

IRAN CLAIMS TO HAVE DECODED ALL DATA FROM CAPTURED SCANEAGLE AND RQ-170 DRONES: WHAT DID THEY LEARN?

Iran has published reports in which it claims to have decoded all data carried by the recently captured ScanEagle drone and the RQ-170 Sentinel drone captured last year. As proof of this decoding, Iran provided descriptions of the missions flown by the surveillance drones. The described mission for the ScanEagle fits well with what would be expected for its use, but the description for the RQ-170 conflicts with widely published accounts in the US media.

The decoding of the mission for the ScanEagle was reported last week, just one day after it was captured:

“Yes, we have fully extracted the drone’s data...,” the IRGC Public Relations Department said on Wednesday, referring to the ScanEagle drone – a long-endurance aircraft built by Insitu, a subsidiary of Boeing.

“The drone, in addition to gathering military data, used to pursue gathering data in the field of energy, especially the transfer of oil from Iran’s oil terminals,” the department said.

It said that the capture of the aircraft helps discovery of “what kind of data they (the Americans) are after.”

This report for the ScanEagle fits well with what we were told about the use of ScanEagles in the region when Iran first made the claim of

capturing this drone. However, the report today on decoding data from the RQ-170 Sentinel drone captured last year is more confusing:

A senior Iranian commander announced that the country has extracted all the data and information existing in the intelligence gathering systems of the United States' highly advanced RQ-170 Sentinel stealth aircraft which was captured by Iran last year.

"All the intelligence existing in this drone has been completely decoded and extracted and we know each and every step it has taken (during its missions)," Commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Force Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh told reporters here in Tehran on Monday.

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The commander further revealed some of the data taken from the aircraft's intelligence system, and added, "The US President (Barack Obama) had told the Israeli officials that the drone was tasked with spying on Iran's nuclear program, but our experts found after decoding the drone that it had not performed even a single nuclear mission over Iran."

"And this reveals that Americans are treating the nuclear issue (of Iran) as an excuse" to conduct hostile moves, including spying operations, against Iran.

We already knew before the RQ-170 went down in Iran that an RQ-170 had been used for surveillance of the compound in Pakistan where Osama bin Laden was found and there was even one of the drones in place during the raid to provide real-time tactical information. By tying the captured RQ-170 to "hostile moves", it

appears to me that Iran has provided the opportunity to link this drone to the explosion at a missile site on November 12, 2011, only about three weeks before Iran captured the RQ-170. This explosion killed the head of Iran's missile program, so the timing of the explosion at the missile site seemed to have excellent tactical information on a high-profile target being present at the time, as would be expected if an RQ-170 were overhead, monitoring movement of people and communications.

Satellite photos confirm extensive damage from that explosion, but another blast on November 28, 2011, has proven more mysterious. This blast was reported near Isfahan, where Iran has a uranium processing facility. Iran has fiercely denied this particular explosion and satellite photos have not been able to identify damage at the site. If the captured drone had been overhead during this explosion, then Iran would not have had a basis for saying the drone had never conducted a mission over a nuclear site.

Of more interest for the question of why Iran would state that the captured RQ-170 drone never flew over a nuclear site relates to the issue of whether Iran has undeclared sites at which nuclear activities are taking place. This is the key sticking point for relations with the IAEA and the P5+1 group of nations in negotiations over Iran's nuclear technology. It is acknowledged that all nuclear material at Iran's declared sites is accounted for and that any activity at one of these sites directed at "breakout" toward development of a nuclear weapon would be detected quickly. However, especially given how advanced work was on the Qom facility before its presence was admitted by Iran (at a time when the US and Israel were ready to announce its discovery), concerns remain about unreported sites.

With those concerns about unreported sites as background, Iran's insistence the captured RQ-170 had flown no missions over nuclear sites may be part of a cat and mouse game. The US was

very quick to declare that the RQ-170 was being used to monitor Iran's nuclear sites after it was captured. Now we are left to wonder why Iran would say the captured drone was never over a nuclear site. Was it over Isfahan for the explosion Iran strongly denied? That is an already known and declared site. If it was not, was the drone only used in searching for undeclared sites? Note that the New York Times article linked here opens with a reference to efforts to "map suspected nuclear sites". Had the drone found an undeclared site? If Iran has truly decoded the data onboard, it would know if detectors found radioactivity and if the drone had lingered over an undeclared site. In this case, the denial would be aimed at planting a seed of doubt on the discovery. On the other hand, if no undeclared sites were monitored by the drone, then the denial from Iran could be seen as Iran confirming to the US that the suspected sites the drone had visited can be crossed off the list of potential undeclared sites. But is that a taunt to the US to keep looking for an undiscovered and undeclared site, or is it even a tacit admission that there are no undeclared sites? The moves and counter-moves continue.