

**Zeitschrift:** Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad  
**Herausgeber:** Organisation of the Swiss Abroad  
**Band:** 48 (2021)  
**Heft:** 6

**Artikel:** Swiss arms industry on the defensive  
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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051936>

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# Swiss arms industry on the defensive

Switzerland's arms industry is booming as countries around the world increase their military firepower. But can a neutral country that prides itself on humanitarianism justify exporting arms at all? Pressure from civil society has forced policymakers into action.

THEODORA PETER

The next FIFA World Cup kicks off on 21 November 2022. Hosts Qatar are currently bolstering their military arsenal to protect match venues and sovereign territory. After shopping around for hardware, the oil-rich emirate has commissioned Swiss-based armament manufacturer Rheinmetall Air Defence to supply it with air defence systems worth some 200 million Swiss francs. Cannon technology developed and built in Zurich will be at the Qataris' disposal to shoot down enemy drones and missiles with laser precision. The Federal Council approved the export deal despite many questions surrounding the human rights situation in Qatar, particularly with regard to the exploitation of migrant workers at the World Cup construction sites. In 2019, the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) concluded that serious and systematic human rights violations were being committed in Qatar – theoretically a good reason for not exporting military equipment to the country. However, the Federal Council invoked its own escape clause dating back to 2014, which stated that weapons exports could still go ahead if there was a “low risk” of the armaments being used to violate human rights in the recipient country. In other words, the Swiss government believes that air defence cannons are unsuited to the purpose of suppressing your own people.

## Weapons in the wrong hands

Arms exports are becoming increasingly contentious within Swiss civil society, especially in the light of repeated high-profile cases in recent years of weapons exported from Switzerland ending up in the wrong hands. For example, Swiss hand grenades originally delivered to the United Arab Emirates in 2003 were found to have been used in the Syrian civil war. Qatar, for its part, illegally passed on Swiss munitions to insurgents in Libya ten years ago. This led to a moratorium on Swiss arms exports at the time. For the critics, these episodes show that arms exports involve many risks, not least in terms of Switzerland's reputation as a guardian of human rights.

In 2018, a broad alliance comprising human rights organisations, relief agencies and political parties launched the “Correction Initiative”, which wanted to include a clause in the constitution banning arms exports to countries that are systematically violating human rights or involved in civil war or any other armed conflicts. The authors of the initiative aimed to stop the Federal Council from caving in to an arms industry pressing for export concessions. They managed to collect well over the necessary 100,000 signatures within just a few months. But no referendum will now take place. Parliament took the hint and has tightened the criteria for arms exports while removing the government's escape clause. The campaigners have therefore withdrawn their initiative because they believe that their demands have been met.

## Greater democratic control

The “Correction Initiative” has essentially helped to “keep the Federal Council in check”, admits one of the campaigners, Josef Lang. The former Green National Councillor and co-founder of the Group for a Switzerland without an Army (GSWA) would actually prefer a complete ban on arms exports. However, the Swiss electorate has re-



**A highly sought-after Swiss export: the Piranha armoured personnel carrier by Mowag.** Photo: Keystone





jected such an idea in the past. A popular initiative to this effect failed in 2009, with an emphatic 68 per cent voting against. The electorate also threw out a proposal over ten years later to ban the funding of arms manufacturers (see edition 5/2020 of “Swiss Review”), with almost 58 per cent voting no at the ballot box at the end of 2020.

Lang nevertheless regards the “Correction Initiative” as a big step in the right direction. “Democratic control will improve, and the Federal Council will find it harder to loosen regulations,” he says. The government can no longer change the criteria on arms exports unilaterally. In future, parliament will be responsible for all relevant decisions.

“Democratic control will improve,  
and the Federal Council will find it harder  
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Josef Lang

And the electorate will have the last word, as Lang is keen to stress. “After all, you can contest any law change by forcing a referendum.” Hence, parliament voted against granting the Federal Council special powers. The government wanted to continue wielding its escape clause “in order to safeguard national interests”. This door has been shut – and will remain shut.

### Arms manufacturers threaten exodus

Switzerland’s arms manufacturers are not amused. “The implications are enormous,” warns Matthias Zoller, managing director of the Security and Defence Technology working group (ASUW), which represents the interests of arms companies. We will see an exodus of arms manufacturers from Switzerland in the medium term, predicts Zoller. There is notable competition from the European Union, he adds. The EU is investing eight million euros in a scheme to attract arms companies – and “would welcome Swiss firms looking for a new base”. Under the future export regime, Switzerland will no longer be able to export

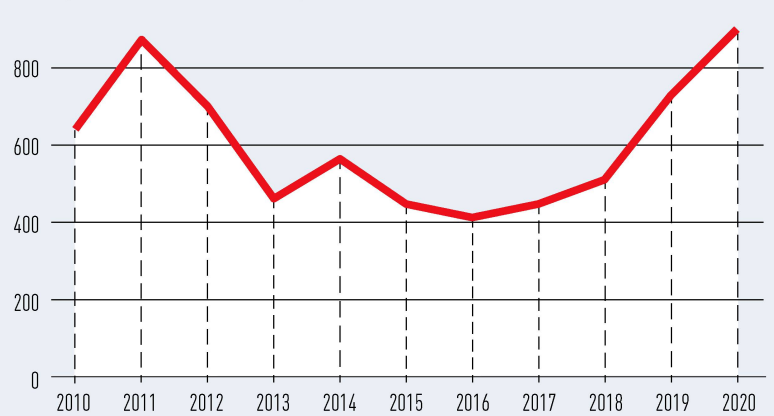
**High-precision cannons from Switzerland, such as the Oerlikon Skyshield air defence system, are one of arms manufacturer Rheinmetall’s exports.**

*Photo: Rheinmetall Air Defence*

to countries involved in armed conflict. “And if the rules are followed to the letter as expected, we may no longer be able to deliver arms to the USA, France or Denmark either.” The industry therefore wants the federal government to provide certainty and, as Zoller puts it, “offer clear assurances that we will still be able to export to and cooperate with our international friends”.

The restrictions affect around 200 companies that regularly apply for arms export permits from the federal government. According to government estimates, Switzerland’s security and defence industry employs between 10,000 and 20,000 people (subcontractors included), who also produce military goods that are not used in active combat and therefore cannot be classed as

Development of Swiss armament exports from 2010–2020 in million Swiss francs



## Swiss involvement in foreign armies

Switzerland boasts a long history of military expertise. Hundreds of thousands of Swiss went to war for foreign powers until well into the 19th century. It was not until the birth of the modern federal Swiss state that curbs on mercenary activity were introduced.

The Swiss confederacy long wanted to conquer foreign lands. This mindset changed at the Battle of Marignano in 1515, when the Swiss were ousted from the Duchy of Milan and the expansion of the confederacy was stopped. Instead of fighting as soldiers for their homeland, young men were permitted to fight as mercenaries in foreign wars thereafter. Swiss mercenary activity peaked between the 15th and 18th centuries. For a long time, service in foreign armed forces represented Switzerland’s second most important economic sector after agriculture. Swiss officers would recruit farmers, grouping them into regiments to fight for countries including France, Spain, Austria, Savoy, Hungary and the Netherlands. The Swiss Guard continues to serve at the Vatican, where it has been responsible for protecting the Pope since the early 16th century.

### Escape from poverty coupled with a lust for adventure

Mercenaries faced increasing curbs on their activity after the federal state was created in 1848. However, the French Foreign Legion continued to recruit tens of thousands of mercenaries. Although Switzerland banned campaigns aimed at recruiting for armed forces such as these in 1859, the hiring of Swiss mercenaries continued to be allowed until the 1920s. Other colonial powers like the Netherlands also relied on Swiss mercenaries. Some 7,600 Swiss mercenaries fought in the Dutch colonial army between 1815 and 1914 in what is now Indonesia, says historian Philipp Krauer, who has been researching the story of these men in the Swiss Tool of Empire project. “Against the prevailing backdrop of mass poverty and emigration,



arms. Take the training aircraft made by Swiss aerospace company Pilatus, for example. Pilatus is free to export these planes to countries including the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, all of whom are involved in the war in Yemen.

The issue of whether Qatar can order more air defence cannons from Switzerland in the future depends on how the Federal Council views the country's human rights situation. At present, the emirate is not involved in armed conflicts such as the one in Yemen. However, Middle East experts say that the rich desert nation in the Persian Gulf is determined to become a regional power. This increases the danger of it becoming embroiled in future conflicts that potentially result in violations of international hu-

manitarian law – the last thing that Switzerland, the depositary state of the Geneva Convention, actually wants.

## Swiss arms exports at a record high

Last year, Switzerland exported arms worth some 900 million Swiss francs – 24 per cent more than in the previous year and more than at any other time in recent years (see table). However, arms account for a tiny 0.3 per cent share of Switzerland's total exports. Denmark and Germany were the leading recipients of Swiss arms exports in 2020. Europe accounted for around 60 per cent of exports. The next important market was Asia. Some of the more controversial recipients included Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman and Pakistan.

**Dressed to kill: the mercenary Gall von Untervalden.**  
Coloured wood engraving from around 1520–1530.

Photo: Keystone



many politicians were happy to see poorer Swiss choose the cheap way out via the colonial army,” he writes. But besides fleeing from poverty, many mercenaries were also inspired by the notion of adventure. Romantic visions of the tropics quickly gave way to harsh reality. Almost half of the mercenaries in Indonesia died in service. In addition, Swiss soldiers in foreign forces were unable to pursue a military career beyond their mercenary rank. Many regretted their step and turned to their local Swiss consulate in the hope that it could extricate them from their contracts – mostly, however, in vain.

Since 1927, foreign service has been prohibited under the Military Criminal Code. Following the Second World War, an average of 240 mercenaries were convicted each year of joining the French Foreign Legion despite the ban. Nowadays, such cases are few and far between. Switzerland's judiciary came down hard on the 800 or so men who served on the side of the Spanish Republicans against Fran-

co's Nationalists from 1936 to 1939. These activists, who fought for freedom and democracy, received a pardon from parliament 70 years later.

## Ban on mercenary firms

Mercenary firms have been explicitly banned in Switzerland since 2013. It is illegal for Swiss-based private security companies to take part in armed hostilities abroad or recruit mercenaries for this purpose. On introducing the ban, the justice minister at the time Simonetta Sommaruga (SP) stressed that Switzerland was taking responsibility: “We cannot be indifferent to what Swiss-based companies do abroad.”

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### Further information

Swiss soldiers in foreign service (Swiss Federal Archives): [revue.link/soldiers](http://revue.link/soldiers)

Swiss mercenaries in Indonesia (Swiss National Museum): [revue.link/mercenaries](http://revue.link/mercenaries)