

INCIRLIK'S ISR DILEMMA

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Abstract

İncirlik, AB has played a key role for American strategy in the middle east since the fall of the Soviet Union, providing a staging point to spread western influence in the region. This western influence has come largely in the form of emerging unmanned technology, filling a vital role in American conflicts but arguably, more importantly, Turkish security. Turkey has continually looked towards the U.S. to provide them these planes along with the training to employ them effectively against the growing Kurdish threat at their borders. America, owing to concerns regarding accusations of human rights violations at the hands of these drones has decided to withhold support and bar the procurement of the systems. This decision has created an expanding divide leading to the Turkish hunt for industrial independence, and more agreeable partners in the Arab world. In the past 30 years Turkey has used this drive to become one of the largest, most advanced producers and exporters of UAVs in the world. Due to this advancement, a whole region is developing new technology, strategy, and tactics absent U.S. collaboration and support. If America were to exit this strategic location its waning influence would completely fade, pushing a one time ally farther away; potentially leading to a future conflict in which the U.S. is unprepared to fight.

İncirlik Air Base is a key staging point for American influence in the middle east region, from this location the United States has been able to hold back competing global powers looking to capitalize on an unstable political atmosphere. Specifically, American influence has contributed significantly in the development of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance technology as well as the strategy by which it is employed. As development has progressed this technology presented itself in the form of the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle(UAV). The Turkish government became aware of the capabilities of this emerging technology early on and sought out American resources and training to utilize this valuable asset. Initially, America obliged, but shortly after halted exports to the country as disagreements arose over the purposes for which these systems were being used. In order to fill the void caused by the withdrawal of American influence, Turkey sought to develop its own drone industry with non U.S partners. In the absence of American exports Turkey has become a global competitor in the drone market. This fact necessitates U.S. presence in Incirlik as without it we may eventually be up against an opponent whose tactics, technology and strategy we do not understand.

Turkey began its first attempt in the UAV market with a project called the UAV-X1 by the Turkish Aerospace Industries Inc. in March of 1990.¹ The navigation and payload integration stages of this project did not proceed due to budget problems although flight tests were performed.² This failure came amidst the Turkish-Kurdish conflict continuing to ignite, thus leaving Turkey in desperate need of border security. The U.S. looking to ease an ally's desperation stepped in and beginning in 1996 Turkey entered into its first drone age the old-

¹ Kahvecioglu, Sinem, and Hakan Oktal. "Turkish UAV Capabilities as a New Competitor in the Market." International Journal of Intelligent Unmanned Systems. Emerald Group Publishing Limited, August 5, 2014.

² Kahvecioglu, Sinem, and Hakan Okta

fashion way - purchasing six unarmed drones from U.S firm General Atomics.³ These initial drones were the GNAT 750s, an unarmed UAV capable of providing a video feed to geographically separated ground control stations, proved especially valuable in hunting down "Turkey's Al-Qaida" as military and government officials of the country called it.⁴ This "terrorist" group, the PKK(Kurdistan Workers Party), threatening Turkey's established political system proved difficult to track as most of their disputed land existed among extremely mountainous terrain. Surveillance from above, made possible by the U.S., aided in the collection of much needed intel; however, following the new capabilities were new problems. The drones would hover in the air for hours to pinpoint PKK fighters' precise locations, after which an F-16 fighter jet would be sent in to launch an attack. But again and again, by the time the F-16 had arrived at the site 20 minutes later, the target had already disappeared.⁵ Recognizing the need for armaments the Turkish government set its eyes on the new MQ-1 predator drone, an upgraded version of the GNAT 750 capable of carrying munitions; the perfect solution to their delayed reaction problem. America, having a shaky stance on how they viewed the PKK though, coupled with NATO claims of human rights violations, barred Turkey from purchasing additional U.S. manufactured drones. Conspiracy theories at the time about possible U.S. support to the PKK - in a desire to keep northern Iraq stable – created increasing anti-American sentiment in Turkey as well.⁶ As their disdain with the U.S. stance grew, Turkey began to look elsewhere, and reached a deal with Israel for the procurement of the Heron drone. Though still unarmed, the longer loiter times and greater distance they could fly seemed to be a viable short

³ AmFarooq, Umar. "How Turkey Defied the U.S. and Became a Killer Drone Power." *The Intercept*, May 14, 2019. Erica.

⁴ Kaya, Karen. "A Different War on Terrorism: The U.S., Turkey and the PKK." *A Different War on Terrorism: The U.S., Turkey and the PKK | Small Wars Journal*. Accessed March 23, 2021.

⁵ Hofman, Lennart. "How Turkey Became a Drone Power (and What That Tells Us about the Future of Warfare)." *The Correspondent*, December 10, 2020.

⁶ Kaya, PKK

term answer but more importantly would help demonstrate their independence from an uncooperative America.

Israel initially signed a contract with the Turkish military involving the supply of 10 Heron UAV's, plus surveillance payloads and ground control stations.⁷ Complications inevitably happened delaying delivery; angering the Turkish government as they anxiously awaited the promised assets. On top of this, systems requested on the aircraft were presenting IAI (Israeli Aerospace Industries) with technical issues that they could not overcome. These issues primarily stemmed from a unique Turkish payload weighing in excess of 155kg, limiting the plane to an altitude of 21,000 ft instead of the desired 30,000ft.⁸ Frustrated, Turkey agreed to a lease option but this was slowly dismantled following the Gaza Flotilla Raid in which Israelis killed nine Turkish activists in international waters, driving the former Prime Minister of Turkey Recep Erdogan to exclaim “nothing would ever be the same” and begin a recalibration of the Turkey-Israeli relationship with the withdrawal of the Turkish ambassador.⁹ As a result Turkey was drawn closer to the Arab world and away from western influence complicating the relationship America had with both countries. Struggling though, once again they looked to America for support as without these drones the PKK movement was gaining momentum. In order to preserve the U.S.'s shaky relationship with their fleeting ally, owing to export exclusions, and their recent pull out of Northern Iraq the U.S redeployed 4 USAF MQ-1 predators from Iraq to Incirlik, AB, to continue surveillance of Kurdish PKK terrorist in cooperation with Turkey.¹⁰ Seeking to take back control, Turkey claimed that it would have sole

⁷ Defense Industry Daily staff ; “Israeli Manufacturers Turkish UAV Contract.” Defense Industry Daily, December 22, 2011.

⁸ Defense Industry Daily staff , 2011

⁹ Alriza, Buleant, Haim Malka, and Stephen Flanagan. “The Gaza Flotilla Raid and Its Aftermath.” The Gaza Flotilla Raid and its Aftermath | Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 28, 2020.

¹⁰ Defense Industry Daily staff , 2011

responsibility for the routes and missions of the 4 USAF MQ-1 Predator drones, deployed at Incirlik AB.¹¹ America, wanting to preserve their presence in Incirlik due to its strategic advantage, continued to fly the missions and looked to dispute these claims diplomatically. As relations strengthened, Turkey one last time requested to purchase General Atomics products, this time the MQ-9 Reaper, a UAV capable of carrying the heavy payloads and ultimately deadly armaments deemed necessary by Turkey. The U.S. denied the request and continued to exclude the Turkish government from purchasing this technology for fear of its intended uses. This was the last straw for current President Erdogan who had enough and sought to develop a robust domestic industry free from reliance on other nations.

President Erdogan during a 2015 event exclaimed that “So As long as there are assailants in the world, we will always be required to be ready for defense...our goal is to completely rid our defense industry of foreign dependency by 2023...by 2023, a locally-made combat plane will fly the Turkish skies.”¹² This vow for self-reliance saw two local Turkish companies rise to the occasion, the well renowned TAI, and new competitor, family owned Baykar. Each company sought to build a UAV that could fit the constant need for surveillance and eventual need for deadly payloads. TAI’s answer to this was the ANKA, an eerily similar plane to the MQ-9. TAI garnered its knowledge of attack drones from previous licensure with U.S.manufacturer General Dynamics to produce the F-16. They utilized this knowledge going forward to produce a MALE (Medium Altitude Long Endurance) UAV of their own that would go on to carry domestically produced SIGINT devices and weapons systems. The other player in the game was Baykar Makina, a small company started by a graduate of the prestigious

¹¹ Defense Industry Daily staff , 2011

¹² Wicaksono, Tresno, and Anak Agung Banyu Perwita. “The Military Industrial Complex In a Developing Country: Lessons from the Republic of Turkey.” *Jurnal Hubungan Internasional*. Accessed March 23, 2021.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This young man of only 26 left his Ph.D program to return to Ankara, Turkey to bid for a contract with his own UAV called the Bayraktar TB2. This UAV, though smaller than the ANKA, came at the small price tag of one million dollars and could be produced using almost exclusively commercial hardware, exactly the sort of self-reliance that President Erdogan was looking for. The ANKA would come to be Turkey's strategic ,wide spectrum UAV with the TB2 being placed for use directly with ground forces owing to its smaller size and more tactical capabilities. This development came absent of U.S. support and erupted into a large market that middle eastern and Russian partners wanted a part in. Now with a UAV superpower in their neck of the woods they could easily bypass the strong arm of America, blocking their attempts to level the playing field.

As Turkey's drone program matures, Ankara has been eyeing opportunities to gain a foothold in the competitive global market for military drones; it has exported the Bayraktar TB2 to Qatar and Ukraine and is reportedly courting sales to Indonesia and Tunisia.¹³ The capability to collaborate with local partners in the use and creation of this technology has pulled Turkey farther from U.S. influence. Turkey has created a wave of desire for unmanned platforms across the entire middle east and today, at least 31 countries operate heavy-class drones like the Bayraktar TB2 and Anka, up from 16 in 2009.¹⁴ This proliferation in drones has introduced a whole new playing field that 20 years ago America alone held the reigns on. As it expands absent of American technology and guidance we continue to see not just massive numbers of militants killed but civilians alike furthering the continued fears of human rights violations. Turkey has transformed from a small ally needing assistance after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, to a

¹³ Wicaksono, 2021.

¹⁴ Gettinger, Dan. "Turkey's Military Drones: an Export Product That's Disrupting NATO." Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, December 6, 2019.

country looking to solve its own political unrest, and now a UAV powerhouse and one of the most advanced exporters in the world. On each step of the way America has always been present, not always in agreement but always present. We have held onto a waning influence over the development of the unique capability that UAV technology can provide, but now are watching as they move on without our support.

With the recent removal of our own MQ-1 and MQ-9's from Incirlik it will not be long until they fill the gap for UAV technology solely with their own domestic drones. In the meantime Turkey has found a new partner with the procurement of the Russian S-400 missile system, a completely incompatible product with current NATO technology.¹⁵ This move, despite the abundant availability of NATO-interoperable systems equally fit to meet its defense requirements, is troubling and as a direct result has led to strict sanctions on its defense industry.¹⁶ Considering America an ally, Turkey is enraged at the sanctions, believing they had no other option after being barred from purchasing U.S. equipment since the late 1990's. As President Erdogan continues talks with Moscow for the purchase and continued use of Russian products he further loosens the grip America has on this uniquely strategic location. All of this has come as a result of years of excluding this country from technological development and support with an asset that they have seen as one of their most important tools. Time and time again we have disagreed with their political dilemmas, instead using them to our advantage in conflicts of our own. Now one of the top global competitors in the UAV market Incirlik has become increasingly important as our last bastion of western influence in the middle east. Complete removal from this location will lead to the entire region developing technology,

¹⁵ Matthew Lee, The Associated Press. "US Sanctions NATO Ally Turkey over Purchase of Russian Missile Defense System." Defense News. Defense News, December 14, 2020.

¹⁶ Lee, 2020

strategy and doctrine without us. This development of new warfare will very likely not fit with current NATO systems whether that be technologically or philosophically. While already proving finding a new ally is not a problem it is not farfetched to believe that Turkey's time as an ally is ticking down and in the near future we may very well be on opposite sides. Collaboration even in the face of disagreements is crucial to the rapidly changing battlespace of the 21st century and without it we may soon be facing an opponent who we are woefully unprepared to fight.

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