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Decentering Arms in Middle East Security

Synthesis paper

Revitalizing the Debate on the Global Arms Trade

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Cover Image: Abstract map of the Middle East featuring symbols of both military conflict and pathways to human security. Concept developed by Emma Soubrier for the DAMES Forum under the PRISME/SALAM project. Image generated with AI assistance (ChatGPT, OpenAI).

ABOUT

Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive Security in the Middle East (PRISME) seeks to redefine the conception of “security” in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to foster strategic, peaceful, and collaborative relations between MENA countries and their partners in Europe and North America. Through dialogue and debate, PRISME brings together foreign policy professionals from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, with a particular focus on engaging young and emerging thinkers and practitioners, working collectively toward the shared goal of a more secure and stable future.

The PRISME Initiative’s first major project, **Sustaining Alternative Links beyond Arms and the Military (SALAM)**, aims to shift the central focus of international relations in and with the MENA region from arms-centric, militarized security to more comprehensive and sustainable approaches. SALAM facilitates critical discussions among scholars and experts on interconnected issues surrounding the arms trade and militarization, challenging entrenched assumptions and exploring alternative security pathways.

Supported by the **World Peace Foundation at Tufts University**, PRISME is part of the research, policy, and activism project, “Revitalizing Debate on the Global Arms Trade”, funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York. With extended support from Carnegie, what was initially conceived as the concluding in-person workshop of the SALAM project, focused on **Decentering Arms in Middle East Security**, has now evolved into the DAMES Forum – a biannual event dedicated to consolidating insights from previous SALAM debates and driving actionable recommendations. As a key component of SALAM, the **DAMES Forum** aims to build a community of established and emerging experts committed to sustainable security in the Middle East.

AUTHOR

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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).

PRISME/SALAM: The DAMES Forum #I

Synthesis paper

The Decentering Arms in Middle East Security (DAMES) Forum fosters an ongoing dialogue to reimagine security in the Middle East. With a focus on solutions and community-building, the inaugural meeting of the forum addressed a key question: How can stakeholders in and engaged with the Middle East reduce the reliance on arms as a cornerstone of their security strategies? The forum sought to dissect the complexities of militarization in the region, addressing both the entrenched challenges and the critical incentives for pursuing alternative approaches. Participants identified emerging opportunities to shift security priorities, examined the drivers of arms-centric policies, and proposed actionable strategies to advance the goal of decentering arms.

The discussions were framed by three key pillars: 1) the evolving regional and global dynamics that shape militarization in the Middle East, including global power shifts, regional realignments, and domestic changes; 2) the significant obstacles to moving away from arms-centered security, linked to power structures, regulatory frameworks, ongoing rivalries, and cultural norms; and 3) ideas to move forward and address the critical need to decenter arms in favor of sustainable security that emphasizes human and environmental well-being, along with regional stability.

This synthesis paper encapsulates the core insights from the forum, offering a detailed examination of how the region's evolving landscape affects security calculations and why decentering arms, though challenging, remains essential. It draws on both forum discussions and participants' memos, which are published separately on the PRISME website. The paper concludes by highlighting salient strategies and recommendations for practical policy changes, collaborative advocacy, and broader public engagement, to ultimately prioritize human security – including environmental considerations in addition to the sociopolitical, economic, and health needs of people – over the militarization of states.

What is Changing? Shifts in the Regional and Global Landscape

The Middle East is undergoing profound shifts that are reshaping regional security dynamics and influencing key security considerations. As participants underscored in their essays and throughout the forum, these transformations are complex and multi-faceted, encompassing transformations at the global, regional, and domestic levels. The sum effect of these shifts on the likelihood that regional stakeholders will reconsider arms as the foundation of Middle Eastern security is uncertain. However, understanding the changes is essential. They set the stage for exploring the broader conversation on

decentering arms and inform a deeper look at why this transition toward more sustainable security approaches is both challenging and critically needed.

The Rise of Multipolarity

The shift from a unipolar, U.S.-dominated world order to a more complex, multipolar landscape is reshaping Middle Eastern security dynamics in profound ways. With fluctuations and uncertainties in U.S. political, military, and economic priorities — often interpreted by Gulf leaders as signs of gradual disengagement — America’s influence appears to be receding. This evolving context has created opportunities for powers like China and Russia to expand their roles in the region. Participants reflected on whether these global power shifts and their regional ramifications might pave the way for approaches that move beyond systematic militarization.

The Middle East’s security landscape has long been shaped by the intertwined influences of global power competition and intra-regional rivalries. Forum participants underscored the importance of historical context in understanding today’s dynamics, highlighting how both the arms control narrative and the region’s extreme militarization trace their roots to international actors. As Pinar Bilgin noted, initial efforts to control arms in the Middle East began with the 1947 U.S. embargo and later agreements like the Tripartite Agreement, which sought to limit arms sales but failed in practice.¹ Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union then funneled weapons into the region, framing these transfers as essential for security. By the 1960s and 1970s, the world’s four major powers — the U.S., Soviet Union, UK, and France — supplied the majority of arms to Middle Eastern states.

This history emphasizes that militarization in the region was fueled not only by local ambitions but also by supplier states prioritizing strategic gains over demilitarization, embedding the arms trade as a central feature of Middle Eastern relations with the rest of the world. Notably, the shift to unipolarity in the 1990s reinforced this arm-centric model. As Annelle Sheline noted, “under American military hegemony, purchasing U.S. weapons [served] a way for partner governments to cement their relationship with Washington.”²

In the first SALAM debate, participants observed that Western countries’ fixation on weaponry as the cornerstone of security not only reinforced militarized foreign policies but also created opportunities for other actors with more nuanced and long-term strategic approaches. At the DAMES Forum, participants discussed whether we are already witnessing such a shift, driven in part by growing distrust in the reliability of U.S. security guarantees.

A key inflection point was Washington’s muted response to the 2019 Abqaiq and Khurais oil facility attacks in Saudi Arabia and the 2022 attacks on oil tanker trucks and airport infrastructure in the UAE. For many in the Gulf, the American response signaled the end of the Carter Doctrine, which, since 1980, had been treated as a firm guarantee of U.S. military support for its allies in the region. As a result, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have

1 Pinar Bilgin. “Who is a militarist? Arms trade and regional security in the Middle East.” *PRISME Initiative*, to be published.

2 Annelle Sheline. “Multipolarity and the Enduring Grip of Militarization in MENA.” *PRISME Initiative*, November 27, 2024, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/multipolarity-militarization-mena-annelle-sheline/>

accelerated efforts to diversify their security alliances. Both have recently sought deeper ties with Beijing and Moscow, hedging their strategic bets by balancing relationships across multiple power centers. Another illustration of this potential shift already is the Chinese-brokered agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023.

In this context, DAMES Forum participants pondered whether the rise of multipolarity might reduce or further increase reliance on arms. As global dynamics shift, Gulf states are once again viewed as strategic battlegrounds in great power rivalries, with recent diplomatic exchanges between the U.S. and Gulf leaders often focusing on countering Chinese influence. Some scholars already anticipate a return to Cold War-like arms trade patterns, where weapons and technology would be limited to specific political blocs.³ However, forum participants also argued that today's competition is primarily commercial and capital-driven, not ideological. Nonetheless, if the Middle East, and the Gulf in particular, becomes a focal point of great power rivalry again, it could further entrench arms-centric policies. This trend points to a consolidated, profit-oriented world order where the Middle East remains a site for strategic — and highly militarized — engagement by major powers.

However, this is far from certain. Annelle Sheline suggested that the changing world order could encourage states to shift from investing in expensive weapons systems to adopting more pragmatic and cost-effective security solutions. She noted that “it may appear plausible that military spending in the Middle East could decline under conditions of multipolarity.” Yet, this shift would not necessarily reduce militarization but instead alter the types of weapons and the main flows of the global arms trade. Shana Marshall also examined how South-South collaboration in arms development has become a key element of an emerging multipolar system driven by anti-imperialist politics. In this context, states are seeking to bypass U.S. sanctions, promote de-dollarization, and engage in large-scale initiatives with partners such as China.⁴ Thus, while multipolarity may provide greater autonomy, it could ultimately sustain the region's militarization rather than reduce it.

Regional Developments and Strategic Realignments

The Middle East is witnessing notable regional realignments, especially among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and Iran. Recent diplomatic developments, such as the Saudi-Iran rapprochement brokered by China, suggest a potential shift towards a less militarized Gulf, as Kristian Coates Ulrichsen argued.⁵ This diplomatic thaw remains fragile, constrained by enduring rivalries and proxy conflicts that have historically driven militarization across the region.

3 Lucie Béraud-Sudreau. “The New Geopolitics of Arms Transfers”. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Geopolitics*, edited by Zak Cope, 2024, 1-17.

4 Shana Marshall. “The Role of the GCC States in Expanded Weapons Production in the Global South.” *PRISME Initiative*, November 29, 2024, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/role-gulf-states-expanded-weapons-production-global-south-shana-marshall/>

5 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen. “Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the search for a durable, less militarized consensus.” *PRISME Initiative*, November 15, 2024, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/saudi-arabia-iran-durable-less-militarized-consensus-kristian-coates-ulrichsen/>

Persistent tensions, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as intra-GCC rivalries, have indeed often led to arms races, with states seeking to bolster defenses against real or perceived threats from neighbors. Proxy conflicts, such as those in Yemen, Libya, and Syria, exemplify how these divides manifest, with regional actors arming competing factions, intensifying conflicts, and entrenching militarization. However, the reignition of other major conflicts may temporarily shift attention away from these traditional rivalries, creating an opening for meaningful change.

Forum discussions agreed that the ongoing Israeli wars on Palestine and Lebanon have reinforced regional solidarity within the Gulf. Tel Aviv's genocide in Gaza, following Hamas' violent attack on Israeli territory on October 7, 2023, has resulted in unprecedented destruction, dehumanization, and violations of international law, with ineffective calls for restraint from the international community and continued support from Western countries. In response, regional actors have increasingly united in condemning Israel's mass atrocities. This shared stance could help foster greater Gulf unity on critical issues.

This articulation of unity could contribute to developing a broader security ethos over the bloc's militarized status quo, paving the way for an innovative, cooperative security architecture including all Gulf states in its design and implementation.

This common perspective is also reflected in the GCC's efforts to articulate a unified framework for regional security. As Bader al-Saif points out, Palestine is the only state named in the GCC Vision for Regional Security, reflecting a collective regional stance on ending the occupation and endorsing a two-state solution.⁶ This articulation of unity could contribute to developing a broader security ethos over the bloc's militarized status quo, paving the way for an innovative, cooperative security architecture including all Gulf states in its design and implementation.

At the same time, participants debated whether Palestine was genuinely a common cause for GCC leaders, aligned with broader public sentiment in the region, or merely a strategic leverage point in their relations with Western allies, particularly the United States. This strategy could be aimed at bolstering their domestic standing while pressuring Washington to make concessions on key strategic issues through a symbolic yet meaningful global statement. Notably, while current developments sharply contrast with the pre-war normalization dynamics with Israel under the Abraham Accords, these agreements—at least the ones already established—have not been jeopardized by the ongoing conflicts.

Notably, the Accords reflected a desire to diversify alliances and enhance Gulf autonomy and influence — echoing engagement with global powers — but, as explored in previous SALAM debates by Tariq Dana and Heba Taha, they also provided a foundation for further militarized cooperation.⁷ Similarly, the recent GCC-Turkey rapprochement, examined

6 Bader al-Saif. "Armless Visions? The Quest for Security in the GCC." *PRISME Initiative*, November 11, 2024, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/quest-security-gcc-bader-al-saif/>

7 Tariq Dana, "The Geopolitics of the Abraham Accords: A Critical View on Militarization", *PRISME Initiative*, June 16,

by Ali Bakir, reflects this drive for diversification while reinforcing an arms-centered relationship, underscoring how Gulf realignments continue to navigate both cooperation and militarization.⁸

Despite recent signs of regional détente, forum participants observed that the accumulation of arms will likely continue to be perceived as essential to securing national interests. This persistent reliance on arms reflects deeply ingrained narratives and strategic calculations that position weapons sales as a cornerstone of international relations. It is further driven by strategic rivalries and domestic initiatives, particularly efforts to establish robust defense industries to achieve greater autonomy from foreign suppliers and promote economic diversification.

This trend is especially evident in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, where ambitious policies aim to increase national self-sufficiency in arms manufacturing. While these initiatives seek strategic independence, they also embed militarization within national economies, potentially complicating future moves toward decentering arms. As domestic arms industries grow, they risk solidifying the region's militarized identity, making defense production integral to economic strategies. Omar al-Ubaydli, in the second SALAM debate, noted that these manufacturing efforts often lack efficiency and fail to deliver substantial economic or developmental benefits, making this a case of militarization without meaningful returns.⁹

At the same time, forum participants observed a growing focus among Gulf countries on human security concerns, such as food and water security and climate-related risks. These issues appear in the GCC's regional security vision and in national agendas, offering potential pathways beyond a purely militarized security paradigm. Some participants argued that long-term stability might require Gulf governments to link regime security with the broader well-being of their populations, prioritizing human security and environmental needs. However, others cautioned that Gulf countries often address these human security challenges through a militarized lens, as seen in land acquisitions in Africa to secure food supplies.

This tension underscores the ongoing complexity: while these shifts could potentially support a reduction in militarization, the deep-rooted reliance on arms and defense industries casts doubt on the likelihood of fully decentering arms in the region.

2023, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/abraham-accords-tariq-dana/> and Heba Taha. "Industries and Identities of War: Militarism, Nationalism, and Arab-Israeli Normalization". *PRISME Initiative*, November 9, 2023, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/industries-identities-war-militarism-nationalism-arab-israeli-normalization-heba-taha/>

8 Ali Bakir. "Weapons of Influence, How Arms-Centric is the Turkey-GCC Countries Relationship?" *PRISME Initiative*, November 21, 2024, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/weapons-of-influence-arms-centric-turkey-gcc-ali-bakir/>

9 Omar al-Ubaydli. "The Potential Drawbacks Associated with Domestic Military Manufacturing in the GCC Countries", *PRISME Initiative*, October 19, 2023, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/potential-drawbacks-gcc-military-manufacturing-omar-al-ubaydli/>

The Difficulty of Decentering Arms

The forum made it clear that the task of decentering arms in the Middle East is fraught with significant challenges, which are not simply true for countries of this region but also, and perhaps first and foremost, for their partners in North America and Europe. These partners have historically fueled regional militarization for their own gain and continue to “[lean heavily] on arms as the lifeblood of [their] partnerships”¹⁰ with the MENA region. More broadly, they remain “focused on the coercive power of military force rather than negotiations and diplomacy, [as] a product of the spiral of militarization [in their policies] towards the region since the late Cold War”.¹¹

These obstacles have to do with entrenched power structures, the limitations of regulatory frameworks, and socio-cultural dynamics. The military-industrial complex, tightly interwoven with global finance, reinforces the entrenchment of militarization within national policies. Meanwhile, existing regulatory frameworks allow legal loopholes that perpetuate arms flows. Cultural and societal norms further complicate shifts, as militarization is often linked to ideas of prestige and sovereignty, along with narratives extolling the value of the arms trade in international relations.

Entrenched Power Structures

One of the primary obstacles to decentering arms in both Middle Eastern security and international relations is the deeply embedded military-industrial complex that spans national and transnational levels. This influence is not limited to MENA countries but extends significantly to – and in fact originated in – the West, where major arms manufacturers maintain strong institutional ties with governments.

Sam Perlo-Freeman illustrated how closely the UK’s arms industry operates with the government, pointing to BAE Systems’ routine access to top officials as emblematic of an influence that blurs lines between government and industry in what he has referred to as a “open-plan office.”¹² Meanwhile, Anna Stavrianakis highlighted a “complex web of transnational and state/private collaborations in favor of arms” that binds Western support to patterns of militarization abroad.¹³ She argued that “decentering arms in Middle Eastern security would necessarily involve decentering arms in Western security too,” due to the reciprocal relationships that prioritize arms exports to the Gulf over demilitarization.¹⁴

10 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/>

11 Waleed Hazbun. “The Spiral of Militarization in US Policy Towards the Middle East”, *PRISME Initiative*, June 21, 2024, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/spiral-of-militarization-us-policy-middle-east-waleed-hazbun/>

12 Sam Perlo-Freeman. “Can the UK kick its addiction to Middle East arms sales?” *PRISME Initiative*, November 7, 2024, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/uk-addiction-middle-east-arms-sales-sam-perlo-freeman/>

13 Anna Stavrianakis. “The demand for conversion: From “economics versus ethics” to “economics with ethics.”” *PRISME Initiative*, December 11, 2024, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/demand-for-conversion-economics-ethics-anna-stavrianakis/> Anna has long argued that “the ongoing and large-scale political and economic support for arms exports is the result of the integration of internationalising arms capital into the structures of the U. K. state, which is itself internationalising. This relationship is the main expression of a military-industrial complex.” Anna Stavrianakis, “Too close for comfort? NGOs, global civil society and the U.K. arms trade” (PhD dissertation), 2007, p. 33.

14 Anna Stavrianakis. “The demand for conversion: From “economics versus ethics” to “economics with ethics.””

The persistent role of Western exporters in MENA defense sectors highlights another challenge: the interconnected reliance on arms as a strategy within and beyond the region. As Pinar Bilgin pointed out, so long as we hesitate to call “militarism”¹⁵ by its name, we cannot decenter arms and arms trade in the Middle East. Neither the traditional suppliers from outside (Western Europe, North America, Russia, and China), nor the new suppliers from inside the region (Israel, Turkey, Iran) identify militarism as their own issue. Forum discussions were thus informed by this challenging question: “Who is a militarist?”¹⁶ Participants noted that Western countries hold significant responsibility in shaping arms as central to Middle Eastern economies and governance, often neglecting their agency in the emergence and persistence of militarism in the rest of the world as well as its lingering presence in Western Europe and North America.¹⁷ This global arms interdependence notably took root in the 1970s and 1980s, when Middle Eastern governments began recycling petrodollars into the American economy. Anelle Sheline noted that this generated massive expenditures, fueling U.S. arms manufacturing and incentivizing MENA states to make arms central to their political economies.¹⁸

Further entrenching these dynamics is the globalized nature of the arms industry. As Anna Stavrianakis observed, “the arms trade plays a significant role in providing the coercive backbone for processes of globalisation in other spheres. The spread of weaponry to the global South has been significant in the creation of a global military culture that privileges capital-intensive militarization”.¹⁹ Shana Marshall’s analysis further emphasized the shift towards a transnational arms industry, where private equity, global supply chains, and shareholder capitalism shape production and influence. She explained that “the globalization of weapons production has produced a transnational industry that is simultaneously subject to a new constellation of incentives,” enabling oil-rich states to fund defense industries locally, thus making themselves attractive partners for major weapons firms. MENA countries, often with ample capital, actively fund defense developments, embedding militarization within their economies and making it part of a larger system that draws on global finance and technology.²⁰ Participants in the forum noted that despite the rise of multipolarity, there is arguably only one “pole”, or one true driving force: capital. Today’s rising militarization is largely motivated by profit rather than ideology. This capital-driven system perpetuates reliance on arms at multiple levels, making arms central to economies worldwide. Collectively, these forces reinforce arms-centric policies and create structural barriers that inhibit shifts away from militarization.

Ineffective Regulatory Frameworks

While international arms control agreements, such as the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), and national export regimes offer tools for regulating the arms trade, their effectiveness is often

15 Understood as a set of attitudes and practices that normalize “war and the preparation for war as a normal and desirable social activity” (Michael Mann, “The roots and contradictions of militarism.” *New Left Review*, 162, 1987, p. 35).

16 Pinar Bilgin. “Who is a militarist? Arms trade and regional security in the Middle East.”

17 Pinar Bilgin, “Thinking Globally about (the Study of) Security.” In *Thinking Globally About World Politics: Beyond Global IR*, edited by Pinar Bilgin and Karen Smith, New York: Palgrave, 2024.

18 Anelle Sheline. “Multipolarity and the Enduring Grip of Militarization in MENA.”

19 Anna Stavrianakis, “Too close for comfort? NGOs, global civil society and the U.K. arms trade,” p. 33-34.

20 Shana Marshall. “The Role of the GCC States in Expanded Weapons Production in the Global South.”

limited by exploitable legal loopholes and ambiguities.²¹ Forum participants discussed how states frequently interpret these frameworks to suit national and commercial interests, abiding by the letter of the law but not necessarily its spirit. Governments often redefine terms and criteria to allow them continued arms exports despite known risks. The lack of enforceable compliance mechanisms ultimately weakens international controls and hampers efforts to decenter arms in the region.

For example, as Anna Stavrianakis argued, while the newly elected Labour government in the UK publicly restored funding to UNRWA and supported ICC arrest warrants, it adopted an ambiguous position on arms sales to Israel. Foreign Secretary David Lammy made a distinction between offensive and defensive weapons, despite neither UK export law nor the ATT formally recognizing this distinction.²² This ambiguity allows arms exports to continue based on subjective interpretations, exemplifying the loopholes in current frameworks. Similarly, Perlo-Freeman highlighted how the UK allowed exports of military components via the U.S. for F-35 jets used by Israel, despite Israel's military actions in Gaza, sidestepping direct export restrictions.²³ This shows how governments adapt export policies to suit political and defense interests, undermining both the regulatory intent and international humanitarian law principles.

Without clear guidelines governing the trade, weapons remain an enduring currency for cementing strategic partnerships.

Governments are also quick to claim compliance, especially when stakes are low or policies have minimal impact. For example, French defense minister Sébastien Lecornu asserted in February 2024 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. However, Israel has historically not been a significant arms partner for France. Meanwhile, as Coralie Pison-Hindawi examines,²⁴ French export licenses for dual-use technologies — like electronics and telecommunications equipment — to Tel Aviv have increased, highlighting how “arms” are sometimes redefined, enabling continued support under a less scrutinized label. This underscores the need to examine the more subtle yet impactful influence of dual-use technologies on militarization.

Without clear guidelines governing the trade, weapons remain an enduring currency for cementing strategic partnerships. Coralie Pison-Hindawi observed that the largely militarized relationship between Western suppliers and MENA countries is highly selective:

21 This, in fact, might be by design. Anna Stavrianakis indeed argued that the ATT has been mobilized by liberal democratic states primarily to legitimize their arms transfer practices – and that a key effect of the ATT is to legitimize liberal forms of militarism. See Anna Stavrianakis. “Legitimizing liberal militarism: politics, law and war in the Arms Trade Treaty.” *Third World Quarterly*, 37(5), 2016, pp. 840-865 and Anna Stavrianakis. “Controlling weapons circulation in a postcolonial militarised world.” *Review of International Studies*, 45(1), 2019, pp. 57-76.

22 Anna Stavrianakis. “The demand for conversion: From “economics versus ethics” to “economics with ethics”.”

23 Sam Perlo-Freeman. “Can the UK kick its addiction to Middle East arms sales?”

24 Coralie Pison-Hindawi. “Exposing the Iceberg: France’s Discreet Ties to Israel’s Military Sector and Grassroot Activism to Decenter Arms.” *PRISME Initiative*, December 3, 2024, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/france-discreet-ties-israel-military-grassroot-activism-decenter-arms-coralie-pison-hindawi/>

allies are generously armed while others face embargoes or disarmament for the same behaviors. At the global level, forum participants pointed to stark contrasts in enforcement of regulatory frameworks: the strict embargo on Russia since its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, compared to continued arms sales to Israel amid its wars on Palestine and Lebanon. These inconsistencies reveal that international law and regulatory frameworks are often shaped by political alliances rather than universal principles, weakening their credibility. This selective application underscores the challenges in moving beyond arms-centered policies, as they are deeply entwined with geopolitical rivalries that hinder equitable enforcement and genuine adherence to international standards.

The Influence of Economic, Cultural and Political Beliefs on Arms Dependency

While arms sales are often justified in reference to their economic benefits, the actual financial impact remains questionable. Forum discussions revisited findings from the second SALAM debate on the opportunity costs of the arms trade, which exposed significant exaggerations in economic claims. Notably, Annelle Sheline reaffirmed that “official justifications for continuing to prioritize U.S. weapons exports as a crucial arm of foreign policy often exaggerate its importance to the U.S. industrial base.”²⁵ This, she explained, overlooks the powerful lobbying forces and elite think tanks invested in sustaining the arms trade — a phenomenon deeply tied to the influence of the military-industrial complex. Similarly, Anna Stavrianakis noted that “arguments about the economic and security benefits of arms exports overlook the massive state subsidy on arms production through defence budget allocations for research and development costs. They also ignore the fact that profits are appropriated privately and, increasingly, by transnational capital in the form of asset and investment managers, and that economic benefits are very heavily localized”.

The persistence of arms exports is not solely rooted in economic beliefs but also in a complex web of political beliefs and norms around the supposed value of arms in foreign policy and international relations. Jennifer Erickson examines these entrenched beliefs, more specifically unpacking three foundational ideas that make decentering U.S. arms sales from its foreign policy difficult: arms as a signal of support, arms as a source of influence, and the inevitability of alternative suppliers.²⁶ These ideas have underpinned arms exports and shaped U.S. strategic interests, embedding arms sales as a resilient tool for diplomacy. The widespread dissemination of these ideas by governmental, defense industry, and media actors in U.S. politics and society renders them challenging to dismantle, complicating any move toward reduced reliance on arms as a foreign policy instrument.

These unproven beliefs surrounding the financial and political benefits of arms are not limited to major producing countries, but also apply to MENA states. In the Middle East, the acquisition and display of advanced military hardware are widely seen as symbols of sovereignty, status, and influence, further normalizing militarization. This perception makes it difficult to advocate for alternative security paradigms, as militarization is viewed

25 Annelle Sheline. “Multipolarity and the Enduring Grip of Militarization in MENA.”

26 Jennifer Erickson. “US Arms Transfers to the Middle East: Challenges of Change.” *PRISME Initiative*, November 1, 2024, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/us-arms-transfers-middle-east-jennifer-erickson/>

as essential to maintaining power and stability. The growing emphasis on domestic arms production in countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE builds on and reinforces these narratives. Leaders in these states perceive local weapons manufacturing as a pathway to economic diversification, technological advancement, and strategic independence — despite ample evidence that such industries generally fail to deliver these benefits. This cultural entrenchment aligns with the priorities of regional leaders, whose focus invariably remains on regime security and survival. Although the end of American hegemony might theoretically create space for MENA governments to scale back military spending, these internal dynamics are likely to sustain or even increase defense expenditures.

Forum participants also discussed how militarism is normalized not only in policy circles but also in public discourse, where it is framed as a fundamental component of national security. This deeply ingrained perception makes it difficult to build popular support for non-militarized alternatives. Discussions additionally addressed the role of academia and think tanks in perpetuating militarized narratives. Some participants openly reflected on the complicity of intellectual and policy circles in sustaining militarism as a default approach, highlighting how cultural and societal norms reinforce the arms-centric status quo.

Strategies for Moving Forward

Despite these significant and persistent challenges of decentering arms in Middle Eastern security, forum discussions yielded several actionable strategies to reduce reliance on arms as a core security solution. While some recommendations center on policy measures, participants also emphasized the need to build and amplify effective communication and counter-narratives. Additionally, they discussed the importance of fostering cross-sector collaboration and engaging diverse communities working toward this shared objective. Critically, as was particularly underscored by Anna Stavrianakis in her memo and Sam Perlo-Freeman in his latest World Peace Foundation report, these recommendations are neither “new, revolutionary, [nor] rocket science.”²⁷ However, they require persistent advocacy and a coordinated, simultaneous push on all fronts.

Policy Proposals for Arms Decentering at Multiple Levels

Addressing arms dependency in Middle Eastern security will require multi-tiered reforms across national, regional, and international levels. At the national level, participants highlighted the need to redefine security priorities in both arms-importing and arms-exporting countries. Broadening the concept of security to include human development, economic resilience, and environmental sustainability could demonstrate that stability is achievable through non-military means. Middle Eastern governments, typically focused on regime security, could instead promote stability through policies that address root causes of instability, such as poverty, inequality, and climate change.

²⁷ Sam Perlo-Freeman. *From revolving door to open-plan office: The ever-closer union between the UK government and the arms industry*. World Peace Foundation and Campaign Against the Arms Trade, September 2024, 92, available at <https://worldpeacefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/OpenPlanOffice.pdf>.

For exporting countries, Sam Perlo-Freeman and Anna Stavrianakis emphasized the need to confront legal inconsistencies in arms export policies that allow continued arms trade despite clear risks of human rights abuses – illustrating this with the UK’s exemption of F-35 components to Israel and calling for legal challenges to hold governments accountable. Additionally, Anna Stavrianakis advocated for economic conversion in the defense industry, from military to sustainable production. This shift, though requiring political will, could bring economic and environmental benefits by redirecting resources from arms production to industries focused on long-term resilience, employment, and ecological sustainability. She highlighted that conversion goes beyond diversification, which simply broadens the activity base of arms companies to include non-military production. Instead, conversion involves moving entirely away from military production, aligning economic activity with social and environmental needs.

At the regional level, shifting security priorities within the GCC provide an opportunity to reframe the regional security discourse around non-military issues. Bader al-Saif pointed to the GCC’s regional security vision, which highlights human security challenges like climate resilience, food and water security, and digital security. Expanding on this vision could encourage regional cooperation on these areas, with arms reduction as a component of collective security. Al-Saif suggested that a focus on human security could bridge some divisions among GCC members, potentially paving the way for de-escalation and regional arms control. Ali Bakir also proposed that a shared focus on human security could benefit broader regional relations, including GCC-Turkey ties, by promoting joint initiatives in areas like climate resilience. As Kristian Coates Ulrichsen noted, shared concerns about the human suffering associated with militarization — exemplified by the region’s response to Israel’s genocidal assault on Gaza — could further catalyze a shift away from arms-centered policies.

At the international level, participants stressed that broader global shifts are essential to support decentering arms in the Middle East. Shana Marshall emphasized the importance of dismantling the global system that prioritizes arms in diplomatic and commercial relations, noting that current security alliances often prioritize weapons transfers over genuine efforts for stability. Anelle Sheline further suggested that promoting non-military technology transfers, such as those in renewable energy or healthcare, could help develop alternative frameworks for security in both North-South and South-South relations. Participants also emphasized the importance of sustained international support for regional de-escalation initiatives, noting that diplomatic and economic backing could provide the momentum for GCC states to move toward a cooperative, less militarized security structure. This echoes what Hala Abi Saleh noted at the local level in Lebanon, namely the importance of mobilizing the support of political actors at various levels of influence to ensure the success of de-escalation or reconciliation projects.²⁸

Effective Communication and Counter-Narratives to Challenge Militarization

Participants emphasized that while arguments against militarization are well-documented, they often need to be repeated and adapted to resonate with diverse

²⁸ Hala Abi Saleh. “From Conflict to Community: NGOs Role in Northern Lebanon” *PRISME Initiative*, December 5, 2024, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/conflict-to-community-ngos-role-northern-lebanon-hala-abi-saleh/>

audiences. Challenging the pervasive militarism that shapes international relations in the Middle East – and everywhere else – requires effective communication that goes beyond academic debates and highlights the real-world impact of militarization.

Jennifer Erickson argued that transforming arms export policies will require addressing entrenched ideas that portray arms as symbols of support, sources of influence, and irreplaceable tools in diplomacy. She noted that simply highlighting the political and economic inconsistencies of the arms trade is insufficient; advocates need to introduce alternative frameworks – such as economic conversion – to shape new perspectives among decision-makers but also in public discourse. In the same vein, Sam Perlo-Freeman also suggested that UK policymakers engage with Middle Eastern civil society for alternative perspectives on security, moving away from imperialist mindsets that prioritize elite interests over popular demands.

Moreover, participants stressed the need to highlight the devastating human costs of arms-centric policies. Militarization leads to widespread civilian casualties, forced

By emphasizing shared interests in addition to the devastating costs of militarization, there might be a chance to build momentum for a security paradigm that prioritizes human and environmental well-being.

migration, and environmental damage. Conveying these impacts through personal stories and relatable narratives can humanize the consequences of arms proliferation and encourage public opposition to militarized security policies. Hala Abi Saleh noted how the “Roadmap to Reconciliation in Tripoli” project facilitated conversations among victims, perpetrators, and political leaders, and how providing such a platform to share personal experiences helped in the process of collectively building a more peaceful future in the aftermath of extreme violence. More broadly, participants noted the importance of using visual media and digital platforms to engage audiences — particularly younger, more connected generations who increasingly question the militarized status quo in the region and globally. By focusing on accessible

narratives, advocates can better convey the urgency of alternatives to militarization.

Critically, the forum emphasized that effective counter-narratives should spotlight pathways toward human security, such as converting military industries to socially beneficial production and promoting cross-border collaboration on technologies and resources. Shana Marshall observed that the emerging multipolar order presents an opportunity to shift away from militarized interactions toward investments that avert ecological catastrophe and foster human flourishing. Anna Stavrianakis also suggested reframing the arms trade debate from “economics versus ethics” to “economics with ethics,” addressing how militarization impacts race, class, and gender, and how security is interlinked across borders, from Palestine to Yemen. By emphasizing shared interests in addition to the devastating costs of militarization, there might be a chance to build momentum for a security paradigm that prioritizes human and environmental well-being.

Coalition-Building and Cross-Sector Collaboration for Sustainable Security

In a similar spirit of highlighting and operationalizing common goals over divisions, discussions noted that fostering collaboration across sectors was essential to move toward sustainable security in the Middle East. Indeed, although many groups — ranging from arms control advocates to civil society actors and academics in Middle East studies — share the same hope or goal of reducing militarization, they often operate in isolation. This segmentation weakens efforts, especially against entrenched military-industrial interests and global capital flows sustaining arms dependency.

The need for greater cooperation was underscored as critical for pushing back against the powerful systems upholding arms-centric policies. And it was noted that something might be learned from them. Anelle Sheline emphasized that just as weapons manufacturers effectively protect their interests through networks of influence, peace-oriented organizations could follow a similar model by partnering with groups and institutions in the Middle East who share an interest in reducing militarization.

The potential for collaborative efforts that go beyond academia and policy circles, directly engaging local communities and civil society actors in transformative ways, was also emphasized. As Hala Abi Saleh suggested, this is particularly demonstrated in the model presented by grassroots NGOs in Lebanon.²⁹ As she explored, experiences shared by Lebanese NGOs, such as SHIFT and Peace Labs, illustrate how bottom-up approaches facilitate resilience and peacebuilding in militarized contexts. These initiatives demonstrate that sustained community support, trust-building, and open dialogue empower local actors to become agents of change rather than passive recipients.

Other participants concurred that encouraging grassroots movements, acknowledging their agency and knowledge, can help create long-lasting change. Anna Stavrianakis noted that direct action and public pressure have proven effective in countries like the UK, where sustained protest partially halted arms exports to Israel. Underscoring the need to consistently and persistently communicate the counterproductive effects of arms sales, particularly in countries with limited parliamentary oversight, Coralie Pison-Hindawi also described initiatives such as citizen-led investigations into military partnerships, which seek to uncover “hidden militarization” through dual-use technologies and other civilian-seeming sectors that sustain the arms industry.

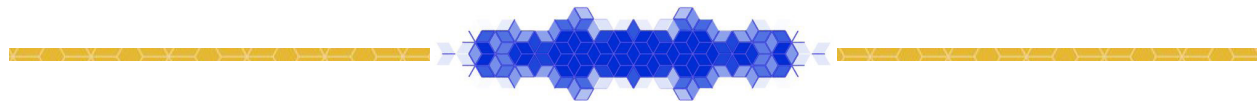
Participants noted the importance for academics to move beyond research production alone and engage actively with activists and civil society. This requires humility, a commitment to practical application, and a willingness to learn from other sectors. By combining academic resources with grassroots and policy networks, cross-sector alliances could yield practical policy recommendations and amplify public advocacy. By uniting voices from diverse sectors, coalition-building across social movements, such as environmental justice, labor rights, and peacebuilding can help create a robust and promising push for change away from militarism and militarization.

29 Hala Abi Saleh. “From Conflict to Community: NGOs Role in Northern Lebanon”.

Conclusion: Toward a Multifaceted Approach to Decentering Arms

The DAMES Forum offered an important space to explore practical steps toward reducing arms dependency in Middle Eastern security, against the backdrop of recent shifts in the regional and global landscape. While acknowledging the enduring complexity of this goal, participants underscored that meaningful progress requires addressing the deep-seated factors sustaining militarization, from global power dynamics and entrenched economic interests at every level to cultural norms and regulatory gaps.

Forum discussions generated a range of actionable recommendations and noted that policy reforms, while vital, must be complemented by efforts to shift public narratives and build coalitions across sectors. As noted throughout the event, these solutions are not new but require sustained commitment and a coordinated push across advocacy, academia, and local communities. While not revolutionary, these ideas reflect a growing consensus that sustainable security in the region will ultimately depend on prioritizing human security and environmental resilience over arms-centered strategies everywhere. The outcomes of the forum, though part of a longer journey, suggest a pathway forward through persistent, coordinated efforts that resonate within and beyond the Middle East.





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