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National Security

# U.S. military drone surveillance is expanding to hot spots beyond declared combat zones

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A U.S. Air Force MQ-1B Predator drone sits on the flightline at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey. (Courtesy of U.S. Air Force)

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BY **CRAIG WHITLOCK** July 20, 2013  [Follow @craigwhitlock](#)

The steel-gray U.S. Air Force Predator drone plunged from the sky, shattering on mountainous terrain near the Iraq-Turkey border. For Kurdish guerrillas hiding nearby, it was an unexpected gift from the propaganda gods.

Fighters from the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, filmed the charred wreckage on Sept. 18 and posted [a video on YouTube](#). A narrator bragged unconvincingly that the group had shot down the drone. But for anyone who might doubt that the flying robot was really American, the video zoomed in on mangled parts stamped in English and bearing the label of the manufacturer, San Diego-based [General Atomics](#).

For a brief moment, the crash drew back the curtain on Operation Nomad Shadow, [a secretive U.S. military surveillance program](#). Since November 2011, the U.S. Air Force has been

flying unarmed drones from Incirlik Air Base in Turkey in an attempt to suppress a long-simmering regional conflict. The [camera-equipped Predators](#) hover above the rugged border with Iraq and beam high-resolution imagery to the Turkish armed forces, helping them pursue PKK rebels as they slip back and forth across the mountains.

As the Obama administration [dials back the number of drone attacks](#) in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen, the U.S. military is shifting its huge fleet of unmanned aircraft to other hot spots around the world. This next phase of drone warfare is focused more on spying than killing and will extend the Pentagon's robust surveillance networks far beyond traditional, declared combat zones.

Over the past decade, the Pentagon has amassed more than 400 Predators, Reapers, Hunters, Gray Eagles and other high-altitude drones that have revolutionized counterterrorism operations. Some of the unmanned aircraft will return home with U.S. troops when they leave Afghanistan. But many of the drones will redeploy to fresh frontiers, where they will spy on a melange of armed groups, drug runners, pirates and other targets that worry U.S. officials.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, the U.S. Air Force has drone hubs in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates to conduct reconnaissance over the Persian Gulf. Twice since

November, Iran has scrambled fighter jets to approach or fire on U.S. Predator drones that edged close to Iranian airspace.

In Africa, the U.S. Air Force began flying unarmed drones [over the Sahara](#) five months ago to track al-Qaeda fighters and rebels in northern Mali. The Pentagon has also set up drone bases in [Ethiopia](#), [Djibouti](#) and [Seychelles](#). Even so, the commander of U.S. forces in Africa told Congress in February that he needed a 15-fold increase in surveillance, reconnaissance and intelligence-gathering on the continent.

[In an April speech](#), Deputy Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter said the Pentagon is planning for the first time to send [Reaper drones](#) — a bigger, faster version of the Predator — to parts of Asia other than Afghanistan. He did not give details. A Defense Department spokeswoman said the military “hasn’t made any final decisions yet” but is “committed to increasing” its surveillance in Asia and the Pacific.

In South and Central America, U.S. military commanders have long pined for drones to aid counternarcotics operations. “Surveillance drones could really help us out and really take the heat and wear and tear off of some of our manned aviation assets,” Marine Gen. John F. Kelly, chief of the U.S. Southern Command, said in March.

One possible destination for more U.S. drones is Colombia. Last year, Colombian armed forces killed 32 “high-value narco-

terrorists” after the U.S. military helped pinpoint the targets’ whereabouts with manned surveillance aircraft and other equipment, according to Jose A. Ruiz, a Southern Command spokesman.

The U.S. military has occasionally operated small drones — four-foot-long ScanEagles, which are launched by a catapult — [in Colombia](#). But with larger drones such as Predators and Reapers, U.S. forces could greatly expand the range and duration of their airborne searches for drug smugglers.

### **An invitation from Turkey**

In the fall of 2011, four disassembled Predator drones arrived in crates at Incirlik Air Base in southern Anatolia, a joint U.S.-Turkish military installation.

See where the Pentagon operates its drone fleet

The drones came from Iraq, where for the previous four years they

had been devoted to surveilling that country’s northern mountains. Along with manned U.S. aircraft, the Predators tracked the movements of PKK fighters, sharing video feeds and other intelligence with the Turkish armed forces.

The Kurdish group has long fought to create an autonomous enclave in Turkey, launching cross-border attacks from its hideouts in northern Iraq. Turkey has responded with airstrikes and artillery attacks but has also sent ground troops into Iraq, further destabilizing an already volatile area. The Turkish and U.S. governments both classify the PKK as a terrorist group.

Turkey's leaders had feared that U.S. cooperation against the PKK would wither after the Americans left Iraq. So they invited them to re-base the drones on Turkish soil and continue the spying mission from there.

Neither side has been eager to publicize the arrangement. The Obama administration has imposed a broad cone of silence on its drone programs worldwide. Pentagon officials declined interview requests about Operation Nomad Shadow.

The Turkish government has acknowledged the presence of Predators on its territory, but the robotic planes are a sensitive subject. A global survey released Thursday by the Pew Research Center found that 82 percent of Turks disapprove of the Obama administration's international campaign of drone attacks against extremists.

Officials with the Turkish Embassy in Washington declined to comment for this report.

### **Pilots 6,000 miles away**

The drones occupy a relatively tiny corner of the sprawling base at Incirlik, according to interviews with other officials and public documents that shed light on Nomad Shadow.

The operation is staffed by about three dozen personnel from the U.S. Air Force's 414th Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron and private contractor Battlespace Flight Services.

The drones, which began flying in November 2011, are sheltered in an unobtrusive hangar converted from an abandoned "hush house," a jet-engine testing facility outfitted with noise suppression equipment.

“It was tight, but we could fit four aircraft inside the hangar and close the doors,” said a former Air Force official involved in Nomad Shadow who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the operation.

For most of their time aloft, the remote-control Predators are flown via satellite link by pilots and sensor operators stationed about 6,000 miles away, at Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri.

While in Turkish airspace, the drones cannot spy and must turn off their high-tech cameras and sensors, according to rules set by the Turkish government. It takes the sluggish Predators, with a maximum air speed of 135 mph, about five hours to reach the Iraqi border.

The Iraqi government [permits the overflights](#). Once in Iraq, the Predators usually fly a rectangular route known as “the box” for up to 12 hours each mission as they beam video and other intelligence to Missouri.

U.S. analysts view and evaluate the footage before transmitting it to a joint U.S.-Turkish intelligence “fusion cell” in Ankara, the capital. There’s usually a built-in delay of at least 15 to 20 minutes. That would give a drone enough time to leave the vicinity if Turkish authorities decided to launch artillery rounds or airstrikes against detected PKK targets, the former Air Force official said.

From the outset, some U.S. officials have worried about the potential for botched incidents.

In December 2011, Turkish jets bombed a caravan of suspected PKK fighters crossing from Iraq into Turkey, killing 34 people. The victims were smugglers, however, not terrorists — a blunder that ignited protests across Turkey.

The Wall Street Journal [reported last year](#) that American drone operators had alerted the Turkish military after a Predator spotted the suspicious caravan. Rather than ask for a closer look, Turkish officials waved off the drone and launched the attack soon after, the paper said. Turkey's leaders denied the report, saying they decided to attack based on their own intelligence.

The incident exacerbated simmering frustrations among officials in Ankara and Washington.

The Turkish government has long pressed the Obama administration to devote more flight hours to the operation and to sell Turkey a fleet of armed Reaper drones. But U.S. officials and lawmakers have resisted both requests.

The Pentagon has expressed concern that the Turkish military wants the fruits of the drone surveillance but has been unwilling to consult with Americans on the best ways to exploit it. "There have been a lot of U.S. attempts to help the Turks get better at fusing the intelligence with an operation," said a former U.S.

defense official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to give a candid assessment.

At the same time, the former U.S. official called Nomad Shadow an overall success. The constant stream of surveillance footage has prevented PKK attacks, he said, and has enabled the Turkish military to carry out more-limited, precise counterterrorism operations instead of sending [large numbers of troops](#) into northern Iraq.

“It’s been extremely effective in preventing cross-border operations by the Turks,” the former official said.

### **Clues in the crash report**

On Sept. 17, 2012, Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited Ankara to see Gen. Necdet Özel, chief of the general staff of the Turkish armed forces.

As other Turkish officials had done in previous talks, Özel pressed Dempsey for more help against the PKK, including more drone flights, according to Turkish media accounts of the meeting.

The next day, in a fit of unlucky timing, a Predator on a routine patrol experienced a sudden and complete loss of power. Drone operators at Whiteman Air Force Base could not communicate with or control the aircraft.

The drone nose-dived, dropping 11,000 feet in about four minutes before crashing into an uninhabited region, according to a U.S. Air Force accident investigation report obtained by The Washington Post under the Freedom of Information Act.

Before releasing the report, the Air Force redacted all geographic references to the location of the crash or where the drone was based. But parts of the report contain clues that make clear that the drone was on a Nomad Shadow mission in northern Iraq.

Transcripts of interviews with the drone's ground crew mention that they were deployed to Incirlik with the 414th Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron. Another document identified the lost aircraft as NOMAD 01.

But the strongest evidence can be found in an appendix to the report with photographs of the accident site.

The images are outtakes from the propaganda video that the PKK posted on YouTube the day after the crash. The photos show several damaged Predator pieces. U.S. military censors carefully blocked out the faces of guerrillas posing with the wreckage.