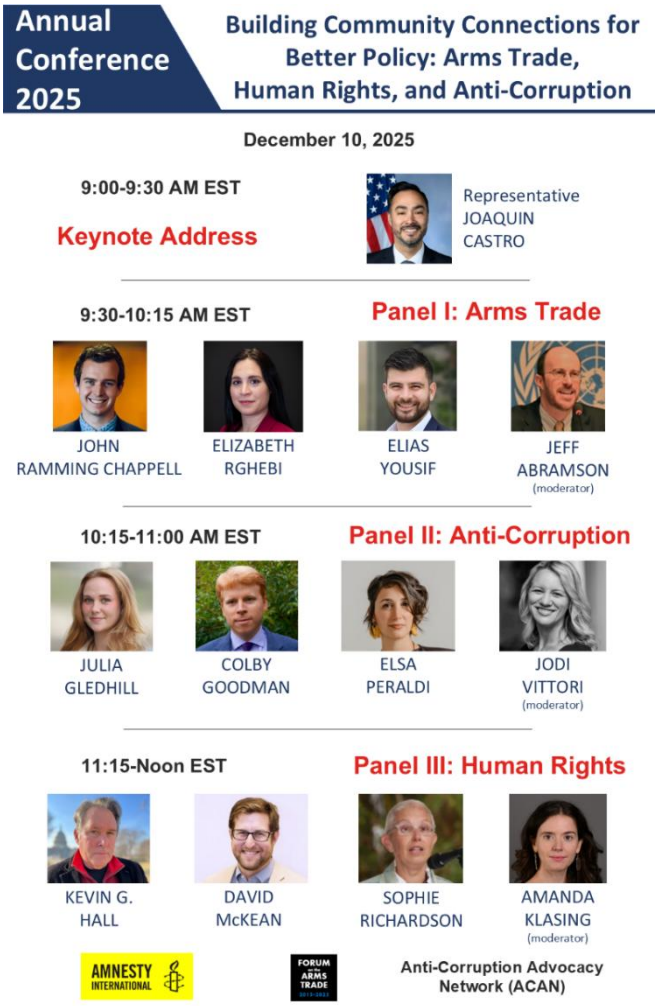
2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE REPORT: RECAP and RESOURCES

Building Community Connections for Better Policy: Arms Trade, Human Rights, and Anti-Corruption
December 10, 2025
(Washington DC)



As the end of the first year of the second Trump administration neared, experts in the responsible arms trade, human rights, and anti-corruption communities gathered on International Human Rights Day to assess a rapidly changing political and security environment that brings new challenges and opportunities. The list of concerning developments was long, including highly controversial changes to the implementation of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, the removal of topics from annual human rights country reports, the provision of weapons and other assistance to corrupt and repressive regimes, the use of military force both inside and outside the borders of the United States, and more. At the same time, there were also new opportunities to better identify and prevent malign actors from diverting U.S. defense and security equipment.

In coming together in the same room, attendees dove into key topics each community was grappling with in an effort to better understand where their work intersects and better collaboration may be possible. The half-day conference featured a keynote address and three distinct panels on December 10, 2025. Organized via a partnership of **Amnesty International USA**, the **Anti-Corruption Advocacy Network (ACAN)**, and the **Forum on the Arms Trade**.

The Forum on the Arms Trade is an independent non-profit organization, with nine institutional partners: Amassuru (Network of Women in Security and Defense in Latin America and the Caribbean); the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM) in the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland; the Center for International Policy (CIP); the Gender Equality Network for Small Arms Control (GENSAC), PRISME (Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive Security in the Middle East); Security in Context; SEHLAC (Seguridad Humana en Latinoaméerica y el Caribe - Human Security in Latin America and the Caribbean); Shadow World Investigations; and Women for Weapons Trade Transparency (W2T2). Partners are not responsible for the Forum's work. The Forum does not itself take positions, but does provide a mechanism for the sharing of experts' ideas. Views expressed at the conference participants should be attributed directly to them, and items in this report should be checked against the video recording for quotation or paraphrasing.

Philanthropic support for Forum events such as these is currently provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

www.forumarmstrade.org

Keynote Address: Representative Joaquin Castro (Texas - 20th district)

Video:

Video available at the Forum website (link) and can also be watched directly at https://youtu.be/nK1fGiH5wRs

click image to launch video

Representative Castro spoke on a variety of themes. One of which was the ability of technology to provide us with "a golden age of knowing," with individuals able to be social documentarians and distribute information very quickly, arguing for a "right to reality." At the same time, he described us being in a "powerful conundrum" in which technology can also challenge that reality, for example via deep fakes. He asked whether we were also in an "age of action"? He argued that Congress "has been sidelined for a long time" and "not as good as we could be," citing issues such as drones and weaponry, commercial spyware, crypto and financial services, and others.

Regarding Gaza, he said that "he believed the atrocities there amount to a kind of ethnic cleansing" and that there has been "an unwillingness of Congress to act". He added, "I've never seen a larger gap within the Democratic party of where the public is on an issue and where Democrats are, in particular, and where Democratic politicians in Congress are."

He cited shootings in Uvalde and El Paso as examples of tragedies that elicit from him and others the question to Republicans on gun safety issues, "Why won't you do something about it?" He compared the gun safety issue for Republicans to the issue of Gaza for Democrats.

He also spoke on Venezuela and boat strikes, where he said he believed crimes have been committed in the strikes.

He predicted an expansion of work on human rights that will focus on the individual and "the right to be human and participate in society," citing for example concerns about technology replacing work and the ability to earn a living. He appreciated the work of advocates and the community, and encouraged the sketching out of what it means in ten years and twenty years to talk about human rights. He earlier added that "The action piece is ultimately what I believe makes the biggest difference."

This synthesis has not been reviewed or approved by Rep. Castro. Please watch the video for a fuller context.

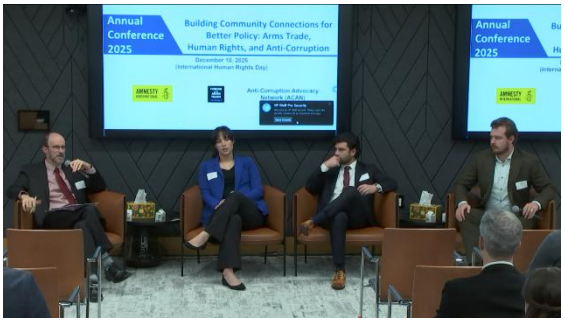
Panel I: Arms Trade

Panelists:

- **John Ramming Chappell,** US Advocacy & Legal Advisor, Center for Civilians in Conflict
- **Elizabeth Rghebi**, MENA Advocacy Director, Amnesty International USA
- **Elias Yousif**, Fellow and Deputy Director of the Conventional Defense Program, Stimson Center
- **Jeff Abramson**, Senior Non-Resident Fellow, Center for International Policy and Director, Forum on the Arms Trade (moderator)

Video:

Video available at the Forum website (link) and can also be watched directly at https://youtu.be/BGqld1RYeVU



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In opening remarks to the panel, **Jeff Abramson** expressed concern about how weapons are traded by the United States, briefly mentioning Israel and Saudi Arabia, and shared recent data detailing that the U.S. is by far the world's largest arms exporter. He quickly mentioned a wide array of laws on arms trade and security assistance that could be put to better use, including the Leahy laws, Foreign Assistance Act (including sections 502B and 620I), Arms Export Control Act, and Congressional notification processes.

Elizabeth Rghebi described how Amnesty investigates violations of international law, with a focus in these remarks on weapons provided to Israel and used by Israel in Gaza. She explained

how research led the work and was conducted, as well as broader patterns seen from individual attacks, that led to their conclusion Israel was committing a genocide. She noted that some Congressional efforts had occurred to limit arms, but had yet to be successful, in describing a lack of sufficient political will as well as continued anti-Palestinian racism. During discussion, some of her recommendations included Congress being more proactive on the full range of military and security assistance to Israel. She stressed the need to look at patterns, rather than individual attacks. She also warned about returning to a previous status quo.

Elias Yousif, noting that because U.S. arms and security assistance decisions are so consequential that oversight and accountability are essential, he focused initial remarks on the need for meaningful and intentional transparency. He described such transparency as "bad and getting worse" and detailed recent changes that have further undermined transparency. He argued that transparency should not be a partisan issue. He called for Congress to reclaim its oversight role, arguing that would also enable civil society to better engage and be a force multiplier for restraint. In particular he recommended: (1) to make all notifications public, clear and searchable; (2) lowering notification thresholds rather than raising them; and (3) that specific legislation should be adopted on what is required in reporting and how it would be delivered. He further countered arguments many make to support transfers that "if the United States does not sell weapons, others will."

John Ramming Chappell explained how Congress is Constitutionally empowered to regulate U.S. arms trade, how the Executive branch has at times acted counter to that, and how Congress has tried to assert authority. He argued that Congress should rewrite the rules. One way Congress could do that would be to require affirmative authority from Congress before arms sales are able to proceed. He argued that how many weapons the United States sells and its share of the arms trade are not good proxies for whether they are serving U.S. interests, serving human rights, or contributing to better foreign policy.

Suggested Resources

- John Ramming Chappell, "Think Big to Rein in the Arms Trade," Center for International Policy, September 17, 2025.
- Elias Yousif, "Eroding What's Left of Congressional Arms Transfer Oversight," Stimson Center, June 4, 2025.
- Elias Yousif, ""If we don't sell it, someone else will:" Dependence & Influence in US Arms Transfers," Stimson Center, March 2023.
- SIPRI arms transfers factsheet, March 2025.
- Amnesty International December 2024 report concluding Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza; and April 2024 research submitted to the U.S. government that U.S. weapons were used by Israel in violation of international and U.S. law. Also "Targeting Civilians: Murder, Hostage-Taking and Other Violations by Palestinian Armed Groups in Israel and Gaza," December 2025.
- Forum on the Arms Trade resource pages on Foreign Military Sales notifications and arms sales below notification thresholds.

- Arms Sales Accountability Project website

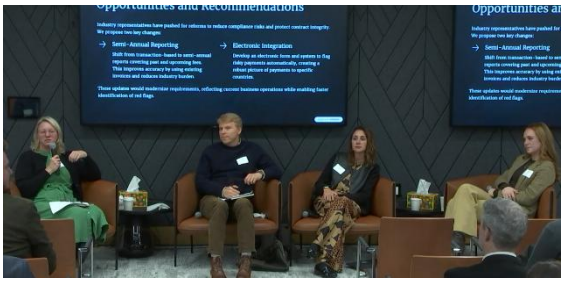
Panel II: Anti-corruption

Panelists:

- **Julia Gledhill**, Research Analyst, Stimson Center
- **Colby Goodman**, Senior Researcher, Transparency International U.S.
- **Elsa Peraldi**, Consultant, EG Justice
- **Jodi Vittori**, Professor of the Practice of International Affairs, Georgetown University (moderator)

Video:

Video available at the Forum website (link) and can also be watched directly at https://youtu.be/KD8blKneQ0U



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In opening remarks, **Jodi Vittori** wished everyone a belated International Anti-Corruption Day, which was December 9. She noted that one definition of a state is that it is supposed to have a monopoly on the use of violence, making how it engages and trades weapons fundamental to the state itself. She explained that there are corruption-related implications for both providing and recipient states, which this panel was designed to address.

Julia Gledhill provided an overview of federal ethics rules and revolving door restrictions, calling them "porous." She rather quickly described the weaknesses of three key statutes: the Ethics in Government Acts (EIGA); the Lobbying Disclosure Act; and the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). She recommended narrowing what we consider lobbying to be, making ethics waivers and exemptions publicly accessible and searchable, publicize who is exempted from FARA registration.

Elsa Peraldi talked about Equatorial Guinea, which she described as having the world's longest dictatorship. While saying the previous two administrations had tried a somewhat cautious approach, she criticized the current U.S. administration for not prioritizing human rights and anti-corruption, including granting a visa to Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue (also known as "Teodorín") as well as expansion of security assistance. She noted recent $7.5 million in U.S. funds to house third-party nationals, including funds to build prison facilities despite a horrible track record. She faulted the current U.S. approach as likely to further entrench inequalities.

Colby Goodman focused remarks on defense companies reporting on political contributions, commissions, and fees when seeking an export license, which is currently under review in the State Department, also known as Part 130 reporting requirements. He described these requirements as similar to a surveillance camera where arms deals are being negotiated, capturing information on brokers, middlemen, and others involved. Recognizing that industry is also seeking reform, he called for modernizing the reporting requirements, including by making the reports semi-annual and develop an electronic system to flag risky payments.

Suggested Resources

- Colby Goodman's slide presentation "Curbing Corrupt Payments and Brokers in U.S. Arms Exports"
- Michael Picard and Colby Goodman, "Under the Radar: Corruption's Role in Fueling Arms Diversion," Transparency International U.S., April 2025.
- Julia Gledhill, "Cutting this much red tape, Santa comes early to weapons industry," *Responsible Statecraft*, December 12, 2025.
- "How the military-industrial complex captured US democracy | Business of War," *AlJazeera English*, August 2025. See also the video series.
- Jodi Vittori, "Is America a Kleptocracy?" *Foreign Policy*, March 25, 2025.

Panel III: Human Rights

Panelists:

- **Kevin G. Hall**, North America Editor, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project
- **David McKean**, Executive Director, International Corporate Accountability Roundtable (ICAR)
- **Sophie Richardson**, Senior China Advisor, Climate Rights International
- **Amanda Klasing**, National Director of Government Relations and Advocacy, Amnesty International USA (moderator)

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Video:

Video available at the Forum website (link) and can also be watched directly at https://youtu.be/--nldFXvqKY

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David McKean described the current U.S. regulatory regime as one seeking to remove guardrails on U.S. companies, citing the suspension of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act as an example. He also pointed to efforts to undermine restraint outside the United States.

Sophie Richardson highlighted harm when government and corporations ignore human rights, looking, for example, at nickel mining in Indonesia and the Philippines, avocado harvesting in Mexico, East African crude oil pipeline construction, and China's labor practices. She did also note success stories, including an avocado certification program in Mexico linked to not committing human rights violations.

Kevin G. Hall described the work of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, recommending the Aleph database. Regarding journalism today, he argued that mainstream media was shrinking, but online and non-profit reporting was growing. He expressed concern that alternate platforms were leading to alternate realities that were splitting the world, as well as the cartels and organized crime (and some governments) that target journalists.

During introductions and commentary, **Amanda Klasing** celebrated International Human Rights Day. She mentioned the importance of the recently introduced ARMAS act as an effort to address cartels in the Caribbean, as well as the harms caused by the small arms flow, citing Haiti as an example. She reminded that polling shows people do not like corruption; and separately noted that Amnesty has called for a moratorium on commercial digital spyware.

During the Q&A, panelists provided thoughts on how to positively frame the importance of human rights. They discussed the challenges of surveillance and other misuses of technology that threaten individual privacy. It was mentioned that there are other drivers and incentives for companies to positively pursue human rights goals, be that under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights or other frameworks as well as demands from investors, consumers, advocates and others.

Suggested Resources

- International Corporate Accountability Roundtable ICAR resources on accountability
- Climate Rights International website
- Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project website and Aleph database
- Noor Hamadeh and David McKean, "Suspension of FCPA Enforcement Is Bad for U.S. and Global Business," *Just Security*, March 13, 2025.