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Israel Brandishes Drones Amid Reports Of Impending Attack On Iran?

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In-depth Report: IRAN: THE NEXT WAR?

-[Major Gil, deputy commander of the 200th Squadron] declined to comment on the unconfirmed reports that Israel also deploys missile-launching drones and kamikaze craft that explode upon impact. But independent experts said Israel has used such hardware on numerous occasions, including for striking targets far beyond its borders.

Israel, a powerhouse of UAV technology, has already sold drones to some 30 militaries worldwide, many of whom dot the skies over Afghanistan, Iraq and other U.S.-led operational theaters.
-Three weeks ago, a huge explosion that destroyed a major missile-testing site near Tehran was attributed to a weapon possibly fired from a drone loitering overhead. Israeli and U.S. intelligence officials said the incident, in which the chief of Iran's missile program was killed, was a major setback for the Islamic Republic's nuclear program.

PALMACHIM AIR BASE, Israel: In an unusual move, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) on Monday invited media for a briefing on its secret drone program, allowing a rare glimpse of one squadron that deploys some of the most sophisticated surveillance technology available.

The tour of the seaside air base, south of Tel Aviv, comes against the backdrop of local media reports in recent weeks that Israel is poised to strike Iran's nuclear sites.

Major Gil, deputy commander of the 200th Squadron, flatly declined to discuss Iran specifically.

"All I can say is that we can get anywhere we want and need to, " he told reporters who assembled at the squadron's headquarters.

Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), commonly referred to as drones, officially entered service with the IAF in 1971, making Israel's military the world's first operator of pilotless aircraft for gathering real-time battlefield intelligence.

Since then, the IAF's drones, all of them locally produced, have evolved into a refined fleet of long-range surveillance platforms that are ever-present in the skies over Israel's borders.

Though outfitted with sophisticated hardware ranging from smart bombs to satellites, the Israeli military presently relies on no technology more heavily than the drones of the 200th Squadron.

Gil said that drones have been shouldering the bulk of the IAF's reconnaissance missions over the past decade, logging more flight hours annually than all of its manned aircraft

combined.

The 200th Squadron's pilots, whose full names cannot be divulged due to censorship regulations, would only provide scarce details of the craft they guide from innocuous, windowless, metal sheds. The operators fly the Heron 1, a drone with a cruising altitude of 30,000 feet that can stay airborne for up to 45 hours. Another squadron based here operates the Hermes 450, a medium- altitude aircraft.

Last February, the IAF inaugurated its flagship drone, the Heron TP II. Developed by Israel Aerospace Industries, the all- weather TP II can reach 45,000 feet high, carry a maximum payload of 1 ton, and remain aloft for 36 hours.

The number of IAF drone squadrons, the range of the aircraft and most other technical specifics are closely guarded secrets.

If Israel were to attack Iran's suspected nuclear facilities, the drones at Palmachim, some of whom are said to be equipped with stealth technology, would be sent well ahead of bomber pilots, transmitting back images of the designated target areas, and would subsequently assess the damage caused by the strike.

While such plans are still confined to the drawing board, remotely controlled drone aircraft are heavily used by the Israeli army in daily operations.

Gil said that his drones' main mission is to provide support to ground troops by relaying bird's-eye views of a combat zone to field commanders.

Mission specialists said there is no ground encounter without a UAV flying overhead. Gil also briefly described how drones often "paint" targets for strikes by manned aircraft.

In the 2006 Lebanon war, for instance, UAVs flying from Palmachim scoured the ravines and villages in southern Lebanon, constituting a critical element in the IAF's efforts to destroy Hezbollah's rocket launchers and to evacuate injured troops.

Outfitted with cameras that can transmit high-resolution images in total darkness, drones have also proved indispensable in the Israeli military's operations against Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip in recent years. They are regularly tasked with overflying the coastal territory to hunt for rocket and mortar launchers and lead helicopter gunships to the locations of hidden arms caches, and they are also reportedly involved in the periodic targeted killings of militants.

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Like all the drone operators here, many of whom began their military service in the IAF's prestigious flight academy, Gil wears flight overalls with sewed-on squadron patches.

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Iran's state-run media dismissed the reports of suspected sabotage, declaring the explosion an accident.

While drone pilots are spared the dangers of a real battlefield, their workload remains among the heaviest in the IAF. Gil said the fact is unlikely to change in the near future.

"I can't tell you how many drones we operate, but I can say that we don't have enough of them," he said.

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