

Turkey Has Long Had Nuclear Dreams

Ankara has been contemplating developing nuclear weapons since the 1960s.

BY [COLUM LYNCH](#)

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In September, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan [told](#) members of his party that it is time for his country to acquire its own nuclear bomb.

Such a move would mark a sharp break from previous obligations by Turkey, a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which bars non-nuclear states from acquiring nuclear weapons. But this is not the first time that Turkey—which has played host to U.S. nuclear weapons since the late 1950s—has craved its own nuclear weapons program.

As part of our Document of the Week series, *Foreign Policy* is posting a copy of a Sept. 26, 1966, memo describing to then-Ambassador Parker T. Hart a troubling conversation Clarence Wendel, the U.S. minerals attache at the U.S. Embassy in Ankara, had with a “reliable” Turkish scientist on Turkey’s nuclear ambitions.

The memo, one of 20 previously declassified documents on nuclear weapons in Turkey [compiled](#) this week by the National Security Archive, claims the source disclosed that officials from Turkey’s General Directorate of Mineral Research and Exploration “had been asked to cooperate with General [Refik] Tulga and Professor Omer Inonu (Professor of Physics at METU) [Middle East Technical University] in a Turkish program to develop an ‘Atomic Bomb.’”

Wendel, according to the memo, had flagged a number of developments suggesting the claim may be credible, including: “Repeated Turkish assertions that a 200 mega-watt nuclear reactor is planned for Istanbul”; the stockpiling of reserves of 300 to 600 tons of uranium in low-grade ore deposits; and the “delaying and haggling tactics of the Turkish negotiators during discussions of

the extension of the bilateral agreement on peaceful uses of atomic energy which primarily concerned the transfer of safeguards responsibility from the U.S.A. to the International Atomic Energy Agency.”

Hart was skeptical that Turkey was bent on going nuclear, but he considered that it may have been preparing a contingency plan in the event that a nuclear arms race gained momentum in the region. They may be “simply putting themselves in a position to jump on the bandwagon in case there should be further serious breaks in the line against proliferation,” he wrote to John Howison, the Turkey country director in the State Department’s Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs.

Much of the history of the U.S. deployment of nuclear weapons in Turkey as part of a wider European deterrent force remains classified. But several documents compiled by the archive detail discussions related to the deployment of Honest John and Jupiter missiles in Turkey in 1959 and the early 1960s, and persistent concerns about the risk that they might be seized in the event that U.S. relations with a future Turkish leader deteriorated.

Relations with Turkey have been particularly strained in recent weeks, as Erdogan ordered an invasion of northern Syria in an attempt to crush Kurdish forces that have served as critical allies in the U.S.-led war against the Islamic State terrorist movement. In response, officials from the U.S. State and Energy departments began a review of contingency plans for the possible evacuation of some 50 tactical nuclear weapons stored at Turkey’s Incirlik Air Base, according to a [report](#) in the *New York Times*.

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NEA *Sci-AE*

14991

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 No. 1 of 6 copies; series A.

October 6, 1966

TO : S/S - Mr *✓* ReadFROM : NEA - Stuart W. Rockwell *SWR*

SUBJECT: Turkish Interest in Atomic Weapon
 Development

Sent
12/7

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I believe it would be preferable for S/S to arrange appropriate distribution of the attached September 30 letter and enclosure from Ambassador Hart reporting possible Turkish interest in atomic weapons development.

We have retained copies of these documents for our own use.

Attachments:
 Letter and enclosure

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 Downgraded at 12-year intervals;
 not automatically declassified.

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 BY S/S: CMS

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pages, No. 1 of 5 copies,
series A.

EMBASSY
OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Ankara, Turkey

September 30, 1966

OFFICIAL-INFORMAL

John M. Howison, Esquire
Country Director for Turkey
Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs
Department of State
Washington, D. C.

Dear John:

The enclosed memorandum to me from our Minerals Attache/Science Officer, Clarence Wendel, on possible Turkish ambitions to develop an atomic weapon is obviously a matter of considerable delicacy and for this reason we have decided not to report it in routine fashion by means of an airgram. I leave it to you to pass on this information to such people in Washington as you deem should have it. I am keeping distribution limited here to a few senior officers including General Evans and John Leavitt.

We will, of course, keep our eyes and ears open for any further signs of Turkish activity which might indicate preparations for atomic weapon production. My preliminary assessment is that the Turks are not preparing to follow in the footsteps of the French but are simply putting themselves in a position to jump on the bandwagon in case there should be further serious breaks in the line against proliferation.

Sincerely,

Parker T. Hart

Enclosure:
Memorandum, September 26, 1966



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downgrading and declassification

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Authority NND 989 592

By BKM NARA Date 7/1/01

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TO : The Ambassador

THRU : DCM - Mr. Martin

FROM : Science Officer - Mr. Wendel

September 26, 1966

SUBJECT: Reported TGS Ambitions for Development of Atomic Weapon

A source considered reliable from the Turkish Scientific Research Council by telephone requested an appointment at my office September 23. He appeared within a half hour and after mentioning a routine matter connected with an international conference, with obvious agitation, disclosed a matter which he had learned just the evening before from the General Director of the M.T.A. The M.T.A. Director (Alpan) had been asked to cooperate with General Tulga and Professor Omer Inonu (Professor of Physics at METU) in a Turkish program to develop an "Atomic Bomb". Source thought that such a program was one which would absorb too much of Turkish scientific and financial resources. Without noticeable rancor or desire to impugn the subject, he mentioned that Professor Inonu had been to Russia last summer. When I observed that this plan of General Tulga's was probably secret in view of its obvious military and political implications, he said he realized that but wanted me to know of it nevertheless.

Comment: Some indications support the possible credibility of this story:

1. Repeated Turkish assertions that a 200 mega-watt nuclear reactor is planned for Istanbul.
2. The emphasis and expenditures of the M.T.A. during the last six or seven years on uranium exploration resulting in indicated reserves of 300-600 tons of uranium in low-grade ore deposits.
3. The delaying and haggling tactics of the Turkish negotiators during discussions of the extension of the bilateral agreement on peaceful uses of atomic energy which primarily concerned the transfer of safeguards responsibility from the U.S.A. to the International Atomic Energy Agency

META - Middle East Technical University

MTA - Minerals Research and Exploration Institute

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General Tulga - Deputy Chief, TGS

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under a trilateral agreement. Of particular interest were reservations expressed at times regarding the applicability of these safeguards to new reactor facilities -- a point which was not relevant to the present agreement and which, as the U.S. representatives suggested, could be covered by a subsequent power reactor bilateral agreement.

CAWendel:cm

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