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Did Iran Just Shoot Down a U.S. Stealth Drone?

By David Axe

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For the third time this year, Iran is [claiming it shot down](#) an American robot warplane trying to snoop on Tehran's nuclear facilities. "An unmanned U.S. spy plane flying over the holy city of Qom near the uranium enrichment Fordu site was shot down by the Revolutionary Guards' air-defense units," lawmaker Ali Aghazadeh Dafsari told Iranian state television.

As with all "news" reports coming from Tehran's official media apparatus, it's wise to take Dafsari's claim with a grain of salt. Notably, no one is showing off any fresh wreckage of an American robot — a [popular pastime](#) in other countries where drones have gone down.

That said, there's reason to believe Dafsari — *and* reason to believe the drone in question is one of a small fleet of radar-evading 'bots the Pentagon saves for the most important, and difficult, missions. That would make the latest U.S. drone casualty the first stealth robot to be shot down, that we know of.

That's a lot of "ifs," to be sure. But in the [world of secret aircraft](#), a [little conjecture](#) is sometimes all you've got.

Again *if* true, Dafsari's tale of a downed U.S. drone is further evidence of America's escalating *global* drone campaign. While [lethal strikes](#) by U.S. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in Afghanistan and Pakistan grab the most headlines, American drones are also busy tracking [Somali insurgents](#) and [pirates](#), [Yemeni terrorists](#), [Latin American drug runners](#) and the [forces of Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi](#), among others, in addition to allegedly spying on Iran.

The Pentagon has been planning for years to eventually [replace many](#), if not most, of its human-piloted planes with flying robots. But the mounting evidence of worldwide U.S. drone operations means our unmanned future is here, today.

Iran claims its nuke program is strictly for peaceful purposes. Most foreign observers believe it's aimed at producing nuclear weapons. While the Pentagon readies [special nuke-busting weapons](#), satellites and human spies are surely hard at work gathering data on Iranian enrichment sites and other nuke facilities. There's little reason to doubt U.S. — [and possibly Israeli](#) — UAVs are on the job, too.

Indeed, that's one possible role for the U.S. Air Force's secretive RQ-170 (pictured), a [stealthy, flying-wing UAV](#) first spotted in Kandahar, Afghanistan in 2007. The Air Force copped to the RQ-170's existence in 2009, making it the first acknowledged, operational stealth drone.

The “Beast of Kandahar,” [as Bill Sweetman dubbed it](#), reportedly [helped guide U.S. Special Forces](#) towards Osama Bin Laden's Pakistan compound back in May. The radar-evading 'bot has also been sighted in South Korea, from where it possibly spied on North Korea's nukes. Phil Finnegan, a UAV analyst at the Teal Group, [told Air Force Times](#) the RQ-170 could be doing the same thing over Iran, too.

So if it was a stealthy Beast that Iran shot down, why hasn't Tehran proudly showed off photos of the smoldering wreckage? It's possible that the RQ-170 comes equipped with a self-destruct mechanism specifically intended to prevent just such a propaganda coup. We know some drones have these kill-switches, because occasionally robot operators [accidentally flip them](#).