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Predator UAV Cleared for Wider Export

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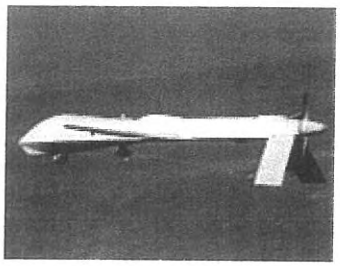
Military Aircraft



The Middle East is included in the U.S. government's broadened export targets for an unarmed version of the Predator UAV.

In a significant move, the U.S. government has cleared an unarmed version of the Predator UAV for wider export, including to the Middle East. Until now, the Predator and Reaper series has been exported only to the UK and Italy, and offered to a few other U.S. allies. Long-endurance UAVs are included in the Missile Technology Control Regime (MCTR), a voluntary 34-nation agreement. The Predator was recently moved from Category I to Category II of the MCTR, which has apparently reduced the restraints on exports.

At the IDEX exhibition in Abu Dhabi, General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc. (GA-ASI) announced a partnership with a local company to offer a version designated Predator XP to the UAE. This is essentially the U.S. Air Force MQ-1 Predator-A version minus weapons, and with a FLIR Systems Star SAFIRE video sensor substituted for the Raytheon MTS-A EO/IR. The alternative MQ-1 sensor, namely GA-ASI's own Lynx mini-SAR/MTI radar, is also cleared for offer with the Predator XP.

The UAE has sought armed Predators since at least 2005, according to a U.S. government diplomatic cable released by WikiLeaks. Another such cable notes interest from Saudi Arabia. It remains to be seen whether these countries will settle for the unarmed version. However, there may also be interest from other countries that are unwilling to buy UAVs from Israel, which has been the export market leader to date.