

ARMS TRANSFERS TO THE MIDDLE EAST

SAM PERLO-FREEMAN

I. Introduction

United Nations member states are currently discussing the feasibility of an arms trade treaty (ATT), which would seek to create better controls on international arms transfers. To support this process, the European Union (EU) is funding a series of six regional seminars, organized by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), to increase the awareness of an ATT among UN member states, regional organizations, civil society and industry, and to promote international discussions about the proposed treaty.

This paper is part of a series of region-specific Background Papers produced by SIPRI to inform discussions during these meetings. Specifically, this paper provides background information for the regional meeting on the Middle East.¹ Section II gives a general overview of international arms transfers to, from and within the Middle East in recent years. Section III discusses a number of issues raised by arms transfers: use of arms in conflicts, small arms and light weapons (SALW), and transparency. Section IV includes brief conclusions.

II. Arms transfers to and from the Middle East

Imports

The Middle East is a region of high military expenditure relative to gross domestic product (GDP), and it has correspondingly high levels of arms imports. Indeed, concern regarding arms supplies by a range of countries to Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq during the 1980s was among the factors that led to the creation of the UN Register of Conventional Arms (UNROCA).²

Military spending in the Middle East rose by 34 per cent over the period 1999–2008.³ With the exception of Turkey, all countries in the region for which data is available increased their military spending over this period (see table 1). However, the average military burden (i.e. the share of military expenditure in GDP) fell slightly. Nonetheless, 7 of the 10 countries with the highest military burdens in 2007 were Middle Eastern.⁴

¹ For the purpose of this paper the Middle East includes Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, the Palestinian territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

² Wagenmakers, H., 'The UN Register of Conventional Arms: the debate on the future issues', *Arms Control Today*, vol. 24, no. 8 (Oct. 1994), p. 8.

³ Unless otherwise stated, all information on military spending is taken from the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, <<http://www.sipri.org/databases/milex/>>.

⁴ These countries are Oman (10.7%, 1st place), Saudi Arabia (9.3%, 2nd), Israel (8.6%, 4th), Jordan (6.2%, 5th), Lebanon (5.1%, 6th equal), Yemen (5.1%, 6th equal) and Syria (4.4%, 9th).

SUMMARY

● United Nation member states are currently discussing the feasibility of an arms trade treaty (ATT) which would seek to create better controls on international arms transfers. This Background Paper is one of a series produced by SIPRI to inform these discussions.

The levels of military expenditure and arms imports in the Middle East have increased in recent years. The region receives a high level of major conventional arms transfers relative to its economic size. Many states in the region are modernizing their military equipment holdings. This has been enabled by strong economic growth and high oil prices and has been driven by regional tensions and conflicts. The United States accounts for the majority of arms deliveries; Israel is the only significant exporter in the region.

Arms imported by both states and non-state groups have been used in recent conflicts in the region, including the conflicts between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon and between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. In all these conflicts all sides have been accused of violations of international humanitarian law. Another area of concern is the diversion of small arms and light weapons to non-state armed groups both within and outside the region, which help to fuel conflicts in Iraq, Somalia and Turkey among other countries. Transparency in international arms transfers in the Middle East is limited.

Table 1. Military expenditure in the Middle East, 1999–2008

Figures are in US\$ m. at constant (2005) prices and exchange rates for 1999–2008 and in the right-most column (marked *) in current US\$ m. for 2008. Figures are for calendar years.

Country	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2008*
Bahrain ^a	340	337	355	424	487	491	486	528	611	[582]	[586]
Egypt	2 250	2 405	2 571	2 689	2 816	2 665	2 659	2 721	2 740	2 585	3 774
Iran ^b	3 200	4 731	5 220	3 926	4 594	5 816	7 213	7 811	6 486	6 089	9 174
Iraq ^c	..	..	..	..	..	..	(1 120)	(972)	(828)	(1 926)	(5 283)
Israel ^d	9 299	9 574	9 996	11 087	10 421	9 931	10 303	11 075	[12 513]	[12 135]	[16 194]
Jordan	581	596	586	567	655	607	604	660	922	973	1 250
Kuwait	2 658	3 082	3 029	3 126	3 369	3 626	3 509	3 486	3 914	3 622	4 663
Lebanon	857	964	998	928	932	948	[970]	[981]	[1 155]	[1 067]	[1 301]
Oman ^e	1 797	2 139	2 488	2 562	2 695	3 030	3 652	3 905	3 956	3 739	4 512
Qatar	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Saudi Arabia ^f	18 260	20 125	21 434	18 817	18 956	21 074	25 393	28 926	33 320	33 136	38 223
Syria ^g	4 969	5 353	5 627	5 841	6 696	6 708	6 746	6 067	6 484	6 300	7 735
Turkey	16 413	15 885	14 562	15 494	13 984	12 762	12 055	13 016	11 155	11 663	15 810
UAE ^h	2 950	2 876	2 836	2 862	2 807	2 585	2 559	..	..	..	3 724
Yemen	589	701	744	943	973	793	816	700	821	801	1 196

.. = data not available; () = uncertain figure; [] = SIPRI estimate.

^a The figures for Bahrain do not include extra-budgetary spending on defence procurement.

^b Figures for Iran exclude spending on the Revolutionary Guard.

^c The figures for Iraq should be seen in the light of the unstable security situation and high rate of inflation.

^d The figures for Israel include military aid from the USA, which in 2008 was \$2.38 billion.

^e The figures for Oman are for spending on defence and national security and exclude capital expenditure.

^f The figures for Saudi Arabia are for the adopted budget, rather than actual expenditure, and are for defence and security.

^g The figures for Syria are based on the official exchange rate of \$1 = 11.225 Syrian pounds.

^h The figures for the United Arab Emirates (UAE) exclude the military expenditure of its 7 constituent emirates.

Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, <<http://www.sipri.org/databases/milex/>>.

The Middle East accounted for 21 per cent of world imports of major conventional weapons during 2004–2008, almost the same as during 1999–2003.⁵ However, the volume of deliveries to the Middle East was 20 per cent higher in the period 2004–2008 than in the period 1999–2003.

The largest recipient of major conventional weapons in the region during 2004–2008 was the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with 29.6 per cent of the regional total (see figure 1). The UAE was the third largest recipient worldwide (after China and India), up from 16th place for 1999–2003. The next largest recipients in the region were Israel (with 19 per cent of the regional total, Turkey (with 12.7 per cent of the regional total) and Egypt (with 12.3 per cent of the regional total). Israel was the sixth largest recipient worldwide for 2004–2008, up from 12th place for 1999–2003; Turkey was eighth worldwide, down from fourth place; and Egypt was ninth worldwide, down from eighth place.

The increases in military expenditure and arms imports in the region have been driven by a combination of strong economic growth, high oil prices, and increasing insecurity due to the various armed conflicts and regional tensions. Tensions in the region have been increased by the 2003 invasion and

⁵ Unless otherwise stated, all information on transfers of major conventional weapons is taken from the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, <<http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/>>.



subsequent occupation of Iraq by the United States and its allies, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the controversy over Iran’s nuclear power programme. The high level of arms imports by Israel and Egypt is partly a result of military aid from the USA. Iraq—which was subject to a complete UN arms embargo before 2003—is set to become a significant importer again and is making a major effort to re-equip its army with armoured vehicles, helicopters and transport aircraft, helped by aid from the USA.⁶

The large-scale imports by the UAE are a relatively new development, beginning in 2004. The UAE’s imports cover the full range of conventional weapon systems. The largest deals have been a \$5 billion deal with the USA for 80 F-16E combat aircraft and associated weapon systems and avionics; and a \$3.4 billion deal with France for an estimated 62 Mirage-2000-5 Mk2 combat aircraft and associated systems along with 390 Leclerc tanks and other equipment. Israel’s acquisitions have focused mostly on air power. Its largest recent deal is the \$5 billion two-stage Peace Marble programme for the licensed production of F-16I combat aircraft. Another major Israeli acquisition is for two Dolphin submarines from Germany, worth \$1.2–1.3 billion. Many other states in the region, including Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, are modernizing the inventories of their armed forces. Iran has concentrated on missile technology and on improving air defences. Numerous countries in the region have sought to acquire long-range strike capabilities, either through combat or ground attack aircraft or through medium- or long-range missile capabilities.

Suppliers

The United States was by far the largest supplier of arms to the Middle East during the period 2004–2008: it accounted for 53 per cent of the volume of deliveries of major conventional arms, up from 46 per cent for 1999–2003. The next largest supplier was France, with 16 per cent, followed by Germany with 8 per cent and Russia with 7 per cent. These four countries thus accounted for 84 per cent of all deliveries to the region (see figure 2).

The USA was a major supplier to most countries in the region, in particular Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the UAE. The USA did not sell to Iran or Syria. The biggest recipients of US arms in the period 2004–2008 were Israel (which received 35 per cent of all US deliveries), the UAE (29.5 per cent of all US deliveries) and Egypt (16.6 per cent). The USA supplied nearly 99 per cent of Israel’s major conventional weapon imports.

Almost all of France’s major conventional weapon deliveries to the Middle East in the period 2004–2008 went to the UAE (79 per cent of deliveries) or Saudi

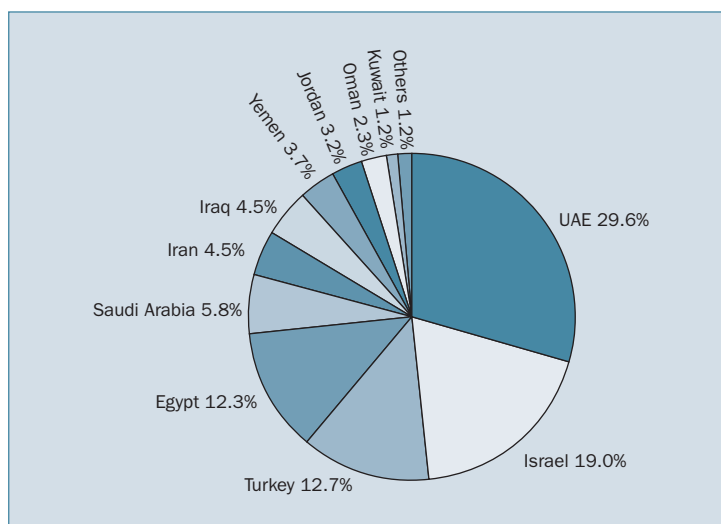


Figure 1. The recipients of major conventional weapons in the Middle East, 2004–2008

Figures are shares of the total volume of transfers to the Middle East.

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, <<http://armstrade.sipri.org/>>.

⁶ See Perlo-Freeman, S. et al., ‘Military expenditure’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2009: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2009), pp. 205–209.

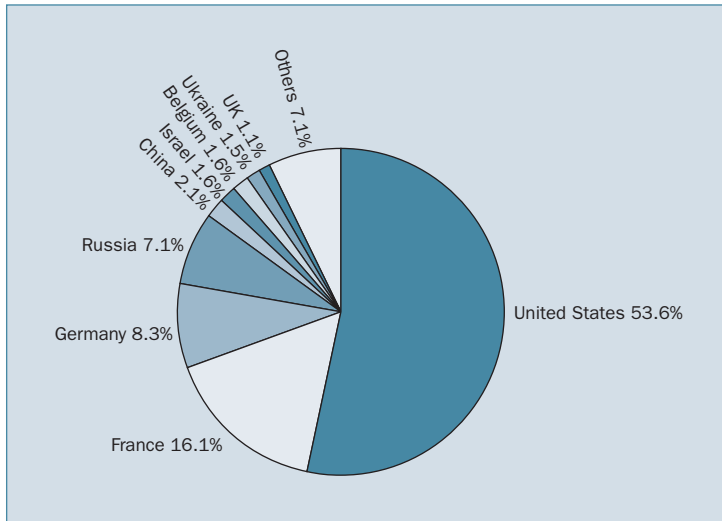


Figure 2. The suppliers of major conventional weapons to the Middle East, 2004–2008

Figures are shares of the total volume of transfers to the Middle East.

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, <<http://armstrade.sipri.org/>>.

Arabia (20.5 per cent). Germany's deliveries were dominated by Turkey, which received 92.6 per cent of the volume of German deliveries to the region. Four countries received almost all of Russia's major conventional weapon deliveries to the region: Iran (59 per cent), Iraq (16 per cent), Egypt (15 per cent) and Syria (10 per cent). Iran and Syria were both largely dependent on Russian arms supplies, although Iran also received significant quantities of equipment from China.

Exports

Few countries in the Middle East have significant indigenous defence industries. Israel has by far the most advanced industry and is the only state in the region that is able to produce a wide range of major platforms. However, it remains largely dependent on the USA for some systems. In some areas, such as unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV)

technology, Israel is a world leader. Israel was the 11th largest arms exporter worldwide in the period 2004–2008 and the volume of major conventional weapons delivered was 23 per cent higher than for 1999–2003. Israel's major customers in 2004–2008 were India (24 per cent of deliveries), Turkey (19 per cent), the USA (9 per cent) and Mexico (9 per cent).⁷

Turkey is the only other significant exporter of domestically produced major conventional weapons in the Middle East. However, its deliveries in 2004–2008 were only one-tenth the level of Israel's. Turkey is seeking to develop its defence industry and has considerable capabilities in areas including armoured vehicles and military electronics. Its major conventional weapon exports were 69 per cent higher in 2004–2008 than in 1999–2003, although some of these exports consisted of second-hand equipment. Albania, Iraq and Pakistan were Turkey's largest customers.

Jordan and the UAE are both actively developing their defence industries, especially in the areas of armoured vehicles and, in the case of the UAE, naval vessels. Exports of locally produced equipment are, however, limited, but both countries have exported significant volumes of second-hand equipment.

III. Issues regarding arms transfers to and from the Middle East

Use of imported arms in conflicts

Every war fought in the Middle East in recent decades has involved the extensive use of foreign-supplied armaments.

Most recently, US-supplied equipment—including F-16 aircraft, Hellfire missiles, guided bombs and white phosphorous shells—was used by Israel in its

⁷ A significant proportion of Israel's arms exports consist of high-tech subsystems and components, which are not classed as major conventional weapons and are therefore not included in the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database (note 5).



assault on the Gaza Strip in December 2008 and January 2009. It also made extensive use of US-supplied equipment in the war in Lebanon in 2006 and uses US-supplied armoured vehicles to maintain its occupation of the West Bank.⁸ Israel has been accused of serious violations of international humanitarian law during the conflicts in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, including specific allegations of the use of US-supplied equipment.⁹ Israel denies these accusations and insists that its forces have behaved in accordance with international law.¹⁰

The rockets used against Israel by the Palestinian militant group Hamas include locally produced Qassam rockets, Russian-made Grad rockets, Iranian-made Al-Fadjr rockets and possibly Chinese-made rockets. These weapons are not necessarily supplied by the manufacturing country. Weapons are frequently smuggled through tunnels linking the Gaza Strip with Egypt and there is very little hard evidence of the identity of the original supplier.¹¹

The major conventional weapons of the Lebanese opposition movement Hezbollah have almost all been supplied by Iran and Syria. These include short- and medium-range rockets and anti-tank, anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles. In 2006 UN Security Council Resolution 1701 imposed an embargo on arms transfers to all non-governmental, non-UN groups in Lebanon.¹² However, Lebanon, the USA and the UN have alleged that arms for Hezbollah have continued to cross the border from Syria, although Syria has committed itself to stopping these flows.¹³

Hamas, Hezbollah and other non-state armed groups have been accused of serious violations of international humanitarian law in the course of their conflicts with Israel, through the indiscriminate firing of rockets into areas populated by civilians. These groups defend their actions as legitimate resistance.¹⁴

Small arms and light weapons

There are extensive stocks of small arms and light weapons in the Middle East, including large stocks for military, police and other security force and, in many countries, a high level of individual ownership. In many cases the wide availability of SALW carries a high risk of diversion to conflicts within and outside the countries of origin. However, information on total stocks and on international flows, both licit and illicit, is limited.¹⁵

The conflict in Iraq has been facilitated by the easy availability of small arms and widespread private ownership. Following the disbanding of the Iraqi Army by the US-run Coalition Provisional Authority in 2003, control of

⁸ Amnesty International, *Fuelling Conflict: Foreign Arms Supplies to Israel/Gaza* (Amnesty International: London, Feb. 2009).

⁹ E.g. Amnesty International (note 8); Amnesty International, *Operation Cast Lead: 22 Days of Death and Destruction* (Amnesty International: London, July 2009); and United Nations, Human Rights Council, 'The human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories', A/HRC/10/22, 10 Mar. 2009.

¹⁰ Israel Defense Forces, 'Conclusion of investigations into central claims and issues in Operation Cast Lead', 22 Apr. 2009, <<http://dover.idf.il/IDF/English/opcast/postop/press/2201.htm>>.

¹¹ Amnesty International (note 8).

¹² UN Security Council Resolution 1701, 11 Aug. 2006.

¹³ Wezeman, S. T. et al., 'International arms transfers', *SIPRI Yearbook 2007: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2007), pp. 409–11.

¹⁴ Amnesty International (note 8); and Amnesty International (note 9), pp. 66–78.

¹⁵ Small Arms Survey, 'The count continues: stockpiles', *Small Arms Survey 2005: Weapons at War* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005), pp. 85–91.

Table 2. Middle Eastern states participation in the UN Register of Conventional Arms, 1998–2007

The table lists only those states that reported at least once during the period.

Country	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Iran	x									
Israel	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Jordan		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Kuwait								o [†]		
Lebanon				o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Qatar		o	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Turkey	x ^{†‡}	x ^{†‡}	x ^{†‡}	x ^{†‡}	x [†]	x [†]	x [†]	x [†]	x ^{*†‡}	x ^{*†‡}
Middle East total	3	4	3	4	4	4	4	5	4	4
World total	85	100	118	126	123	115	117	118	113	91

x = report submitted; o = nil report submitted; * = report includes background information on imports and exports of small arms and light weapons; † = report includes additional information on arms holdings; ‡ = report includes additional information on arms production.

Source: UNROCA online database, <http://disarmament.un.org/UN_REGISTER.nsf>.

Iraq's arms stockpiles was weak, which enabled arms to reach a variety of armed groups.¹⁶ US officials have alleged that arms have been smuggled across Iraq's borders with Syria and Iran, but no hard evidence has been provided as to the identity of the suppliers of such arms; indeed, identifying suppliers in such cases is extremely difficult.¹⁷

The USA has itself supplied large quantities of SALW to the new Iraqi Army but has failed to exercise effective monitoring and control over these weapons. A 2007 report by the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that the US Department of Defense had lost track of around 190 000 weapons supplied to the Iraqi Army since 2004, around 30 per cent of total supplies.¹⁸ This raised concerns that some of these arms may have fallen into the hands of insurgent groups. The Turkish Government has seized US-supplied arms from the rebel Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK) which are likely to have been intended for Iraqi security forces but subsequently diverted.¹⁹ Since these problems came to light, the USA has imposed stronger controls on M-16 and M-4 rifles supplied to Iraqi troops by using a centralized database and biometric information to link each rifle to its user.²⁰

Yemen has one of the highest rates of private gun ownership in the Middle East, according to the Small Arms Survey.²¹ Eighteen public arms markets operated freely until they were officially banned in June 2008.²² These arms

¹⁶ Small Arms Survey, 'From chaos to coherence?: global firearm stockpiles', *Small Arms Survey 2004: Rights at Risk* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2004), pp. 44–50; and US Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, Report to Congressional Committees GAO-07-444 (GAO: Washington, DC, Mar. 2007).

¹⁷ See e.g. MacAskill, E., 'Iranian arms intercepted at Iraqi border', *The Guardian*, 11 Aug. 2005; and Knickmeyer, E., 'British find no evidence of arms traffic from Iran', *Washington Post*, 4 Oct. 2006.

¹⁸ US Government Accountability Office (note 16).

¹⁹ E.g. Hartung, W. D. and Berrigan, F., 'U.S. arms recipients, 2006/07: Eurasia', *U.S. Weapons at War 2008: Beyond the Bush Legacy* (New America Foundation: Washington, DC, Dec. 2008), <http://www.newamerica.net/publications/policy/u_s_arms_recipients_2006_07_eurasia>.

²⁰ Giordano, J., 'Iraqi soldiers switching over to M-16s and M-4s', *Stars and Stripes*, 16 May 2007.

²¹ Small Arms Survey (note 15).

²² Madayash, A., 'The arms trade in Yemen', *Asharq Alawsat*, 9 Jan. 2007; and 'Yemen stems weapons trade', Yemen News Agency (SABA), 23 Sep. 2008..



markets are believed to be a significant source of arms for many parties to the conflict in Somalia, despite a UN arms embargo against all parties there. In December 2008 the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia reported that the Yemeni Government has tightened regulation and increased coastal patrols but that illicit flows of SALW to Somalia had continued.²³

One positive sign on this issue was the passing of a resolution by the League of Arab States in September 2004 on combating the illicit trade in SALW.²⁴

Transparency

Transparency in arms transfers in the Middle East is poor. Since 1998 only Israel, Jordan and Turkey have regularly submitted substantive reports to the UN Register of Conventional Arms, detailing their imports and exports of major conventional weapons (see table 2). Turkey is the only country to have submitted additional information on transfers of small arms and light weapons, as well as information on holdings and production. Most Arab states boycott UNROCA since they believe that, as well as information on transfers of major conventional weapons, it should include information on weapons of mass destruction and on arms holdings.

No state in the Middle East publishes an annual report on its exports of conventional weapons.

IV. Conclusions

The Middle East is a region of high military expenditure and arms imports relative to its economic and demographic size. In common with most other regions worldwide, military expenditure and arms imports have been on an upward trend in recent years. The United States has increased its dominance of the Middle East arms market; it accounted for over half of all major conventional weapon deliveries between 2004 and 2008. France, Germany and Russia are the other major suppliers. Many countries engaged in major military modernization programmes over this period, spurred by strong economic growth, high oil prices and high levels of tension. Few Middle Eastern countries have significant indigenous arms industries; Israel dominates exports from the region.

Both legal and illicit arms transfers to and within the Middle East raise concerns regarding the potential for fuelling conflict and for use in violations of international humanitarian law. However, most states in the region remain uncertain as to the merits of an arms trade treaty. In December 2008 only 4 Middle Eastern states—Jordan, Lebanon, Oman and Turkey—voted in favour of the UN General Assembly resolution on establishing an ATT, with the other 11 abstaining.²⁵ Transparency in arms transfers is limited and few states participate in the UN Register of Conventional Arms on a regular basis.

²³ United Nations, Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1811 (2008), S/2008/769, 10 Dec. 2008.

²⁴ League of Arab States, Ministerial Council, 'Arab coordination for combating the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons', Resolution 6447, 14 Sep. 2004. See also Small Arms Survey (note 15).

²⁵ UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/63/240, 24 Dec. 2008.

SIPRI is an independent international institute for research into problems of peace and conflict, especially those of arms control and disarmament. It was established in 1966 to commemorate Sweden's 150 years of unbroken peace.

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CONTENTS

I. Introduction	1
II. Arms transfers to and from the Middle East	1
Imports	1
Suppliers	3
Exports	4
III. Issues regarding arms transfers to and from the Middle East	4
Use of imported arms in conflicts	4
Small arms and light weapons	5
Transparency	7
IV. Conclusions	7
Figure 1. The recipients of major conventional weapons in the Middle East, 2004–2008	3
Figure 2. The suppliers of major conventional weapons to the Middle East, 2004–2008	4
Table 1. Military expenditure in the Middle East, 1999–2008	2
Table 2. Middle Eastern states participation in the UN Register of Conventional Arms, 1998–2007	6

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