

מרכז עזרי לחקר איראן והמפרץ הפרסי



The Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies

The Persian Gulf Observer

Perspectives on Iran and the Persian Gulf



The Mystery of Hermes: Iran alleges that it shot down an Israeli UAV over Natanz

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The Mystery of Hermes: Iran alleges that it shot down an Israeli UAV over Natanz

By Dr. Alexander Murinson

The Iranian statement that its troops shot down an Israeli Hermes drone over its territory, purportedly launched from the territory of its northern neighbor, the Republic of Azerbaijan, on Saturday, August 23, has multiple goals and multiple audiences. These allegations have precipitated another diplomatic crisis with Azerbaijan, but it is more likely that this was a piece of Iranian propaganda directed at Israel and the Palestinians.

Background

Iran is in the midst of nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 powers (Britain – China, France, Russia, the United States and Germany) – which imposed heavy sanctions in an attempt to curb the rogue nation’s ability to produce nuclear weapons. Iran, for its part, claims that its enrichment program is strictly peaceful. In July 2014, a six-month interim deal was extended to November, during which time the sides are meant to work out a more lasting deal. The US wants Iran to cut its nuclear program by three quarters, whereas Iran wishes to expand uranium enrichment ten-fold.

The Iranian Natanz site houses more than 16,000 centrifuges for uranium enrichment and is the country’s primary enrichment site. The more fortified Fordo site contains an additional 3,000 centrifuges, and on July 30 a new nuclear plant in Isfahan was inaugurated.

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, two countries from the Southern Caucasus, namely Azerbaijan and Georgia, have established close military and economic ties with Israel. In view of Azerbaijan’s secular constitution and an estimated 30 million Azerbaijani Turks living in Iran, Tehran views the growing economic and military strength of the Republic of Azerbaijan as an existential threat. Iran, in particular, is disturbed by the evolving strategic partnership of Baku with Israel and uses every opportunity to pressure Baku to distance itself from Israel if not to suspend its diplomatic relations with her completely. In the past, Israel has frequently threatened to attack Iran's nuclear plants, and Iran suspects that Israel is planning to use Azerbaijani territory as a launching ground for Israel’s military strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities.

Implications

On August 24, it was reported in the Israeli media that Iran has shot down an Israeli drone over the Natanz nuclear facility plant. According to media reports, the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), who downed the drone, provided additional details about the drone and released a video of the wreckage. IRNA, the official Iranian news agency, confirmed on Monday that an Israeli Hermes 450, which utilized radar-absorbent materials, was on its way for an intelligence mission over the Natanz facility. General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the commander of the Aerospace Brigade of the IRGC, was quoted in the IRNA report and corroborated this information. According to him, an Israeli drone was equipped with two front and side cameras that could capture panoramic imagery at a very high resolution. "This drone can operate in a range of 800 kilometers," – Hajizadeh said. According to the commander, the aircraft can operate at a distance of 1,600 kilometers on one tank of fuel. He added that Iran had previous knowledge about this drone model because a Hermes 450 had been shot down in Syria, but the downed UAV was a more advanced version. In the IRNA report, General Hajizadeh said that on the basis of its flight characteristics, the drone was not launched from the bases in Israel, but it was launched from a base in one of the countries of the region. "We have some clues about the departure point of [the drone]," – he added.

Only three countries in the region have acquired this model of UAV from Israel: Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Turkey would be excluded from the Iranian list, because Israelis would not be able to launch their intelligence drones from its territory due to the freeze in the Israeli-Turkish military cooperation. Two remaining possibilities are Azerbaijan and Georgia. The distance from Baku to Natanz is 1,120.4 km. The distance from Georgia is even greater. But the flight capabilities of Hermes 450 would rule out both of these options. The flight range of Hermes 450 is 300 km (186 mi; 162 nmi) and its endurance: 20 hours (450LE – 30 hours). It would be foolhardy for Israelis to send a drone on the intelligence mission from the Azerbaijani territory without assurance that it would reach its destination. The new model of Hermes with improved flight characteristics– Hermes 900 is still undergoing testing. An important "detail" mentioned by the IRGC general also raises a doubt that the drone was built by Israelis with "stealth technologies." There is only one UAV model built with "stealth" technology by Israelis. It is dubbed "Ghost", but its length is only 20 cm.

Another argument was voiced that the downed drone was a different Israeli UAV, Heron, built by Israeli Aerospace Industries (IAI) and it was launched from an American Navy boat on patrol in the Persian Gulf. But this argument seems far-fetched. Why would American navy need to launch an Israeli drone for an American clandestine operation, while America possesses American-made drones. Israeli experts also doubt that the Iranians' claim is valid. In an interview to Israeli *Maariv* on August 27, David Hardy, a manager at the IAI, who has been building Israeli UAVs for 17 years, commented: "All these allegations are very strange." He added: "I looked at the picture of the debris, and it is true that parts of it look like a drone. But from the image [shown by the Iranians], it cannot be determined whether this UAV is real or dummy. And there is no problem to build a dummy model." Hardy also noted that the size of the front wheels on one of the photographs was 50–60 cm in diameter "like on the models we built in the 70s." Yossi Melman, an Israeli veteran journalist on military and defense affairs, who filed the *Maariv* report with an illuminating title "Revelations about Israeli UAV: a bluff made in Iran", concluded: "Careful evaluation suggests that this is a total propaganda for the domestic and foreign policy needs [of the IRI]. Tehran might just want to be relevant during the fighting in Gaza."

Azerbaijani authorities promptly denied the Iranian allegations and expressed their disapproval of the reports in the Israeli press. Ali Hasanov, the head of the Department of Social and Political Affairs of the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan, called the information that drone, shot down over Iranian territory, was launched from the territory of Azerbaijan, as yet another provocation against Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense was even sterner in its assessment of the Israeli media coverage. According to the Azeri Daily, from August 27,

"Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense expressed its attitude in relation to what is potentially an Israeli media provocation against Azerbaijan, and an attempt to hamper friendly relations between Iran and Azerbaijan." The same article assured that Azerbaijan is committed to the friendly relations with all its neighbors, including Iran. In the same newspaper report, Ali Hasanov emphasized: "Visit of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to Iran in April of this year was held at the highest level and in the course of meetings with the leadership of this country, the bilateral relations between the two countries have been comprehensively discussed, bringing clarity to pre-existing problems, and there was not one aspect of bilateral relations left, which could raise questions." The Azerbaijani high official used diplomatic language in accusing Israel of interfering in

Azerbaijani–Iranian relations: “Apparently, this situation is causing concern among some foreign circles and by disseminating this kind of information they are trying to spoil relations between Azerbaijan and neighboring countries, and in particular with Iran. I declare unequivocally that Azerbaijan does not have anything that could generate its interest in the territory of friendly Iran and this information is nothing else, but yet another provocation.”

Conclusion

The Western and Israeli media reporting about the downed drone and the Iranian not–very–subtle public statements, brought a sour note to the close Israeli–Azerbaijani relations. That would be consistent with an Iranian strategic policy of bringing discord in Israeli–Azerbaijani ties. At the same time, Iran threatened to retaliate for “the failed Israeli intelligence mission” by supplying the Palestinian “resistance forces” in the West Bank with more weapons. Iran certainly does not desire to be sidelined by any other Islamic nation as the key supplier of weapons to the Palestinian resistance.