

Turkey's Military Drones: An Export Product that's Disrupting NATO

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Just over a decade ago, the prototype of an unmanned aircraft that would become the Bayraktar TB2 took off for its maiden flight at Sinop Airport on the Black Sea. There were few signs then that the mid-sized, twin-boom aircraft would become Turkey's first indigenously produced armed drone and the backbone of its unmanned air force. At the time, domestic drone manufacturers struggled against technical difficulties and foreign competition. Ten years on, however, the situation is radically different: Ankara's drone program has morphed into a successful industry that's already exporting products. It's also a potent military force that's [further straining](#) the NATO alliance.

Turkey is wielding its new arsenal in a military campaign against Kurdish fighters in Syria, part of a long-standing conflict that has taken on new significance since US President Donald Trump announced a controversial decision to withdraw troops from northern Syria this fall, opening up allied Syrian Kurds to Turkish attacks. The president of France, another NATO ally of Turkey's, recently accused Turkey of "fighting against those who fight with us." Turkey's drones have enabled a conflict in an already volatile region; more worrisome, Ankara's successful drone program is an example that several other countries hope to emulate.

Drones have proliferated to militaries around the world at a dramatic rate. According to [The Drone Databook](#), a study of military drone capabilities I published with the Center for the Study of the Drone in September, at least 95 countries have a military drone program. These programs are growing in size and complexity. Nearly 60 countries have activated at least 267 units to operate drones. Like many other countries, Turkey has prioritized the development of a domestic industry in order to reduce its dependency on systems made by the United States and Israel, the traditional drone-production powerhouses.

Building a domestic drone program. Ten years ago, Turkey still relied heavily on foreign-made drones. The military operated a handful of aging US General Atomics Gnat 750s it purchased in 1995, as well as several Israeli-made IAI Herons, which were introduced in 2010. But, in an early sign of Turkey's keen interest in bolstering its own production capabilities, the country introduced the domestically-produced Bayraktar Mini, a handheld reconnaissance drone, in 2007.

Some of Turkey's early efforts to develop domestic drones did not go smoothly. Ankara awarded Turkish Aerospace Industries a contract in 2004 to develop the Anka, a medium-altitude long-endurance drone. The Anka made its first flight in 2010, but [reportedly crashed within](#) 15 minutes. As Turkey was working on its domestic program, the country was also finding it harder to acquire foreign-made aircraft. Ankara's efforts to import US-made

Predators and, later, Reapers eventually [stalled out amid congressional opposition](#).

In the past two years, Turkey's drone program has ballooned. From the end of 2017 to today, the military's inventory of Bayraktar TB2s more than doubled from around 38 to 94, about half of which are believed to be armed. Turkey's fleet of Ankas, which have become another of the country's mainstays, has grown to around 30. The two aircraft models are now in service with at least six military and security organizations: the Army, Air Force, Navy, Gendarmerie (national military police), the National Intelligence Organization, and the General Directorate of Security (national civilian police).

Turkish drone developers have achieved important technical milestones in recent years. In August 2018, the Anka carried out [Turkey's first satellite-controlled airstrike](#) and in December, an Anka completed its first flight [with a domestically-produced engine](#), a critical step towards creating a sustainable domestic manufacturing base. In 2019, both the Bayraktar TB2 and the Anka have broken their previous endurance records, with each flying longer than 24 hours. Two large drone producers, Baykar Makina and Turkish Aerospace Industries, have both unveiled new large unmanned aircraft, the Akinci and the Aksungur, respectively. Given the recent progress of Turkey's drone program, it's not surprising that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently [committed \\$105.5 million in funding](#) to support the continued development of the Bayraktar TB2.

To accommodate Turkey's growing unmanned fleet, Ankara has been rapidly building out a network of drone outposts at airports in the southeast of the country, along the Syrian border, as well as on the Aegean and Mediterranean coastline. Since 2018, Turkey appears to have constructed drone facilities—aircraft hangars and shelters, aircraft aprons and taxiways, and communication towers—at seven airports, bringing the total number of drone bases to at least nine. These facilities are essential because the majority of Turkish Bayraktar TB2s and Ankas have an operational range limited to about 100 miles. (Only the Anka-S, a satellite-enabled variant of the Anka, is currently capable of flying beyond line of sight.)



Turkey worked to develop military drones like the Anka during a time when the country faced difficulties acquiring US-made aircraft like Predator drones. Credit: N13s013 (cropped). (Creative Commons)

Turkish drones on the battlefield. One key factor behind Turkey's efforts to develop drones

and related infrastructure is Ankara's ongoing fight against Kurdish organizations such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party. As of June, Turkey's Bayraktar TB2s have [accumulated more than 100,000 operational](#) flight hours in a little under four years, an indication of how important drones are to Turkish military officials. According to media reports, Turkish drones have participated in airstrikes against Kurdish organizations in at least 11 provinces in southeast Turkey. They've also been used in at least five cross-border operations into Syria and Iraq, targeting members of Kurdish organizations since 2016, including in Turkey's recent military incursion into Syria dubbed Operation Peace Spring.

And these drones may not be targeting only fighters, as Turkey claims. Turkey's Human Rights Association has documented [several drone strikes in which](#) it says that civilians have been killed. Amid Turkey's ongoing invasion of northern Syria, the head of a Syrian Kurdish organization said that Turkish drones have [continued to strike Kurdish military and civilian](#) targets, despite a ceasefire. Kurdish fighters in Syria have been working alongside the United States in a campaign against the Islamic State.

Turkey's other main drone operations are in the east, along its Aegean and Mediterranean coasts. These operations have also caused friction. Greek officials have reported that Turkish drones have repeatedly flown over Greek islands in the Aegean. In 2018, Greek F-16 fighters [intercepted a Turkish drone over Rhodes](#). This year, Turkish Navy drones have accompanied [Turkish gas drilling ships](#) into territorial waters claimed by Cyprus. Cypriot officials said in September that [Turkish drones had interfered with commercial aircraft](#) landing at Paphos Airport.

Armed drones for sale. 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. In Libya, Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones have [reportedly been used](#) by the UN-recognized Government of National Accord against the forces of Libyan National Army leader General Khalifa Haftar, who has his own supply of [Chinese-made drones](#).

Turkey is not alone in its efforts to develop, acquire, and deploy unmanned aircraft. According to the *Databook*, the number of countries with military drones has increased by an estimated 58 percent between 2009 and 2019. Today, at least 31 countries operate heavy-class drones like the Bayraktar TB2 and Anka, up from 16 in 2009.

Ten years on from that first flight of the Bayraktar TB2 at Sinop Airport, Turkey has come to exemplify the significant trends in and consequences of [military drone proliferation](#). It has a growing and increasingly diverse inventory of systems and has integrated these aircraft into the operations of multiple military and security organizations. Turkey's drones are proving capable weapons on domestic and foreign battlefields alike, and the country has invested deeply in developing new drones, partly, at least, with a view to exporting them.

This example will likely be replicated by other countries in the next decade.

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Dan Gettinger founded the Center for the Study of the Drone at Bard College. He is the

author of *The Drone Databook*, a comprehensive survey of military drone activities around the world.

Featured image: Turkey's military drone program has ballooned in the past few years. It has a fleet of about 94 Bayraktar TB2 drones. Credit: Bayhaluk (cropped). (Creative Commons)

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