Iran pumps up “massive” offensive exercise with as many as 50 drones

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- A display (non-flying) version of an Iranian “Saegheh” drone based on the US RQ-170 Sentinel.
- A more recent version of the Saegheh (“Thunderbolt’) carries ground strike missiles based on Iran’s domestic TV-guided antitank missile. It has no landing gear and is recovered by parachute; another version has landing skids.
- Another Iranian knockoff—this time, of the MQ-1 Predator.
- Iran’s Mohajer 6 drone is very similar to the AIA RQ-7 Shadow flown by the US Army.
- A guided bomb dropped from an Iranian drone during a weapons exercise.

Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Division staged what Iranian state media described as “massive drone drills” on March 14, including coordinated offensive operations with dozens of flying-wing drones based on the Lockheed RQ-170 Sentinel, captured by Iran in 2011, and Iranian copies of the General Atomics MQ-1 Predator. During the exercise, called “Towards al-Quds” (al-Quds is the Arabic

name for Jerusalem), a total of about 50 drones—including "Saegheh" unmanned combat aerial vehicles based on the RQ-170's flying wing design—were used in a coordinated air strike on training targets 1,000 kilometers (about 600 miles) from their launch site.

The Saegheh is much smaller than the RQ-170, with a wingspan of about six meters (about 20 feet). It has been shown carrying Sadid-1 TV-guided antitank missiles on its belly in static displays, and it does not appear to have landing gear—unlike a fiberglass replica of the RQ-170 that was displayed five years ago. There are two variants of the Saegheh: one uses a piston-driven propeller for thrust, while the other uses a small turbofan engine.

[embedded content]
The Saegheh drone in flight demonstrations.
Video from Iran's PressTV showed guided bombs being dropped from other types of Iranian drones but did not show weapons released from the Saegheh drones. The video claimed 50 of the RQ-170 knockoffs were used in the exercise, while the text of the article published by PressTV said "dozens" in a headline, and then the actual text of the article stated 10 Saegheh drones were used. So just how many were flown is left as an exercise for the reader's imagination.

Iran has been accumulating captured US and Israeli drones and attempting to reverse-engineer them for years. Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh of the IRGC Aerospace Division said in a press conference in November of 2018 that Iran had collected the US' General Atomics MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper, as well as the smaller AAI RQ-7 Shadow (flown by the US Army and Marine Corps) and the Boeing/Insitu ScanEagle (flown by the US Navy as a shipboard reconnaissance drone) in addition to the RQ-170. The IRGC has also obtained an Israeli Elbit Hermes long-range drone. While the sophistication of Iran's drones may not match current US and Israeli designs, the IRGC has significantly pushed forward

domestic drone production in Iran—and Iranian drones have been used in offensive and reconnaissance roles in Syria and Yemen.

Listing image by Iran TV

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