

Defence and security goods for Africa: what a Swiss company can and cannot do

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African military spending is growing, and new suppliers from China, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates are gaining market share. For defence and security business with Africa, a Swiss company is nevertheless rarely a suitable supplier, because the licensing practice under the War Material Act stands in the way for most African destinations. Swiss law still matters wherever goods may be war material, specific military goods or dual-use goods, and wherever a Swiss company is involved in the transaction.

1 The market

Military spending in Africa reached USD 58.2 billion in 2025, an increase of 8.5 per cent. Algeria leads with USD 25.4 billion, followed by Morocco with USD 6.3 billion, South Africa with USD 3.2 billion and Nigeria with USD 2.1 billion, an increase of 55 per cent. Arms imports in the period from 2021 to 2025 fell by 41 per cent compared with the previous five years, while China, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates gained market share.

2 Swiss exports to Africa

Swiss exports of war material reached CHF 948.2 million in 2025. Only 0.03 per cent of this went to Africa, or about CHF 280,000. The figures reflect the licensing practice under the War Material Act, which rejects exports to most African destinations. A Swiss company is therefore not a viable vehicle for supplying arms to African buyers.

3 Where Swiss law matters

Defence and security business with Africa nevertheless raises Swiss legal questions in several situations.

Defence and security goods for Africa

- **Classification:** whether goods are war material under the War Material Act, specific military goods or dual-use goods under the Goods Control Act decides which licence is required and whether one can be obtained.
- **Security, border and surveillance technology:** goods for border protection, surveillance and communications often fall under the dual-use rules or under specific controls on surveillance technology.
- **Licensing procedures:** applications to the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO) require a precise description of the goods, the end user and the end use.
- **Trading without goods in Switzerland:** export control duties attach to the seat of the company that disposes of the goods and also apply to merchanting and brokering in which the goods never enter Switzerland.
- **Proceedings:** violations of the War Material Act and the Goods Control Act are criminal offences, and companies and their managers need defence in investigations by SECO and the prosecution authorities.

Where a Swiss company has Chinese shareholders, the US rules described in the article on [US sanctions and the BIS Affiliates Rule](#) apply in addition.

4 How Ressos Legal helps

I advise on the classification of goods, export licences and the structuring of defence and security transactions, and defend companies and individuals in proceedings under the War Material Act and the Goods Control Act. I have advised on defence industry government transactions in the Middle East. [Contact me](#) for a first conversation.

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