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## **When Do Free-riders Start Cooperating? A Study on the European Arms Control Regime.**

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### **Citation**

Sertore, E. (2021). *When Do Free-riders Start Cooperating?: A Study on the European Arms Control Regime.*

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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# **When Do Free-riders Start Cooperating? A Study on the European Arms Control Regime.**

**Master Thesis - Msc International Organization  
Leiden University - Faculty of Social Sciences**

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**Word count** 1050

*Photo frontpage: UAE Mirage 2000. Retrieved from:*

*<https://www.flickr.com/photos/uflinks/9491712187/in/photostream/>*

## **Abstract**

The EU arms control regime is a set of rules agreed at the European level in order to harmonize Member states' arms export policies. Among the norms established by the regime, there is the specific requirement to deny export licences to countries performing poor records of human rights protection or responsible for international humanitarian law violations. Although the strict observance of these provisions is of significant importance for the preservation of international peace and security, they are often subject to infractions for the sake of material benefits. It follows that the European arms control regime is a case in point of collective action dilemma that this study seeks to throw more light on by investigating whether and to what extent social norms make collective action more feasible as well as the temptation to free-ride surmountable. On the basis of a qualitative content analysis applied to a single case study, the research provides empirical findings suggesting a positive answer to the question.

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## 1. Introduction

*While remote and desperately poor, Yemen is not irrelevant, nor is the war raging there. We ignore troubled places, irrelevant places at our peril. If we have learned anything over the past 20 years, it is that no country's problems are beyond our concern. Enlightened self-interest, if for no other reason, makes a resolution of this conflict and remediation of its roots in our interest—and that is “our” interest in the broadest sense of the word.*

- Barbara K. Bodine (Former US Ambassador to Yemen)

Six years after the escalation of the conflict, Yemen still remains the worst humanitarian crisis in the world (UN, 2020). Along with the total collapse of the economy and social services, some 80% of the Yemeni population is in deep need of humanitarian assistance and is currently facing a dramatically increasing threat of famine (World Bank, 2020).

The ongoing civil war is currently fought between two parties claiming power over the country, along with the relative allies: on the one side, the Houthi movement - formed in 2004 and consisting of members of a branch of Shia Islam, a religious minority in Yemen - and on the other side, the internationally recognised Hadi government<sup>1</sup>. It began in 2014, when Houthis attacked and took control of the capital, supported by the former enemy and president Saleh, with the goal of overthrowing the government. The exacerbation of the conflict is attributable to the 2015 military intervention launched by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and several other countries in support of president Hadi. This uninterrupted civil war brought about an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, deteriorated by the constant violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by both warring parties (Human Rights Council, 2019).

Being that Saudi Arabia and the UAE are among the largest customers of the European arms industry, one of the most contested issues related to the Yemen war is the questionable legality of arms transfers to parties to the conflict by European democracies (Arms Trade

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<sup>1</sup> The origins of the conflict in Yemen are rooted in historical tensions dating back to the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. For further information, see Stephen W. Day and Noel Brehony. (2020). *Global, Regional, and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis*. Springer International Publishing AG.

Watch, 2019; Human Rights Council, 2019). Indeed, the approval of arms transfers to such countries appears to be inconsistent with the provisions included in the arms export control regime<sup>2</sup> that they have themselves agreed upon (Maletta, 2021).

The EU arms control regime is a set of common rules agreed at the European level in order to harmonize and strengthen member states' arms export policies in compliance with the EU fundamental values, rooted in the rejection of war as a means of settling international disputes, the promotion of peace and respect for human rights (Anastasiou, 2007; Bromley, 2012). After the end of the Cold War, the emphasis on conflict prevention and human rights protection - along with other factors<sup>3</sup> - considerably contributed to the call for a more ethical approach to foreign policies and consequently, arms exports (Bromley, 2012). The current cornerstone of such efforts consists of the Council Common Position, introduced in 2008 by adapting and replacing the previous 1998 EU Code of Conduct (Hansen, 2016). As a legally-binding instrument, it reiterates the commitment of member states to their international obligations within the scope of arms export - such as the 1996 Wassenaar Arrangement and the 2013 Arms Trade Treaty - and incorporates the demand of a responsible arms export by laying down a set of criteria to be respected in the assessment of an export licence concession (Council Common Position, 2008). Member states are required to:

- Deny an export licence if the country of final destination fails to respect human rights and international humanitarian law because of the clear risk that military technology or equipment to be exported might be used for internal repression or in commission of serious violations of international humanitarian law.
- Deny an export licence which would provoke or prolong armed conflicts or aggravate existing tensions or conflicts in the country of final destination.
- Deny an export licence which would undermine the preservation of regional peace, security and stability.

Given that EU member states are accountable for about a third of the worldwide arms export, the strict observance of these norms is of significant importance for the preservation of international peace and security (Hansen, 2016). However, in spite of the commitment to common and legally-binding instruments regulating arms trade, inconsistencies in member

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<sup>2</sup> From now on, the expression "arms export control" will be replaced by "arms control".

<sup>3</sup> For more information about the origins of the European arms control regime, see Bromley, Mark. (2012). *The Review of EU Common Position on Arms Exports: Prospects for Strengthened Controls*. Stockholm Peace Research Institute, Non-proliferation Paper No. 7.

states' national export decisions are not unusual (Maletta, 2021). Indeed, behind the rhetoric about the willingness to cooperate on a more ethical approach to arms sales, states often find a way out to the non-compliance with international obligations for the sake of material interests (Cooper, 2011; Erickson, 2011; Hansen, 2016).

The Yemen conflict represents a clear-cut example of such contradictions. Since the beginning of the military escalation, international humanitarian organizations, NGOs and UN agencies have widely documented the unregulated conduct of both warring parties and the resulting devastating consequences on the population (Amnesty International, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020). According to the provisions of the European arms control regime, arms transfers to the Saudi-led coalition should have been refrained in light of such severe violations of international law, but in fact this was not the case. On one side, some member states - for example Germany, Denmark, Finland and The Netherlands - have progressively halted or restricted arms exports to Saudi Arabia and other countries of the coalition (Maletta, 2021). On the other side, other member states - such as France and Italy - have continued with their supplies, thus undermining the goal of responsible arms transfers (Erickson, 2013; Maletta, 2021). It follows that in order for the principles underlying the European arms control regime to be upheld, a strong and homogenous commitment to the rules is required, making the success of this institution strictly dependent on the collective willingness to faithfully cooperate in order to achieve common objectives. Accordingly, the failure to engage in faithful cooperation determines the failure of the regime itself and, in this respect, the humanitarian crisis in Yemen is an evident instance (Musa, 2017).

The decision of some member states - although it came at different stages - to halt or restrict arms export to the Saudi-led coalition in the Yemen conflict demonstrates that the temptation to free-ride can be overcome notwithstanding the material benefits deriving from it. But when is this the case? What leads a European member state to decide to give up free-riding on the efforts of others and engage in cooperation in responsible arms export?

Extensive literature on collective action highlights the role played by social norms in enabling large-scale cooperation between individuals (Andersson, 2015; Bicchieri et al., 2018; Gavrillets & Richerson, 2017; Milinski et al., 2002; Ostrom, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Social norms can be defined as culturally transmitted social attitudes of approval and disapproval governing human behaviour (Sunstein, 1996). They specify whether a conduct is socially appropriate or not and, as a result, they are reinforced by the approval of compliant



individuals and the punishment of those who do not apply such norms (Gavrilets & Richerson, 2017). Thorough scholarship demonstrates that by prescribing a sort of “grammar of social interactions”, social norms carry a significant weight in facilitating the solution of collective action issues (Bicchieri et al., 2018).

This study looks at the European arms control regime as a form of collective action problem by investigating the extent to which social norms influence the likelihood of successful and faithful cooperation on arms export. In particular, it will analyse the Italian decision of halting arms exports to Saudi Arabia and the UAE as it represents a suitable case study for researching the effect of social norms upon the free-riding behaviour within the EU arms control regime.

The contribution that it intends to provide to the understanding of collective action in arms export control has both a theoretical and policy relevance. On the theoretical level, it links the literature on collective action and the literature on arms control with the purpose of analysing the variables that are posited to increase the likelihood of successful cooperation in this field. On the policy level, it contributes to the ongoing debate on the enhancement of a common European approach to arms export policies by providing empirical based evidence of the role played by social norms in fostering collective action.

By exploring the conditions deemed to make collective action achievable as well as the temptation to free-ride surmountable within the European arms control regime, this study will therefore attempt to answer the following research question: *Which role do social norms play in facilitating collective action in the European arms control regime?*

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Arms Control Regimes**

The pursuit of a balance between economic, political, security and ethical needs and interests unquestionably makes arms export so controversial that it is regarded as “one of the most contested issues challenging democracies” (Tago & Schneider, 2012). Arms transfers constitute an economic necessity for the European defence industry as well as an obstacle to the normative goal of spreading peace and stability worldwide (Erickson, 2011). Besides economic profit, arms transfers also signal a political relationship between the supplier and the recipient which might suggest a certain degree of dependence of the latter on the former (Kinsella, 1998). Such a position might in turn give exporters a leverage to achieve concessions in return, making arms supply a unique form of political influence over the receiving country and thus a great source of political interest (Catrina, 1988). In addition to that, they represent political decisions as they entail a direct conveyance of the capability to carry out political violence and thus an inevitable impact on regional security (Kinsella, 1998; Moore, 2010). As a result, EU member states can subject third countries and individuals to security threats through the export of arms, hence the need for a restrictive and homogenous control on this kind of trade (Hansen, 2016). Furthermore, the attempt to coordinate arms export is also due to commercial reasons - asserting that the European defence industry requires a level playing field from a legal point of view - and moral concerns over conflicts and abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law (Bromley, 2012; Hansen, 2016). These are the rationales explaining the formation of the EU arms control regime.

International regimes consist of provisions for an issue-area of international relations regulating the behaviour of participating states (Schimmelfennig, 1994). Accordingly, the concept of arms control regimes falls within the field of cooperative security as means of achieving international security through limits and restraints on military forces with the ultimate aim of preventing the risk of war (Larsen, 2002). In this respect, Schelling and Halperin (1985) argue that the objective of an arms control regime is to reduce the political and economic costs of preparing war and minimise its scope in case it occurs. A correlated effect of arms control is therefore the enhancement of national security, especially against nuclear proliferation (Larsen, 2012).

The proper functioning of arms control regimes is what Schimmelfennig (1994) defines “regime robustness”, meaning that the rule-compliant behaviour of states is guaranteed and the goals of the regime are attained. A number of theories might explain the conditions under which regimes are expected to be more robust by focussing on factors such as power distribution, the degree of national interests in the enforcement of the regime, the distribution and perception of net gains and the stability of the normative environment (Schimmelfennig, 1994). However, all these theories look at international regimes from the perspective of either states as rational actors or the normative quality of the regime itself, leaving aside the theoretical comparability between effective arms control regimes and successful collective action. Indeed, the likelihood of achieving common objectives - which is the basic purpose of any international regime - is highly correlated to the full commitment of each member state. The same goes for the European arms control regime, which is therefore considered a suitable case for collective action theory.

## **2.2. Collective Action**

Collective action is expected to occur when the achievement of an objective requires the efforts of two or more countries (Sandler, 2015). As Sandler (2000) points out, “arms control regimes represent the quintessential collective action problem with the need for a large number of heterogeneous participants to act. [...] It is in every suppliers' interests to free-ride on the efforts of those who limit their arms sales through arms control regimes, while surreptitiously consummating weapon sales that undercut the regimes”. The establishment of a solid and cohesive arms control regime falls within the provision of a global public good because it is jointly produced and it provides benefits to all members of the group, who are also expected to bear the costs involved in the provision (Desai, 2003; Heckathorn, 1993). Given its public good nature, it is consequently liable to suffer from the major collective action problem of free-riding, namely the failure of an individual to contribute to collective action while still enjoying its benefits (Heckathorn, 1993; Kaul, 2012). Moreover, arms control regimes are public goods characterized by weakest-link aggregation technology, meaning that the nation doing the least to comply with the rules will determine the success of the whole regime (Sandler, 1998; 2000).

The literature on collective action finds its roots in Olson's (1965) *The Logic of Collective Action*. In the attempt to define the principles of collective action, the author advances several propositions concerning group size, group composition and institutional recommendations

(Sandler, 2015). The larger the group, the lower the collective provision level; groups characterized by heterogeneity in their members characteristics - such as preferences and resources - are more likely to achieve collective action; collective action can be prompted by institutional design involving coercion (Sandler, 2015). When these conditions are not met, Olson's zero contribution thesis (1965) claims that rational, self-interested individuals will be less likely to act in their common interest. Olson's thesis has been extensively challenged for its limited explanatory power of concrete collective action problems (Runge, 1984; Ostrom, 2000; Ferguson, 2013; Pecorino, 2015; Sandler, 2015). An outstanding contribution in this respect derives from Ostrom's work on commons (1998; 2000; 2003; 2010). Although her research mainly addresses the governance of the commons, her findings are as relevant as ever in providing valuable insights into the topic of this study. By applying a theory of norm-based human behaviour to collective action, she identifies several variables both at the exogenous and the endogenous level predicted to affect the likelihood of cooperation (Ostrom, 1998; 2010). In a situation that does not need to be repeated, structural variables determining the degree of cooperation between individuals are: the number of participants involved; whether benefits are subtractive or fully shared; heterogeneity of participants and the possibility of face-to-face communication (Ostrom, 2010). When a situation is repeated, additional factors add up: these are information about past actions, how individuals are linked and whether they can enter and exit if they wish so (Ostrom, 2010).

In particular, Ostrom emphasizes the role played by social norms such as trust, reciprocity and reputation in inhibiting the temptation to free-ride and thus prompting the achievement of collective action (1998; 2010). It has been argued that institutions able to convey an expectation of contribution from all its members may actually reinforce it (Runge, 1984). Similarly, Axelrod and Keohane (1985) assert that international institutions can facilitate cooperation by incorporating norms of reciprocity and reputation which, in turn, become important assets in making governments more willing to engage in cooperation. Norms of reciprocity are considered as an unquestionable important determinant of successful collective action (Gächter & Herrmann, 2009) by offering individuals an incentive to accept short-term costs in order to work together to address collective problems (Rönnerstrand & Andersson, 2015). Reputation is deemed equally essential as it enables the development of interpersonal reciprocity and trust, which is meant as individuals' reliance on expectations about others' behaviour before deciding whether to cooperate with them or not in a social dilemma (Milinski et al., 2002; Ostrom; 1998; Putnam, 2000).

The discussion of the literature on arms control regimes and collective action reveals the complexity of addressing how successful cooperation in arms export control can be achieved. Research on the incentives for collective action is abundant and so is the literature on arms control regimes. Nevertheless, less attention has been given to such regimes meant as forms of collective action themselves, thus leading to a void in the understanding of how the likelihood of successful cooperation at the European level can be enhanced in this field. Therefore, this study will attempt to fill this gap by applying insights from collective action theory to the European arms control regime.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

In general terms, collective action can be conceived as “an action taken by a group - either directly or through an organization - in pursuit of members’ perceived shared interests” (Scott & Marshall, 2009). Consistently with this definition, successful collective action is here conceptualised as the collective effort of members of a group to reach a common objective. The conceptualisation of the arms control regime relies on Larsen’s contribution (2002) to scholarship in the field of arms control. He defines arms control as any agreement among states in order to regulate some aspects of their military capability. The European arms control regime is thus understood as the set of principles, norms and rules regulating member states’ behaviour towards arms export. The term “arms” in this study refers to military technology and equipment included in the Common Military List of the EU (2019), which lists all the items whose export needs to be controlled in consistency with the EU Common Position (2008). They range from automatic weapons, accessories, ammunition, bombs and missiles to vehicles, surveillance equipment and chemical weapons.

This study looks at the cooperation dynamics involved in the European governance of arms export control with a specific focus on the variables that are posited to make successful collective action feasible as well as the temptation to free-ride surmountable.

The review of the literature on cooperative behaviour suggests that social norms do count in prompting collective action (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985; Ostrom, 2010). Therefore, assuming that the institutional design of the EU incorporates social norms as argued by Axelrod and Keohane (1985), the theoretical framework of this research takes direct inspiration from Ostrom’s (1998; 2010) preponderant work on the identification of variables at the endogenous level that are predicted to affect the likelihood of collective action. After providing the main theoretical arguments that the research will draw upon, this section advances a set of three hypotheses which are expected to explain the causality between social norms and successful collective action in arms export control. As it will be discussed in the next section, the object of the analysis consists of reports of Italian parliamentary debates over the acceptability of arms export towards the countries of the coalition fighting in Yemen. Therefore, the three theoretical expectations are connected with arguments brought up by members of parliament.

### 3.1. Theoretical Arguments

Ostrom's "core relationships" of reciprocity, reputation and trust between members of a group are deemed essential in developing a theoretical explanation of how successful collective action can be prompted (Ostrom, 2010). Reciprocity, reputation and trust consist of social norms that individuals first internalise in repeated situations that imply interactions with other members of a group, and subsequently adopt and use in their social interactions (Ostrom, 1998). Such norms end up affecting levels of cooperation among members of a group as they are taken into account when it comes to choose between free-riding or collaborating with them.

Reciprocity norms teach individuals to react positively to others' positive actions and negatively to others' negative actions (Ostrom, 1998; 2003; 2010). Applying reciprocity to social interactions is an asset when there is evidence that other individuals will use it in turn, because the effort is likely to be reciprocated (Ostrom, 1998; 2003; 2010). This implies that in a collective action dilemma, a cooperative behaviour is expected to follow up other members' positive actions (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981). Accordingly, reciprocity is conceptualised as the willingness of members of a group to behave in a certain way in light of the fact that other members are doing so.

Reputation serves as an enabling factor for reciprocity, as it defines the identity that individuals create of themselves in order to project their intentions and norms (Ostrom, 1998). Acquiring a reputation as a trustworthy individual is advantageous in social dilemmas because trusting others while being trusted at the same time leads to mutually productive exchanges (Ostrom, 1998). The same logic applies to collective action issues as well: gaining a positive reputation can be the incentive for engaging in cooperation. Reputation is therefore understood here as the image of themselves that members of a group aim at conveying to others.

Finally, trust implies the acceptance to cooperate with others on the expectation that they will reciprocate in turn (Ostrom & Walker, 2003). Trust that individuals have in others thus affects whether they will collaborate or not in social dilemmas and collective action issues. Because definitions of trust are quite disparate in the literature, the term implies here the willingness to cooperate with others on the expectation that they will reciprocate in turn (Ostrom & Walker, 2003).

The three variables of reciprocity, reputation and trust are said to be core relationships because they mutually reinforce each other in such a way that any increase or decrease in their level will lead respectively to more or less cooperation (Ostrom, 2010). The combined effect of social norms is expected to overcome material benefits tempting individuals to free-ride (Ostrom, 2010).

### **3.2. Hypotheses**

The literature linking reciprocity, reputation and trust to the success of collective action leads up to a relative set of three hypotheses that are expected to explain the extent to which social norms within the EU enhance the likelihood of successful and faithful cooperation on arms export while inhibiting the temptation to free-ride.

*(H1) Reciprocity*: Parliamentarians use other member states' compliant behaviour as an argument to adhere to the arms control regime.

*(H2) Reputation*: Parliamentarians use the matter of the Italian international reputation as an argument to adhere to the arms control regime.

*(H3) Trust*: Parliamentarians use their trust in other member states' intentions as an argument to adhere to the arms control regime.



## **4. Methodology**

Qualitative research on a single case study will be conducted, as the research question requires an investigation on the development and perception of social norms as a facilitating condition for collective action. Besides the fact that this variable cannot be easily given a numerical value, the aim of the study needs to be addressed by researching contextual information about symbolic practices and meaningful beliefs attached to social relations, which would be unfeasible with quantitative research (Roberts, 2014).

### **4.1. Case Selection**

A single case study has been chosen because it allows a greater focus on causal mechanisms through a detailed contextualized analysis and thus the obtainment of results that contribute to accumulating knowledge over broader political patterns (Gerring, 2009). A typical case study is proposed because it represents an instance of a broader phenomenon and allows to explore in detail the causal mechanisms under consideration in order to either confirm or disconfirm them (Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

The case selection is guided by its relevance to the research objective of the study. Accordingly, the case selected for this study consists of Italy's decision in January 2021 to halt arms exports to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the context of the Yemen conflict, thus joining the commitment of other European member states to the compliance with the provisions under the arms export control regime. The Italian case is considered appropriate for the goal of the research because it represents a typical case of a country which has been free-riding on the efforts of others for years before deciding to cooperate with them, subordinating material interests to the compliance with the arms control regime. The time span between the escalation of the Yemen conflict - which coincides with the conditions for which the arms trade should have been refrained - and the announcement of the suspension of arms export might have been crucial for the development of the investigated social norms. Indeed, Ostrom (2010) points out that social norms are learned through repeated situations, which is the case of Italy as the time spent free-riding provided the opportunity to acknowledge how other member states were behaving in relation to the issue. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been among the largest customers of the Italian arms industry, therefore providing Italy with strong incentives for free-riding - as it was the case

until January 2021 (SIPRI, 2021). Lastly, Italy has been chosen as a typical case because by representing the most recent example of engagement in collective action in halting arms exports, it allows the observation of causation over a broader timeframe and thus the formulation of more reliable inferences. Finally, the analysis is conducted within the timeframe between the escalation of the Yemen conflict in 2015 and the Italian announcement of the block of arms export in January 2021.

#### **4.2. Methods of Data Collection and Analysis**

In order to investigate the role played by social norms in encouraging Italy's decision to engage in collective action, this study will apply content analysis to secondary sources, namely the reports of 67 Italian parliamentary debates - taking place in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate of the Republic - over the acceptability of arms export towards the countries of the coalition fighting in Yemen, in particular Saudi Arabia and the UAE<sup>4</sup>. Such debates can offer valuable insights into a consistent part of the domestic decision-making process and rationales that lead up to the decision to halt arms exports. Furthermore, the parliament is the place where politicians can - more or less openly - exchange and discuss their point of views, opinions and positions on behalf of their parties and therefore allows an insightful perspective on the alleged role played by social norms.

A content analysis is proposed as it focuses in a highly systematic way on selected aspects of meanings according to the research question (Schreier, 2013). It is suitable for the aim of the study as it reveals themes and main ideas of the text as well as context information while studying and interpreting them in detail and in-depth (Mayring, 2000). Moreover, by systematically identifying specific characteristics of messages, qualitative analysis can provide an in-depth insight into both manifest and latent content (Nefes, 2020).

The content analysis will be applied through categories and indicators associated with the variables conceptualized in the previous section, with the goal of identifying the expected causal relationship among them. The creation of a coding frame for the analysis of the data will follow a mixed approach, that is both deductive and inductive, as the three theoretical derived hypotheses need to be brought in connection with the text (Mayring, 2000).

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<sup>4</sup> The reports can be accessed through the links listed in Appendix 1.

Finally, Table 1 shows the link between conceptualisation and operationalisation of the relevant variables.

Table 1. *Conceptualisation and operationalisation of the relevant variables*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Conceptualisation</b>	<b>Operationalisation</b>
Successful collective action	Collective effort of members of a group to reach a common objective	Parliamentarians' arguments expressing willingness to suspend arms export to countries which violate human rights and IHL
Arms control regime	Set of principles, norms and rules regulating member states' behaviour towards arms export	Parliamentarians' arguments referring to the provisions requiring the suspension of arms export to countries which violate human rights and IHL
Arms	Military technology and equipment included in the Common Military List of the EU	Parliamentarians' explicit reference to the concept of arms and related terms such as military goods, armaments, bombs, aerial bombs, missiles
Reciprocity	Willingness of members of a group to behave in a certain way in light of the fact that other members are doing so	Parliamentarians' arguments expressing willingness to suspend arms sales to countries which violate human rights and IHL in light of the fact that other member states are doing so
Reputation	Image of themselves that members of a group aim at conveying to others	Parliamentarians' arguments referring to the Italian international image linked with arms export to countries which violate human rights and IHL
Trust	Willingness to cooperate with others on the expectation that they will reciprocate in turn	Parliamentarians' arguments referring to their expectations on other member states' behaviour with regard to arms export to countries which violate human rights and IHL

### 4.3. Coding Frame

The data collected from 67 Italian parliamentary debates provides the basis for the development of three main categories and the relative subcategories associated with the set of hypotheses advanced by this study, as well as the indicators useful to recognise the presence of the phenomena under consideration (Schreier, 2013). Table 2 illustrates the full coding scheme.

Table 2. *Coding frame for content analysis*

Hypothesis	Main category	Subcategories	Indicators
<i>Reciprocity</i>	Reference to what other EU member states do	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positive model</li> <li>- Act in coordination</li> <li>- One of the reasons</li> </ul>	Germany, Sweden, The Netherlands, Finland, European countries, as already decided by
<i>Reputation</i>	Allusion to the image of Italy on the international level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Group of states abiding by the rules</li> <li>- Duty towards the Union</li> <li>- Model for other countries</li> <li>- Comparison of commitment</li> </ul>	International credibility, commitment, effort, role of our country, coherence
<i>Trust</i>	Confidence that other EU member states will not speculate on the Italian block of sales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Protect national interest</li> <li>- Make sure of other countries' intentions</li> </ul>	-

As Table 2 shows, for the first hypothesis which draws on *reciprocity* to explain the Italian decision to halt arms export licenses to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the main category is *reference to what other EU member states do*. This category is present when members of parliament state that Italy should halt export licenses by linking this assertion to the evidence that other member states are doing so. Three subcategories have been generated in order to specify what the content expresses in relation to the main category (Schreier, 2013):

- *Positive model* is used when other member states are portrayed as a positive model to imitate in contrast with the current Italian position.
- *Act in coordination* pertains to arguments in favour of acting in coordination with those member states halting arms export.
- *One of the reasons* applies when parliamentarians mention other EU member states abiding by the arms control regime among the incentives to stop arms export towards Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Indicators attesting the presence of such categories include words such as *Germany, Sweden, Denmark, The Netherlands, Finland, European countries, as already decided by*.

The second hypothesis assumes that the decision to halt arms export licenses to Saudi Arabia and the UAE is a matter of *reputation*. The main category for reputation is *allusion to the image of Italy on the international level* and it appears whenever parliamentarians talk about what should characterise the role and the reputation of Italy within the European Union. In this case, there are four subcategories:

- *Group of states abiding by the rules* applies when parliamentarians hope for a suspension of arms export and consequently wish to see Italy among the member states abiding by the rules.
- *Duty towards the Union* relates to arguments claiming that the suspension of arms export is a duty towards the European Union as it would reflect the Italian coherence with the European commitment to the arms control regime.
- *Model for other countries* applies whenever members of parliament encourage the Italian government to halt arms export in order to stand as a model of compliance with the law for other countries.
- *Comparison of commitment* is used when parliamentarians claim that the Italian commitment to the arms control regime cannot be weaker than other member states'.

Indicators for this category are words such as *international credibility, commitment, effort, role of our country, coherence*.

The third hypothesis links the Italian decision to stop arms export to its level of *trust* towards other European member states. The main category for this hypothesis has been generated deductively according to the literature from which it derives, namely Ostrom's study on how trust as a social norm enhances the likelihood of collective action and decreases the temptation to free-ride (1998; 2003; 2010). Individuals are assumed to cooperate in collective

action issues when they trust others to do the same, because they have the positive expectation that their effort will be reciprocated (Ostrom, 1998; 2010). Conversely, they will not engage in cooperation if they expect others to not reciprocate and thus free-ride on their commitment (Ostrom, 1998; 2003). Applying such theoretical assumptions to the Italian case leads to the following main category: *confidence in the fact that other EU member states will not speculate on the Italian block of arms sales*. Two subcategories are useful to recognise its presence in the data:

- *Protect national interest* signifies that parliamentarians express concern over the potential damage to the national defence industry due to the block of arms trade.
- *Make sure of other countries' intentions* applies to statements in favour of the suspension of arms sales as long as other countries pledge to do the same.

In this case, indicators are represented by the main category itself, as there are no recurring single words or phrases that testify the presence of such a phenomena.

#### **4.4 Weaknesses of the Study**

In order for the findings of the study to be best evaluated, the awareness of its weaknesses, along with the strengths described above, is considered essential. First of all, the choice of a single case study allows an in-depth observation of the variables under consideration but makes generalisation to a broader pattern of cases more difficult (Zainal, 2007). Moreover, the selection of parliamentary debates as data for the analysis has the advantage of providing a valuable insight into the national level dynamics that certainly contributed to the realisation of the outcome. On the other hand, however, they do not represent a comprehensive empirical basis because they only partially represent the decision-making process that led up to the suspension of arms sales.

An additional weakness of the research is linked with the level of subjectivity which characterises content analysis, as the application of the method requires interpretation from the coder (Ahuvia, 2001).

## 5. Empirics

The analysis of the parliamentary debates reveals that from the onset of the military intervention launched by a coalition of nine countries led by Saudi Arabia on the 25th of March 2015, the Italian arms export has been the subject of copious heated debates within the parliament. This is the case for both the XVII and the XVIII Legislature - which started on the 23rd of March 2018 - suggesting that the change in the composition of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies did not affect the perception of arms export as an issue to be addressed. Moreover, this research confirmed that the export of arms towards those countries was considered as a clear violation of the EU Common Position and hence a matter of concern for the Italian parliament.

The analysis looks at the debates from the perspective of the influence that social norms perform on collective action and its results provide a valuable insight into their effect over the European arms control regime. Out of the 118 parliamentary discussions over the Yemen crisis, 67 focus explicitly on Italian arms export towards the countries involved in the coalition. Among these 67 debates, 33 interventions contain relevant statements that have been included in the main categories described in the empirical section. Table 3 lists the number of debates analysed in chronological order and illustrates the outcome of the full coding scheme applied to each debate. Every “X” under reputation, reciprocity and trust indicates the presence of one relevant argument.

Table 3. *Full coding scheme*

<b>Debate</b>	<b>Reciprocity</b>	<b>Reputation</b>	<b>Trust</b>	<b>Not relevant</b>
1				<b>X</b>
2		<b>X</b>		
3				<b>X</b>
4				<b>X</b>
5				<b>X</b>
6				<b>X</b>
7				<b>X</b>
8				<b>X</b>
9				<b>X</b>

<b>Debate</b>	<b>Reciprocity</b>	<b>Reputation</b>	<b>Trust</b>	<b>Not relevant</b>
10				<b>X</b>
11	<b>XX</b>			
12				<b>X</b>
13	<b>X</b>			
14				<b>X</b>
15				<b>X</b>
16				<b>X</b>
17				<b>X</b>
18				<b>X</b>
19				<b>X</b>
20				<b>X</b>
21				<b>X</b>
22				<b>X</b>
23				<b>X</b>
24				<b>X</b>
25	<b>X</b>			
26				<b>X</b>
27				<b>X</b>
28				<b>X</b>
29				<b>X</b>
30				<b>X</b>
31				<b>X</b>
32				<b>X</b>
33				<b>X</b>
34				<b>X</b>
35				<b>X</b>
36				<b>X</b>
37				<b>X</b>
38		<b>XXX</b>		



<b>Debate</b>	<b>Reciprocity</b>	<b>Reputation</b>	<b>Trust</b>	<b>Not relevant</b>
39	X		X	
40				X
41	X			
42				X
43				X
44				X
45		X		
46				X
47				X
48	X			
49	X			
50	X			
51	X			
52	X			
53				X
54	XXX			
55	XX	XX		
56	X			
57	X			
58	X			
59	X			
60	X			
61			X	
62				X
63				X
64	X			
65	X			
66	X			
67				X

## 5.1. Reciprocity

The first hypothesis to be verified is: *Parliamentarians use other member states' compliant behaviour as an argument to adhere to the arms control regime.*

Out of the 67 debates analysed, 24 assertions suggest that reciprocity carries significant weight in the argumentations in favour of halting arms export. Indeed, they indicate that on the domestic level a lot of attention is paid to how other states behave in relation to a certain issue. In the first place, such arguments exhibit a sense of reciprocity towards other EU member states by putting an emphasis on their compliant behaviour with international norms, as opposed to the Italian non-compliance. This kind of attitude regularly characterises the parliamentary debates since the end of 2015, when some members of parliament question the legality of the Italian arms trade by bringing up for the first time the example of Germany suspending any arms supply to Saudi Arabia because of the high instability spreading in the Yemeni region (Senate of the Republic, 2015). In addition to that, they ask for an explanation of the ongoing Italian arms trade with Saudi Arabia, notwithstanding that Germany decided to suspend it (Senate of the Republic, 2015).

Over time, the list of partners mentioned in similar speeches grows as more countries gradually join the halt of their arms sales in light of the serious violations of international humanitarian law committed by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen (Chamber of Deputies & Senate of the Republic, 2015; 2016; 2018; 2019; 2020). The allusion to other states' position falls again within the disapproval for the Italian conduct in this respect, followed by a call for a policy change in the authorisation of arms export licenses (Chamber of Deputies & Senate of the Republic, 2015; 2016; 2018; 2019; 2020). Furthermore, the meaning of reminding other states' conformity with the arms control regime lies in the belief that it is opportune to act in the same way and the more other countries start joining such a position, the more compelling this request becomes. It is noteworthy that the same kind of reference is also made to European member states where the arms sales have not been interrupted yet, but the national parliaments are discussing it (Chamber of Deputies, 2019). It follows that the fact that other parliaments aim at leading their government to halt the arms trade is perceived as an equally valid incentive to pursue the same policy. The importance carried by this sense of reciprocity is furthered highlighted by the fact that even after the actual and formal suspension of arms sales to Riyadh, parliamentarians do not stop referring to other partners when talking about the awaited decision:

*The Italian Government has adopted a 18-months suspension of arms supply to Riyadh, after acknowledging the demands of a parliamentary motion tabled on the 26th of June 2019, in order to block the export and transit of aerial bombs and missiles towards Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece and The Netherlands did.* (Chamber of Deputies, 2020)

An additional remarkable finding concerning reciprocity is that the willingness to adopt the social norm is expressed both towards the European partners, as explained above, and the European Union itself. This is the case of the speech of a parliamentarian arguing that asking the EU to impose an arms embargo towards Saudi Arabia makes sense only insofar as Italy commits itself in the suspension of arms sales, implying that a request is successful as long as it is reciprocated (Chamber of Deputies, 2017). Similarly, many of the parliamentarians calling for a halt in arms export also solicit the government to promote the same initiative at the European level, in order to encourage other partners to do the same (Chamber of Deputies, 2019).

Although the parliamentary debates containing relevant assertions for the verification of the first hypothesis do not represent the majority of the speeches about the issue of arms export, the results of content analysis indeed confirm that reciprocity is a relevant social norm within the decision-making process at the national level. By showing how much emphasis is put on other member states' conduct, they validate the assumption that the evidence that other partners are complying with the law is perceived on the domestic level as a stimulus to undertake the same effort.

## **5.2. Reputation**

The second hypothesis to be verified is: *Parliamentarians use the matter of the Italian international reputation as an argument to adhere to the arms control regime.* In order to investigate the validity of such assumption, the speeches referring to the Italian image on the international level have been analysed. Out of the 67 debates over arms export to the Saudi-led coalition, 7 speeches contain statements specifically focused on the topic. The low number of relevant arguments implies that reputation is certainly not among the primary concerns for the Italian parliament, at least compared to the adoption of reciprocity.

Nevertheless, it did inspire some interventions in favour of the suspension of arms sales, which link the call for a policy change with the image that should characterise Italy within the European Union. This is the case, for example, of a parliamentarian reminding the assembly that the Italian international credibility is damaged by the uninterrupted arms trade with countries violating international law (Chamber of Deputies, 2018). Another allusion to reputation falls within the demand for a unilateral decision to halt arms export, aimed at “setting an example” of the right behaviour for other countries (Chamber of Deputies, 2017). According to this point of view, the Italian commitment to a more responsible arms trade should be stronger on the European level, in order to convey an image of Italy as a country that asks for an effort by consistently reciprocating it in return (Chamber of Deputies, 2017). In a similar speech, a member of parliament reports that “the legislative assemblies of important countries” immediately announced the suspension of any military supply to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and successively claims that Italy cannot do less than them (Chamber of Deputies, 2019). It is therefore implied that Italy should adopt other important European member states’ positions in order to acquire the same prominence. In addition to that, the analysis throws light on another argument referring to the reputation of Italy. It is put up by a parliamentarian who asks for a block of arms sales to the countries involved in the Yemen conflict and argues that such an effort would honour Italy by placing it in the group of countries abiding by the principles set by the international community (Chamber of Deputies, 2019).

In conclusion, the results of content analysis empirically demonstrate that the desire to improve the Italian reputation can be considered as an incentive for cooperation. Indeed, the speeches in parliament alluding to the international image of Italy signal the correlation between the willingness to engage in cooperation and the enhancement of the Italian reputation in the eyes of the international community. However, because the number of such discussions is low compared to the total debates analysed, the second hypothesis advanced by this study can only be partially validated.

### **5.3. Trust**

The third hypothesis to be confirmed is: *Parliamentarians use their trust in other member states’ intentions as an argument to adhere to the arms control regime.*

The main category for the application of the qualitative analysis has been generated according to a deductive approach because the empirical data does not provide a diversified

basis to create it inductively (Mayring, 2000). Indeed, out of the 67 parliamentary debates, only two speeches contain relevant statements for the verification of the hypothesis. The first one was held in September 2017, namely when Italy was still maintaining its arms trade with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. A member of parliament recognises the importance of suspending arms export, but at the same time he reveals concern over the potential damage that it could cause to the Italian defense industry, prompting the assembly to remember that Italy's partners have been supplying Saudi Arabia with weapons for years (Chamber of Deputies, 2017). Therefore, although admitting that suspending arms export would be a noble decision, the parliamentarian expresses disapproval of the intervention on behalf of his party (Chamber of Deputies, 2017). Even though this address represents an isolated case throughout the totality of the parliamentary debates, it still confirms the role of trust towards other countries when assessing a policy proposal by proving that, as a social norm, it can enhance the chances of cooperation.

The second speech related to trust took place in October 2019 and is even more crucial for the confirmation of the hypothesis as it belongs to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. After reporting that a part of arms export to Saudi Arabia and the UAE has been blocked and that an investigation for the total suspension has been initiated by the government, he states:

*I would like to specify that we promoted the initiative at the European level precisely because we want to prevent other countries from adopting speculative behaviour on our block of arms sales. It must be clear that if we are in the European Union, we all block our arms sales and we do not play any games. [...] Before acting alone, we have asked for everyone to adhere.*

(Senate of the Republic, 2019)

Although being another isolated speech, it is still considered particularly relevant because later on, the same Minister pronouncing those words finally led Italy to suspend its arms sales to the countries involved in the conflict in Yemen (Al Jazeera, 2021). This indicates that the issue of trust raised by the Minister of Foreign Affairs must have been taken into account during the actual decision-making process that brought about the resolution. Connecting his statements with the eventual policy change in arms export suggests that trust towards other European member states is indeed among the conditions at the base of the decision.

#### 5.4. Overview of Results

The results of the analysis provide evidence for the verification, albeit to varying degrees, of the three hypotheses originally advanced. As far as the different degrees of the evidence are concerned, it is important to reiterate that according to Ostrom (2010), reciprocity, reputation and trust are interrelated social norms that mutually reinforce each other. Therefore, although they carry more or less weight within the parliamentary debates, they can be linked together in a general discussion about the relevance of social norms.

First of all, the findings for the first hypothesis reveal that a sense of reciprocity is perceived at the national level towards the countries abiding by the European arms control regime. They demonstrate the willingness to undertake the same effort as other member states' for a common cause and thus confirm the importance of reciprocity as a social norm within the decision-making process concerning collective action. As for the second hypothesis, there is limited but varied evidence that a reputation for complying with the law represents an incentive to engage in collective action. In spite of the fact that only a small percentage of the debates call forth the Italian international image linked to the free-riding attitude, they confirm indeed the validity of reputation as a social norm that enhances the likelihood of cooperation. Finally, the results for the third hypothesis are limited but still crucial for the verification of trust as an essential condition for collective action since they derive from a speech held by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, who is directly responsible for the 2021 permanent halt of arms sales.

Overall, none of the three social norms surfaces in every discussion, as the debates also focus on other aspects of the issue of arms export. Some of them are for example concerns over human rights violations, migration issues linked to the instability in the Middle East, the risk of an increase of global terrorism or the refusal to be accountable for human suffering in Yemen. However, the goal of the study has been reached through the empirical evidence that social norms do serve as an incentive for collective action. Although they do not represent the only motive to engage in cooperation, the results of the analysis confirm their importance in the assessment of an intervention involving collective action.

## 6. Discussion

The findings of this research add a new contextualised insight to scholarship on social norms and collective action by demonstrating that norms of reciprocity, reputation and trust matter in encouraging cooperation between countries on arms export control. They reinvigorate the literature on collective action by successfully applying theories of social norms to the European arms control regime, a context which has never been previously explored through this theoretical lens. The findings therefore reflect outcomes of experimental research and studies on the effectiveness of social norms as facilitating conditions for collective action (Gächter and Herrmann, 2009; Milinski et al., 2002; Ostrom, 1998; 2000; 2003; 2010; Rönnerstrand and Andersson, 2015). This research also contributes to the literature challenging Olson's (1965) zero contribution thesis as it proves that collective action can be supported on a voluntary basis through social norms by overcoming short-term self-interest, even in the absence of coercion.

In addition to that, the results of this study enrich the literature on arms control, in particular by showing how the so called "regime robustness" can be upheld by endogenous variables that go beyond power distribution between actors, the degree of national interests in the enforcement of the regime, the distribution and perception of net gains and the stability of the normative environment (Schimmelfennig, 1994). This finding encourages further research on arms control as a form of collective action problem in order to investigate under which conditions arms control regimes perform more effectively.

Another important outcome surfacing from the study is the confirmation that institutions incorporate social norms which, in turn, make governments more willing to cooperate (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985). Indeed, the research shows how being part of the EU - even in the absence of sanctions against norm violators - enhances the perception of social norms by member states, and hence cooperation. This implication could be a good starting point for further research on which institutional mechanisms could strengthen the internalisation of norms with regard to the arms control field.

As far as the societal relevance of this study is concerned, the findings suggest a valuable direction for the current debate on the enhancement of a common European approach to arms export policies. Given the proven relevance of social norms, this research reveals the willingness to engage in cooperation on the basis of reciprocity, reputation and trust. This means that unsuccessful cooperation on arms export might be also due to a lack of perceived

social norms among member states, thus indicating an issue-area where improvement could be beneficial.

Finally, this study recommends further research on social norms by analysing additional cases of countries engaging in collective action in arms export, in order to solve the issue of difficult generalisation typical of single case studies (Zainal, 2007). Moreover, as parliamentary debates do not entirely represent the domestic decision-making process, one way to fill this gap could be the triangulation of the study through interviews with relevant stakeholders. This would allow for more insightful information on the topic and might as well increase the objectivity of the interpretation of data.



## **6. Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore social norms as conditions deemed to foster collective action within the European arms control regime. By relying on literature indicating social norms as such, three theoretical expectations have been advanced by supposing that norms of reciprocity, reputation and trust can strengthen the willingness to cooperate on arms export control. As a free-rider that eventually joined other member states' commitment in complying with the rules, Italy has been chosen as a case study and parliamentary debates about the issue have been selected as data for the research. The analysis reveals that within the domestic policy-making process, social norms are indeed considered as incentives to cooperate with other member states and thus played a relevant role in the Italian decision to stop free-riding. The fundamental outcome of the study is that social norms do matter in encouraging cooperation in arms control, thus leading to a new theoretical perspective from which arms control regimes can be studied and improved.

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## Appendix

### List of parliamentary debates

1st April 2015

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9th Aprile 2015

2. Retrieved March 27, 2021, from [ShowDoc](#)

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10th September 2015

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16th September 2015

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6th October 2015

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24th November 2015

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26th November 2015

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3rd December 2015

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