

New report presses thorough review of EU arms export control system

Brussels, 10 November 2011

European NGOs and academics launch a report on 10 November that sheds light on the vast tide of arms that has swept across the Mediterranean from Europe to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) over the past decade. The report, *Lessons from MENA – Appraising EU transfer of military and security equipment to the Middle East and North Africa*, is a contribution to the review of the EU Common Position on arms exports, which EU member states are scheduled to begin before the end of 2011. The report makes specific recommendations as to how the EU instrument could be improved.

While the review would seem to provide the perfect opportunity to examine previous excesses and to ensure there is no repeat in future, there is concern that some member states will resist attempts to strengthen controls. Despite years of warnings from external observers, the region has year-on-year been one of the key markets for EU defence manufacturers. None of the states at the centre of the Arab Spring have been immune. EU Governments have awarded licences to export arms to many of the authoritarian regimes facing popular uprisings in MENA. Also they appear to have ignored other risks related to these transfers, such as the diversion of arms.

Libya stands as a particularly egregious example. Once Libya ‘came back from the cold’ in 2004 and an earlier arms embargo was lifted, EU governments and manufacturers were lining up to provide the dictator Gaddafi with all manner of military and security hardware. Arms contracts spiked as EU Member States agreed to supply small arms, anti-tank weapons and military helicopters to Tripoli.

Export policies towards Saudi Arabia are also of particular interest. The Kingdom has long had a shocking human rights record, and more recently has shown signs of becoming more assertive beyond its own borders. In 2009 Saudi planes, sourced from the UK, attacked Yemeni territory. Saudi forces entered Bahrain earlier this year to support in curtailing the unrest. But for EU Governments the Kingdom is also by far its main customer in the region, with approved arms sales to Saudi valued at more than €5 billion in 2009, while news of a major new tank deal with Germany emerged this summer, suggesting that EU member states are continuing a “business as usual” approach to arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

Commenting, An Vranckx, one of the report’s authors, said: “The huge volumes of arms which have been exported from EU countries to authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa over recent years clearly demonstrate that the EU’s arms export controls are not working well. The upcoming review of EU export control policy provides a much needed opportunity to rectify this problem, but there remains a question over whether Member States will grasp this opportunity, or if we will be right back here again in another five years.”

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Notes to editors:

- ‘Lessons of MENA’ is edited by An Vranckx, Frank Slijper and Roy Isbister, and draws from research and other input of a large number of international civil society organisations

- The report can be downloaded from www.conflictresearchgroup.be

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