

US spy drone downed in Iran

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A murky incident involving an unmanned American spy drone going down in eastern Iran raises questions about what it was doing there, amid the increasingly provocative stance taken by the US and Israel toward the Iranian regime.

Iranian media reported on Sunday that Iran's armed forces had shot down a US RQ-170 Sentinel—a sophisticated stealth drone. The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force issued a statement in response, claiming that the operators of a drone had lost control of it in a surveillance flight over western Afghanistan last week.

Washington denied that the drone had been shot down, claiming that it had veered off course and crashed. According to NBC, US officials admitted that the drone was being operated by the CIA, and was carrying out a secret mission.

US media reports have downplayed or entirely ignored the violation of Iran's sovereignty, taking Washington's official story as good coin and repeating its concerns that Tehran and other governments may acquire sensitive technical information about the drone. None of the serious questions raised by the incident has been probed.

The RQ-170 model drone has reportedly been used extensively by the US military in Afghanistan, and carried out surveillance of Osama Bin Laden's compound in Pakistan, before and during the US raid in May. It is capable of evading radar detection and other surveillance systems, and is equipped with high-powered cameras and devices capable of intercepting audio communications.

The use of radar-evading surveillance drones in Afghanistan is questionable, given that the Taliban and the various insurgent movements have no radar technology. This has fuelled speculation that the drones simply use Afghanistan as a base to launch

reconnaissance flights into Iran and Pakistan.

Stratfor, a think tank with close ties to the US military and intelligence establishment, described the official story that the drone strayed into Iranian air space as “dubious,” saying that the US had been mounting intelligence operations inside Iran for years. Stratfor raised the concern that Iran might have acquired the ability to detect and shoot down stealth drones.

The article explained: “The United States has long waged a broad, comprehensive ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) campaign in Iran, particularly to map out Iranian nuclear sites, ballistic missile units and development efforts, its air defence network and command-and-control nodes. Given the photographs of the RQ-170 in Kandahar, the RQ-170 has almost certainly been actively involved in this effort for years.”

Iran claimed to have shot down two unmanned spy drones in the Persian Gulf in January, and one in July over the city of Qom, near its Fordu nuclear site—a uranium enrichment plant being constructed deep underground.

The list of intelligence targets inside Iran highlights the detailed preparations being made by the Pentagon and the CIA for operations against Iran's nuclear facilities, which in the case of air strikes would have to target air defences and military command posts. The Obama administration has continued to maintain that all options remain “on the table”—that is, including unprovoked air strikes and war.

The “broad, comprehensive ISR campaign” may well have a more immediate purpose—to support what appears to be an escalating covert war by Israel and the US aimed against Iran's nuclear and missile programs.

An unexplained blast at a military base near Tehran on

November 12 killed a top general, Hassan Tehrani Moghaddam, who was central to Iran's missile development. According to a *New York Times* article, entitled "Explosion seen as big setback to Iran's missile program," the base was used to test and develop advanced solid-fuel missiles. Satellite images released by a Washington-based research-group purportedly show that whole sections of the base have been destroyed by the blast.

The Iranian regime has declared that the November 12 explosion was an accident, but several analysts have suggested that it might have been the result of US or Israeli sabotage. The *New York Times* drew a connection between the blast and the downed drone, noting there had been "intense surveillance efforts" of suspected Iranian weapons sites.

The article added: "One of the many theories swirling around the explosion at the missile base is that it could have been hit by a weapon, including one fired from a drone, setting off the huge explosion that followed."

That blast is not the only unexplained incident. On November 28, the semi-official Fars news agency initially reported a "loud explosion" near the city of Isfahan. The regime denied that the explosion was at the country's uranium conversion plant, located near the city. An article in the *Times*, however, claimed to have viewed satellite imagery showing "smoke" and "destruction" at the facility, and cited Israeli intelligence officials saying there was "no doubt" a blast had struck the facility.

On the same day as the Isfahan explosion, Israel's intelligence minister Dan Meridor pointedly told the media: "There are countries who impose economic sanctions and there are countries who act in other ways in dealing with the Iranian nuclear threat."

The explosions follow last year's assassinations of two top Iranian nuclear scientists and another failed attempt, that are widely attributed to the Israeli intelligence agency, Mossad, which is notorious for such criminal acts.

A *Los Angeles Times* article on Sunday declared that the November 12 explosion was believed by "many former US intelligence officials and Iran experts" to be "part of a covert effort by the US, Israel and others to disable Iran's

nuclear and missile programs." Analyst Patrick Clawson from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy told the newspaper: "It does appear that there is a campaign of assassinations and cyber war, as well as the semi-acknowledged campaign of sabotage."

Within Israel, the media has widely reported that Defence Minister Ehud Barak and Prime Minister Netanyahu have been campaigning in the Israeli cabinet for a pre-emptive attack on Iran. Yesterday the conservative *Jerusalem Post* commented that the dispute was "not over the extent or gravity of the threat—all agree Iran needs to be stopped—but rather when the right time would be for Israeli action." It also described the two explosions as "part of the covert war the west is waging against Iran."

The Israeli government has seized on the latest International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report, which claimed to have evidence that Iran had carried out research related to nuclear weapons. Much of the report was based on dated information supplied by various intelligence agencies, including those of Israel and the United States. Tehran has repeatedly denied plans to build a bomb and has dismissed the evidence as fabricated.

As it did in Iraq, the US and its closest allies are using dubious claims about nuclear weapons to justify an aggressive policy aimed at fashioning a regime in Tehran more amenable to its economic and geo-political interests. Mounting evidence of reckless covert operations, including the downed drone, raise the spectre of an attack or provocation against the Iranian regime that could spark a far broader military conflagration.



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