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Nuclear Weapons



Türkiye Must Now Be Considered Nuclear Ready

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Türkiye must now be considered a nuclear weapons state, or at least an incipient nuclear weapons state.

It is now apparent that the Turkish defense establishment has created nuclear weapons miniaturized for short-/intermediate-range delivery by artillery, missiles, or aircraft for regional use, quite apart from the capability it has now developed for inter-continental nuclear weapons delivery.

This changes the regional defense equation, putting Türkiye — in its own interpretation — in some degree of parity with regional competitor Israel and significant superiority *vis-à-vis* Greece and Western Europe, as well as Russia. Ankara could well be reluctant, for political purposes, to give absolute confirmation of its military nuclear capacity. Rather, by implying it, Ankara would retain the same ambiguity which Israel and Iran have maintained with their own nuclear offensive capabilities.

Preparations for this situation have been underway in Türkiye for at least 30 years in a serious manner, and were definitively reported by *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis* on July 23, 2010, in the report entitled “Turkey Now Escalating its Moves Toward the Acquisition of Nuclear Weapons”, which cited earlier *Defense & Foreign Affairs* reporting on the work toward a Turkish nuclear weapons capability.

The revelation of the operational readiness of a new Turkish Intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), the 6,000km+ (3,728 miles+) range *Yildirimhan* (meaning “lightning” or “thunderbolt”), should be regarded as the *final* indication that the nuclear weapon/warhead capacity has already been reached, and, indeed, that considerations of weapons miniaturization and fit for the new ICBM have already been achieved. *Yildirimhan* was developed by Turkey’s National Defense Ministry R&D Center and shown off for the first time at the SAHA Expo 2026 defense and aerospace exhibition in Istanbul on May 5, 2026. The single-stage missile uses liquid nitrogen tetroxide fuel for its four motors, and was reportedly capable of reaching speeds of between Mach 9 and Mach 25.

There has been no confirmation of a flight test program completion, but the missile had been under development for some 10 years, according to Turkish Ministry of Defense sources.

Türkiye has made a commitment in recent years to developing hypersonic and ballistic systems of greater capability than, for example, its *Tayfun* short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) system. Türkiye’s *Tayfun* Block IV ballistic missile is capable of reaching speeds above Mach 5 with a range of 800 km, and it carried out successful testing during the last week of April and the first week of May 2026. Turkey had already indicated that it had plans for mass production of that missile by 2026.

The English-language Ukrainian online publication, *Defense Express*, reported on May 6, 2026, that the new *Yildirimhan* ICBM could be the “early indication” that Türkiye was preparing to develop nuclear weapons.

This is a misreading of the situation.

The revelation of the ICBM was the indication that the Turkish military nuclear program had already reached the stage of weapons completion.

The initial reporting was that the road-transportable *Yildirimhan* could “reach Beijing” was an understatement. A reduction in payload could enable the ICBM to achieve greater range than that. But initial declared warhead mass was given as 3,000kg (6,600 lb.). To deliver a conventional warhead on such an expensive and strategic delivery system as the *Yildirimhan* would be militarily counterproductive: to deliver a minor payload onto a strategic target — inviting a comprehensive strategic response (ie: nuclear) — would be taking a knife to start what would inevitably become a gunfight.

However, it must be considered that the Turkish Government has also considered ICBM delivery for chemical and/or biological payloads, in light of the known Turkish research into such weapons since at least 1974. At a basic level, however, it must be considered that the system would utilize multiple independently-targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs), possibly at least three in each payload. Again, there is no evidence that Türkiye has yet tested its MIRV capabilities, but, as with nuclear weapons, computer simulated tests can provide much of the proving without the need for physical testing.

Defense Express noted: “For comparison, the American *Minuteman III* ICBM carries the W87 nuclear warhead, rated at 300 kilotons [explosive yield] and weighing only 180 to 270 kg. The *Yildirimhan* could therefore carry several such warheads simultaneously along with a bus vehicle, with significant mass margin remaining margin that could extend the missile’s maximum range by several thousand additional kilometers.”

Ankara had long been concerned over not only the Israeli nuclear advantage, but also the Iranian nuclear weapons program — and, indeed, capability — but had been forced to maintain high secrecy about the Turkish nuclear developments for fear of alienating its NATO partners and, indeed, Russia.

It is possible — even probable — that despite the clearly military-linked name of the new missile, the Turkish Government would portray the *Yildirimhan* as a space-launch vehicle to enhance the country’s space program. The missile was allegedly named after the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid I (1389-1402), known as “Yildirim” for his speed and military power.

The question remains as to which countries provided technical support to Türkiye’s nuclear program. Clearly the double impetus for the Turkish nuclear weapons program was the nuclear weapons capabilities of Israel and Iran, although Ankara had long portrayed Türkiye’s ambition as a regional great power at least on a par with the United Kingdom in Europe. But it can be deduced that the only powers possibly interested in assisting Türkiye with a nuclear weapons program would have been Pakistan and Ukraine.

Pakistan, as the July 23, 2010, report in *Defense & Foreign Affairs* noted, had already offered its support to Türkiye in developing such a nuclear weapons capability. The People's Republic of China (PRC) may well have been concerned about a Turkish nuclear weapons program, given the reality that Türkiye was not necessarily a stable ally for Beijing. That, then, could have ruled out support from North Korea.

If evidence could emerge pointing to Ukraine as a source of support for the Turkish nuclear program, this would potentially further alienate the Ukrainian Government from continuing military support from the United States and, indeed, from several European states.

Ukraine, as a potential source of nuclear technology and material support, must, however, be considered strongly, given the fact that Ukraine was heavily involved, after the collapse of the USSR, in the trade in full nuclear weapons and components to Iran (and perhaps other states) as part of the criminal exploitation of the residue of the Soviet nuclear stockpiles. Ukraine, too, would have been a desirable source for Türkiye of missile-related skills.

One of the significant aspects of the *Yildirimhan* is that its liquid fuel system shows that Türkiye had not yet developed a solid-fuel capability such as has been used for some decades in ICBM programs among the major powers. The liquid fuel requirement means that the *Yildirimhan* would need to be fueled just prior to launch, meaning that its time for launch order to launch would be delayed by comparison with opposing forces.

Türkiye has been making strides on a number of significant advanced weapons system in ground force, naval, and air force missions, and has made inroads into foreign defense markets in 2026. Its new manned fighter aircraft, the supposedly fifth+-generation KAAN, has attracted strong interest from Spain, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia. But that program, too, benefited from major technological input: the total system being supported by the United Kingdom, and the initial powerplant provided by General Electric of the US (F110-GE-129 engines), to be later replaced by Turkish engines.

All of this has occurred while the Turkish economy has been in dire straits, with severe hardship on the Turkish population, but the defense and aerospace projects have generated foreign currency sales and international prestige, all of which reflects well on the embattled presidency of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.