

TWO DRONE QUESTIONS: HOW DID IRAN GET IT? WHAT WILL THE DAMAGE BE?

As I noted in an update to this post, the US has now admitted that the drone Iran claimed to down is, in fact, one of its new-fangled RQ-170 Sentinels. Sources have admitted anonymously that CIA was using the drone for reconnaissance, implicitly of Iran.

Which leaves a number of questions. First, how did the drone go down?

Marc Ambinder quotes a source suggesting the US lost communications with the drone, after which it glided to land inside Iran.

Controllers lost contact with the prized stealth unmanned aerial drone, the RQ-170 "Sentinel", last week over western Afghanistan, said one government official who spoke on condition of anonymity. Based on its projected glide path, officials assume it fell just inside the Iranian border.

But as he notes, if it had just lost communication with its controllers, it should have either returned to base or self-destructed.

The story that the drone was not flying over Iran, but flew into it as it came to the ground, is repeated in this CNN piece.

The officials said they did not believe the mission involved flying the aircraft directly over Iran because the reconnaissance capability of the RQ-170 Sentinel drone would allow it to gather information from inside Iran while remaining on the Afghanistan side of the border. The officials also for the first time confirmed to CNN it was an RQ-170

drone that was lost.

A third U.S. official confirmed that when the drone crashed, the United States briefly considered all potential options for retrieving the aircraft or bombing the wreckage, but those ideas were quickly discarded as impractical. There was also satellite surveillance over the site, which helped confirm the location of the wreckage before the Iranians retrieved it.

Of course, the US has reason to want to deny it had violated Iran's airspace, though I don't doubt the drone has significant surveillance powers.

In any case, satellite surveillance must be how this anonymous official confirms the drone came down largely intact.

Another U.S. official with access to intelligence said that losing the Sentinel is a major security breach. The official, who was not authorized to publicly speak about the information, wouldn't say how the drone fell into Iranian hands, but confirmed that the downed drone was largely intact.

"It's bad – they'll have everything" in terms of the secret technology in the aircraft, the official said. "And the Chinese or the Russians will have it too."

Which would seem to rule out some of the speculation of a number of experts quoted by the LAT, who still can't seem to explain how the drone was brought down intact, but it did not return home (as it would have been programmed to do) or self-destruct. Moon of Alabama offers some thoughts here.

Now, I still think it's possible—as some of these sources suggest—that this might be an intentional ploy on our part. Though I can't see

doing that with a Sentinel.

Which leads me to a point a few of these sources note. Iran would only be able to make so much use of the drone (aside from politically). It would likely need Russia's or China's help to reverse engineer it.

So I wonder: Is it possible that one of the countries everyone agrees would have much more capability to to reverse engineer the technology—Russia and/or China—might have been involved in downing the drone? After all, both are getting fed up with our drive to war against Iran. And, as Ambinder reveals, the event has resulted in the grounding of all the Sentinels.

An investigation is under way and the rest of the small fleet of classified UAVs have been grounded. They number less than 10 and are piloted by the 30th Reconnaissance Squadron at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada.

Downing this drone would seem to be useful to Iran in several possible ways. First, the PR victory, particularly if it can refute the American claim the drone wasn't over Iranian airspace. Next, if it can reverse engineer the stealthy and communications technology, probably with help, it can cut into American advantage on drone technology. It seems that downing the drone has already stopped the Americans from using other Sentinels to surveil it. And here's one question: What would it take for Iran to demonstrate what the drone was surveilling? That is, could it do more than just prove the US had violated its airspace, but tie the US back to some of the attacks within Iran?

Update: Here's another question. Why the fuck is the government telling us Iran that the drone has been watching what they claim to be Hezbollah training camps before?

The RQ-170 stealth drone that crashed in Iran last week has been used by the CIA in the past to spy on Iran's nuclear

facilities and Hezbollah training camps inside Iran, U.S. officials told NBC News on Tuesday.

Unless that's another feint to distract from who would be most interested in that "Hezbollah camp"?

Update: More uncanny leaking on the CIA's activities in the area.

According to these officials, the U.S. has built up the air base Shindad, Afghanistan, with an eye to keeping a long-term presence there to launch surveillance missions and even special operations missions into Iran if deemed necessary.

I sort of wonder whether David Petraeus hasn't come out of his undisclosed location?