



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on April 23, 2012

Iran May Have Decoded Captured U.S. Drone

According to General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, head of Iran's Revolutionary Guard aerospace division, Iranian engineers are in the final stages of [decoding](#) data from the Sentinel aircraft, the U.S. drone that was captured by Iran near the Afghan border last December.

Prior to the capture of the drone, the Sentinel was used in Afghanistan and Pakistan and played a significant role in the raid that allegedly killed Osama bin Laden last year.

The drone went down in December in the eastern portion of Iran and was almost immediately recovered by the Iranians, with the machine fully intact. American officials stated that the drone was being used to monitor Iran's military and nuclear facilities prior to going down.



Reports on how the drone was [acquired](#) vary depending on the source. While Iran claims it shot the drone down, Washington sources assert that the drone in fact malfunctioned. Those sources also claimed that Iran was unlikely to be able to crack the code that would get the Iranians into the drone's security system.

President Obama pressed Iran to return the aircraft, following the capture, but a senior commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guard said at the time that "no one returns the symbol of aggression."

Hajizadeh recognized immediately the benefits of capturing the American drone, telling state television that acquiring the drone was a "national asset" for Iran at the time of its capture.

Likewise, Iranian lawmaker Parviz Sorouri, a member of the parliament's national security and foreign policy committee, said that the information extracted from the aircraft would be used to file a lawsuit against the United States for what he called the "invasion" by the drone. Sorouri added at the time that he had the capability to reproduce the drone through the use of reverse engineering.

When the drone was initially captured, some experts in the United States voiced concerns that such a capture could result in developing countries modeling their own drones after the American craft. The biggest concern was focused on the special coatings on the surface of the drones.

Fox News reports on additional concerns that were raised: "There are concerns in the U.S. that Iran or other states may be able to reverse-engineer the chemical composition of the drone's radar-deflecting paint or the aircraft's sophisticated optics technology that allows operators to positively identify terror suspects from tens of thousands of feet in the air."

As [noted](#) by *Time*, Iran has "gone a long way in reverse-engineering some key technologies in the past three decades, particularly in the areas of nuclear and missile technology." For example, Iran's



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Shahab-3 missile is believed to have been based on North Korea's Nodong-1 design. Likewise, Iran's ability to develop a uranium-enrichment program is attributed to a centrifuge it obtained from Pakistan in 1986.

It appears that many of the concerns following Iran's capture of the drone may have been [founded](#). Hajizadeh was quoted by the Fars news agency as saying, "The Americans should be aware to what extent we have infiltrated the plane. Our experts have full understanding of its components and program."

U.S. officials are questioning the validity of these assertions, however.

Senator Joe Lieberman of the Armed Services Committee articulated skeptical sentiments during his appearance on Fox News Sunday. "There's a history here of Iranian bluster, particularly now when they're on the defensive because of our economic sanctions against them," Lieberman said, referring to the increasing restrictions on Iran's oil industry and central bank that have been imposed by the United States and Europe because of Iran's nuclear program. "But, look, it was not good for the U.S. when the drone went down in Iran, and not good when the Iranians grabbed it," he added.

Lieberman admitted that the drone was a "very sophisticated piece of machinery," and that it was useful in significant operations and locations, "particularly at areas where we have reason to believe that they are working on a nuclear weapon."

Similarly, Dennis M. Gormley, an expert on drones and cruise missiles at the University of Pittsburgh, said on Sunday, "It's hard for me to imagine no self-destruct or erase mechanism was embedded in the drone to destroy sensitive systems, including software."

But experts on the security systems of the drones admit that the security systems do not always function properly.

Gormley, like Lieberman, notes that Iran tends to be misleading and could very well be bluffing. "As someone who does monitor Iranian aerospace and missile claims closely, let me simply observe that they are preternaturally disposed to exaggeration," said Gormley.

Despite Lieberman's contentions that Iran may be bluffing, Hajizadeh has provided some samples of the data he claims that Iranian experts have extracted from the drone.

"This drone was in California on October 16, 2010, for some technical work and was taken to Kandahar in Afghanistan on November 18, 2010. It conducted flights there but apparently faced problems and (U.S.) experts were unable to fix it," said Hajizadeh.

He also stated that the drone was flown over Osama bin Laden's compound in Pakistan just two weeks before bin Laden was reportedly killed by U.S. Navy SEALs, though he did not provide details as to how the Iranian experts knew it. Hajizadeh was also able to report that the drone had been taken to Los Angeles in December 2010 where the aircraft's sensors were able to undergo testing.

"There is almost no part hidden to us in this aircraft. We recovered part of the data that had been erased. There were many codes and characters. But we deciphered them by the grace of God," Hajizadeh adds. "If we had not achieved access to software and hardware of this aircraft, we would be unable to get these details. Our experts are fully dominant over sections and programs of this plane. It's not that we can bring down a drone but cannot recover the data."

Reuters reports that the information extracted by Iran is not only valuable to the Iranian government. "An Iranian defense official said recently that Tehran has received numerous reports for information on



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the craft and that China and Russia have shown most interest.”

Iranian with drone: AP Images



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