On 8 April 2021, the Bussola Institute, in partnership with the Atlantic Council, hosted a webinar addressing Iran’s regional policies in relation to small arms and illicit weapons. These policies are widely considered to be the product of a number of competing priorities centred around the ideology of Iran’s Islamic revolution and the perception of threats to the regime from external interests. Iran supports and supplies a range of armed non-state actors as part of its foreign policy objectives. The extent and impact of the security threats have been established in the recently released report by the Atlantic Council, *A Guide to Illicit Iranian Weapon Transfers: The Bahrain File*, authored by Tim Michetti. The report highlights the necessity of developing transparent monitoring systems in the Gulf region for stopping illicit weapons transfers. This webinar examined what actions could be taken to support regional and international measures to address the threats posed by illicit weapons transfers in the Gulf. As the US administration considers re-joining the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a range of confidence-building measures will be necessary in the pursuit of regional cohesion. This webinar explored how the EU can work with Gulf states in support of effective security measures for the region.
THE EXPERTS FOR THE PANEL INCLUDED:

Mr. Tim Michetti

Ms. Rasha Al Jouandy
Senior Researcher for Gulf Affairs, b’huth – Dubai Public Policy Research Centre, Dubai

Dr. Richard Burchill
Senior Research Fellow, Bussola Institute, Brussels

The webinar was moderated by Mr. John Dennehy, Secretary-General of the Bussola Institute.
Iran, Armed Non-state Actors and Small Arms

A key dimension of Iran’s foreign policy is the support of armed non-state actors across the Gulf, Middle East, and the wider world. With this backing, the provision of weaponry, including small arms and light weapons, components, and ammunition is commonplace (hereafter, the term small arms will be used to cover the full range of materiel in question). Support for armed non-state actors is morally and politically problematic and often runs contrary to international legal obligations related to responsibility in armed conflicts. Furthermore, the 2030 Agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 16.1) seeks to significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates and this includes the impact of small arms. The supply of small arms to armed non-state actors has a destabilising impact on security in the Gulf region, impeding efforts to realise sustainable peace and security.

Iran makes widespread use of armed non-state actors for diverse foreign policy and security objectives. It is currently backing various Iraqi militias for the purpose of expanding Iranian influence within Iraq. These militias are typically well-organised military units and have a significant impact on the political situation in Iraq. A number of the Iranian-backed militias are suspected of involvement in arbitrary killings and criminal activities. Iran’s support for Hezbollah is widely known and Hezbollah’s involvement in conflict zones around Lebanon and further afield has also been well documented. Hezbollah is also known to be widely involved in terrorist acts and violent criminal activity around the world, including in the European Union. Iran saw an opportunity to extend its support to Ansar Allah in Yemen as part of Iran’s objective to create instability in the wider Gulf region. This support has varied over time, initially involving small arms and escalating to the provision of material for short-range ballistic missiles.

Iran’s ongoing funding and assistance to armed non-state actors is a point of debate and disagreement regarding responses and responsibility. As some of the groups that Iran supports are also involved in acts of social and economic governance, analysts tend to excuse the involvement of Iran in supporting these groups as they engage in armed conflict or criminal activities. Hezbollah and Ansar Allah are the more prominent examples of this, and illicit weapons found in Bahrain have been similar to and part of the same trafficking networks used by these groups. Hezbollah has been able to build a global transnational criminal network through its Iranian support, as well as being an active participant in the Syrian conflict. Ansar Allah continues
to frustrate attempts at bringing peace to Yemen as Iran’s backing, including the provision of materiel and technical support, allows the group to continue its armed campaign. There is a tendency to marginalise the relevance of Iran’s support for armed non-state actors as it is seen as a secondary matter in comparison to the attention given to global diplomacy seeking to regulate Iran’s nuclear weapons programme.

The report published by the Atlantic Council, *A Guide to Illicit Iranian Weapons Transfers: The Bahrain File*, provides essential evidence on the extent of Iran’s role in supporting armed non-state actors through illicit weapons transfers. While current attention remains focussed on Iran’s nuclear situation, the continued support by Iran for armed non-state actors is arguably a more dangerous situation for regional and global security. Iran’s supply of arms and related items is often done through illicit channels which is an illegitimate activity in any legal system. Equipping armed non-state actors that then carry out attacks contrary to international humanitarian law raises issues about state responsibility in the conflict. As Hezbollah and Ansar Allah have been documented as being responsible for terrorist activity, Iran’s supply of small arms to these groups raises issues of state responsibility. The Bahrain File exposes the extent of Iran’s activities and their impact on the GCC states. To address Iran’s activities concerning the illicit trafficking of small arms, it is imperative to ensure the development of a regional system for regulating the manufacture, import/export, and distribution of small arms. For states committed to multilateralism in the pursuit of peace and security, cooperation through such a regional framework brings obvious benefits. For the GCC states, given the conflicts surrounding their region and the negative impact of small arms entering their territories, a regional framework to limit Iran’s activities in this space would be a significant contribution to sustainable peace and well-being in the region.

**The Bahrain File**

*The Bahrain File* study, produced by Tim Michetti, is a result of work funded by Conflict Armament Research (CAR) – a monitoring organisation that is supported by national governments, the European Commission and the United Nations. The report provides information regarding the wider impact of Iran’s illicit arms supply throughout the wider Gulf region, demonstrating the breadth of the matter. The evidence in the report comes from the Bahraini Public Security Forces (PSF) as a result of security operations conducted from 2013 to 2018, the case study from the seizure of materiel from the ship Jihan 1, and the results of an investigation by a UN Panel of Experts. The charting of illicit weapons movements in detail brings to light “distinct ecosystems” where the presence and use of illicit weapons is a result of particular circumstances. The report also shows the existence of “cross-regional ecosystems” where the material has shared provenance (Iran) and being used by different actors or in different forms of conflict. This demonstrates the depth of the issue and how a relatively small amount of materiel may result in significant disruption to sustainable peace and security.

*The Bahrain File* acts “as a guide to identify illicit conventional and unconventional materiel attributable to Iran” and informs evidence-based analysis regarding how Iran supports and supplies armed non-state actors across the region. The methodology in the report is rooted in “Weapons Technical Intelligence”, which monitors the origins of small arms and their subsequent distribution. The report exposes the extent to which Iran has been supplying small arms, ammunition, explosives, and related equipment to a range of armed non-state actors in the Gulf region. The evidence not only links these small arms to ongoing armed conflicts in the region, it also shows how Iran’s supply of illicit weapons supports terrorism and other criminal activity.
The *Bahrain File* provides recommendations that will support the development of a regional system for monitoring the illicit traffic of small arms, going forward. This includes improving transparency and information gathering in relation to manufacturing, import and export, storage, and increasing vigilance of these activities. This necessitates increased coordination in the region, which can benefit from experiences from the international community and the European Union.

**Regional Monitoring and Managing of the Illicit Weapons Trade**

The illicit trafficking of small arms and the negative impacts caused is not unique to the Gulf region, it is a global issue of concern. The matter is included in the Sustainable Development Goals with Goal 16, the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development. Within this Goal, the specific target (16.4) is the significant reduction of illicit financial and arms flows and this will be determined by reference to the proportion of arms seized, where the origin and context can be traced or established in line with international practice.

The international community has recognised the negative global impact of the illicit arms trade in a UN General Assembly Resolution adopted in 1991. This led to the creation of an expert committee to study the matter further, resulting in a UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms in 2001. This conference adopted a programme of action to address illicit small arms which included improvements in national legal systems, more effective import/export controls, enhancements in stockpile management, and global cooperation and assistance. Also in 2001, the Firearms Protocol to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime was adopted, coming into force in 2005. This is the only global international legal instrument addressing the illicit trade in small arms. It sets out obligations and action for the control and regulation of arms and arms flow to prevent their illicit transfer. The EU and a majority of its Member States, along with Oman, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia from the GCC, are parties to the Firearms Protocol. The combination of the Firearms Protocol as a binding legal instrument and the programme of action on the illicit trade in small arms as a non-binding agreement creates a wide-ranging framework for furthering international cooperation.
For the GCC states, both in response to Iran’s activities and more broadly pursuing multilateral approaches to peace and security, a regional system for addressing the trafficking and use of illicit small arms is an effective way forward. The international system offers support for this endeavour providing the normative backing, subject-specific expertise and technical support for the development of regional action. Regional initiatives and frameworks addressing small arms are prominent in Europe due to the EU, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Wassenaar Agreement. Each of these initiatives is grounded in global efforts to control and limit the illicit traffic of small arms, while at the same time focusing on different issues and involving diverse memberships. Of course, it is not possible to merely transpose one regional approach to another region, yet the experience and technical expertise available from the European experience is beneficial in supporting efforts to control the illicit transfer of small arms elsewhere.

The EU first addressed the issue of small arms in a 1998 action plan as part of its foreign and security policy. A 2002 update to the action plan set out key objectives that continue to guide activity in this area, such as working to address the destabilising impact of the accumulation and spread of small arms and the problems caused, along with working to reduce stocks. A 2015 action plan continued to develop these themes, increasing cooperation within the region and with countries outside the EU. In this action plan, closer cooperation with the Middle East and North Africa for controlling illicit trafficking in small arms was raised. The EU’s security agendas also recognise the impact of illicit small arms and the need for greater cooperation with global actors. In 2018 the EU adopted an updated “EU Strategy Against Illicit Firearms, Small Arms & Light Weapons & Their Ammunition.” The updated Strategy reinforces EU action around four pillars - (a) strengthening the normative framework; (b) implementation of norms in different life cycle phases of firearms/SALW; (c) compliance through monitoring and enforcement, and (d) international cooperation and assistance. The 2018 Strategy views the EU’s actions as embedded in the global framework on the illicit traffic of small arms as established by the UN, providing a basis for regional action and inter-regional cooperation.

The 2018 Strategy makes clear the importance of the normative imperative for taking action on small arms as the illicit trade and circulation of these weapons impacts the realisation of the sustainable development goals, hampers crisis management, contributes to the destabilisation of societies, states, and regions, fuels organised crime, and supports terrorist activity. This position supports the global framework in attempting to reinforce accountability and responsibility in ensuring the illicit traffic of small arms is reduced, something that requires increased commitment and cooperation. The increase in commitment and cooperation requires a strengthening of, and a commitment to, the normative position, leading to the improvement of regulation and controls over small arms along with increasing capacity in knowledge and expertise.

The OSCE provides a model that focuses on confidence-building measures amongst its participants to help broaden the normative and practical frameworks for action. The OSCE has experience in working with ongoing conflict situations and post-conflict rebuilding. It has produced extensive guidance on technical good practices and administrative arrangements that support states in developing effective regulatory systems. The Wassenaar Agreement is not exclusive to Europe (nor is the OSCE), as it has a diverse membership consisting of 42 states from around the world, including 25 EU Member States and 26 NATO members. The Wassenaar Agreement seeks to foster greater responsibility in controlling the import and export of various weapons, including small arms and dual-use technology preventing “destabilising accumulations.” The Agreement is directed at voluntary information sharing and transparency regarding weapons sales and transfers. It has developed various good practices and support networks, as well as supporting confidence building through its voluntary practices.
Developing a Regional Approach to Illicit Arms for the Gulf

There is much to be gained by the GCC states from these multilateral initiatives dealing with illicit arms to address Iran’s activities. It is a matter also in the interest of the EU and European states, as security concerns related to the region are impacted by Iran’s activities in supporting armed non-state actors. In 2019, the EU undertook a joint project with the League of Arab States on combatting the illicit trade of small arms and their proliferation. The project involved information sharing along with technical training for supporting customs administration and for the detection of illicit weapons. The cooperative project also addressed issues of effective management of small arms stockpiles, including related equipment, and ensuring demobilisation and disengagement of fighters is realised. The objective of this project was to support national and regional efforts in developing capacity that supports the UN system combatting the proliferation of illicit small arms as a means of increasing security and combating terrorism. The EU could extend its support to the GCC countries in developing a similar partnership with the GCC and drawing on the wider experiences gained from the OSCE and Wassenaar Agreement.

The starting point for furthering a regional arrangement to address small arms is a reinforcement of the normative framework. The GCC region is surrounded by ongoing conflicts that are prolonged by armed non-state actors, which increases the demand for illicit arms. While limiting the illicit traffic of arms will not end these conflicts, it would be beneficial to bring about their eventual resolution and the pursuit of sustainable security at the local level. Reinforcement of the normative framework leads to further cooperation as all concerned will be striving to support the same objective, resulting in the evolution of confidence-building measures. Confidence-building leads to practical measures of multilateral cooperation to address the illicit trafficking of small arms through actions such as technical expertise in monitoring and labelling, reinforcing border controls, establishing systems for transparency in import and export activities. These measures can start as voluntary compliance mechanisms in a fashion similar to the Wassenaar Agreement, hopefully, over time, building up the capacity and confidence to adopt greater transparency.

“IIn 2019, the EU undertook a joint project with the League of Arab States on combatting the illicit trade of small arms and their proliferation. The project involved information sharing along with technical training for supporting customs administration and for the detection of illicit weapons.”
In the Gulf region, historically there has been a reluctance to increase multilateral cooperation, as it involves the sharing of information in areas such as border control, arms purchases, or the import/export controls for arms, and these are deemed sensitive national issues. Engagement in the UN programme of action, which includes reporting procedures, is bringing about some change that can be furthered by ongoing reinforcement of the normative framework. *The Bahrain File* provides evidence as to how a small cache of arms has an impact on varying ecosystems of crime and conflict, sowing instability on a wider scale. The GCC parties to the Firearms Protocol, through their legally binding obligations, are in a position to take the lead in furthering agreed norms in this area, facilitating increased cooperation in the region. An established, rigorous regional system of control and inspection would greatly enhance the security situation as well as limit Iran’s ability to spread further instability. In addition, increasing transparency and fostering responsibility may work to uncover Iran’s activities, something in the interest of the GCC states.

Globally, it is clear that the accumulation and movement of small arms are most prevalent in territories with weak governance, where the state authorities are not in a position to address the illicit trade and may even be complicit in it. It is at the local level of society where the negative impact of small arms is felt most. As the Sustainable Development Goals make clear, it is necessary to reduce the amount of illicit arms being trafficked and used in conflicts, terrorism, and criminal activity. The reinforcement of the normative framework directed at limiting the illicit trafficking of small arms is an essential first step. This would support global cooperation in the sharing of knowledge and technical expertise can reinforce regional efforts. Going forward, increasing collaboration between the GCC states and existing European institutions can mainstream the importance of addressing the illicit use of small arms by non-state-actors and foster greater responsibility in stopping this trade. Cooperation can be directed towards:

- Reinforcing the normative framework globally and in the Gulf region – the UAE’s upcoming membership on the UN Security Council provides an opportunity for this;

- Increasing technical expertise – the sharing of expertise and experience between Europe and the Gulf would ensure that global standards are upheld in the regional context.