

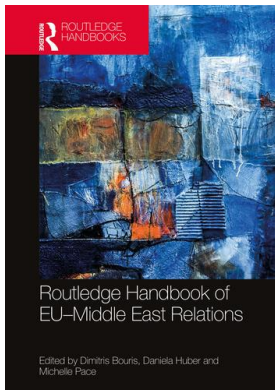
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THEIR VIOLENCE OR OURS?

EU–Middle East arms sales and military cooperation

David Wearing

Introduction

This chapter examines arms exports from EU Member States to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as part of the historical development of the political economy of European relations with the region. State violence has played a central role in these processes. It will be argued that the violence of the MENA regimes – both in terms of internal repression and external conflict – is European violence as well, to the extent that it is enabled and made possible by European arms exports and wider forms of military and strategic cooperation. The fundamental purpose of that violence has been to secure the integration of the region into the global capitalist system, on terms preferable to European state power and capitalist interests by entrenching the rule of allied authoritarian regimes, and the West's own strategic presence in MENA by extension.

The chapter begins with a brief summary of the modern history of European involvement in the MENA. It then sets out a broad overview of current EU arms sales to MENA states, assessing their relative strategic importance. The final section provides an illustrative case study, examining British arms sales to, and military cooperation with, the Gulf Arab monarchies. The Gulf is the strategic heart of the region, and Britain is the most significant European power in the modern history of the Gulf area. The nature and extent of UK–Gulf military relations will be assessed, particularly with regard to the response to the Arab uprisings of 2011 and the more recent war in Yemen. These will be set in the context of the wider political economy of British relations with these regimes, as an important current example of the ways in which state violence remains central to capitalist relations between the Global North and the Global South. Save for the work of this author (Wearing, 2018), there is no literature on UK relations with the Gulf Arab monarchies that sets arms sales to those regimes within a framework of critical political economy, and very little literature on UK relations with these regimes more broadly. This chapter builds on my previous work in addressing that gap in the literature.

History

European advances into MENA began in earnest during the nineteenth century. Britain took control of the port of Aden and its environs (what is now southern Yemen) in 1839, while

creating a treaty system of protectorates in the Persian Gulf from 1830s onwards, extending its influence into Iran, and occupying Egypt in 1882. The broad strategic aim was to create a buffer zone around Britain's Indian possessions, while securing the key shipping lanes between the subcontinent and the metropole. France developed its own set of colonial possessions closer to home, seizing control of Algeria in 1830, Tunisia in 1881 and Morocco in 1912, while Italy occupied the Tripoli province of what is now Libya in 1911 (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009: 103–117; Wearing, 2018: 13–18).

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire provided the leading imperial powers with the opportunity to carve up the region amongst themselves. Britain and France had already attempted to agree advance booking of Iraq and Syria respectively, via their secret Sykes–Picot agreement of 1916. In the end, the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne settled the post-Ottoman borders, and the League of Nations then sanctioned European “mandate” rule over a number of former Arab Ottoman provinces: what is now Lebanon and Syria were allocated to France, while Britain took effective control of Iraq and what are now Jordan, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009: 149–170).

European domination of MENA was now near total, and held firm despite considerable local resistance through the inter-war period. The state structures – characterised by oversized militaries and security forces – that developed under European tutelage reflected the priorities of the colonial powers: securing the dominance of local allied elites in the face of nationalist resistance so that the region could be integrated into global capitalism on terms favourable to the Europeans (*ibid.*: 193–237). Central to this was the discovery of vast oil reserves, concentrated around the Persian Gulf area, where Britain was the leading power, albeit with the United States (US) making highly significant inroads through its relationship with the Saudi kingdom. By now, oil was the lifeblood of the world economy: not only a major commercial prize, but also a vital strategic asset in great power competition.

Britain's strategic priority after World War II was to ensure that oil exported from the region was traded in pounds sterling, and extracted and sold by British firms, thereby alleviating the UK's parlous balance of payments situation during the post-war recovery. London also sought to keep these strategically vital reserves out of the hands of independent Arab nationalists, partly (though by no means exclusively) since such governments often developed cooperative relations with the Soviet Union (Wearing, 2018: 16–23).

Britain therefore helped the local regimes to develop the systems of surveillance and repression necessary to see off any nationalist challenge, and to establish coup-proofing forces, such as the Saudi National Guard. Britain also colluded with the US to overthrow the elected government of Iran in 1953 after the latter had nationalised an oil industry formerly run by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. That coup culminated in the installation of the Shah as dictator, and the subsequent development of a police state shoring up his rule with crucial Anglo-American assistance (Curtis, 2003: 303–315; Wearing, 2018: 24–25, 28).

Britain joined the tripartite aggression against Egypt in 1956, alongside France and Israel, primarily due to the strategic threat posed by Cairo's nationalisation of the Suez Canal to oil exports from the sterling area in the Gulf. The failure of that military enterprise – thwarted in part by Washington, on grounds that the threat of anti-colonial nationalism required a less clumsy response – dramatically symbolised the decline of European power in the region. Nationalist resistance had already driven France out of Syria and Lebanon in 1946, and would see it expelled from Algeria in 1962, while through the 1950s and 1960s Britain lost its strategic footholds in Egypt, Iraq and southern Yemen. In 1971, London brought down the curtain on a century and a half of hegemony in the Gulf, ending its permanent military presence after

a currency crisis in 1968 had made clear that its capacity to project imperial power could no longer be sustained at previous levels (Wearing, 2018: 26–33).

Petrodollars and the arms trade

The 1973–1974 oil crisis shifted the relationship between the MENA producer states and the Global North powers. As the producers took control of their oil industries from the Western corporations (in the context of political pressure from Arab nationalism), they sought to alter the terms of trade and increase the amount of revenue flowing to them. The “petrodollar” emerged as a new prize in international trade and finance, and the Western powers sought to use their influence with the producers to attract petrodollar investment into their financial systems, and to secure exports into petrodollar-rich markets.

Military exports and imports in particular expanded significantly, and the loosening of ties between the Gulf producers and the UK made a degree of competition for market access possible between the Global North powers. France markedly increased its share of arms exports to Qatar and the UAE in particular, eclipsing Britain in both cases and securing a significant market share which it retains to this day, while also making some inroads into the important Kuwaiti and Saudi markets. Another round of stiff competition for weapons contracts commenced after the 1990–91 Gulf War, as the regional monarchies sought to bind themselves militarily to the US, the UK and France, who remained their main guarantee of survival, while those powers took the opportunity to deepen these strategic ties (SIPRI, 2019; Wearing, 2018: 37–40, 165–166).

This historical context allows us to comprehend the true significance of EU–MENA arms exports as part of a deeper strategy of securing the rule of friendly regimes willing to support European strategic goals and keep their economies integrated within global capitalist structures on terms favourable to the European powers. State violence has been central to that process of capitalist integration since the nineteenth century, when the MENA region was first brought under various inherently coercive forms of Western colonial control. Through the era of the League of Nations mandates, and subsequently, the Europeans together with the US equipped their local allies with the means of violence necessary to suppress popular opposition to their rule, and thus protect these strategically important and economically lucrative ties, and deepen Western influence over the regimes. The petrodollar-fuelled arms sales of the present day continue to serve this broad function.

The persistence of authoritarianism in MENA must be understood within this context, and with reference to the role of the European powers. In their study of this phenomenon, Yom and Gause (2012: 78) note that

the near-absolute power wielded by Arab royals originates not from some ancient cultural essence but from modern colonialism which turned weak and fragmented claims of dynastic authority into centralized autocracies. . . . [T]he Gulf region’s royal families . . . could not impose their will on rival tribes and clans until Britain formalized their respective claims to rule through defense treaties in the late nineteenth century, and later helped to put down internal resistance.

In Bahrain, for example, “[t]he al-Khalifas faced severe worker riots and Shia protests in the 1950s, but British intervention squashed the unrest and restored their authority” (Yom and Gause, 2012: 82).

In respect of the region's apparent immunity to wider global trends of democratisation, Bellin argues that

the solution to the puzzle of Middle Eastern and North African exceptionalism lies less in absent prerequisites of democratisation and more in present conditions that foster robust authoritarianism, specifically a robust coercive apparatus in these states. The will and capacity of the state's coercive apparatus to suppress democratic initiative have extinguished the possibility of transition.

(Bellin, 2004: 143)

That coercive apparatus has been provided, in no small part, by the major European arms exporters.

EU–MENA arms trade: 2009–2018

This section surveys EU–MENA arms sales over the last decade. It identifies the key regional importers, their main suppliers, and assesses the commercial and geostrategic significance of these exports. Data for this section was taken from the website of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). SIPRI data is derived from a variety of sources and expressed in the institute's database as "SIPRI Trend Indicator Values" at constant 1990 prices. These values are calculated using the known unit production costs of a core set of weapons, representing the transfer of military resources rather than the financial value of the transfer. This data is useful for assembling a picture of international arms transfers that allows for comparison between sales to and from various countries, and over time. It is this relative comparison that is the analytical focus of this section, rather than the absolute financial value of arms transferred. SIPRI's data captures major transfers only, meaning those with a Trend Indicator Value of US\$0.5 million and above (SIPRI, 2019).

The value of EU arms exports to the region

Between 2009 and 2018, EU states accounted for 27% of the value of major global arms exports, behind the US (33%) but ahead of Russia (23%) and China (5%). The EU's leading exporters are France and Germany (6% each of the global total), the UK (4%), Spain (3%) and Italy and the Netherlands (2% each). The EU and the US between them therefore account for 60% of the value of major transfers worldwide, compared to the 28% sold by their geopolitical rivals Russia and China (SIPRI, 2019). These divisions largely map onto the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, as will be discussed in more depth later.

Over the same decade, MENA received 33% of the value of major arms transfers worldwide, despite accounting for just 6.35% of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2019 (SIPRI, 2019; IMF, 2019). The large majority of these went to a small number of countries. Saudi Arabia alone accounted for 24% of the region's imports, followed by the United Arab Emirates (12%), Algeria (11%), Egypt (10%), Iraq and Turkey (8% each). In most of these cases, imports from EU Member States accounted for a sizeable proportion of the total. In both Saudi Arabia and Egypt, EU Member States supplied 37% of the value of imported arms, while taking 29% of the market share in Turkey and 23% in the case of the UAE.

There are, of course, other strategically significant states in the region who are not among the leading arms importers of the last decade. Israel has historically been a major regional arms importer, but accounted for just 4% of transfers to MENA between 2009 and 2018. EU states

provided 35% of Israel's imports during this period. Iran and Syria are also highly significant actors in the region, but only account for 1% and 2% of the value of regional imports respectively, importing nothing from the EU.

The market share of specific EU Member States varies considerably from one importer to the next. In the largest market, Saudi Arabia, imports from the UK accounted for 23% of the total while France accounted for 4%. In the UAE, France supplied 9% and Italy 4%. France supplied 28% of major exports to Egypt, and Germany provided the same proportion in respect of Israel, while Italy supplied 7% in the latter case. Turkey's leading EU suppliers were Italy (10%), the Netherlands (9%) and Germany (6%).

French exports to the UAE include Leclerc tanks, whose sale has been criticised by Amnesty International in light of their use in the Yemen war. Amnesty accused France of “shamelessly flout[ing its] international obligations by continuing to supply arms . . . in violation of the Arms Trade Treaty”, given the “possible war crimes and other serious violations of international humanitarian law” committed by Emirati forces (SIPRI, 2019; Amnesty, 2019). French exports to Egypt surged following the military coup against the elected government in 2013, with Human Rights Watch highlighting the sale of warships, fighter jets and armoured vehicles, as well as tools for surveillance and crowd control. Noting that, to give one example, “French-supplied armoured vehicles were used by Egyptian security forces to violently disperse peaceful sit-ins across the country”, the nongovernmental organisation (NGO) remarked that France was “directly enabling abuses and not respecting its own international obligations regulating arms sales” (Houry and Jeannerod, 2019). German exports to Israel include frigates and Dolphin submarines, which reportedly could be modified to carry nuclear missiles (SIPRI 2019; Deutsche Welle, 2017).

The geostrategic context

EU states are significant but secondary exporters of arms to MENA. The biggest supplier by far is the US, covering 59% of Saudi Arabia's major imports, 62% for the UAE, 55% for Iraq, 49% for Turkey, 64% for Israel's imports and 26% for Egypt. It is vital to reiterate that arms sales are not a purely commercial matter but also an expression of geopolitical support. The preceding figures, if anything, understate the preponderance of the US in the militarisation of the region. Israel and Egypt have long been major recipients of US aid, and their military strength is drawn to a significant extent from those geopolitical ties (Congressional Research Service (i) 2019; Congressional Research Service (ii) 2019). The presence of the United States in the region's systems of state violence also takes more direct forms, from the basing of the US Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, the massive al Udeid air base in Qatar, and direct involvement in conflicts in Libya, Syria and Iraq (Benaïm and Hanna, 2019).

The full geostrategic significance of EU arms sales to MENA should therefore be assessed with reference to the bloc's alignment with US power. US and EU military cooperation with MENA regimes and direct power projection into the region are strategically complementary. Focusing more narrowly on the value of major arms sales over the past decade, the EU and US together account for 99% of Israel's major arms imports, 96% of Saudi Arabia's, 85% for the UAE, 78% for Turkey, 64% for Iraq and 63% for Egypt. In other words, the majority of the most strategically significant states in the Middle East and the region's leading arms importers are overwhelmingly supplied with arms by the Western allies, as a reflection of their geopolitical alignment.

By contrast, the West's key geopolitical rivals – Russia and China – can only boast a combined majority share in one of the region's most lucrative markets, taking 75% and 8% respectively in

the case of Algeria, which sits far away from the strategic core of the region, the Persian Gulf. Russia's 31% market share in Egypt over the past decade should be read within the context of Cairo's deeply structured and long-established military and strategic alignment with the US. Moscow's 26% market share in Iraq is somewhat more meaningful, given Baghdad's ambiguous geopolitical alignment in the post-Saddam Hussein era (Arango et al., 2019), and the location of Iraq at the head of the Persian Gulf. The Iranian and Syrian markets, as noted earlier, are of minimal commercial value, but these remain strategically significant states. Russia and China provided 70% and 28% of major exports to Iran in the last decade, while Russia provided 86% of arms to Syria as well as, more importantly, direct military support that has effectively sustained the regime during that country's civil war. These figures illustrate the important but limited penetration that the EU's (and the West's) strategic rivals and their local allies enjoy in the MENA region.

Having examined how the relative value of EU arms sales maps onto the geopolitical alignment of the various importer states, we shall now take a closer look at the geostrategic significance of the specific importer states in question. As noted earlier, the fundamental strategic value of the region lies in its sizable hydrocarbon reserves, and the wealth generated by their sale. Today the MENA holds 52.3% of the world's oil reserves and 42.4% of its natural gas reserves. These reserves are overwhelmingly concentrated in the Persian Gulf region: 48.1% of the global total in the case of oil and 37.8% in the case of natural gas (BP plc, 2019).

MENA's two leading arms importers, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are both situated in this area, holding 17.2% and 5.7% of global oil reserves respectively. The monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE and Oman) together account for 45% of regional arms imports and 30.6% of global oil reserves. The GCC has long functioned as a bastion of the West-aligned conservative regional order, and the West's dominance of the GCC area counts as a major strategic asset. Meanwhile, Russia and China's ties with Iran (which holds 9% of the world's oil reserves and 16.2% of its natural gas), and Iran's deep influence within Iraq (8.5% of global oil reserves) offsets the Western position in the wider Persian Gulf (BP plc, 2019).

To summarise, EU Member States are important, second-tier exporters of arms to MENA, behind the US which is far in the lead. They have significant shares of key regional export markets such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In the context of the EU's ties with the US, and of other forms of military cooperation between these Global North states and the states of the region, this combined penetration of the regional arms import market reflects a major strategic presence in the MENA, and a major structural advantage over Russia and China in the world system.

Case study: the UK and the Gulf states

The UK's relations with the Gulf Arab monarchies provide an important case study of an EU Member State exporting arms to the MENA region within the wider strategic and economic contexts just described. Over the past two centuries, Britain has played a crucial role in the processes of state formation, capitalist integration and development of the means of state violence in the Gulf region. This section will survey the wider political economy of UK–Gulf relations, detail UK arms sales to the Gulf, outline wider forms of UK–Gulf military cooperation, and examine two illustrative episodes – the Arab uprisings and the war in Yemen – where Britain played an enabling role in the exertion of Gulf state violence.

The political economy of current UK–GCC relations is in many ways a legacy of the 1970s oil shock, discussed earlier, with the centrality of petrodollars to the relationship still firmly in place. This has been particularly true from the turn of the millennium onwards, when the

global price of oil rose significantly, peaking between 2008 and 2014 and falling to some degree thereafter, but still remaining high in historical terms. This constituted a major windfall for the producer regimes, who ran significant current account surpluses for most of this period, which accumulated as sovereign wealth available for investment, and for the consumption of imported goods and services.

At the same time, Britain's adoption of the neoliberal economic model from the 1980s onwards, and the associated shift of emphasis from manufacturing exports to financial services, resulted in a growing deficit of the UK current account. Gulf petrodollars came to play an important role in addressing this major macroeconomic challenge in two ways: first, significant petrodollar investment into the City of London helped to finance the current account deficit; and second, a surplus of UK exports to lucrative Gulf markets reduced Britain's trade deficit with the rest of the world. Gulf petrodollars have therefore helped to sustain the UK's neoliberal economic model over the last two decades (Wearing, 2018: 84–153).

Gulf petrodollars have also helped the UK address another key strategic priority: maintaining its status as a global military power despite the loss of empire. To remain a largely independent military power requires a domestic arms industry, but keeping that industry economically viable can potentially become a fiscal drain to the point where it is politically unsustainable. Major arms export contracts help in this regard, by earning external revenue for the arms industry, and helping it to maintain key production lines and retain skills.

Since the end of the Cold War, the proportion of UK arms exports going to the Gulf states has steadily risen while the proportion to the rest of the world has fallen. Since the start of the oil boom at the turn of the millennium, the Gulf market has accounted for 31% of UK arms exports worldwide. In the last decade, it accounted for 54% (SIPRI, 2019). Britain's two key Gulf markets – Saudi Arabia and Oman – account for 43% and 10% of the value of its military exports worldwide over that decade. The Gulf regimes are therefore playing an increasingly vital role in helping the UK to maintain its status as a global military power.

By deploying their petrodollar wealth to help sustain British neoliberalism and Britain's military capacity, thereby making themselves valuable to the British state and British capitalism, the Gulf regimes are able to secure and entrench Britain's strategic commitment to their survival. Arms purchases in particular serve this purpose, as well as buttressing the military capabilities of a Global North power that has long served as their protector (albeit now in a secondary role to the United States). British arms sales to the Gulf are therefore not a purely commercial matter, but a component of a wider political economy and set of strategic ties in which the means of state violence play an important part.

Perhaps the most significant European arms deal of the modern era was that signed between the British government of Margaret Thatcher and the Saudi kingdom in 1985. Under its terms, Britain provided 72 Tornado military jets, as well as the ongoing supply of components, ammunition, pilot training, maintenance and supporting infrastructure necessary to keep that fleet operational. A second phase of the deal was signed by Thatcher's successor John Major in 1993, supplying another 48 Tornado jets under the same terms. At the time, the so-called Al-Yamamah deal was thought to be the most lucrative single arms contract in world history. In 2007, the New Labour government of Gordon Brown signed the successor deal to Al-Yamamah, named Al-Salam, and covering the supply of 72 Eurofighter Typhoon jets, again with all the technical and logistical support necessary for the new fleet's operation (Wearing, 2018: 40–42, 166–169). A similar deal for 12 Typhoons was signed with Oman in 2012 (BBC, 2012).

Beyond arms exports, British military and security cooperation extends throughout the GCC area. British forces enjoy basing rights across the sub-region and provide training and equipment to the security forces of all the GCC regimes, including for internal security. The

UK has formal defence cooperation agreements with all six monarchies, with one Western diplomat quoted by the Financial Times in 2003 describing the 1996 UK-UAE agreement as “the UK’s largest single commitment to the defence of a country outside NATO” (Allen, 2003; House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committee, 2013: 19).

The Arab uprisings that began in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread across MENA through the winter and into the spring of 2011 represented the greatest challenge to regional authoritarian rule in recent history. It is highly illustrative of the nature of UK relations with the Gulf Arab monarchies that in the subsequent months and years, Britain sought to substantively deepen its ties with those regimes, particularly in the military and internal security spheres (Roberts, 2014; Kelly and Stansfield, 2013). Some analysts went so far as to describe a “return to East of Suez”, an allusion to the draw-down of the British presence in the Gulf in 1971 (Stansfield and Kelly, 2013), and while this was no doubt something of an exaggeration, the British policy nevertheless added up to a major strategic vote of confidence in the conservative regional order at precisely a time when that order was facing a serious political challenge to its position and legitimacy.

In Bahrain, to take the key example from the Gulf region, a broad based and peaceful pro-democracy movement was violently crushed by the regime’s internal security apparatus in the spring of 2011, with back-up provided by Saudi-led joint-GCC forces (Bronner and Slackman, 2011; Ulrichsen, 2012). Despite revoking some arms export licences, British supplies of equipment capable of being used in internal repression substantively continued, while the UK and Bahrain signed a new defence cooperation agreement and the monarchy agreed to the construction of a new British naval base in the country (Eason, 2012; Raphael and St John, 2016). This overall approach constituted a substantial expression of political and material support for the regime.

The depth of British military cooperation with the Gulf regimes is most clearly illustrated by its involvement in the Yemen war, commencing in March 2015 when a Saudi-led coalition intervened in Yemen’s internal conflict, a military campaign that remains ongoing at the time of writing. While Britain has not been a combatant in the war it has been an indispensable participant from the point of view of the Saudis, who rely on British support to keep a substantial part of their air force operational, under the terms of the major contracts described earlier.

At the outset of the intervention, the then UK Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond pledged to “support the Saudis in every practical way short of engaging in combat” (Foster et al., 2015). In 2019, a British technician who had been stationed in Saudi Arabia during the war told journalists from Channel 4 that if British support were withdrawn then “in seven to 14 days there wouldn’t be a jet in the sky” over Yemen. A former Saudi Air Force officer told the same documentary makers that his compatriots “can’t keep the Typhoon in the air without the British”, and that – notwithstanding the importance of US-supplied jets to the war effort – the British-supplied Typhoon was so crucial that “without the Typhoon they will stop the war” (Dispatches, 2019).

Throughout the war, the world’s leading human rights NGOs, humanitarian NGOs and experts reporting to the UN Security Council have documented a consistent record of violations of international humanitarian law, up to and including possible war crimes, committed by the Saudi air force in Yemen. An October 2015 report by Amnesty International identified specific “serious violations of international humanitarian law, including war crimes”, and more broadly, “a clear pattern of serious violations . . . over a period of several months”, concluding that Coalition bombing was responsible for the majority of civilian deaths in the conflict. In January 2016, a report by a UN investigators leaked to The Guardian described a pattern of “widespread and systematic” attacks on civilian targets (Amnesty International, 2015;

MacAskill, 2016). At the same time, a blockade imposed by the Saudi-led coalition has resulted in a man-made humanitarian crisis which, according to Save The Children, had led to an estimated 85,000 infant deaths as a result of extreme hunger or preventable disease by 2018 (Save the Children, 2018). The UN panel of experts warned in 2019 that if starvation was deliberately being used as a war tactic then that would amount to a war crime, and one in which the US, the UK and France could be liable as leading external facilitators of the Saudi-led intervention (Wintour, 2019).

Taking the examples of Bahrain and Yemen in the context of the wider political economy of UK–Gulf relations, it is clear that state violence continues to play a central, constitutive role, as it has done since the days of formal empire, and that Britain’s role in providing the means of such violence is significant.

Conclusions

Beyond the empirical detail on EU–MENA arms sales laid out in this chapter, the argument has been made that those exports are not purely a commercial matter, but part of a wider geostrategic landscape. Crucially, state violence has been an important component in the processes through which the MENA region has been integrated into the system of global capitalism, and the European powers have played a leading role in providing the means of such violence.

The European powers’ are implicated in the violence of authoritarian regimes in MENA to such a deep and consistent extent that questions must be raised about the wider meaning of this phenomenon. Concepts such as human rights and democracy are often taken to be synonymous with Europe, and portrayed as European or Western values. But if the empirical record is to have any bearing on what we take to be European values, then the record of the European powers in the MENA region stands as a powerful counterpoint to these familiar assumptions within our intellectual discourse. Authoritarianism and human rights abuses in MENA cannot be meaningfully externalised as the violence of the regional regimes – as Arab or Muslim violence – when the means of that violence are consistently supplied by European powers, and the West more broadly. This violence cannot be externalised when it has resided at the heart of the European powers’ relationship with the region throughout modern history. Europe is implicated in the authoritarianism and violence of the MENA regimes to such a degree that these must be considered – to a significant extent – forms of European authoritarianism and violence as well.

However, the future of these relationships is uncertain. If the world takes serious action to avoid the worst of the climate emergency in the limited time that remains available, then a large amount of the region’s oil and natural gas will have to remain in the ground. This would in turn severely limit the flow of petrodollars available for arms purchases, alter the strategic significance of the region that has underpinned wider forms of EU–MENA military cooperation, and thus undermine the ability of the regional regimes to maintain their means of violence and ultimately their authoritarian rule. It is impossible to predict how such a future would play out, but these are likely to be the trends to watch over the coming decades.

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