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UAE to buy Predator drones

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International Golden Group (IGG), a defence supplier based in Abu Dhabi, has signed an agreement with a US manufacturer to be its agent in marketing Predator surveillance drones to the UAE.

General Atomics Aeronautical Systems and IGG are to begin talks with the UAE Armed Forces about the Emirates purchasing the unmanned aircraft. The UAE would join the US and a select group of its allies in using the technology.

"We have signed a memorandum of understanding and hope to agree a deal with the Armed Forces this year," Emad Arikat, the deputy chief executive of IGG, said yesterday.

The agreement marks a shift in US policy on the Predator. Until now, sales of the aircraft to other governments have been severely restricted.

General Atomics has been given the go-ahead to sell an unarmed version of the craft, called the Predator XP, or Export.

The XP has the same physical dimensions and capabilities as the US air force's original Predator, but without weapons.

"We have been previously restricted to whom we could sell the aircraft," said Christopher Ames, the director of strategic development at General Atomics. "But we have worked very hard to get the authorisation to sell the Predator XP."

The unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) is one of the most advanced defence systems in the field of intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance.

It can circle high above a battlefield and provide live video and other imagery to military staff in command centres kilometres from the action.

"First and foremost, our focus is to provide this capability to the UAE Armed Forces," Mr Ames said.

In addition to the Predator, General Atomics can also now sell the Grey Eagle, Reaper and Avenger UAVs.

The Predator is said to have spent more hours in the air than any aircraft in the US military. It has come to prominence in recent years as it is being used in an increased number of attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Major Gen Obaid al Ketbi, the spokesman for the UAE Armed Forces at the International Defence Exhibition (Idex), which ended yesterday in Abu Dhabi, said the Armed Forces had not yet begun discussions with IGG and General Atomics on the Predator.

But new forms of technology are certainly on the Armed Forces radar. The UAE military committed nearly Dh3 billion (US$817 million) to cyber networks, communications and intelligence at Idex this week.

Major Gen al Ketbi said the Armed Forces were "paying more attention" to intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.

The biggest deal of the week was signed between the UAE and a local defence intelligence company, Emiraje Systems. The company is a joint venture between C4 Advanced Solutions (C4AS) and the European defence company Cassidian.

The UAE will pay Emiraje Dh2bn to upgrade command and control systems for the country's military assets. C4AS was awarded a deal to develop military communications networks in the Emirates.

Under the Dh889.7m deal, C4AS, a locally owned company, will also train communications technicians.