



Small Arms Transfers: Importing States

The Small Arms Survey estimates that the annual authorized trade in ‘small arms’¹ exceeds USD 7 billion a year (Small Arms Survey, 2011a, p. 9).² A lack of transparency on the part of many states and difficulties of disaggregating data on transfers that some states do report create numerous challenges for the study of this activity. Lists of the most active countries tend to be skewed towards those that are more transparent. Nonetheless, sufficient data and expertise exist to allow for broad assessments to be made about the trade in small arms. This *Research Note* assesses the countries that import the greatest value of small arms.

As highlighted in the Survey’s *Research Note 11* (Small Arms Survey, 2011b), state reporting of small arms transfers is opaque or incomplete. In their submissions to international reporting mechanisms, such as the UN Commodity Trade Statistics Database (better known as UN Comtrade), the UN Register of Conventional Arms, and national reports, states either fail to report transfers or are selective in those that they report. Furthermore, international reporting mechanisms often aggregate various commodities, such as different types of weapon, into single categories, which makes it difficult to discern trade data on any one type of weapon.

Since 2001 at least 15 countries have imported more than USD 100 million worth of small arms in a single calendar year. Analysis of the 2001–08³ period indicates that the United States is the country with the largest recorded yearly imports, having received more than USD 1

billion in small arms in both 2007 and 2008 (Small Arms Survey, 2010, online annexe 1.2; 2011a, online annexe 1.2). Canada, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom have also routinely imported more than USD 100 million in small arms a year during the period 2001–08. However, imports by the United States average more than the *combined* averages of these five states.⁴

Analysis of customs data suggests that nine other countries—Australia, Cyprus, Egypt, Japan, the Netherlands, Pakistan, South Korea, Spain, and Turkey—have imported USD 100 million or more in small arms in a calendar year since 2001, but not routinely.

Besides the 15 countries mentioned above, 66 additional countries have imported small arms valued at USD 10 million or more in a calendar year since 2001 (see Table 1). Of note is that these importers (81) far outnumber states (49) believed to have exported USD 10 million in small arms in a calendar year since 2001. When national defence and security forces procure weapons and ammunition (see Small Arms Survey, 2006, pp. 7–35), they often retain their older weapon stocks for some time. If states do find a market for materiel that is surplus to their requirements, its value is often considerably lower than that of newly manufactured and recently acquired materiel.⁵ While a number of states may import more than USD 10 million per calendar year in new weapons, their (re-)export of surpluses is unlikely to approach the USD 10 million threshold.

Table 1 Importers of small arms, 2001–08 (estimated annual average value)

Category		Value (USD million)	States (listed alphabetically in each row)
Top importers	Tier 1	500+	1: United States
	Tier 2	100–499	5: Canada, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom
Major importers	Tier 3	50–99	10: Afghanistan, Australia, Belgium, Cyprus, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, South Korea, Spain
	Tier 4	10–49	22: Austria, Azerbaijan, Colombia, Denmark, Egypt, Finland, Greece, India, Iraq, Israel, Libya, Mexico, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Venezuela

Note: At least 43 countries have imported USD 10 million or more in small arms in a single calendar year between 2001 and 2008, but imported *on average* less than USD 10 million annually during this period: Algeria, Argentina, Armenia, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Botswana, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chad, Chile, China, Côte d’Ivoire, Czech Republic, Dominican Republic, Estonia, Ethiopia, Georgia, Guatemala, Honduras, Indonesia, Iran, Ireland, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kuwait, Latvia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Namibia, New Zealand, Nigeria, North Korea, Oman, Philippines, Singapore, Slovakia, South Africa, Sudan, Taiwan, and Ukraine.

Sources: Small Arms Survey (2004; 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010; 2011a; including online annexes available at <<http://www.smallarmssurvey.org>>); and author’s interviews.

The discrepancy between the number of states importing small arms from those exporting small arms *habitually* at values exceeding USD 10 million annually is not so great. The Survey categorizes states that import or export small arms valued at between USD 10 and USD 99 million per calendar year as ‘major importers’ and ‘major exporters’, respectively. Between 2001 and 2008 the Survey estimates that 32 states routinely imported small arms at this level, of which ten countries may be described as ‘Tier 3 Major Importers’ and 22 as ‘Tier 4’ (see Table 1). The number of ‘major exporters’ during this period is believed to be 31 states (Small Arms Survey, 2011b).

Many ‘importers’ are, in reality, ‘trans-shippers’. While they may report having imported small arms, they are not the final destination for the transfer in question and subsequently ‘re-export’ the weapons. Several countries—such as Cyprus—serve as trans-shipment points. Between 2001 and 2003 Cyprus imported small arms in excess of USD 150 million a year on average (Small Arms Survey, 2004, p. 109; 2005, p. 107; 2006, p. 75). Although its recorded exports were only a small fraction of this value, it is widely understood that the vast majority of materiel received was transferred further afield. In the case of Cyprus, states shipping materiel to that country probably know that it is not the final destination for their exports. In other instances, however, the exporting state may not be aware of the subsequent re-export of the small arms transferred. While such retransfers can often be innocuous, the regular disregard for and abuse of end-user certificates facilitates diversion that may be quite problematic (Small Arms Survey, 2008, pp. 155–81; Bromley and Griffiths, 2010). ■

Sourcing

This *Research Note* is based on a series of *Small Arms Survey* yearbook chapters for which Nicolas Marsh and Matt Schroeder were the primary authors. Pablo Dreyfus, Janis Grzybowksi, Patrick Herron, and Jasna Lazarevic also contributed to the research and analysis. The *Research Note* was written by Eric G. Berman.

Notes

- 1 The term ‘small arms’ refers to small arms and light weapons, as well as their related munitions, parts, and certain accessories. For more-specific criteria, see UNGA (1997); Small Arms Survey (2008, pp. 8–11; 2011a, p. 10).
- 2 The Survey will complete its four-year re-evaluation of authorized trade next year with the publication of *Small Arms Survey 2012*, when it assesses small arms parts and accessories.
- 3 The Survey and the Peace Research Institute Oslo wait two years before analyzing a calendar year’s global customs data. Many countries need this additional time to submit and correct their data.
- 4 Of these five countries, only Saudi Arabia is recorded as having imported more than USD 200 million worth of small arms in a single year during this period, i.e. USD 261 million worth in 2001 (Small Arms Survey, 2004, p. 111).
- 5 This ‘value’ may actually represent a potential sizeable cost to the owner. Often surplus materiel is improperly stored and accounted for, posing a safety threat or lending itself to being diverted.

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This Research Note forms part of a series that is available on the Small Arms Survey website at <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/publications/by-type/research-notes.html>. The online version of this document will be updated as more information becomes available. For additional information on small arms transfers, please visit: <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/weapons-and-markets/transfers.html>.

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The Small Arms Survey serves as the principal international source of public information on all aspects of small arms and armed violence, and as a resource centre for governments, policy-makers, researchers, and activists. The Survey distributes its findings through Occasional Papers, Issue Briefs, Working Papers, Special Reports, Books, and its annual flagship publication, the *Small Arms Survey*.

The project has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, international public policy, law, economics, development studies, conflict resolution, sociology and criminology, and works closely with a worldwide network of researchers and partners.

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Credits

Author: Eric G. Berman

Copy-editing: Alex Potter
(fpcc@mtnloaded.co.za)

Design and Layout: Richard Jones
(rick@studioexile.com)

Contact details

Small Arms Survey
Graduate Institute of International
and Development Studies
47 Avenue Blanc
1202 Geneva
Switzerland

t +41 22 908 5777

f +41 22 732 2738

