

[\(Japanese Version\)](#)

[\(Arabic Version\)](#)

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## **Military deployment of drones (UCAVs) in the Middle East**

Drones for military purpose are spreading throughout the Middle East. In Japan, usually, drone means radio-controlled unmanned helicopter with multiple rotors for peaceful purpose such as taking aerial photography at disaster area, new type of home delivery and so on. However, drones are originally developed for military purposes. They are called UAVs (Unmanned aerial vehicles) or UCAVs (Unmanned combat aerial vehicles). There are many types of UCAV, ranging from those that are guided by radio waves from the ground to those that UCAV itself searches for enemy and attacks them. Today, IT technology has been prevailing. Therefore, it is possible to make cheap and high-performance UCAV without state-of-the-art technology. As a result, the development and production of UCAV became active in Turkey and Iran. They supply their UCAVs to their allies as a military assistance. Otherwise, they make money by UCAVs as a promising export product.

## **Multinational UCAVs are flying over the Middle East**

In Yemen, the government and the Houthis militia are fiercely fighting. Saudi Arabia and Iran support each side. Civil war in Yemen looks like a proxy war between the two countries. In the ground battle, the government forces confront with the Houthis. The Houthis is currently in an advantageous situation. So, Saudi Arabia, as a coalition force, supports the government ground forces by air bombing using the US jet fighter F-16. Meanwhile, Iran provides UCAVs for the Houthis. Houthis uses it to attack targets in Saudi Arabia. US-made manned jet fighters and Iran-made unmanned UCAVs are flying over Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

The frequent attacks by Iranian UCAVs against Saudi Arabian premises have taken place in these days. Major targets of UCAVs were Saudi Aramco's oil facilities<sup>1</sup> and Airport of Abha and Jizan in southern province near Yemeni border. Human casualties were reported there<sup>2</sup>. Now, the targets of Iranian UCAVs expanded to Israeli tanker<sup>3</sup>.

The United States, which is hostile to Iran, is also fighting back with its UCAV. US killed Iran's General Qassem Soleimani who served in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) at Baghdad Airport in Iraq by MQ-9 Reaper in January, 2020<sup>4</sup>.



(The photo: US UCAV 'MQ-9 Reaper')

Turkey is also enthusiastic about the development and production of UCAVs. They used it not only to attack IS (Islamic State) forces during the Syrian Civil War but also to wipe out Kurdish forces inside Syria after destroying IS. Now Turkey is keen on exporting UCAVs.

### **Development and export of UCAV in Turkey and Iran**



(Turkish UCAV Bayraktar TB2)

According to the SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) database, Turkey is the 16th largest arms exporter in the world, and the top in the Middle East. Recently Turkey is enthusiastic about the development of UCAV. Bayraktar TB2, the latest UCAV model of Baykar, has the huge inquiries from various countries. Bayraktar TB2s have been delivered to Ukraine, Qatar, Azerbaijan and Poland<sup>5</sup>. Poland is a member state of the EU and NATO. Ukraine plans to

purchase an additional 24 sets<sup>6</sup>. It is reported that more than 10 countries including Saudi Arabia are interested in to purchase Turkish UCAVs.



Iran officially cannot export UCAVs due to US economic sanctions. However, Iran supplies its UCAVs to anti-American or pro-Shiite sects in the Middle East including the Yemeni Houthi faction. Their typical model is Mohager-6. (photo)

The United States is nervous about UCAVs by Turkey and Iran. The US Congress warned of exporting Turkish UCAVs to other countries<sup>7</sup>, and the commander of the US Central Command (CENTCOM) tells that Iranian UCAV threatens the security in the Middle East<sup>8</sup>.

### **UCAVs flying over the Middle East**

Wherever the conflicts take place between states, ethnicity or religion, people require weapons. Unfortunately, armed conflict never stopped in the Middle East. Once the Arab Spring in the early 2010s delivered the illusion that the Arab would change in peaceful and democratic society. However, it was disillusion and political turmoil has deepened. Yemen and Libya are such example.

Formerly, UCAV was monopolized by the United States. But when IT and AI technology became popular, Iran and Turkey got their own UCAV. Gulf oil-producing countries, which has no own technology but has abundant money, procured UCAVs from other countries. UCAV is much cheaper than F-35 stealth man-piloted bomber of \$ 100 million. They can easily buy UCAVs. Cost of the US made UCAV Reaper MQ-9 is approximately \$ 13 million. That is about one tenth of the F-35. Gulf oil-producing countries don't mind the price tag of Reaper MQ-9. UAE bombed the Libyan government forces with the Reaper MQ-9 when they join the rebel Haftar corps in the Libyan civil war.

More and more countries are procuring Turkish or Iranian UCAVs, which are much cheaper than the Reaper MQ-9. The Quds Forces of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps explained that UCAVs were a major pillar of military operations outside Iran<sup>9</sup>.



China, the world's fourth-largest arms exporter, is focusing on selling its own UCAV Wing Loong as a promising export product<sup>10</sup>. China is the world's largest exporter of UCAV. (Photo; Wing Loong made in China)



When offensive-type UCAV becomes popular, defensive-type UCAV is inevitably be developed. Turkey is developing Fedai. Fedai searches for enemy's UCAV soaring at high altitude, and catch and explode the object. They call Fedai as Kamikaze UCAV<sup>11</sup>. (Photo: Fedai)

The development of the offensive UCAV as a spear and the intercepting UCAV as a shield is accelerating. This is an endless war.

By Areha Kazuya

E-mail: [Arehakazuya1@gmail.com](mailto:Arehakazuya1@gmail.com)

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<sup>1</sup> Drone attacks strike major Saudi Aramco facility, oilfield

2019/9/14 The Peninsula

<https://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/14/09/2019/Drone-attacks-strike-major-Saudi-Aramco-facility-oilfield>

<sup>2</sup> Houthi drone attack on Saudi Arabia's Abha airport wounds 8, damages plane

<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1920271/saudi-arabia>

2021/8/31 Arab News

<sup>3</sup> Israel blames Iran over lethal attack on oil tanker off Oman

<https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/418064/World/Region/Israel-blames-Iran-over-lethal-attack-on-oil-tanke.aspx>

2021/7/31 Ahram Online

<sup>4</sup> Iran's Gen. Soleimani killed in airstrike at Baghdad airport

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<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1607686/middle-east>

<sup>5</sup> SIPRI Military Expenditure Database

<https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>

<sup>6</sup> Unprecedented demand pours in for Turkey's combat drone

<https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/unprecedented-demand-pours-in-for-turkeys-combat-drone>

<sup>7</sup> Ukraine to buy 24 more Turkish Bayraktar TB2 UCAVs

<https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/ukraine-to-buy-24-more-turkish-bayraktar-tb2-ucavs>

<sup>8</sup> US Congress alarmed by Turkish drones' global success, capability

<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/us-congress-alarmed-by-turkish-drones-global-success-capability>

<sup>9</sup> Mideast plays key role in Chinese export of armed drones, report says

<http://www.arabnews.com/node/1422101/business-economy>

<sup>10</sup> Can Iranian drone tech shift Middle East's strategic balance of power?

<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1864131/middle-east>

<sup>11</sup> Drones main pillar of Iran's Quds forces overseas ops: opposition

<https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/426458.aspx>