

## **Beirut conference: Arms Control Mechanisms in the Middle East, 11 – 13 February 2015**

At the opening of the conference on Arms Control in the Middle East on 11th February 2015 in Beirut, the Human Rights Minister of Yemen, Ezz-el-Din el-Asbahi, the Director of the Permanent Peace Movement (PPM), Fadi Abi Allam, and the Minister-Counsellor of the German Embassy, Carsten Meyer-Wiefhausen, stressed the importance of human rights, rule of law and democracy for a peaceful development in the Middle East. They welcomed that Lebanon has signed the international Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), which entered into force on 24 December 2014, and highlighted the German commitment in the field of international arms control.

The opening was followed by a two days long conference (12 – 13 February 2015) organized by Permanent Peace Movement/Lebanon, and supported by the German government. It highlighted the most important international instruments of conventional weapons control, such as the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in all its Aspects (UNPoA); the International Tracing Instrument (ITI) and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT); the latter focusing on the international arms transfer. The 41 participants from 15 Arab and 4 European countries received detailed and quite technical insights into these three instruments of arms control. Although the UNPoA has been accepted by all UN member states, not all Arab countries are well informed about this political, legally non-binding instrument that focuses on small arms and light weapons. The Arms Trade Treaty, which entered into force last year, and has been signed, but not ratified, by 6 member states of the Arab League of States, is legally binding to all UN member states, and an expert from Switzerland's Small Arms Survey explained what the ATT implies for the UN member states: in particular, that it follows strict guidelines obeying international human rights and humanitarian law when weapons are to be exported to crisis regions. Another expert from Sweden-based Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons stressed the importance of parliamentarians' role as "watch-dog" in order that the countries implement stricter laws for weapons control.

The conference participants came from different sections of government and civil society: the security sector such as the army, police, customs and internal security; the ministry of foreign affairs of the different countries, the parliaments and civil society. Only few Arab countries, such as Sudan, maintain functioning national focal points, where the major issues about arms control should be dealt with, and data about arms and arms transfers should be collected. Consequently, the conference tackled this important issue during day 3 in interactive sessions: The participants split into working groups according to their region and elaborated how national focal points, and national coalitions for arms control could be established in their respective countries.

The participants, having come from different countries and different sectors of government and society, regarded the conference as a fruitful opportunity to learn technical details about arms control instruments and to exchange

experiences. The general feel was, however, that the Arab countries are passing through a very difficult period of time, and governments, if they exist, have very heavy tasks ahead of them. "How can you water the roses in your garden, if the house is burning," asked Col. Toufic Slim from the Lebanese army. They all agreed that international law is not powerful enough to create more peace and stability in this region, and consequently lower the density of weapons, but that efforts need to continue from all countries and all sectors of society towards more participation, justice, the rule of law and democracy.