

U.S. Jet Shoots Down Iranian Drone Over Iraq

Contributed by Noah Shachtman
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An American fighter jet shot down an Iranian drone as it was flying over Iraq, U.S. military sources in Baghdad tell Danger Room.

Details of the previously-unreported shoot-down, which occurred last month, are still sketchy. But we do know that American commanders have long accused Tehran of supplying weapons and training to all sorts of Iraqi militant groups. Shi'ite militias fired Iranian rockets at U.S. troops in Iraq, according to the American military; Sunni militias allegedly used Iranian armor-piercing bombs to reduce U.S. vehicles to ribbons. In early 2008, however, the torrent of Iranian weapons into Iraq slowed to a trickle, the U.S. said. And now, the new Obama administration is looking for ways to reach out to the Tehran regime -- dangling invitations to international conferences, and offering promises of renewed relations. Which means the drone incident comes at a particularly sensitive time. Iran has built an array of unmanned aerial vehicles, or UAVs. The pneumatically launched Ababil ("Swallow") has a wingspan of more than 10 feet, and cruises at 160 knots, according to Globalsecurity.org. The Mohajer or Misrad ("Migrant") drone is a bit smaller, and slower-flying. Iran has supplied Hezbollah, the Lebanese terror group, with both models. Misrad drones flew reconnaissance missions in both November 2004 and April 2005. Then, in 2006, during Hezbollah's war with Israel, the group operated both Misrads and Ababils over Israel's skies. At least one was shot down by Israeli fighter jets. Since then, Tehran claims to have radically upgraded its unmanned fleet. In 2007, Iran said it built a drone with a range of 420 miles. In February, Iran's deputy defense minister claimed its latest UAV could now fly as far as 600 miles -- a huge improvement over crude drones like the Misrad, if true. Iran often exaggerates what its weapons can do. But, if this drone really can stay in the air for for that long, the Washington Times notes, "it could soar over every U.S. military installation, diplomatic mission or country of interest in the Middle East." Including those in Iraq. UPDATE: So I finally got a hold of a spokesman for Multi-National Corps - Iraq. His response: "I believe MNF-I [Multi-National Forces - Iraq -- Corps' bosses, basically] is taking the lead on this incident." So then I reached out to MNF-I. A spokesman there wouldn't confirm the shoot-down. Nor would he deny it. "We've got nothing for you, Noah," the spokesman said. [Photo: Globalsecurity.org]