

The arms industry is a shady business: Transparency is often curtailed by the ‘veil of national security’. Governments are often unwilling to reveal any information and arms lobbyists love to operate in the shadows. However, as a multi-billion dollar industry, the arms industry leaves traces and campaigners, demanding more transparency, have successfully exposed some of its secrets. Research can play an important role in campaigning against the arms trade by putting the spotlight on this controversial trade and supporting grassroots groups in taking action.

## Mapping the arms industry

The arms industry consists of thousands of companies and subsidiaries around the world. The major companies are based in Europe, the United States, Russia and China. Arms factories are the most traceable aspect of the arms trade and often [make a great action target](#). That’s why mapping the arms industry in your region or country, is a good way to get a better idea of this industry.

A first way to get a rough idea about the companies involved in the arms industry is through [data released each year by the research institute SIPRI](#). Since 1989 SIPRI has been keeping track of the 100 biggest arms companies, which is traditionally dominated by American and European companies.

The SIPRI data however leaves out the thousands of smaller companies who are equally involved in the arms trade. Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT) has identified and mapped 409 companies in the UK alone. Although CAAT has only mapped companies that have offices or factories in the UK, you can find out a lot of useful information generally about these companies including what weapons and weapons systems they produce, which countries they have applied for arms export licences to sell to, and which arms fairs they have exhibited at. It’s a good place to start to get a quick overview of some of the world’s biggest arms companies and who they sell to.

Other organisations have produced similar online tools in their countries:

- The research institute GRIP has a [useful database of the Belgian arms industry](#).
- The peace organisation Vredesactie has built a database mapping the European arms industry called [Arms Industry Watch](#).
- The research institute IPIS has made an accessible and easy-to-use [mapping of the African arms industry](#).

If you want to start mapping your own arms industry and nobody has done it yet, there are some good places to start. Although deciding if a company is an arms company is not always straight forward, you can start by combining several sources of information to get a good picture of the sector:

- Trade organisations which represent the interests of the arms sector often give an idea of the most active part of the arms industry in a country. For example, in the UK there is ADS and in Belgium, Agoria. Their members give a general overview of the arms industry in a specific country. If you are in a European country, you can check the member organisations of the European arms industry body: [AeroSpace and Defence Industries Association of Europe \(ASD\)](#)
- A lot of companies are not embarrassed about their activities in the ‘defence’ market. Their websites are dedicated to PR but can also be a great source of information. For example, the website of [Belgian company Mecar](#) lists all the types of ammunition they sell.
- The list of exhibitors at major arms fairs such as Eurosatory in France, DSEI in the UK or IDEX in the United Arab Emirates also gives a good overview of companies active in the arms industry. These fairs are all about PR and sales, so their websites often contain quite a lot of useful info including a list of exhibitors.

- Some governments, like Sweden, publish a list of companies who have applied for an arms export license. This is not the case in all countries, but can be an easy to use list to map the arms industry in a specific country.

## Arms trade: who is trading weapons with whom?

Which companies are involved in the arms trade? Which countries are the main exporting countries, with whom do they trade weapons and where do these weapons end up? To know if a country is involved in arming an armed conflict or a dictatorial regime it is important to look in the right places. Years of campaigning by NGOs and grassroots groups means there is now a lot more information available than there was twenty years ago.

SIPRI is again a great place to start. They publish an annual report about the most recent trends in the arms trade, the exporters and the importers and the dollars going round in the arms trade. Even more useful is their [SIPRI Arms Transfer database](#), which lists military hardware traded since 1950.

But SIPRI data has its limits. The Arms Transfer database only lists military hardware such as tanks, armoured vehicles and other finished products. Parts and components, ammunition and small arms are not included in the database.

The [European Network Against the Arms Trade \(ENAAAT\) database](#) is another good starting point to get a general idea of the European arms trade. The database is based on data from EU governments on the licenses they have granted. As always when governments give figures, watch out for the quality of the data. France for example is famous for overestimating the amount and value of licenses granted, and so you shouldn't take them into account. Other countries only provide the numbers of the licenses they granted, but not their actual exports (licenses are a good indication of the arms export policy of a state, but actual exports gives a better view of the exact amount of weapons exported).

Most governments are obliged by law to provide a certain amount of transparency. Sometimes these national reports can be quite detailed, including the types of weapons being exported, the destination, how much the license is worth, etc. SIPRI has [a database of all the national reports](#), but the most updated information you will most likely find on the official websites.

Once weapons have been exported, it is important to find out if they have been used in war, in crushing protest or the violation of human rights violations. Twitter is a great source. There is an enormous amount of information from within conflict zones and dictatorial regimes about the type of weapons being used. Independent journalists, warring factions and twitter feeds of armies often share footage and images of the military hardware being used.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch regularly publish reports which might contain information about the kind of weaponry being used in the violation of human rights. Peace organisations such as [Stop Wapenhandel](#), [Campaign Against the Arms Trade](#), [Obsarm](#) and other also often have a lot of info on which weapons are being used. Reports by United Nations expert committees are also a great source of information of weapons being used if there is a UN arms embargo in place. [ITrace+](#) assembles info on diverted conventional arms transfers based on field investigations.

## The murky world of the arms lobby

The arms lobby has a heavy footprint on governmental policies. Already in 1961 then US president Eisenhower warned for the “unwarranted influence of the military-industrial complex”. Moreover, the arms lobby operations are not always immediately visible. Meetings often take case behind closed doors,

‘advisory’ groups operate in opaque ways and there is often a steadily spinning revolving door. Despite this, there are some ways of uncovering the wheelings and dealings of the arms industry lobby.

Corporate Europe Observatory has compiled [a useful toolkit to research corporate lobbying](#) at the EU level. In the United Kingdom [the lobby watchdog Spinwatch](#) is a good source of information.

Some governments have lobby registers in place. The website ‘[Open Secrets](#)’ is an excellent tool to get a first clue about all lobbying taken place in Washington. The EU lobby register is less reliable as it is a voluntary register and lobbyists often give underestimated numbers, but it does give an indication of the resources they have. A useful website for EU lobbyists is [lobbyfacts](#). A bonus is that all meetings with cabinet members and European Commissioners themselves are also listed on lobbyfacts.

Revolving doors are another indication of the influence of the arms industry in the halls of power. When senior decision-makers leave office and go straight into lobby jobs, or when lobbyists join government institutions, the risk of significant conflicts of interest is great. CAAT [has mapped all the public servants who have gone over to the arms industry](#) since 1996. Transparency International keeps track of the jobs EU Commissioners and MEPs take after they work for the EU via [EU integrity watch](#).

Another useful tool are Freedom of Information requests. A lot of countries nowadays have a procedure where everybody can request documents falling within a specific scope. The quality of these access to documents law varies and it can be an uphill and time intensive battle to file a procedure, but the results can be satisfying. The European Forum on Armed Drones (EFAD) has listed [some tips and tricks on how to draft a Freedom of Information request](#) specifically in relation to drone warfare, but which can also be used with regard to the arms trade.

The most useful tool for filing Freedom of Information requests at the EU level is the asktheEU.org website. You can file a request using a simple form and find other peoples requests and responses given by the EU. With regard to FOI requests on arms industry lobbying a major stumbling block is the exception on access to documents based on military sensitivity, which the EU will often use to shield documents from disclosure. You need to be persistent if this is the case. The EU or any other government institutions cannot use these exceptions as a blanket check to hide all documents. Certainly in case of meetings and minutes of meetings with the arms lobby, this exception is hard to sustain. Do not hesitate to use other methods to name and shame an institution in handing over documents in case their excuses become laughable. The media can be a great ally in putting pressure on institutions to take the fundamental right on access to information more serious.

Often there will be means to appeal a refusal to disclose documents. On the European level, the European Ombudsman is an advocate of greater transparency and it is worthwhile to file a complaint in case your FOI request has not been handled well.

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