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First Steps: **Exploring Small Arms Issues in the Arab Region**

For observers following the small arms issue, the Middle East is a puzzling region. Admittedly, some things are clear. For example, there is no question that small arms are held and used there in great numbers. Governments rely on them for national security and civilians possess them for traditional purposes, for self-protection and, sometimes, for criminal activities. The view of Arab states toward the upcoming July, 2001 UN conference on small arms¹ is equally clear. They think the conference's Program of Action should be confined to supporting member states in their efforts to strengthen controls within their borders and to exploring, but not yet negotiating, broader international agreements on marking, tracing and brokering of small arms.

In other words, the Arab group places itself on the conservative side regarding global controls, and on the reticent side regarding their own internal experience with the weapons. So far, the numbers of small arms present in Arab states - whether state or civilian owned - and the impact of those weapons on countries in the region are not yet part of the international dialogue on small arms. This situation leaves many unanswered questions. Are Arab states really unified in their regional views on small arms? How do they view their internal struggle with small arms proliferation and how open are they to sharing information about it?

On May 6-7, 2001 The Regional Human Security Center, at the Jordan Institute of Diplomacy in Amman, invited governmental and non-governmental representatives to a "Regional Workshop On Small Arms In The Arab Region: National And Regional Measures." The meeting, funded in part by the Netherlands and Canada, began with a look at issues from a regional perspective and at the global effort to negotiate a comprehensive program of action at the UN conference in July.

In Amman Arab states expressed familiar positions on the UN conference. Broadly, they view it as explicitly focused on arms control with a narrow focus on illicit transfers, and they support a cautious approach that allows little opportunity to widen the conference scope to include human rights, humanitarian or development dimensions. Even technical and administrative issues such as marking, tracing and brokering of small arms receive only qualified support.

What was evident in Amman were some of the reasons behind these positions. For Arab states, the continued conflict with Israel still dominates their security picture. This means that small arms are seen as a subsidiary arms control issue, one that is attached to the dynamics of the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict and of much less concern to regional states than controls on nuclear or major conventional weapons systems.

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In general, government speakers stick to a hierarchy of security issues that puts Israel and nuclear weapons first and minimizes the effects of small arms proliferation. At present, unlike some other regions, the Arab group does not perceive its small arms problem as a humanitarian issue, nor does it view the issue as a seriously destabilizing influence. This approach sides with a deeper problem. Many Arab states may not have sufficient trust in each other to begin serious collaboration on improved policing and border controls or on the transparency that would make these improvements possible.

Perhaps the most important opening towards a new regional policy on small arms is represented by the Arab insistence that "root causes" of small arms proliferation must be addressed. For them this means dealing with the main political conflict (Israel), the main humanitarian issue (Palestinian refugees) and the poverty and underdevelopment in the region. None of these can be addressed easily, and probably any real progress on any of them will depend on an integrated solution involving all these issues. Nevertheless, the emphasis on root causes is an admission that the scope of the small arms problem does include conflict management, humanitarian and development aspects. Whether this can be fashioned into a politically operational opening, rather than a rhetorical one, is still to be seen.

The Amman workshop confirmed that some Arab states do have political and social problems connected with small arms. Most refreshingly, some government and NGO representatives offered detailed accounts of their national histories, procedures and problems regarding small arms. In doing so, they made an implicit statement about the need for greater transparency among Arab states on small arms issues. Jordan, as host of the event, was the most detailed in its diagnosis and treatment reports from a government perspective. Yemen also presented a warts-and-all picture of the severity of its problems and its need for outside assistance. Similarly, an NGO report on western Sudan provided a candid picture of the impact of unrestricted small arms proliferation.

Looking at the destabilizing influence of conflicts across the Arab region and at the emerging presence of organized crime networks, one could easily make the case for stronger regional cooperation - if only to deal with criminality and terrorism. The conference noted the absence of this kind of border and policing cooperation and many speakers recommended first steps in collaboration and transparency.

Like the UN conference itself, the meeting in Amman is important as the first of what should be many steps in opening the small arms issue to scrutiny and international action. While it may not be reasonable to expect any comprehensive actions on small arms to be forthcoming soon in the region, there may be possibilities for fruitful exploration of particular topics, such as the reduction of surplus arms or combating criminal networks. Such meetings could be part of the

follow-up process proposed in the UN Conference's action program.

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¹ Its full name is the UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects. The conference was mandated by the UN General Assembly in late 1999. The preparatory process has included three sessions in 2000 and 2001 leading to the Conference itself, July 9-20, 2001.