

“THIS ISN'T THE ASSASSINATION SURVEILLANCE DRONE YOU'RE LOOKING FOR”

[YouTube]vzcWPKAv20w[/YouTube]

Before you read this David Sanger/Scott Shane piece reporting that the RQ-170 Sentinel drone that just went down in Iran was, “among other missions, [] looking for tunnels, underground facilities or other places where Iran could be building centrifuge parts or enrichment facilities,” I invite you to review what David Sanger has been writing for the last few months. Sure, he’s been the key person orchestrating the IAEA Iran report story, going back months. There’s also this story, curiously mixing reporting on the capture of the drone with a report citing sources describing surveillance photos of the Iranian missile testing base conveniently blown up while Iran’s top missile expert was there.

And then there’s this story from last month, which is or was titled “The Secret War with Iran.” It suggests how the assassins targeting Iran’s nuclear scientists knew exact details of their daily commutes, and then went on to describe the centrality of drones to our surveillance efforts against Iran.

COMMUTING to work in Tehran is never easy, but it is particularly nerve-racking these days for the scientists of Shahid Beheshti University. It was a little less than a year ago when one of them, Majid Shahriari, and his wife were stuck in traffic at 7:40 a.m. and a motorcycle pulled up alongside the car. There was a faint “click” as a magnet attached to the driver’s side door. The huge explosion came a few seconds later, killing him and injuring his wife.

On the other side of town, 20 minutes later, a nearly identical attack played out against Mr. Shahriari's colleague Fereydoon Abbasi, a nuclear scientist and longtime member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. Perhaps because of his military training, Mr. Abbasi recognized what was happening, and pulled himself and his wife out the door just before his car turned into a fireball. Iran has charged that Israel was behind the attacks – and many outsiders believe the “sticky bombs” are the hallmarks of a Mossad hit.

[snip]

Iran may be the most challenging test of the Obama administration's focus on new, cheap technologies that could avoid expensive boots on the ground; drones are the most obvious, cyberweapons the least discussed. It does not quite add up to a new Obama Doctrine, but the methods are defining a new era of nearly constant confrontation and containment. Drones are part of a tactic to keep America's adversaries off balance and preoccupied with defending themselves. And in the past two and a half years, they have been used more aggressively than ever. There are now five or six secret American drone bases around the world.

And oh yeah. Sanger was part of the team that claimed US and Israeli credit for StuxNet.

So David Sanger, the (American **and** Israeli) intelligence community's chief mouthpiece to boast about their latest victories against Iran, by-lined this story from Boston (rather than his home base of DC) to tell us the Sentinel drone was surveilling Iran's suspected nuclear sites, using its isotope-sniffing powers.

In addition to video cameras,

independent experts say the drone almost certainly carries communications intercept equipment and sensors that can detect tiny amounts of radioactive isotopes and other chemicals that can give away nuclear research.

But the real advantage of the Sentinel drone, Sanger and Shane tell us, is the ability to see who's onsite when.

While an orbiting surveillance satellite can observe a location for only a few minutes at a time, a drone can loiter for hours, sending a video feed as people move about the site. Such a "pattern of life," as it is called, can give crucial clues to the nature of the work being done, the equipment used and the size of the work force.

Actually, we knew that. Here's the kind of information the Sentinel presumably gave us about Osama bin Laden's compound.

Agents, determining that Kuwaiti was living there, used aerial surveillance to keep watch on the compound, which consisted of a three-story main house, a guesthouse, and a few outbuildings. They observed that residents of the compound burned their trash, instead of putting it out for collection, and concluded that the compound lacked a phone or an Internet connection. Kuwaiti and his brother came and went, but another man, living on the third floor, never left. When this third individual did venture outside, he stayed behind the compound's walls. Some analysts speculated that the third man was bin Laden, and the agency dubbed him the Pacer.

In our assassination of Osama bin Laden, it seems, we used the Sentinel to learn the daily routine of everyone in the compound. Just the

kind of information we've used to assassinate key Iranian scientists.

Don't get me wrong. I'm sure the Sentinel **is** looking for secret nuclear or other military sites to bomb, "among other missions." But I also suspect the reason government sources have been so forthcoming with confirmation about the Sentinel and its role in hunting nuclear sites is to distract from its role in hunting human beings. Not to mention any Israeli role in using information collected using the Sentinel to carry out these assassinations on the ground.

We're all still pretending these Iranians, whose assassinations and attempted assassinations depended on knowing key details about their day to day travels, just died in freak accidents (Sanger even cites sources making that claim about the missile base!). Meanwhile, our spooks would like to take this opportunity to boast about the Sentinel's ability to track nuclear sites.

You see, these nuclear-isotope sniffing drones are not the assassination surveillance drones you're looking for.

Update: Iran just released video of the drone.