Flying Blind: Why Armed Drones May Detract from Turkish Security

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Eager to land the decisive blow in its long-standing battle with its Kurdish insurgency, Turkey is seeking to purchase armed drones from the United States. Intent on replicating the central element of the United States' counterterrorism strategy in Pakistan and Yemen, Ankara aims to use targeted strikes to thwart the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) insurgency. While Turkey's procurement effort dates back to 2010, the issue has become more complex following the ill-fated raid that killed 34 smugglers near the town of Uludere in December of last year.

After months of relative quiet, the issue was recently thrust back into the collective consciousness of Turkey's non-Kurdish majority when a piece by Adam Entous and Joe Parkinson appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*. The article cites Pentagon sources claiming that a video feed from an American-piloted unarmed drone provided the initial intelligence that led to the disastrous strike. The unarmed drones were loaned to Turkey in 2012 to provide intelligence coverage of Turkey's porous border with Iraq. The four drones are flown by pilots from the private American company Battlespace Flight Services from a facility in Ankara dubbed the data fusion cell. The cell, which was established in 2007 and is jointly manned by American and Turkish military personnel, is responsible for transmitting intelligence gleamed from American manned and unmanned airplanes operating in Iraq.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan dismissed the claims of American involvement, arguing instead that the intelligence that led to the strike came from a Turkish—i.e. Israeli-made Heron—unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). The Prime Minister—backed by reports and op-eds in sympathetic media outlets—claimed the WSJ story was a political ploy by some in the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill to prevent the sale of armed drones to Turkey.

Yet, Erdogan manipulated the American position for entirely domestic reasons. Unofficially, the United States has opposed the sale of armed drones in general; instead, the U.S. markets unarmed variants to its allies abroad. Turkey has been no exception. The United States' unstated policy seeks to balance concerns of defense contractors—who are obviously eager to market all forms of drones abroad—with international norms intended to limit the proliferation of drone technology.

In keeping with unofficial policy, the Obama administration has refused to submit an arms sale package to Congress that includes the armed drones. Even if the administration were to submit such a package, however, its uncertain if it would pass given Turkey's diminished reputation among some Republican lawmakers. Thus the Obama administration has opted for compromise half-measures. To its valuable ally, Turkey, the U.S. opted to loan and pilot unarmed predator drones used in the Iraq War. Eager to address Turkish needs but unwilling to buck convention, the Obama administration's policy enabled it to bypass Congressional approval while reassuring Turkey of the United States' commitment to its most pressing security threat.

The domestic backdrop for Turkey's repeated requests has been the breakdown of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) Kurdish opening and the re-militarization of the Kurdish issue. After appearing to change tactics and address the issue politically in his first term, Erodgan's approach has reverted back to that of Turkey's old gaurd: defeating the PKK militarily. This approach leads Ankara to covet armed drones as the weapon of choice for its own "war on terror."

Yet, adding armed drones to Turkey's vast arsenal will yield few, if any, greater successes in its military campaign against the Kurdish insurgency. At the same time, use of armed drones poses a threat of unconsidered and unintended political and security consequences. For example, the United States has received permission from the Pakistani, Yemeni, and Somali leadership to violate their respective sovereign airspaces when conducting drone missions. Will Turkey conclude similar agreements with Iraq, Iran, or Syria? Turkey's ongoing political difficulties with all three countries are likely to complicate such a request. Is Turkey willing to carry out cross border attacks without permission? If not, where does the military plan to use these drones and what are the legal implications of the Turkish military using missile strikes to assassinate its own citizens? How will Turkey handle the fall out after the first drone strike misses its target and kills civilians in the Kurdish majority southeast?

Beyond these pressing domestic concerns, Turkey's leadership has paid far too little attention to the spread of drone technology globally. Countries like China, Russia, India and Pakistan have invested in drone technology as part of a larger effort to replicate the capabilities of the United States' current UAVs. Iran has also developed drones to help compensate for its weak air force. Hezbollah has acquired Iranian-made drones capable of carrying out kamikaze attacks. In the United States, a 26-year-old man was charged with plotting to load explosives on a remotely controlled plane and fly it into the Pentagon or the Capitol.

Already, the capability for similar small scale attacks using unmanned aircraft is within reach of terrorist organizations like the PKK—or its more radical offshoots. A terrorist group could simply purchase a large radio-controlled aircraft, attach plastic explosives, and fly it into a public area. Given the history of reprisal killings in Turkey and the PKK's history of attacking civilian targets, a scenario involving some sort of radio controlled response to future Turkish drone strikes is a possibility worthy of consideration by the government, academics and military tacticians.

Absent international norms on the use of armed drones, the proliferation of UAV technology creates new abilities for destructive and harder to prevent terrorist attacks. However, discussion of precedent has been wholly absent from debates in Turkey. While Washington is the ultimate trendsetter, Turkey's procurement and development of armed drones would add to the perceived international legitimacy of targeted killings from 10,000 meters above ground. If Turkey were to use armed drones in Kurdish areas, it would lose standing to challenge such strikes elsewhere. While the idea of Turkey challenging American strikes against mutually-loathed al Qaeda operatives is unlikely, a scenario involving China using armed drones to attack separatist Uighurs would certainly elicit concern from Ankara.

Turkey's current policy elevates short-term tactical gains over the long-term implications of using armed drones. With the GDP growth rate expected to slow down, Ankara should be asking tougher questions about the price of its military procurements compared with their expected payoff. Armed drones are more expensive to fly than the F-16, are more prone to crashing, and carry fewer munitions. Its vaunted sensors are less effective at border monitoring than cheaper manned airplanes outfitted with thermal imaging technology.

Equally important, the quality of drone video is too poor to accurately assess the difference between friend and foe. Turkey will have the luxury of operating in an environment with no air defenses—so the drone will be able to operate at lower altitudes—but that does not preclude accidental airstrikes on civilians. After Uludere, Turkey's leadership should proceed more cautiously in its effort to arm itself with a similar platform that features the same intelligence capabilities that led to the killing of 34 people.

Is Ankara prepared to endure a repeat of Uludure? Without careful delineation of the legality and chain of command, the government is bound to repeat its recent mistakes. Without a public debate over whether it supports armed drone warfare, the government can expect a backlash at least as strong as the one it experienced in recent months. At the very least, the AKP should mimic the tactics of the Obama White House and release details about the drone kill list, the chain of command, and the involvement of the Prime Minister in authorizing strikes to friendly media outlets. Thus far, Turkey has opted to cloak these details in a shroud of secrecy, rather than address questions posed by the local media and the political opposition.

Before pressing forward in its quest for drones, Turkey might consider the global and domestic ramifications of deploying these weapons. Politically, introducing and using armed drones belies the optimism, rhetoric, and

messaging on which the ruling party campaigned in previous elections. Attacking the PKK issue politically and investing in more effective tools to protect its citizens would better serve Ankara's long and short-term political interests. A sustained political effort to engage Turkey's Kurds without using armed drone strikes would likely yield greater political and military returns than short-term tactics using platforms that duplicate Turkey's current capabilities. Doing so would indicate that Turkey's leadership is serious about its pledges to increase minority rights and deepen Turkish democracy.

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