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# Should we sell arms to human rights violators? What the public thinks

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## ABSTRACT

Arms-exporting countries – even those that are liberal democracies – sell weapons to governments that violate human rights. Does the public support the provision of weapons to human rights violators? We examine public attitudes on arms exports through a survey experiment in Israel – a major arms exporter that is often criticized for arming repressive governments. Our analysis finds that human rights violations substantially increase the public's opposition to the sale of arms – by 21 percentage points. Furthermore, opposition to the arms sale arises even when the recipient country carries economic or strategic importance. Overall, we find a public preference for arms exports constrained by ethical concerns – a preference that is often at odds with governments' export practice. This study enhances our understanding of the domestic politics of the arms trade, which has received little scholarly attention, but increases in importance with rising public scrutiny and criticism of arms sales.

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The violation of human rights often entails the use of arms: killing, detaining, or torturing political opponents – or inciting fear in the population – requires governments to employ weapons, which they often purchase from abroad. This puts the onus on arms-exporting countries to sell weapons responsibly and to minimize the risk that these weapons might be abused for committing human rights violations. Arms-exporting countries, however, have often shirked this responsibility by selling weapons to governments with dubious human rights records and overlooking the pernicious consequences of indiscriminate arms sales. The NGO community has long advocated for stronger controls on the sale of arms, warning that the uncontrolled proliferation of arms and ammunition fuels conflicts, facilitates human rights abuses, and exacerbates poverty.<sup>1</sup> And the major Western arms-exporting countries – the United States, Britain, France, and Germany – have indeed professed their commitment to ethical arms sales (Erickson 2015). Yet in practice they have abrogated this commitment by continuing to supply arms to human rights violators, in pursuit of security and economic interests (Erickson 2013; Johnson and Willardson 2018; Perkins and Neumayer 2010).

Is the public indifferent to, or even approving of, unconstrained arms exports? Or do citizens wish that human rights constrain the sale of arms? To date, few studies have systematically examined how human rights shape citizens' view of the arms trade (Rudolph, Freitag, and Thurner 2022). Thus, we know little about the public's perception of the arms trade and the concerns it raises.

Yet the ongoing conflict in Yemen demonstrates that public opinion on arms exports may indeed matter. A coalition of states, led by Saudi Arabia, has participated in this conflict since 2015 and bears much responsibility for its heavy toll of human rights violations and more

than 200,000 fatalities. The Saudi-led coalition obtained its weapons from the United States, Canada, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain, among other countries (ATT Monitor 2016). The sale of arms later used for violating human rights and the laws of war sparked public protest (Chase 0000; Desai 2021), with critics accusing their governments of hypocrisy, complicity in the carnage, and making a mockery of international obligations to deny arms to human rights violators. In several arms-exporting countries, the public pressure resulted in pledges to limit the supply of arms that might be used in the conflict in Yemen (Dudley 2018).

The Yemen-war experience, and previous arms-sales scandals (Erickson 2015), demonstrate how critical it is to study public opinion on arms exports. These episodes show that, occasionally, public pressure can indeed constrain arms sales. Understanding when the public becomes agitated over arms sales is important for scholars; it is also critical for activists who may wish to harness these sentiments for putting pressure on governments that sell arms to dictators (de Moraes 2021). We therefore believe it is time for a serious, systematic examination of what the public thinks about the arms trade. This study thus asks two interrelated questions: First, do citizens oppose the sale of weapons to foreign countries with a record of serious human rights violations? Second, do citizens believe that security or economic interests should prevail over human rights concerns in arms exports? In light of the increasing importance of cyberweapons (Washington Post 2021; Stevens 2017), we ask a third question: Are citizens more concerned about providing human rights violators with conventional weapons – that shoot and kill – compared to cyberweapons? Or do both types of weapons raise similar concerns? Note that answering these questions contributes not only to our understanding of the arms trade: it enhances a deeper understanding of how people evaluate the appropriateness of foreign policies, and how they balance competing concerns (e.g. Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Long 2018; Kreps and Wallace 2016).

We answer these questions through a survey experiment among citizens of Israel – one of the world's largest arms exporters, and a country often criticized for arming rights-abusing governments (Amnesty International 2019; Mack 2021). Israel's permissive approach to arms sales makes it a particularly interesting site to examine whether the public believes that human rights violators should be denied weapons. Furthermore, Israel presents a hard case in this context. As Israel is constantly rebuked for its own human rights violations, Israelis might be reluctant to pass judgment on – and retaliate against – other countries' rights violations.

Yet our survey experiment yields startling results: The arms recipient's human rights violations considerably boost public opposition to the sale of arms. Survey participants informed of the recipient's poor human rights record were more opposed to the arms sale by 21.4 percentage points. Indeed, the rate of opposition to the proposed arms deal leaped from 33.2% to 54.5% – a majority. Notably, the public resistance to the sale of arms applies even to human rights violators that enjoy economic or security ties with Israel. Cyberweapons are not spared: The public holds misgivings about providing human rights violators with either conventional arms or cyberweapons.

This study marks a significant step in our understanding of the domestic politics of the arms trade by providing a scientific portrayal of public preferences. This portrayal indicates a significant gap between public opinion and official policy. While governments often disregard human rights concerns in arms sales, we demonstrate that citizens give human rights concerns significant weight. Such a public attitude may be a boon for advocates of stricter controls on arms proliferation, reinforcing their demands for ethical arms sales (Green and MacDonald 2015). More broadly, our finding adds to a growing literature that identifies citizens' moral concerns and preference for ethical conduct in foreign policy (Allendoerfer 2017; Heinrich and Kobayashi 2020; Kertzer et al. 2014). While citizens are aware of the benefits of selling arms, they believe that governments should pursue those benefits within moral boundaries.

## Human rights concerns in arms exports

It is quite obvious to state that arms exports might negatively affect human rights: after all, the purpose of arms is to kill, injure, and destroy. During peacetime, governments might use the arms they import as tools of coercion and repression, violating the rights of political opponents and the broader population. And the pernicious effects of arms significantly increase during conflict, when they could be used in the commission of war crimes and, in particular, for targeting civilians (Geneva Declaration 2008, 2011).

Despite the far-reaching impact of the arms trade on human rights and human welfare, they have seen little international regulation until recent years. Only in 2013 did states establish an international treaty to address the human rights concerns of arms exports: Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). This treaty requires arms-exporting countries to avoid the sale of arms if those might be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international humanitarian law or international human rights law. Beyond this global agreement, arms exports may be subject to regional or national regulation that gives weight to human rights concerns.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, while states have made rhetorical or legal commitments to ethical arms sales, they have often violated these commitments. In 2019, the UK Court of Appeal ruled that the UK government acted unlawfully in granting export licenses for the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia, for possible use in the conflict in Yemen.<sup>3</sup> A review of the German arms-export policy since 1990 concluded that it has often violated the criteria laid out in the EU rules on arms exports: 'Germany grants licenses and exports weapons of war and military equipment to third countries that violate international humanitarian law in armed conflicts, but also to countries that severely violate the human rights of their citizens and to regions of tensions' (Wisotzki 2020; see also Platte and Leuffen 2016). Cross-national studies, which include the United States and the major European arms exporters, reach similar conclusions: human rights violations in the receiving country typically do not prevent arms exports from advanced industrialized democracies (Blanton 2005; de Soysa and Midford 2012; Erickson 2013; Johnson and Willardson 2018; Perkins and Neumayer 2010). Perkins and Neumayer (2010) bluntly suggest that their research exposes the organized hypocrisy of Western countries which sell arms to rights-abusing governments to advance their economic and security interests.

Indeed, the twin considerations – economic and security motivations – often drive arms-export policy. Arms exports serve the commercial interests of defense firms; defense firms, in turn, contribute to their countries' economies through their revenues and by providing jobs. Although some have cast doubt on the economic benefits of arms sales (Caverley 2018), governments often treat arms exports as important for national prosperity (Bergengruen 2017). Arms exports also advance the exporting country's security and diplomatic interests: By providing arms, a nation can strengthen the military position of its friends and allies while at the same time having leverage to influence their behavior. As Erickson (2013, 227) notes, 'Economic factors and military power concerns strongly affect arms transfer policy, even when norms claim the public spotlight. Moreover, norms may be set aside or conveniently reinterpreted when they work against other more tangible state interests.' Following a growing interest in the link between public opinion and foreign policy (Bayram 2015; Tomz and Weeks 2021), this study asks: Does the public agree with the prioritizing of interests over human rights norms in arms exports?

## The public's view on human rights and foreign policy: The state of knowledge

Public opinion polls suggest that citizens generally favor foreign policies that promote human rights abroad. In surveys of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (Smeltz et al. 2019, 2021), 56% of respondents said that promoting democracy and human rights worldwide makes the United States safer; 86% indicated that democracy and human rights promotion is important to the United States' remaining influential on the world stage. Yet, as McFarland and Mathews (2005,

366-367) point out, the U.S. public's concern for human rights abroad is weaker than these percentages suggest. In these and previous surveys, the promotion of human rights ranked consistently lower than goals that serve national self-interests, such as protecting the jobs of American workers or stopping the flow of illegal drugs into the country. They conclude that 'Americans strongly endorse human rights as abstract principles, but their commitment to human rights, their willingness to invest national resources and to take risks on behalf of human rights, is much weaker' (p. 379).

In recent years, the public's preference for an ethical foreign policy has attracted renewed interest, especially in studies of foreign aid. Several studies have sought to test whether citizens show concern for human rights, manifested in the disapproval of aid to repressive regimes. In a survey experiment conducted by Allendoerfer (2017), prompting American respondents with information on rights violations in the recipient country boosted their support for decreasing or eliminating foreign aid, even for recipients that are economically or strategically important for U.S. interests. By contrast, Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Long (2018) find that economic or security interests mitigate the American public's disapproval of aid to human rights violators. Yet Heinrich and Kobayashi (2020) do find support for the key claim that citizens evaluate aid using moral standards. In their study, respondents strongly disapproved of aid provision to regimes with unpalatable policies, including aid theft, election rigging, media crackdown, and torture. Dasandi et al. (2021) reach a similar finding in the UK.

Scholars have also examined the role of human rights in shaping public attitudes toward humanitarian intervention. Kreps and Maxey (2018) find that interventions aimed at addressing humanitarian crises enjoy U.S. public support. They suggest that this support stems not from instrumental motivations, but from a normative view that the United States has a moral obligation to protect civilians abroad. In the UK, by contrast, emphasizing the ethical case for intervention does little to generate political will among the public (Davies and Johns 2016).

Overall, existing scholarship identifies a public interest in a foreign policy that has a human rights dimension. Citizens wish to see their governments take human rights into account when interacting with foreign countries. At the same time, the public's commitment to human rights is not ironclad and may be mitigated under various circumstances.

## Human rights and arms exports: Theorizing the public's preferences

Does the public believe that arms sales should be consistent with moral principles? Theorizing the public's preferences on arms exports begins from a fundamental premise: individuals' foreign policy positions are influenced by deep value commitments (Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017; Kertzer et al. 2014). As discussed above, individual preferences on foreign aid reflect the impact of values: the public generally disapproves of aid provision to human rights violators. We argue that the case of arms exports will exhibit an even stronger impact of moral concerns because of the direct link between the provision of arms and human rights abuse. In the case of aid, no such direct link exists. While foreign economic aid may allow rights-violating governments to survive in power (Ahmed 2012; Kono and Montinola 2009), economic aid in itself does not serve as a tool of repression. Accordingly, cutting aid does not directly prevent or stop the violation of human rights. It merely signals donors' disapproval and puts pressure for change – pressure that recipients governments often disregard. Indeed, the efficacy of foreign aid in promoting human rights is widely contested (Kiyani 2021).

In the case of arms exports, by contrast, the goods transferred to the recipient – i.e. the weapons – are themselves the instruments for committing human rights violations or war crimes. Furthermore, by providing the means of violence, the arms-exporting country may be seen as playing a supportive role in repression and bearing indirect responsibility for it (Boivin 2005). And by denying arms to human-rights violators, exporting countries can directly and effectively reduce the recipient's capacity to violate human rights. All this means that citizens would likely identify a strong moral case for human rights restrictions on arms exports. To avoid the moral culpability of supporting and

facilitating human rights violations, and to make it harder to commit such violations, individuals will likely wish that human rights violators not receive arms.

Yet, it would be unrealistic to suggest that individuals approach arms exports only with human-rights concerns in mind. Indeed, in weighing material considerations against normative principles, people often give priority to the former. For example, while Americans generally favor compliance with the ethical norms regulating warfare, they may express willingness to abandon such norms when doing so offers military advantage or reduces U.S. casualties (Dill and Schubiger 2021; Sagan and Valentino 2018). Similarly, citizens might be loath to accept ethical constraints on arms sales that could weaken the arms industry and undermine the benefits it delivers, such as self-reliance in arms acquisition. Citizens may also appreciate the economic benefits of the arms industry in providing revenue and jobs and spurring development and industrialization (Bitzinger 2015). As the arms industry symbolizes power and brings the country prestige, citizens might be reluctant to constrain it through human rights requirements.

In this competition between material and normative considerations, we expect the normative concerns to prevail. This expectation arises from the large body of literature reviewed above suggesting that citizens consider the moral implications of policy when forming policy preferences (Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Long 2018, 197). Furthermore, the sale of weapons makes one's country *complicit in and responsible for human rights violations*, potentially triggering a sense of guilt that may prevail over industry interests (Ferguson and Branscombe 2014). As Kolcava, Rudolph, and Bernauer (2021) demonstrate, the public generally supports government intervention and regulation to ensure the ethical conduct of corporations abroad. We therefore hypothesize that the public is likely to oppose the export of arms to countries that violate human rights.

**H1:** *Citizens are more likely to oppose arms exports to countries that violate human rights.*

We now turn to two additional questions relating to citizens' assessment of arms deals with human rights violators: whether this assessment changes in light of the exporter's beneficial ties with the recipient and whether the type of weapon matters.

While individuals may generally oppose the sale of arms to repressive governments, their calculation might change when the promotion of human rights conflicts with other foreign policy goals. A large literature shows how states prioritize security or economic considerations over human rights concerns: they often avoid criticizing or pressuring governments that violate human rights so as not to spoil the relations with them (Efrat and Richemond-Barak 2023; Efrat and Tomasina 2018; Nielsen 2013; Terman and Byun 2021). Individuals may similarly evaluate arms exports to rights-violating countries, exhibiting a qualified commitment to human rights. Support for moral constraints on arms exports will grow if there is little economic or security benefit from the relationship with the rights-violating country. Indeed, curbing arms exports is easier when the relations with the arms recipient carry little importance. By contrast, individuals may set aside their human rights concerns when the denial of arms might jeopardize the security or economic ties with the rights-violating country (Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Long 2018).

**H2:** *Economic or security ties with the rights-violating country diminish the public's opposition toward arms exports to human rights violators.*

Does the public concern over the human rights implications of arms exports vary with the type of weapon? Specifically, do conventional weapons sold to human rights violators raise greater concern than cyberweapons? Nascent research on cyberweapons – computer code used for attacking, infiltrating or damaging the opponent's systems – suggests that people may perceive them as less harmful. In studies conducted in the United States, UK, and Israel, Shandler,

Gross, and Canetti (2021) find that the public exhibits stronger support for cyber retaliatory strikes, rather than conventional strikes, in response to terrorism. Importantly, they find that the preference for cyberstrikes stems from the perception of cyberweapons as less hostile, less lethal, and less destructive than conventional weapons. If the public perceives cyberweapons as a lesser threat, we would expect greater willingness to sell them to countries that violate human rights, compared to conventional arms. By contrast, the public may be wary of exporting conventional arms to human rights violators: conventional weapons can easily and immediately be used for killing people or otherwise violating their rights.

**H3:** *The public is less likely to oppose the sale of cyberweapons to human rights violators, compared to conventional weapons.*

### Israel as a hard case

Situating our empirical analysis in Israel offers several benefits. Israel is an illuminating case given its status as a major arms exporter: It ranks as the world's 8<sup>th</sup> largest exporter of arms (Wezeman, Kuimova, and Wezeman 2021). Furthermore, Israel often comes under criticism for selling arms to human rights violators. South Africa's apartheid regime used to be a major customer of the Israeli defense industry (Polakow-Suransky 2010), and, according to critics, Israel persists in its practice of indiscriminate arms sales: a report from Amnesty International (2019) documented Israeli arms exports to countries involved in grave human rights violations, including South Sudan, Myanmar, Philippines, Cameroon, and Azerbaijan. Relatedly, Israel has not joined the Arms Trade Treaty. This background makes the study of Israeli public opinion all the more intriguing: Do Israelis approve of their government's liberal approach to arms sales?

Importantly, Israel constitutes a hard case for our argument: compared to other countries, we would expect Israelis to show weaker willingness to deny arms to human rights violators. Since Israel routinely experiences military conflict, the local arms industry serves as an important guarantor of security and a means to reduce the country's reliance on external support; indeed, the industry is a source of national pride (Lifshitz 2020; Rubin 2018). This may reduce Israelis' motivation to constrain the arms industry. The fact that much of this industry is state-owned – part of the state apparatus – strengthens the industry's association with national security, possibly motivating Israelis to reject human rights constraints that might harm the industry (Efrat 2010, 2012).

And as Israelis ponder the possibility of punishing human rights violators, they may have in mind the international criticism of their own country's human rights record. Israel has long come under international pressure over its treatment of the Palestinian population; this pressure intensified in recent years as a result of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement calling to coerce Israel to respect the human rights of Palestinians (Barghouti 2011). Being on the receiving end of human-rights pressures, Israelis might hesitate to act against other countries' rights violations. Furthermore, the frequent criticism of Israel has fostered a sense of cynicism toward international law among Israelis. In a recent survey, 54% of Israeli respondents suggested that the Israeli military should *not* take care to comply with international law (Harel 2021). Lupu and Wallace (2019) detected a backlash against international law in a survey experiment in Israel: when informed that government action violated international law, respondents expressed *greater approval* of the government. Having little faith in international law and norms, Israelis might be reluctant to enforce international human rights through the denial of arms.

Finally, citizens aware of their country's international commitments may support government compliance with those commitments (Tomz and Weeks 2021; Simmons 2009). Yet, since Israel has not joined the Arms Trade Treaty and made no legal commitment to ethical arms sales, Israelis

would not necessarily expect or demand that their government deny weapons to human rights violators.

In summary, the special status of the arms industry in Israel, the country's bitter experience with human rights pressure, and the nonratification of the Arms Trade Treaty should make Israelis *less* sensitive to human rights concerns in arms exports. This constitutes a hard case for our argument.

## Methodology

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an online survey experiment in Israel. Respondents were asked to read a short vignette describing a scenario in which a country is seeking to buy arms from Israel. As we describe below, several details in this scenario were manipulated. The survey, conducted in Hebrew, was fielded between October 28 and 1 November 2021.

## Sample

A total of 1,824 Israelis completed the online survey. Respondents were recruited by *iPanel*, Israel's largest online survey company. The sample is not fully representative of the Israeli population, reflecting biases that are common in online samples in Israel, such as a lower percentage of Arab citizens of Israel. Nonetheless, this sample is diverse with regard to key demographic and political variables: the average age is 43.1 ( $SD = 14.5$ ), and women constitute 48.2% of the sample. Those who identified as ideologically right-wing (1-3 on a 1-7 ideological self-categorization measure) comprised 49.1% of the sample; centrists (4 on that measure) comprised 31.3%; and leftists (5-7 on that measure) comprised 19.7% of respondents. Such a distribution of age, gender, and political orientation is largely consistent with the overall Israeli population (for more details about the sample and a comparison to standard Israeli benchmarks, see Online Appendix A).

## Experimental design

All respondents were first presented with a short paragraph describing a hypothetical scenario of a civil war in a country in Central Asia, where a rebel group is trying to overthrow the government. Seeking to stop the rebels, that government wishes to purchase arms from Israel for its security forces. In this description of events, we did not name a specific country to avoid biasing the results; yet we did identify the country's location in Central Asia to make the scenario more realistic and since that scenario was broadly inspired by a Central Asian country whose security forces indeed use Israeli-made weapons: Azerbaijan (Wezeman, Kuimova, and Smith 2021). Azerbaijan is also a country with a dubious human rights record (U.S. Department of State 2021), as well as security and economic ties with Israel – all reflected in the experimental component of the survey – resulting in an experiment with a real-world feel and greater ecological validity than one that is purely hypothetical (for a similar design, see Dasandi et al. 2021).

The experimental component involved a random assignment of respondents to additional information provided in three separate sets of treatment: the Central Asian government's human rights violations in the civil war, its ties to Israel, and the type of weapons it sought to purchase.

In the first experimental factor, respondents randomly assigned to the *violations of human rights* condition read the following statement: 'It has been reported that, as part of their efforts against the rebels, the security forces use torture, carry out mass detentions, kidnap civilians, and kill many civilians.' In contrast, the control condition in this experimental factor did not include any information about human rights abuse.

Note that the human-rights treatment is relatively 'gentle,' in that it describes a factual situation of human rights abuse without mentioning the terms 'human rights,' 'abuse,' 'violations,' or 'war crimes;' without attributing the information to an authoritative source, such as an international organization or an NGO; and without stating that international law prohibits such violent conduct.



Nor did we indicate that selling arms to a rights-violating governments might break international norms as expressed in the Arms Trade Treaty. This design of the prompt as a simple statement of facts aimed to avoid additional confounding layers and to directly capture the impact of the arms recipient's conduct on respondent preferences.

The second experimental factor detailed the Central Asian country's ties to Israel. In the *economic ties* condition, respondents read that the country 'has economic ties with Israel, including the sale of oil to Israel.' Those in the *security ties* condition read that the country 'has security ties with Israel owing to their joint interest in containing Iran.' Respondents in the control condition in this experimental factor did not receive any information about ties between Israel and the Central Asian country.

Finally, the third factor manipulated the type of weapon that the Central Asian country wished to buy from Israel. Respondents in the *guns* condition read that the Central Asian country 'is now seeking to buy guns from Israel in order to arm the security forces in their fight against the rebels,' while those in the *cyber* condition read that the country 'is now seeking to buy from Israel a cyber software, which will allow the security forces to hack the cellphones of the rebel leaders in order to track or strike them.' See Online Appendix B for the full wording of all experimental vignettes.

Notably, the inclusion of a control condition in each of the first two experimental factors provides us with baseline levels of support/opposition to the arms sale to which we can compare the effects of the Central Asian country's violations of human rights and its ties to Israel. Furthermore, our fully-crossed experimental design allows us to independently assess the effects of each of the three experimental factors.

Overall, the experiment involved 12 conditions in a 2 (*human rights violations*: violations of human rights, control [no mention]) X 3 (*ties to Israel*: economic ties, security ties, control [no mention]) X 2 (*type of arms*: guns, cyber) design. As shown in Online Appendix C, the respondents in the different conditions are balanced on various socio-demographic and political characteristics.

## Measures

After reading the vignette, respondents answered an item tapping whether they support or oppose the sale of arms. Specifically, they were told that the Israeli Ministry of Defense is considering whether to approve the sale of guns (or cyberweapon) to the Central Asian country and were then asked the following question: 'Do you support or oppose selling the guns [cyberweapon]?' Answers were recorded on a 5-point scale in which 1=strongly support; 2=support; 3=neither support nor oppose; 4=oppose; 5=strongly oppose.<sup>4</sup> This item was then rescaled to vary between 0 and 1 to create a dependent variable indicating opposition to the arms deal, with higher values denoting greater disapproval of the arms sale. The mean score in this measure is 0.57 ( $SD = 0.28$ ).

To capture opposition to the arms sale more directly, we also collapsed the 'Oppose' (4) and 'Strongly Oppose' (5) responses into a single category and created a binary dependent variable where 1 denotes a respondent who opposed the arms sale, and 0 otherwise (either supported the deal or provided a neutral response). Overall, 43.8% of respondents opposed the arms sale.

We also conducted two factual manipulation checks (Kane and Barabas 2019), intended to ascertain respondents indeed read and comprehended the experimental text. The first check asked respondents whether, according to the text they read, Israel and the Central Asian country have (i) economic, (ii) security, or (iii) cultural ties, or whether (iv) no such information was mentioned in the text. Overall, 64% of the sample answered this question correctly. Our second manipulation check asked what the Central Asian country wished to buy from Israel: (i) tanks, (ii) guns, or (iii) cyber software, or whether (iv) no such information was mentioned in the text. Overall, 88% of the sample correctly answered this item.

Note that the main text reports results from *all* respondents, including those who failed one or both of the manipulation checks. As we note below (and report in Online Appendix D), excluding those respondents who failed the checks *strengthens* the key treatment effect. The results presented

in the main text, which include all respondents, should therefore be considered conservative estimates of that effect.

### Estimation Strategy

To test our first hypothesis, our analysis first takes the following functional form:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{humanrightsviolations} + \beta_2 \text{economicities} + \beta_3 \text{securityties} + \beta_4 \text{cyber} + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

where  $y_i$  denotes our dependent variable (opposition to the arms sale);  $\beta_1$  captures the coefficient of the *violations of human rights* condition, compared to no mentioning of such violations (it is expected to be positive, following *H1*);  $\beta_2$  and  $\beta_3$  capture the coefficients of the *economic ties* and *security ties* conditions, respectively, compared to no mentioning of such ties (control); and  $\beta_4$  captures the coefficient of the *cyber* condition, compared to the guns deal. Finally,  $\varepsilon$  is an idiosyncratic error term. This is our baseline model, and we also estimate a similar model where we control for several variables capturing respondents' socio-demographic profile and political views.

To test *H2*, we analyzed the effect of economic and security ties on the opposition to the arms sale among those respondents in the *violations of human rights* condition. Specifically:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{economicities} + \beta_2 \text{securityties} + \varepsilon \quad (2)$$

where  $\beta_1$  and  $\beta_2$ , respectively, capture the effect of economic and security ties. As per *H2*, we expect both coefficients to be negative, attesting to a reduced opposition to the sale of arms in light of the beneficial ties with the rights-violating country.

Finally, to test *H3*, we analyzed the effect of a cyber deal compared to a gun deal among respondents in the *violations of human rights* condition. Specifically:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{cyber} + \varepsilon \quad (3)$$

where  $\beta_1$  captures the cyber-versus-guns effect. As per *H3*, we expect this coefficient to be negative, attesting to a reduced opposition to selling cyberweapons to human right violators, compared to conventional weapons.

## Results

We begin by graphically depicting the effect of the experimental conditions on the binary measure of opposition to the requested arms sale. We then test our hypotheses using multivariate regression analysis, following Equations (1), (2), and (3).

Figure 1 presents the percentage of respondents who oppose the arms sale in the two experimental conditions capturing the Central Asian government's conduct: informing respondents that the government engages in human rights abuse in the course of the civil war; and not providing such information. Consistent with *H1*, human rights violations committed by the intended arms recipient substantially increase the opposition to the arms sale, by about 21.4 percentage points: from 33.2% to 54.5% ( $\chi^2(1) = 76.12$ ;  $p < .001$ ). In other words, among respondents not informed about the recipient's rights violations, only a third opposed the arms deal; providing that information boosted the rate of disapproval, resulting in a majority of respondents opposing the sale of arms.

This effect size is large. Consider, for example, previous studies with an 'international law' treatment. In those studies, informing respondents that government conduct violated international law reduced their support for that conduct by roughly 4%–9% (Chilton 2015; Kreps and Wallace 2016; Wallace 2013; Lupu and Wallace 2019). The effect size presented here was also obtained without mentioning international law, norms, or ethics. As Carpenter and Montgomery (Charli and Montgomery 2020) argue, international law and norms are more likely to affect preference formation when they are invoked explicitly and brought to respondents' mind. In our experiment, we did *not* provide

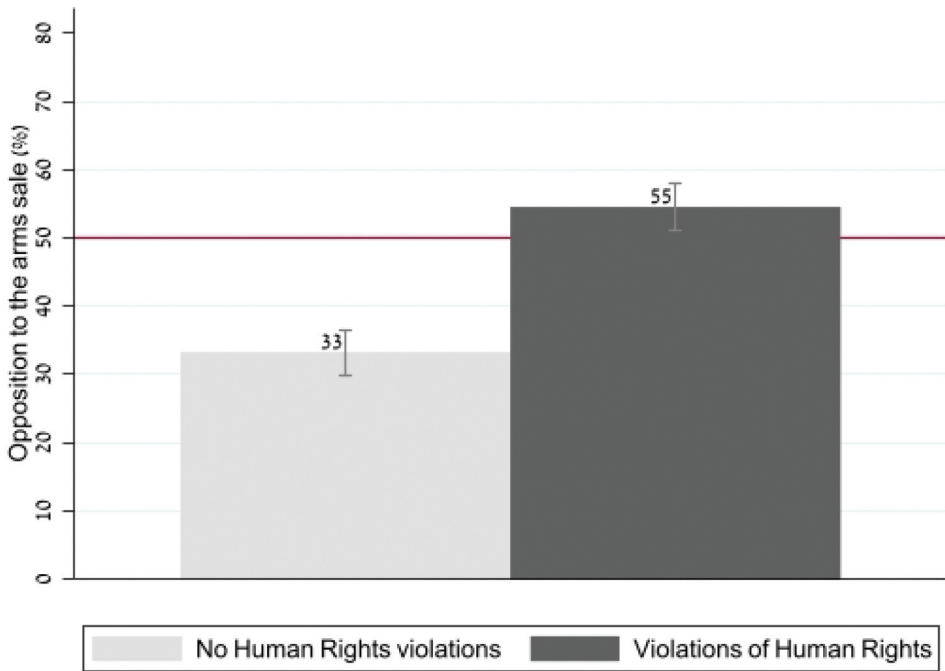


Figure 1. Impact of human rights violations on the opposition to the arms sale. Whiskers denote 95% confidence intervals.

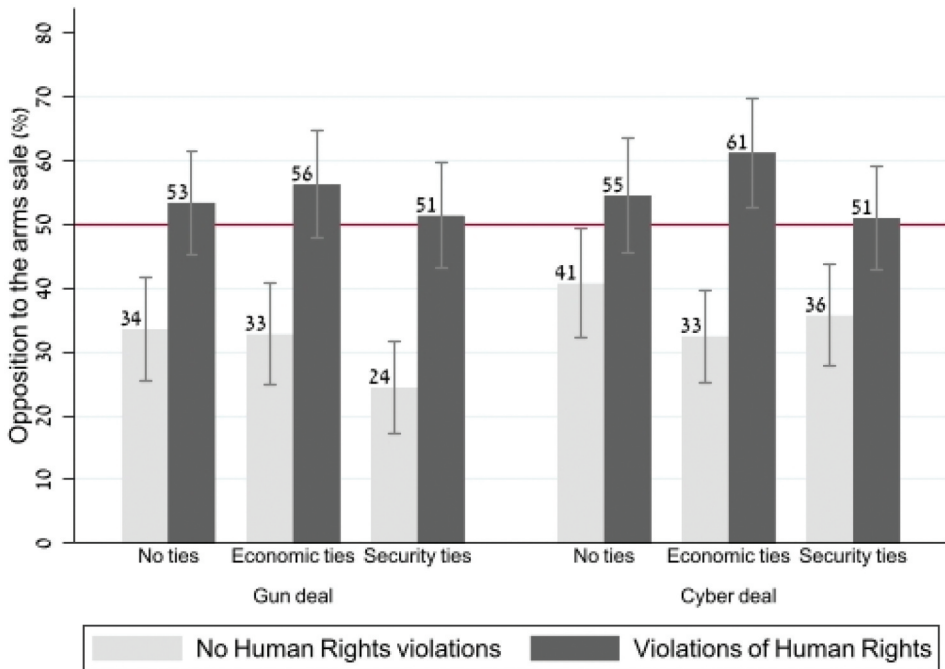


Figure 2. Opposition to the arms sale across all 12 experimental conditions. Whiskers denote 95% confidence intervals.

respondents with information about applicable norms regarding human rights or the arms trade, nor did we prime respondents to consider such norms. A one-sentence factual description of the government's abuse was enough to raise respondents' concerns and bring a majority to oppose the arms deal.

Figure 2 presents the share of opposition to the arms sale for each of the 12 experimental conditions. This figure allows an easy comparison between respondents assigned to the same conditions with respect to the recipient government's ties to Israel and the type of requested arms, but assigned to different conditions with respect to the government's rights violations. For example, opposition to the arms sale reached 33% among respondents who received the *guns* and *economic ties* conditions, with no information on human rights violations. Yet, when considering the sale of guns to a government that has economic ties to Israel *and* violates human rights, respondents exhibited much stronger misgivings, with 56% opposing the sale. Similarly, in a scenario involving the sale of cyberweapons to a country with security ties to Israel, the rate of opposition to the deal increased from 36% to 51% once respondents were informed about the recipient government's record of human rights abuse.

More broadly, all six experimental conditions that received the *violations of human rights* treatment were significantly more likely to oppose the arms sale than the respective groups which were not informed about human rights violations (all  $ps < .031$ ). And the substantive gap is large: in all conditions that include human rights violations, the rate of respondents opposing the arms sale is higher than 50% (ranging from 51% to 61%), compared to none of the six conditions with no mention of human rights violations (where the rate of opposition to the deal ranges from 24% to 41%). Overall, these results provide considerable support for *H1*.

But could these results reflect a social desirability bias? We acknowledge that questions on human rights may raise social desirability concerns (McFarland and Mathews 2005). Yet we judge these concerns to be weak in the current case given the anonymity of responses and the fact that respondents were unaware of the study's human-rights focus (Larson 2019). Furthermore, in terms of policy impact, what matters is that a majority of citizens express disapproval of arms exports to human rights violators. Even if some citizens are motivated by social desirability, *the perception* of public opposition could make it harder for governments to approve unethical arms sales. If governments perceive public concern about human rights – even if they overestimate the true extent of concern – ignoring these values in arms sales becomes more difficult (relatedly, see Mernyk et al. 2022).

After establishing the substantial effect of human rights violations on the opposition to the sale of arms, we seek to identify variation in the public responses to arms sales to countries that violate human rights (*H2* and *H3*).

Do beneficial ties with the arms recipient diminish the opposition to the arms sale? Figure 3 shows they do not. 54% of respondents oppose the sale of arms to a rights-violating government with no special ties to Israel; the rate of opposition remained substantially the same for a rights-violating government with economic ties (59%) or security ties (51%) to Israel ( $\chi^2(2) = 3.17; p = .205$ ).<sup>5</sup> In other words, the beneficial ties that the rights-violating government maintains with Israel did *not* significantly dampen the opposition to the sale of arms. Note that the rising price of oil was on Israelis' mind at the time of the experiment (Fisher 2021); the talks to revive the Iran nuclear deal, which Israel opposes, gave prominence to the Iranian threat at that time. Aware of the recipient government's importance for Israel's oil needs or its efforts against Iran, a majority of respondents still preferred that the arms be denied. This finding contradicts *H2* and suggests that the concerns over arms sales to human rights violators may indeed carry weight in the face of self-interested considerations.

Do preferences over the sale of arms to human-rights violators vary with the type of weapon at stake? According to Figure 4, they do not. This figure shows little difference between conventional and cyberweapons: 54% of respondents opposed the sale of guns to a rights-violating government; 55% believed that a rights-violating governments should be denied cyberweapons ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.26; p = .610$ ). One might have expected lesser concern about providing human-rights abusers with cyberweapons, whose negative impact on human rights is more remote compared to the immediate

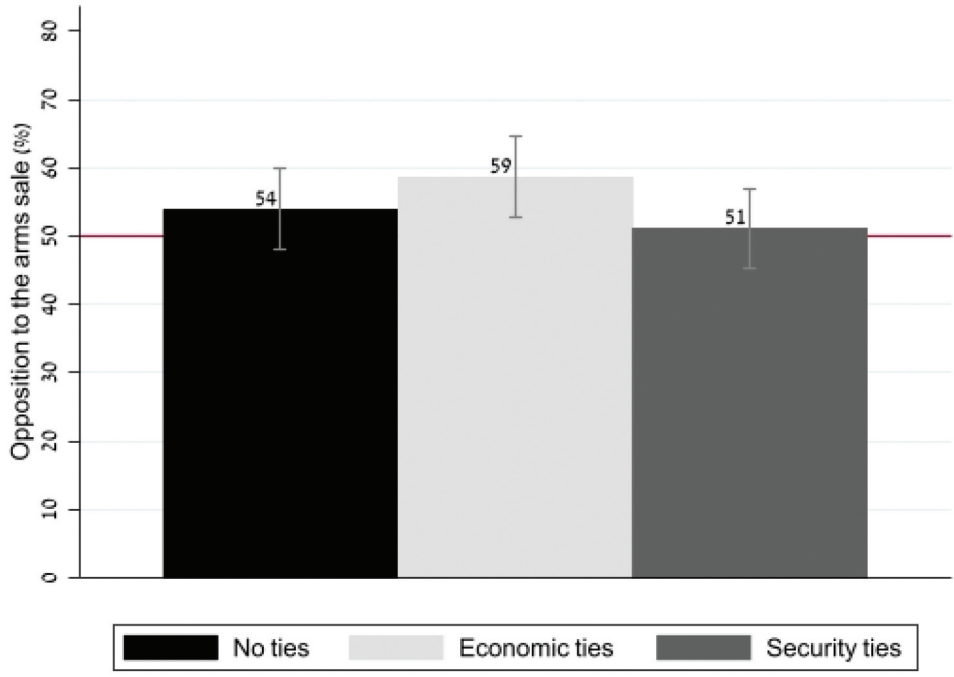


Figure 3. Arms sales to human rights violators: Impact of the ties with recipient country. Whiskers denote 95% confidence intervals.



Figure 4. Arms sales to human rights violators: Impact of the type of weapon. Whiskers denote 95% confidence intervals.

and direct effect of conventional weapons. Yet, contrary to *H3*, we find that the sale of cyberweapons does raise public concern, similar to the sale of guns. This accords with Shandler, Gross, and Canetti (2021) who find that the public responds strongly to cyberattacks that results in fatalities. Informed that the requested cyber software may be used to strike the rebel leaders, respondents may have grasped the software's potentially lethal effect and objected to its sale at the same level they did to the sale of guns. It is also possible that Israelis have a better awareness of the impact of cyberweapons, given their country's involvement with a cyberweapon employed against Iran's nuclear program (Nakashima and Warrick 2012) and, more broadly, Israel's status as a leader in the high-tech and cyber industries (Senor and Singer 2009). Future research may examine whether the similarity in resistance to the sale of cyber and conventional weapons holds in other settings as well.

To measure the impact of the various treatments while controlling for additional factors, we conducted several OLS regressions, with the 5-point measure of opposition to the arms sale (rescaled to range between 0 and 1) as the dependent variable. Higher values on this scale indicate greater opposition to the arms deal. Tables 1 and 2 presents the results.

Model 1 in Table 1 presents the baseline model intended to test *H1*, following Equation (1). This model includes the three experimental factors: human rights violations, the recipient country's ties to Israel, and the type of arms requested. Consistent with *H1*, respondents in the *violations of human rights* condition were significantly more likely to oppose the arms deal compared to those not exposed to information on such violations ( $b = 0.13, p < .001$ ). Those presented with information of security ties between Israel and the recipient country were significantly less likely to oppose the arms deal, but the substantive impact is weaker than that of human rights violations ( $b = -0.05, p = .006$ ). This reflects the public's understanding of arms exports as means to strengthen one's friends and

**Table 1.** Determinants of opposition to the arms sale (full sample).

Dependent variable	(1)	(2)
	Opposition to the arms sale	Opposition to the arms sale
Violations of Human Rights	0.13*** (0.01)	0.12*** (0.01)
Recipient's ties with Israel:		
Economic ties	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Security ties	-0.05*** (0.02)	-0.05*** (0.02)
Type of arms (cyber=1)	0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Age		-0.00*** (0.00)
Gender (female=1)		0.07*** (0.01)
College education		-0.01 (0.01)
Jewish		0.07*** (0.03)
Religiosity		0.01 (0.01)
Right-Left ideology		0.04*** (0.01)
Constant	0.51*** (0.02)	0.36*** (0.05)
Observations	1,644	1,638
R-squared	0.06	0.12

*Notes:* Robust standard errors in parentheses; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$  (two-tailed test). The dependent variable varies between 0 and 1, with higher values denoting greater opposition to the arms sale. The reference category for the *violations of human rights* condition as well as the *economic ties* and *security ties* conditions is a control with no mention of violations or ties, respectively. The reference category for the *type of arms* condition is guns. "Don't know" responses are excluded from the analysis.

**Table 2.** Opposition to the arms sale (*violations of human rights condition*).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dependent variable	Opposition to the arms sale	Opposition to the arms sale	Opposition to the arms sale	Opposition to the arms sale
Recipient's ties with Israel:				
Economic ties	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)		
Security ties	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)		
Type of arms (cyber=1)			0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)
Age		-0.00 (0.00)		-0.00 (0.00)
Gender (female=1)		0.06*** (0.02)		0.06*** (0.02)
College education		0.01 (0.02)		0.01 (0.02)
Jewish		0.06* (0.04)		0.06* (0.04)
Religiosity		0.00 (0.01)		0.00 (0.01)
Right-Left ideology		0.04*** (0.01)		0.04*** (0.01)
Constant	0.63*** (0.02)	0.46*** (0.06)	0.63*** (0.01)	0.46*** (0.06)
Observations	818	814	818	814
R-squared	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.06

Note. Robust standard errors in parentheses; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$  (two-tailed test). The dependent variable varies between 0 and 1, with higher values denoting greater opposition to the arms sale. The reference category for the *economic ties* and *security ties* conditions is a control with no mention of ties. The reference category for the *type of arms* condition is guns. "Don't know" responses are excluded from the analysis.

allies. By contrast, economic ties between Israel and the recipient country did not significantly reduce the opposition to the arms deal ( $b = -0.01$ ,  $p = .520$ ). Finally, those presented with a cyber deal were slightly more likely to oppose the sale of arms compared to those presented with a gun deal, but this effect is not statistically significant ( $b = 0.02$ ,  $p = .156$ ).

Model 2 in Table 1 adds several individual-level control variables: dummy variables for gender (female), college education, and Jewish respondents, as well as controls for age, a 4-point religiosity scale, and a 7-point right-left ideological self-placement item. Results suggest younger respondents, as well as Jewish, female, and leftist respondents were more likely to oppose the arms deal (see the graphic presentation of the results in Figure 5). Importantly, adding these controls has little effect on the main experimental result: the recipient country's human rights violations significantly increase the opposition to the arms deal, with a substantively large impact. Holding all other variables at their means, respondents who did not receive information on human rights violations had an average score of 0.50 on the 0-to-1 measure of opposition to the arms sale [95% CI: 0.49, 0.52], while those in the *violations of human rights* condition had an average score of 0.63 [0.61, 0.65].

Table 2 presents models intended to test  $H2$  and  $H3$  for respondents who received the rights-violations treatment.

Model 1 follows Equation (2) and includes dummy variables for the economic or security ties with the Central Asian country. The coefficients of the two dummy variables are not statistically significant ( $ps > .38$ ). The predicted values of opposition to the arms sale stand at 0.63, 0.65, and 0.61 for no ties, economic ties, and security ties, respectively. This suggests that when the recipient country violates human rights, security or economic ties do *not* diminish the opposition to the arms deal. Adding various individual-level control variables in Model 2 hardly changes these estimates. Overall, these results go against  $H2$ : the opposition to the sale of

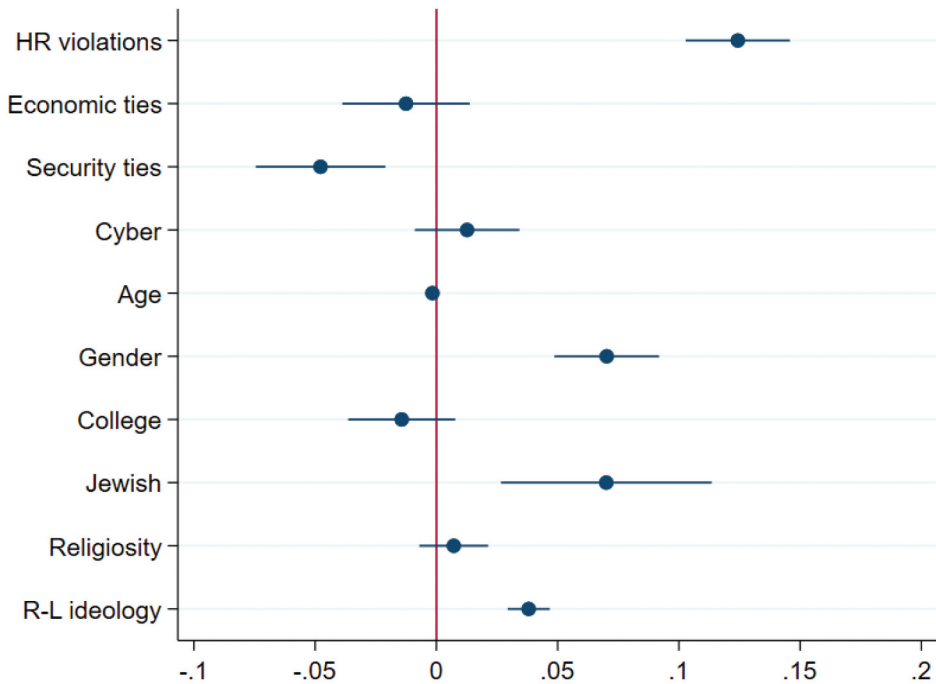


Figure 5. Determinants of opposition to the arms sale (Table 1, Model 2).

arms holds even for right-violating recipients that carry economic or strategic importance. Whereas governments often cast aside the promotion of human rights for the sake of security or economic interests (e.g. Baker and Shear 2017), the public seems more wary of such a tradeoff and less willing to sacrifice values on behalf of interests. Citizens may be perceiving arms sales to human rights violators as morally outrageous, notwithstanding the security or economic benefits they deliver (cf. Leuker, Samartzidis, and Hertwig 2021).

Model 3 in Table 2 tests  $H3$  through a binary variable capturing the effect of cyberweapons versus guns. Contrary to  $H3$ , this coefficient is insignificant and very small ( $b = 0.00$ ;  $p = .909$ ). Thus, respondents made no distinction between the two types of arms. This holds with the addition of individual-level controls in Model 4.

Overall, our findings indicate significant resistance to the sale of arms to human rights violators: the export of arms to countries that violate human rights faces much higher opposition; economic or security ties do not diminish the opposition to the sale of arms to human rights violators; and this opposition extends to both conventional and cyberweapons. These results are robust to a range of robustness checks, presented in Online Appendix D.

## Conclusion

Governments – even those strongly committed to human rights – tend to avert their eyes from the poor human rights record of the countries to which they sell arms. This much has long been documented. This study has found, however, that this practice is at odds with public preferences. Our results indicate that citizens, without being primed about international law or norms, show concern about the potential abuse of arms exports and tend to oppose the sale of arms to human rights violators – even when this threatens valuable security or economic benefits. Such a preference may reflect a key moral value



shaping foreign policy attitudes: harm/care, that is, a concern for the suffering of others, caring for others, and protecting them (Kertzer et al. 2014); or it may stem from a realization that arming human-rights abusers violates normative expectations and might bring opprobrium.

The public's aversion to selling arms to dictators, as revealed here, carries important policy implications: it provides potential support and ammunition to parliamentarians and activists who seek to obstruct such sales. Those seeking greater transparency and accountability of the arms trade can give force to their demands by invoking the public's concern (de Moraes 2021; Green and MacDonald 2015). Governments may indeed become more attentive, if they realize that the public holds misgivings about such deals. In other words, the gap between government practice and public opinion, revealed in this paper, may be narrowed – and this requires the activation of the public sentiment and its translation into pressure on policymakers and arms-sales regulators.

Future research may seek to replicate our findings in other arms-exporting countries. A result obtained through a single-country design has obvious limits. Nonetheless, there are good reasons to expect that this finding will hold – and even become stronger – in other settings. As we noted, Israel is a country where one would *not* expect much public concern about the human-rights impact of arms exports. In countries less preoccupied with their security and less cynical about international human rights, public concern would likely be even greater; and, in countries with private arms industries, the weight of industry interests will be smaller than in Israel. Furthermore, Israelis have little expectation for morality in arms sales, as their country never ratified the Arms Trade Treaty or otherwise committed to considering human rights in arms exports. In the United States and Europe – where governments declared human rights as a principle guiding arms exports<sup>6</sup> – citizens may have higher expectations for ethical conduct.

Future research may also overcome some of the limitations of the current study. For example, the *economic ties* and *security ties* conditions did not indicate how these ties might be affected if the arms deal is not approved. Some respondents may not have realized that scuttling the deal would negatively affect Israel's economy or security. A future study may include more detailed treatments that explicitly lay out the implications of arms denial. Such a study may also examine attitudes toward the sale of major conventional weapons, rather than the small arms ('guns') or cyberweapons addressed here.

The outrage over the supply of weapons to the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen signals growing public concern over arms exports and increasing impatience with governments' practice of selling weapons to human rights violators (Merat 2019; Walsh and Schmitt 2018). Intensifying interest in the human-rights implications of cyberweapons adds urgency to the debate over the regulation of the arms trade (Bergman and Kingsley 2021). With growing parliamentary and media scrutiny of arms sales, and with activists demanding that governments comply with the Arms Trade Treaty (Edmondson and Wong 2019), the arms trade may no longer exist in the government-to-government sphere, removed from the public arena. Indeed, it faces increasing constraints. This article has highlighted another potential constraint on arms exports: public opinion. This influence long lay dormant, ignored by policymakers and regulators. Yet this paper has clearly demonstrated its existence. If activated, following the efforts of activists or critical media coverage, public opinion may contribute to greater restraint in the sale of arms.

## Notes

1. <https://controlarms.org/about/>
2. For example, Council Common Position 2008/944/CFSP.
3. ([2019] EWCA Civ 1020, decision issued on June 20, 2019).
4. Respondents were also offered a sixth, 'don't know' option. Those who chose it (9.9%) were excluded from the analysis. Including these respondents in the analysis has little effect on the results.
5. The difference between the *economic ties* and *no ties* conditions is  $p = .523$ ; the difference between the *security ties* and *no ties* conditions is  $p = .267$ .

6. <https://www.state.gov/conventional-arms-transfer-cat-policy/>; Council Common Position 2008/944/CFSP.

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