

# Small Arms and Regional Security in the Western Mediterranean: Reflections on European Views

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The issue of small arms has surfaced on the international agenda as a major security concern. The damage inflicted on civilians in conflicts both by states and armed groups (for example, in Bosnia, Zaire, Rwanda, Afghanistan, and Lebanon) has motivated the international community to initiate substantive policy controls to curb the proliferation of small arms and light weapons.<sup>1</sup> The existence of radical social groups in the western Mediterranean and so-called rogue states in the south has prompted the European Union and its security agencies to be even more concerned and begin addressing small arms as an immediate threat.<sup>2</sup> This concern, however, has sometimes been

1. Small arms, sometimes also referred to here as *light weapons*, are defined as weapons that can be handled by one or two persons and include machine guns, mortars, rocket launchers, grenade launchers, and portable launchers of antitank missile and rocket systems, including their ammunition. Pistols, rifles, and weapons used by individuals for private use, even though those could be considered as weapons in the military sense, are not included. These would drag the argument into national gun control and gun culture in North Africa and southwestern Europe. Among the features of small arms is that unlike nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, for which production is difficult to conceal, they are relatively cheap to make and thus affordable to many nonstate actors and are easy to conceal and smuggle into conflict areas. The definition of small arms in this essay is that used in United Nations, *Report of the Panel of Government Experts on Small Arms*, UN document A/52/298, 27 August 1997. For more on small arms, see Derek Allsop, *Brassey's Essential Guide to Military Small Arms* (London: Brassey's, 1997); William Benson, "Light Weapons Controls and Security Assistance: A Review of Current Practice," *International Alert and Safer-World* (September 1998); *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists: Small Arms, Big Problem*, special issue (January–February 1999); Small Arms Survey, *Small Arms Survey: Profiling the Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

2. In this essay the *western Mediterranean* refers to southwestern Europe (France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain) and western North Africa (Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia).

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overstated or rather generalized in the European security literature on the southwestern Mediterranean; it is widely stated that the situation in the south could “explode” with further proliferation of small arms and conventional weapons.<sup>3</sup>

How do European security analysts justify their claims about small-arms proliferation in the region? In this essay I examine the *strength* of the claim that small arms generate regional insecurity in the western Mediterranean. I analyze southwestern European worries about small arms and rising insecurity in North Africa and contextualize European security debates on small arms and potential threats within the broader theme of regional security.

I argue two interrelated points. First, the link between small arms and regional insecurity is difficult to make clear-cut conclusions or generalizations about. Second, bearing in mind the geopolitical and military particulars in the western Mediterranean, the causal relations between arms and regional insecurity do not look as clear and threateningly immediate as they are often claimed to be. Thus, claims about a “small arms explosion” or an “imminence of threat” in the western Mediterranean remain interesting but need further substantiation.

I discuss small arms in relation to two themes: what I label *conceptual hurdles* and *empirical problems*. The former refer to the fact that the elusive nature of small arms presents security analysts with particular conceptual problems, particularly when trying to link small arms to security scenarios in the western Mediterranean. *Empirical problems* refer to the geopolitical specificities surrounding small arms in North Africa, namely, conflicts, the arms culture, and the conditions surrounding legal and illegal small-arms transfers. I discuss criteria conducive to the escalating number of small arms and to regional armament and relate these to European security claims. What I seek to draw implicitly from this analysis is that claims about small arms and regional insecurity have to be tested and contextualized rather than generalized. In the western Mediterranean, discussing how small arms

3. For further readings on how the European media and European security agencies discuss small arms in North Africa, see Elvira Sánchez Mateos, “European Perceptions of Southern Countries: Security and Defence Issues; A Reflection on the European Press,” EuroMeSCo Paper 23, July 2003, available at [www.euromesco.net/imgupload/euromescopaper23.pdf](http://www.euromesco.net/imgupload/euromescopaper23.pdf); Béchir Chourou, “Security Partnership and Democratization: Perception of the Activities of Northern Security Institutions in the South,” in *Euro-Mediterranean Partnership for the 21st Century* (London: Macmillan, 2000).

and armament are perceived by EU security actors is a realistic reflection on Euro-Mediterranean relations and the outlook for the future of these relations. Also, assessing the strength of European security views is an attempt to redress the perverse effect of security perceptions on regional security cooperation.

The essay is organized as follows: First, before I analyze small arms in the region, I provide background on the links between small arms and regional security and discuss the European security outlook on the western Mediterranean. In the analysis, I unpack a few conceptual problems related to European claims about small arms in the region. Then I discuss the sociopolitical characteristics of the western Mediterranean in relation to small arms and potential insecurity. In this part, I analyze a set of empirical problems related to the claims about small arms and overall armament in the region. In the conclusion, I put forward a few recommendations in relation to the research on small arms and threat assessment in the western Mediterranean.

### **Small Arms and Regional Security**

Internationally, it is only recently that the small-arms issue has emerged as an independent security threat on the global disarmament agenda, edging out a long-standing preoccupation with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and conventional weapons.<sup>4</sup> Postconflict microdisarmament efforts in southern Africa and Kosovo have put small arms on the global agenda of peace and security. Keith Krause reminds us that the regional threats posed by small arms relate to “the increasing intensity of contemporary conflicts, diminishing the security of vulnerable groups . . . , increasing the violence associated with large-scale criminal activity . . . , eroding development gains and the prospects for socioeconomic development, undermining respect for human rights, [and] threatening humanitarian relief operations and workers.”<sup>5</sup> Conceptually, however, even though small arms relate to security in every facet, there are major disagreements on the links between small arms and insecurity scenarios. Krause states that “there is not even a clear agree-

4. Small Arms Survey, 251.

5. Keith Krause, “Multilateral Diplomacy, Norm Building, and UN Conferences,” *Global Governance* 8 (2002): 251.

ment on what the threat is as such: some define it as a human-rights issue, others as a development issue. Still, others relate small arms to postconflict microdisarmament, or transnational criminality.<sup>6</sup> In fact, each approach focuses on different angles of the threat and advocates different strategies to minimize the insecurity caused by small arms.

### **The European Security Outlook on the Western Mediterranean**

Geographically, the western Mediterranean refers to southwestern Europe and western North Africa, a region linked by societal, economic, and military security nodes. Even though I refer here loosely to the western Mediterranean, I focus more on the southern part, since it is presumed to be the source of conflict and insecurity. Space does not permit a detailed discussion of the various security nodes that have been developing within states in this region. But a short background on European interest in the security of the western Mediterranean is relevant.

In regional security, patterns of amity or enmity between geographically contiguous states dictate interlinked security nodes.<sup>7</sup> In the western Mediterranean, for instance, European concerns about North African societal insecurities (for example, rising demographic pressure, Islamic fundamentalism, and soaring immigration) relate to economic underdevelopment in the south and trigger EU securitization of the threats. In the meantime, and in an effort to contain the threats, southwestern European states seek to cooperate with North Africa on security matters because they view their individual securities as closely linked to North Africa, not least because of their geographic propinquity to the Maghreb.<sup>8</sup>

Specialists on the region also find that overlapping security nodes between southwestern Europe and North Africa have made their securities so inter-

6. Keith Krause, "The Challenge of Small Arms and Light Weapons," 1998, available at [www.crinfo.org/index.cfm](http://www.crinfo.org/index.cfm).

7. For a theoretical background on security complex theory, see Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Harvester, 1991).

8. The Maghreb is used interchangeably here with North Africa. The Arabic source of the word means "the place where the sun sets" and refers to the furthestmost and western part of the Arab world, the Middle East being the center.

linked that it is impossible to discuss one without mentioning the other.<sup>9</sup> Examples of these security interrelations are evident at the policy level in the 5+5 Dialogue (among Italy, France, Malta, Portugal, Spain, and the five members of the Arab Maghreb Union) and the 1995 Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (also referred to as the Barcelona Conference). The security links have recently been strengthened through multilateral commitments to security dialogue between Europe and its near abroad. Claire Spencer argues that “Europe’s own security agenda has, in turn, been addressed through articles committing the signatories of the Barcelona agreement to cooperate in fighting organized crime [and] in preventing the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.”<sup>10</sup>

Over the past decade, southern EU member states grew increasingly concerned about new threats emanating from their southern neighbors. While a few analysts argue that the Mediterranean does not present Europe with a major military threat, the collapse of the Soviet Union (mainly the fact that large stockpiles of arms could end up within the hands of radical groups) and new terrorist challenges required continued armaments programs, and the strategic importance of North Africa continues as a source of potential threat to southwestern Europe. Although the primary purpose of French president Jacques Chirac’s official trip to Algeria in 2003 was to recast the French relationship with that country, Chirac also was interested in promoting French security visions to both domestic and regional audiences in the Mediterranean. Klaus Bühler, then president of the assembly of the Western European Union (WEU), clearly articulated an emphasis on EU security interests in the region on 8 October 2002:

The Assembly and the Portuguese Presidency chose to focus on this region because it is adjacent to the EU and there is a risk of it being neglected

9. For further readings on security in the western Mediterranean, see Roberto Aliboni, “Security and Common Ground in the Euro-Med Partnership,” 2001 Report by the EuroMesco Group on the Euro-Med Charter: Searching for Common Ground, available at [www.iai.it/sections\\_en/ricerca/MEDITERRANEO/PDF/Eurmesco\\_Rep.PDF](http://www.iai.it/sections_en/ricerca/MEDITERRANEO/PDF/Eurmesco_Rep.PDF); Chourou; George Joffe, “The European Union and the Maghreb,” in *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 1, ed. Richard Gillespie (London: Pinter, 1994).

10. Claire Spencer, “The EU as a Security Actor in the Mediterranean: Problems and Prospects,” in *The EU as a Security Actor in the Mediterranean: ESDP, Soft Power, and Peacemaking in Euro-Mediterranean Relations* (Zurich: Center for Security Studies, 2001), 9.

as the security debate tends to be dominated by events in the eastern part of the Mediterranean. The Western Mediterranean is in many ways an important neighbor for us.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, whether viewed in the context of a reactive EU solidarity toward southern threats, to borrow Roberto Aliboni's thought,<sup>12</sup> or within a pan-Mediterranean cooperative security framework, as clearly championed by the EU in the Barcelona Conference of 1995, southern EU member states have placed western Mediterranean security as an important pillar in their rotating EU presidency agendas and labeled small arms as an immediate threat through EU involvement in various security entities: the WEU, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Spencer argues that "the Mediterranean thus figures in both Europe's dilemmas (collective defense/cooperative security and 'hard' security/ 'soft' security)."<sup>13</sup> The issue of small arms has been given particular emphasis among rising security problems in EU official documents.<sup>14</sup> The EU initiatives on small arms predate the 2001 UN Conference on Small Arms and Light Weapons. For instance, in 1997 the EU Council agreed on the Programme for Preventing and Combating Illicit Trafficking in Conventional Arms, and in 1998 the council developed the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports. The EU Joint Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons is legally binding on EU member states and covers political and strategic guidelines for governments involved in arms export. The OSCE also recognized the need to take action to combat small-arms trafficking when it adopted the Document on Small Arms and Light Weapons in November 2000.<sup>15</sup>

11. Speech by Klaus Bühler, available at [www.assembly-weu.org/en/presse/cp/2002/38.html](http://www.assembly-weu.org/en/presse/cp/2002/38.html).

12. Aliboni, "Security and Common Ground."

13. Claire Spencer, "Rethinking or Reorienting Europe's Mediterranean Security Focus," in *Rethinking Security in Post-Cold War Europe*, ed. William Park and G. Wyn Rees (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), 138.

14. See a historical review of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Agreement online at [http://europa.eu.int/comm/external\\_relations/euromed/index.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/euromed/index.htm). It pledges, in part, "to promote regional security by acting, inter alia, in favour of nuclear, chemical and biological nonproliferation through adherence to and compliance with a combination of international and regional nonproliferation regimes, arms control and disarmament agreements."

15. See the 2000 OSCE document on small arms at [www.osce.org/docs/english/fsc/2000/decisions/fscw231.htm](http://www.osce.org/docs/english/fsc/2000/decisions/fscw231.htm).

### **Small Arms as a Threat in the Western Mediterranean: Conceptual Problems**

In the 1990s, particularly after the emergence of a wave of policy and academic “Mediterraneanism” (partly fueled by EU concern about rising non-traditional threats within the context of EU enlargement), European security analysts began to emphasize small arms as an urgent security issue.<sup>16</sup> On 8 February 1995, the *Independent* published an interview with NATO’s secretary-general, Willy Claes, in which he identified Islamic fundamentalism and weapons proliferation in North Africa as two of the most important post-Cold War challenges facing the West. Since then, the proliferation of weapons in the region and their linkages to violent opposition groups and rogue states have become a European security leitmotif.<sup>17</sup> Assessing these threats in the western Mediterranean began to be done in ways that paralleled the threat assessments made about the eastern Mediterranean during the conflict in the Balkans in the early 1990s. Timothy Garden and others, for instance, referred to small-arms proliferation and WMD in the western Mediterranean within the context of the Balkan crisis.<sup>18</sup> Others also argued that the Mediterranean harbors some of the largest dangers for regional and global security, noting that small-arms and conventional-weapons proliferation are prominent among those dangers. Ian Lesser, for instance, argues that “Europe’s greater Mediterranean periphery—from Algeria to Iran, Iraq and as far afield as the subcontinent—displays a striking concentration of proliferation risks.”<sup>19</sup>

Whether in policy papers or academic assessments of threats in the Mediterranean, various authors have spoken about armament and small arms as

16. See, for example, Pierre Willa, “La Méditerranée comme Espace Inventé,” *Jean Monnet Papers in Comparative and International Politics*, available at <http://aei.pitt.edu/archive/00000596/01/jmwp25.htm>.

17. Ian O. Lesser, for instance, predicted it is possible that within ten years every southern European capital will be within range of ballistic missiles based in North Africa or the Levant. Ian O. Lesser, *Southern Europe and the Maghreb: US Interests and Policy Perspectives* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand, 1996).

18. Timothy Garden, “Weapons of Mass Destruction and Mediterranean Security,” delivered at the RUSI Panel, 2002, available at [www.tgarden.demon.co.uk/writings/articles/2002/020430rusi.html](http://www.tgarden.demon.co.uk/writings/articles/2002/020430rusi.html).

19. See Ian O. Lesser, “The Renaissance of Mediterranean Security,” available at [www.afsa.org/fsj/oct01/lesseroct01.cfm](http://www.afsa.org/fsj/oct01/lesseroct01.cfm).

urgent security issues and emphasized that while interstate conflict is suppressed, domestic violent conflict has increased, in the form of political turmoil, terrorism, guerrilla actions, and insurgency.<sup>20</sup> Writing on security perceptions of Europe, Andreas Jacobs and Carlo Masala argue that “ten years after the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, discussions of proliferation are sparking a fear that the southern Mediterranean is considered as a future threat enclave.”<sup>21</sup> While many sources point to instability indicators and seek to profile threats, they tell more or less one story: the proliferation of light and conventional weapons, combined with radical social groups in the south, is causing serious security concerns in southwestern Europe.

It would, however, be unwise to accept the above statements uncritically. In every way, the elusive nature of small arms makes generalizations about the link between regional conflicts and small arms hazardous. Indeed, several characteristics of small arms make them an uncommonly difficult terrain to study. These characteristics include the very nature of these weapons themselves: they are easy to transport, difficult to track, and relatively simple to maintain for a long time. The large number of producers (up to six hundred firms worldwide) makes traditional supply-side control mechanisms and even research difficult.<sup>22</sup> The black markets of such weapons, which often link them to transnational crime, and the fuzzy relationship between light weapons flows and regional insecurity scenarios make the study of small arms a complicated exercise. Also, the fact that light weapons cross the dividing line between military, police, and civilian uses makes conclusions about them quite controversial.

In addition, there exist major conceptual disagreements concerning the study of small arms in relation to regional conflict. Some of these disagreements center on what types of light weapons should be included in the research agenda on threats and how the former deepen regional insecurity. Should we include military assault rifles, hand grenades, and other portable (and high-tech) military equipment, or the new “dirty” bombs associated

20. Roberto Aliboni, “Resetting the Euro-Mediterranean Security Agenda,” *International Spectator* 33, no. 4, 1998, 33–3.

21. Andreas Jacobs and Carlo Masala, “Germany’s Mediterranean Challenge,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 20, no. 2 (1999).

22. Small Arms Survey, 8–10.



with international terrorists? The classification of small arms in relation to conflict is a significant component in that it connects particular small arms to particular groups and thus paves the way for sound analysis of likely threats and violence scenarios.

Nonetheless, in most statements about the “explosion of armaments and threats” in the south, many EU analysts, first, fail to discuss what types of arms that are “out there,” and second, they neglect to discuss empirically the link between such arms and the likely insecurity scenarios. While most statements about small arms as a southern threat do have some merit in profiling the new nature of possible threats and the fact that small arms can lead to insecurity, EU security analysts do not point to the nature of arms and how these arms are linked to the new insecurities predicted. It is difficult to imagine how one could refer to the “new war,” that is, threats fueled by small arms, with full certitude without mapping the elusive nature of arms and the fluid network of arms transfers and potential insecurities.

Another point worth discussing deals with the quantity of small arms. The number of small arms in North Africa and southwestern Europe, for instance, remains unaccounted for as of today. Small Arms Survey, a Geneva-based think tank on small arms, states in its *2001 Survey* that “the total number and global distribution of small arms remains one of the greatest enigmas in the field of international peace and security.”<sup>23</sup> This implicitly means that it is quite difficult to correlate small arms to illegal arms transfers, on the one hand, and to potential insecurity scenarios in the western Mediterranean, on the other hand. Such a conclusion contradicts and undermines the categorical claims made about small arms and the magnitude of their threat to regional peace in the western Mediterranean.

Further, claims about arms proliferation and its relation to threat remain quite unclear, since the distribution of small arms within states themselves and among nonstate actors in North Africa and the link with potential violence is also ambiguous and remains unaccounted for. Assia Alaoui further argues that “considered as a taboo, military matters of the region [North Africa] are under-analyzed.”<sup>24</sup> Accounts of regional statistics (particularly

23. *Ibid.*, 2.

24. Assia Alaoui, “The Maghreb,” in *Regional Approaches to Disarmament: Security and Stability*, ed. Jayanthap Dhanapala (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth Publishing, 1993), 155.

in southern countries) concerning the transfer of small arms are sparse and far from yielding accurate analyses.<sup>25</sup> Small Arms Survey begins its 2002 report on small arms in North Africa with the following statement: “Concrete data on small arms in North Africa is hard to come by.”<sup>26</sup> Armies in North African states have usually been linked to the national security of states, and information on arms has been the domain of the state. The connection between the state and the army and the fact that rulers in North Africa have a military background have cloaked the issue of armaments with secrecy and lack of detail, making categorical statements about small arms and armaments quite relative.

This is quite revealing, since most security monitors in Europe refer to armaments, light weapons, and the potential threat in the south as if they have detailed empirical data relevant to national cultures of militarism in the region. Alaoui maintains that “the related detailed information [regarding arms and military expenditure] is rarely available to national experts themselves.”<sup>27</sup>

Even educated guesses about the size of a government’s arms inventories cannot tell much about the proliferation of small arms in a country and how that could contribute to regional insecurity. How much equipment is imported within states in North Africa is unclear. Even more, there are virtually no data on nonstate actors’ arms acquisitions. Peter Lock contends, “The evidence being fed into the media by interested parties and secret services is difficult to establish, which makes it a daunting task to research the diffusion of small arms and the supply chains that support protracted conflicts.”<sup>28</sup>

Thus, quantifying both the supply and demand sides of the small-arms market and their link to threats in the western Mediterranean is broader and more complex than often assumed to be. Obviously, small arms do not proliferate by themselves. In general, the demand for small arms is influenced not only by a state’s military or paramilitary organizations but also by

25. Small Arms Survey, 8–9.

26. *Ibid.*, 3.

27. Alaoui, 153.

28. Peter Lock, “Armed Conflicts and Small Arms: Refocusing the Research Agenda,” in *Security, Cooperation and Disarmament: The Unfinished Agenda*, ed. Joseph Rotblat (Singapore: World Scientific, 1998), 335.

organized crime, law-enforcement agencies, and others. The demand also involves large numbers of manufacturers, dealers, and illicit supply mechanisms through fluid networks.

The demand and supply sides of small arms obviously remain still unclear in the western Mediterranean. Who is on the demand side in the region, particularly in North Africa, as it is regarded as the hotbed of threats? Is it governments, radical groups, or extraregional entities, or a combination of the above? Who is on the supply side? And how does that relate to small-arms proliferation and the likely increase of regional insecurity? While reference in the European security literature tends to focus on rogue states (Libya, for instance) and radical groups (in Algeria, mostly) and the danger they pose to European security, these claims are not substantially assessed, particularly in line with the likelihood these actors might cause further insecurity.

The proportions of small-arms distributions among government armed forces, insurgents, and other nonstate actors remain unclear. Although small-arms proliferation is a global phenomenon, the distribution of small arms and light weapons is subject to differing regional, national, and local norms and conditions that either facilitate the spread of small arms or curb their circulation. This proposition leads us to further ask how small arms are distributed within states in North Africa and the western Mediterranean at large. It is clear that even though North African societies share similar socioeconomic problems, their national securities are quite different, and thus their approaches to small arms as a national security issue are different from each other. This is another reason that one cannot make crossregional generalizations about small arms and rising insecurity without discussing the particularities of cases.

It is widely assumed in the European security literature that there is a causal relationship between small-arms availability and the exacerbation of the level of violence in North African conflicts. Conversely, even if we hypothetically have a rough idea about small-arms distribution in the south, this does not necessarily tell us if their presence could lead to violence and insecurity and thus constitute a real threat to European security. Lock argues that “there is no denying that arms and their continued supply are a necessary condition for protracted war, but widespread availability of firearms

does not automatically translate into violent conflict.”<sup>29</sup> There are a number of highly “armed” societies—Australia, for instance—where small arms are not causing violence and insecurity. While one cannot deny the fact that large quantities of arms make conflicts more deadly and thus increase insecurity, this assumption still lacks both empirical evidence and a framework for understanding the dynamics of civil wars in which small-arms use and high lethality are most prominent. In what way availability contributes to conflict is still understudied and throws into question assumptions about the proliferation and immediacy of the threat of small arms in the western Mediterranean.

### **Conflicts and Small Arms: Characteristics of the Region**

#### Macro Indicators

In light of the conceptual obstacles related to small-arms claims in the western Mediterranean, it is useful to discuss a few points related to conflicts, the proliferation of small arms, and insecurity in the western Mediterranean. It is axiomatic that the particular characteristics of a region will determine attitudes toward arms and conflict. First, the geostrategic characteristic of the western Mediterranean is its distance from areas of intense conflict, such as the Middle East or the Balkans. Despite sharing the Mediterranean as a common seaway, the western part enjoys a relative remoteness from major conflicts in the Persian Gulf and the eastern part of the Mediterranean. Geopolitical distance has, in fact, tempered Maghreb states’ feelings toward the Palestinian cause (which is the root of Arab-Israeli conflicts), despite feelings of common Arab or Islamic culture. And this remoteness has, indeed, placed Maghreb societies more on the edge of Europe, on the outside looking in, desperately eager to be included in the European sphere of economic prosperity and keen to distance themselves from regional conflicts.<sup>30</sup>

29. *Ibid.*, 334.

30. Morocco clearly expressed its intention to join the European Community when King Hassan forwarded Morocco’s application to the EC in 1986. Tunisia, also on many occasions, expressed its intention to seek further economic ties with the EC and now with the EU. Algeria’s civil conflict has thwarted the country’s European ambitions. Libya, on the other hand, has not been included in the Euro-Mediterranean Charter due to Muammar Qaddafi’s isolationist ambitions and uncompromising stance on the Middle East conflict.

This argument could even be traced historically. Alaoui argues that “compared to the turmoil of the East Mediterranean, the Western part is indeed a low-intensity conflict area and enjoys relative stability.”<sup>31</sup> Historically, while the transition from colonization to self-rule was not free from bloody resistance, particularly in Algeria, North Africa has enjoyed a relative stability dotted with low-intensity violence, usually over border disputes. In fact, this regional stability—not necessarily a result of democratic governance—has indirectly been furthered by the fact that postdecolonization state building in North Africa pushed states more toward introspective agendas, stressing socioeconomic development and capitalizing more on curbing political opposition with the least amount of bloodshed. This, as a result, distanced states in the region from engaging in major regional and extraregional armed conflicts—conflicts that have undermined several peace initiatives between Arab states and Israel in the Middle East and have stalled major peace and disarmament initiatives in the region.

While territorial and border conflicts remain the major source of interstate conflicts in North Africa, these conflicts are not as acute as in other parts of the Middle East. For instance, unlike in the Middle East, where British rule and influence in the 1920s imposed boundary systems on land, creating ministates within a small geographic area, North African states’ territories were, more or less, accepted and demarcated during Ottoman rule in the late nineteenth century.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the boundary conflicts are focused in particular spots (for example, Western Sahara), which reduces the level of conflict in the whole region.<sup>33</sup> While this is not to deny that border disputes exist between Morocco and Spain, Algeria and Tunisia, and Tunisia and Libya, and the fact that border claims have been refueled in the postdecolo-

31. Alaoui, 143.

32. The Algerian and Moroccan border disputes were settled by the Tlemcen Treaty of 15 June 1972. The borders between Tunisia and Algeria were confirmed by the Friendship Treaty of 19 March 1983. The borders between Libya and Algeria, and Libya and Tunisia, resulted from a French-Ottoman agreement of 12 May 1912.

33. One could also mention here the border disputes between Morocco and Spain over Ceuta and Mellila and islands off the Mediterranean coast. Also, Libya and Tunisia have maritime delimitation disputes. Often referred to as the “North African apple of discord,” the Western Sahara stalemate stood against all efforts to draw Algeria and Morocco into forging unity within the Maghreb Arab Union. Although these disputes are of low intensity, they have been hurdles in attempts at unity among North African states.

nization period, the scale of these conflicts remains very minimal compared to other disputes in the Middle East or elsewhere.

Tribalism and state structure are particularly interesting features to discuss in relation to small arms and potential insecurity. In theory, tribalism usually coincides with relatively weak state structures, and in Arab contexts—particularly in the Middle East—it has led to tribal violence and further armament of tribes and individuals. Unlike parts of the Middle East, which today still witness acute small-arms problems (Yemen, for instance),<sup>34</sup> states in North Africa, whether through the use of force or national ideology, have been relatively successful in forging a social consensus among tribes (for example, Arab-Berber) under a nationalistic umbrella. Tribalism is still socially strong in North African societies, although not so strong as to trigger violence and engender proliferation of small arms and, consequently, regional insecurity. The weakness of central authority in many parts of the Balkans, on the other hand, has hindered control and oversight over weapons production and transfers, particularly light weapons. Combined with the lack of international control mechanisms, lax national policies also have led to a mushrooming of weapons factories, illegal pipelines, brokers, and gun runners.

Even though North Africa is regarded by many analysts as a troubled spot (generally with reference to violent nonstate actors), small-arms acquisition and transfer remain largely within the realm of state power. Since decolonization, states in the region have sought to develop modern armies and acquired military arsenals from the former Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War. Most of the acquisition process was done by states, and weapons are stocked and maintained by governments. Thus, the social perception of arms acquisition (within states themselves) as being the domain of states (which happen to be authoritarian and worried about maintaining their status quo) clearly distinguishes this region from Latin America or Central Africa or even the Middle East itself, where loose state structures indirectly contribute to small-arms proliferation. In a conference on small arms, Mohammed Bennouna, Morocco's permanent representative to the United Nations,

34. Derek Miller, "Demand, Stockpiles, and Social Control: Small Arms in the Yemen," available at [www.smallarmssurvey.org/OPapers/OPaper9Yemen.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/OPapers/OPaper9Yemen.pdf).

stated, “We in Morocco have not had to deal with the problem of the illicit trade in small arms as have some other regions. Nevertheless, we are pursuing an active program to control arms stocks. And we are certainly aware of the problem of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons to other countries.”<sup>35</sup>

### Micro Indicators

The following are some conditions relevant to small-arms proliferation—points often ignored by European security analysts in discussing small arms and regional security in the western Mediterranean. These points further contextualize small arms in the North African setting and pave the way for further discussion of particular problems concerning claims on small arms and regional insecurity.

First, a particular point that distinguishes the western Mediterranean from other regions in relation to small-arms transfers is crossborder movement. Unlike other regions—say the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier, where porous borders facilitate arms transfers—the movement and trafficking of small arms are largely curtailed in North Africa by bad relations between neighboring states and armies on alert along borders (for example, between Morocco and Algeria and between Libya and Tunisia).<sup>36</sup> Not only that, but the movement of persons and goods, which tends to be vertical (that is, south-north), particularly has come under intense policing and monitoring from the EU well before the implementation of the Schengen agreement and the escalation of North African illegal migration (maritime borders between Morocco and Spain are a good example here). For instance, Spain, after an expression of concern by countries in northern Europe, tightened its border controls against migration, both legal and illegal. The bottom line is that it is difficult to come to a definitive conclusion regarding licit/illicit arms trans-

35. Mohammed Bennouna, statement made at the UN Conference on Small Arms, “Defining Terrorism and Its Root Causes: References to the Definition of Terrorism and Root Causes,” at the UN, New York, 1–5 October 2001.

36. An interesting story was reported by the *Guardian* on smuggling attempts made via donkeys loaded with goods between Morocco and Algeria, which resulted in the killing by Algerian border officials of nearly two hundred donkeys. See [www.taipetimes.com/News/world/archives/2003/11/16/2003076069](http://www.taipetimes.com/News/world/archives/2003/11/16/2003076069).

fers in a region characterized by tight border controls or, at times, closed borders (for example, between Morocco and Algeria).

Moreover, historically the region has not seen large transfers of arms as compared to regions such as the Middle East or Central America. What Tara Kartha characterized as “a tradition of smuggling,” which usually facilitates small-arms transfers, could substantially be labeled as low-profile in the western Mediterranean.<sup>37</sup> Small Arms Survey, as well as other international monitors, classifies the western Mediterranean as a region not to be placed on a par with arms-producing regions (such as Latin America or southeastern Europe), where organized crime and fragile political regimes further contribute to small-arms proliferation and political violence.<sup>38</sup> Obviously, one cannot deny the minor small-arms transfers that are connected to narcotics trafficking in northern Morocco (usually toward Spain and northern EU countries, particularly the Netherlands) and to the receding civil conflict in Algeria. Western intelligence services are reportedly aware of these minor illicit arms transfers, particularly between Israel and Algeria’s Front Islamique du Salut,<sup>39</sup> but they choose to turn a blind eye since the scope and magnitude of such transfers remains minimal and reflects on the internal problems in Algeria. Further, organized crime in North Africa still cannot be compared to the rates of transnational criminality in Eastern Europe or the Balkans in terms of procurement of light weapons and the threats to national and regional security. Drug trafficking, particularly in northern Morocco, has caused concerns in the EU, but that does not qualify it as a major organized crime threat that could develop serious arms procurement and thus increase regional insecurity.

Another point worth mentioning about the region is the relative absence of local small-arms producers, the reverse scenario of which usually makes small-arms acquisitions easy and exacerbates local conflicts. Brazil, for instance, a major arms producer in South America, has been cited by Small Arms Survey as playing an indirect factor in illicit arms transfers in South

37. Tara Kartha, “Controlling the Black and Gray Markets in Small Arms in South Asia,” in *Light Weapons and Civil Conflict: Controlling the Tools of Violence*, ed. Jeffrey Boutwell and Michael T. Klare (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 56.

38. Small Arms Survey, 170.

39. *Ibid.*, 171.



America and thus contributing to regional insecurity. North African states, on the contrary, are listed in various small-arms monitoring sources as “unasessed” areas or as relatively low arms producers compared to other states in the Middle East, such as Israel or Egypt. While the absence of indigenous small-arms manufacturers does not, in effect, diminish the potential to regional insecurity, making a distinction between the western Mediterranean and other regional zones of conflict sets the context for further discussion about European claims of arms and rising insecurity.

### **Empirical Problems**

At the state level, the risk of proliferation of systems of conventional and unconventional weapons in the Maghreb often leads European strategists to overexaggerate North African states’ military threats.<sup>40</sup> Thus, it is sometimes argued that the levels of military expenditures are quite high in North Africa compared to the defense requirements of the states in the region. What is particularly ignored among European security analysts, however, is that North African states are not greatly preoccupied with the military aspects that concern Europe. North Africa does not consider Europe as a direct military threat and has neither the military capacity nor the political ambition to “invade” Europe. In fact, various economic development trends favor scaling down of arms in the Maghreb. Alaoui states that “if disarmament is indeed a future issue, scaling down military expenditures and the arms race, not only for security reasons but for the sake of development, is badly needed.”<sup>41</sup> Governments’ worries about what they see as internal threats come well before their need to deal with what could be labeled external threats.

For the time being, Europe is not perceived as a threat—in any case not a military threat—either by governments in the Maghreb (except perhaps Libya) or by the sectors of the elite who have nothing against Islam but fear an Islamic state. Rather, Europe is seen as an essential partner whose presence is not feared but whose lack of greater political and economic interest is regretted. Governments and elites in North Africa who verge on secular-

40. Alaoui, 168.

41. *Ibid.*, 157.

ism fear that Europe (1) will abandon its economic assistance or make it conditional on sound political reform; (2) that the question of the Maghreb, which is now a European security issue (bearing in mind the presence of large immigrant communities in Europe) could be used in a xenophobic way for domestic political motives (for example, in France, Austria, and Spain); and (3) that radical Islamist movements could obtain material support from Europe and threaten the status quo in the region.

While it is not impossible to purchase small arms from extraregional suppliers, the states in North Africa (which happen to be autocratic) have a relatively tight grip on small-arms acquisition. Unlike states in the Middle East like the Yemen, where small arms are widely available, there is a tight control by governments on the acquisition and transfer of small arms in North Africa. Since decolonization, states in North Africa have adopted strong measures to control civilian access to small arms. Aware of their domestic political opposition, states in North Africa have outlawed possession of arms through a culture of no tolerance for arms. This stands in contrast to the small-arms situation in the Balkans. “In Albania, for example, there was massive looting of government arsenals,” says Rachel Stohl, a senior analyst specializing in conventional arms at the Center for Defense Information in Washington. “Those weapons made their way through the civilian population to other countries.”<sup>42</sup>

Another point worth discussing is the often-cited interrelation among regimes in the south, small arms, and instability. Conversely, one could argue that in North Africa, the sheer idea of states eager to maintain a “clean” international image consistent with economic stabilization policies, that is, not to be labeled a terrorist state (which would hurt their ability to lure foreign investments), has pushed states in North Africa to go to extra lengths to maintain an extremely strong grip on access to arms within their national boundaries. Tunisia and Morocco are good examples here. The shooting events Morocco witnessed in Fes and Marrakech in summer 1994 and the bombing in Casablanca of the Belgian consulate in May 2003 shocked the national security apparatus and put the army and security apparatuses on

42. See Rachel Stohl, “Iraq Small Arms Are a Big Threat,” *Christian Science Monitor*, available at [www.csmonitor.com/2002/1204/p02s02-usgn.html](http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/1204/p02s02-usgn.html).

alert. Crises of domestic vulnerability such as these make it tempting to argue that for North African states, the less they are associated with arms transfers, proliferation, and so on, the better.

In a way, the anticipated explosion of violence in the western Mediterranean, as a cause of southern instability and the proliferation of small arms, often stated in sensational terms by the media and at times even articulated with similar hyperbole by official institutions within the EU, has simply not materialized since the early 1990s when European external relations began focusing on the security of the western Mediterranean as the near abroad. A relevant note emphasized by S. Evilia Mateos in a recent study of European press coverage of security issues in the Mediterranean Basin is worth quoting here: “The insistence on linking the Arab world to terrorism contributes to the negative image of the South and is an expression of understanding security in Eurocentric terms.”<sup>43</sup> There is little doubt that small arms could pose problems in the region. What is less clear, however, is the extent to which this could threaten the overall security of the western Mediterranean in the sense that warrants statements such as a “new war,” or “high instability” caused by proliferation. This is not to totally dismiss the claims made by the authors cited earlier in this essay regarding the threat posed by small arms. Instead, the distinction should be one between short-term and long-term dangers to European security. Whereas the former may not be clear at present, certainly not by Cold War standards, the long-term threats posed by small arms to European security interests are more potential than reality. Lock states that “without further qualification and empirical data, these alarmist statements should be handled with reservation.”<sup>44</sup>

### Conclusion

Limited as they are, issues of military threats will not be absent from among the many challenges facing western Mediterranean security in the next decade. In fact, issues of military security might be gaining more ground with the radicalization of Islamic groups as a consequence of the US pre-

43. Mateos.

44. Lock, 335.

emptive doctrine against terrorism. My argument has been that European analysts still discuss small arms as if they constituted an autonomous issue that could increase the spillover of threat, and thus threaten the security of Western Europe. Clearly, this perspective, while yielding interesting observations about small arms as a threat, misses a great deal by not attempting to realistically look for the links among small arms, threats, and regional insecurity scenarios. While the southern Mediterranean has seen emerging pockets of military insecurity, these zones of conflict have at their root cause either economics or security perceptions or the environment. Without necessarily de-emphasizing the consequences of armament or trivializing small arms as a security threat in the western Mediterranean, the immediacy of small arms is not as clear as it is often assumed to be. Although there seem to be violent repercussions that could stem from the proliferation of small arms and conventional weapons alike, the links between arms and the immediacy of threats are not as clear-cut as most European security analysts argue. The emphasis should be rather on a good empirical distinction between short-term and long-term military threats as they appear, rather than simply on profiling them. Also, when making projections about small arms and threats, analysts have to bear in mind the type of possible conflict scenarios and whether these are of a territorial, ideological, religious, ethnic, or strategic nature. Drawing distinctions between possible conflicts or threats and relating them to small arms is more likely to yield realistic predictions. It was not my attempt to relegate European worries to sheer alarmism, but any study of small arms and the violent repercussions they could engender needs to contextualize small arms in their indigenous milieu. Put simply, research on military threats has to study societies in relation to arms and arms in relation to societies before jumping to conclusions about threats and “new wars” in regions. Our ability to perceive a danger ahead is not enough; we should be able to capitalize on empirical evidence to realistically map likely threats and thus further our understanding of the security of regions.