting – especially in a country that has earned the dubious distinction of being the world’s second-largest arms exporter – and thankless, amid largely apathetic societies with very limited parliamentary oversight. Such inquiries are essential for those who wish to shed light on the centrality of arms in commercial and research partnerships– especially with a state accused of engaging in patterns of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. In France, this critical research has so far been carried out mainly by small organizations and committed individuals – courageous

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ CGT UGICT, “Lettre ouverte à Patrice Caine, PDG de THALES : Ventes de matériels militaires Thales lors de conflits en cours notamment à Gaza,” September 16, 2024, <https://padlet.com/stoparmingisraelfrance/stop-arming-israel-france-smlj5i3burhikad3/wish/LNV1Q7eNOy6oWmq3>.



“scuba divers” exploring the depths of the iceberg in their brightly colored swimming suits. Their work is a vital step toward challenging the normalization of militarized security frameworks and building momentum for more transparent, accountable, and human-centered policies.

The Observatoire des armements, with support from the Amnesty International Foundation, has begun offering training sessions for “citizen investigators” eager to monitor local companies involved in the military sector. It was striking to meet some of the individuals who completed this training and hear them present their ongoing research at a recent conference in Grenoble.³¹ These are ordinary people, intentionally detached from regular, state-sponsored research networks, working with modest means yet resolutely determined to do their part, at their level, to unravel the intricate connections between civilian and military high technologies – deciphering and aiming to decenter arms we do not even see.

These individuals are, however, not alone. The case of Stop Arming Israel France clearly shows how a synergy of efforts from individuals, activists, NGOs, workers’ unions, and independent media and researchers can converge to uncover, each in their own way, the submerged parts of France’s relatively discreet support to the Israeli military sector. While these efforts are crucial in their own right, particularly given the scale of atrocities in the Middle East and the credible accusations of genocide, they also contribute to a broader struggle: unveiling the full extent of France’s arms-centric activities, a far larger and deeply entrenched iceberg.

³¹ Conference “De l’eau pas des puces,” organized by STopMicro on April 5, 2024 – particularly presentations by the Observatoire des armements, the Collectif Régional Anti-Armement et Militarisme du Rhône et de la Loire, and the Groupe Grothendieck. See <https://stopmicro38.noblogs.org/post/2024/03/18/5-6-7-avril-2024-le-programme/>.



PRISME

Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive
Security in the Middle East



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PRISME

Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive
Security in the Middle East

PRISME Initiative

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

SALAM Project

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

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