



The “Cougar Mystery” That Killed 40 Turkish Soldiers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The shady purchase of Cougar helicopters by the Turkish military was a 1990s-era controversy. An even bigger question than the terms of their purchase is how the Turkish military managed to lose 40 soldiers while operating them.

On March 4, a Turkish AS-532 Cougar army helicopter went down in a snow-covered area close to the village of Çekmece, in the predominantly Kurdish-populated Bitlis province. Eleven soldiers died in the crash, including Lt. Gen. Osman Erbas, an army corps commander.

The next day, the Turkish Defense Ministry said a sudden mid-flight change of weather conditions was thought to have been the cause of the disaster. An initial inspection of the wreckage showed no evidence of an explosion or fire, and there was no meteorological warning prior to the flight. Another Cougar had gone down.

As I read about this event, I recalled an off-the-record meeting I had with a senior defense procurement official in 1993. He complained about an “arrogant” French weapons agent who told him, “I am not here to negotiate the terms of our agreement. I am here to notify you of the terms of our agreement. You can always call your prime minister and ask.” When he told me this story, the Turkish official said, “I blushed in his place. What rudeness!”

I asked whether he did in fact call the PM. “I forwarded the matter to my superiors,” he said, “who I am sure must have presented it to the prime minister.” Once again, a sensitive matter got lost in the labyrinthine corridors of Turkish bureaucracy and politics.

The “arrogant” French agent was a senior official of Eurocopter, maker of the AS-532 Cougar SAR/CSAR utility helicopters. Eurocopter was a partnership between French Aerospatiale and Germany’s DASA.

In 1996, Eurocopter’s consolidated turnover was around \$1.76 billion, half of which came from exports. The company had thus far sold 10,825 helicopters to customers in 127 countries.

The Turkish military’s need for utility helicopters was declared in 1991. International bidding led to a three-way competition between Eurocopter, Italy’s Agusta, and the American company Sikorsky. In 1993, the French contender defeated the others to win a \$253 million contract to sell 20 Cougars to Turkey. The deal was inked just two weeks after official visits by Turkish PM Tansu Çiller to Germany and France.

Shortly after the deal, France visibly hardened its policy on members of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and their activities on French soil. Coincidence, French officials said.

On June 20, 1995, PM Çiller was on another state visit to Paris to meet her French counterpart, Alain Juppe, and seek French support for the customs union agreement then under negotiation between Turkey and the EU. On June 21, in Ankara, Çiller “urgently” summoned the committee that oversaw defense procurement. That committee endorsed a \$500 million contract with Eurocopter for the purchase of another 30 Cougars.

In 1996, the first consignment of Cougars arrived in Turkey. Amid speculation and allegations of corrupt dealing, an opposition MP filed a question motion to Çiller: “Is the timing of the Eurocopter contracts and your visits [to France and Germany] a coincidence? [...] Have you or anyone else made private gains or interests from those deals?”

By the following year, most of the Turkish public had forgotten about the Eurocopter deals and whether they were corrupt or clean. That lack of interest continued until June 4, when a Cougar transporting military units to an operational zone near Zap in northern Iraq was hit by a Russian-made rocket shot off by the PKK. Eleven Turkish soldiers were killed.

It was only then that the Turkish people learned that the Cougars flying over one of the world’s most perilous combat zones did not have either radar warning systems or chaff and flare systems to protect them from hostile fire. The fallen soldiers were returned to Turkey in coffins wrapped in the Crescent and Star and were buried while politicians made the customary speeches and swore vengeance.

Meanwhile, the corporate world continued to turn. In 1997, a few months after the downing of the Cougar, Eurocopter and Tusas Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI) signed a mutually lucrative contract. The main bodies of Cougars would be manufactured by TAI until 2002.

On April 23, 2003, another Cougar crashed, this time during a training mission. Four commandos were killed.

On June 1, 2017, another Cougar crashed during an anti-terror operation in Şırnak province in southeast Turkey. Fourteen soldiers died, including a major general.

“Cougars are one of the finest choppers in [their] class. The problem is not the age of the Turkish fleet,” said retired Brig. Gen. Osman Aydoğan. “The problem is their use for missions different than their ideal mission design. Cougars were built to transport personnel and run search and rescue or reconnaissance operations. They are not ideal platforms in mountainous land, high altitude, challenging weather, and hostile terrain.”

We may have forgotten how the Cougars were negotiated in the early 1990s. But why were they used in missions for which they were not designed?

The latest state funeral for fallen soldiers witnessed the same official speeches about avenging the dead and finishing off the PKK terrorists. Any day now.

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