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Massive military drone crashes, technical glitch fingered as culprit

By Gili Cohen

A state-of-the-art Israel Air Force drone crashed yesterday in southern Israel while on a test flight. No injuries were reported.

The flight was testing new navigation components in the Heron-class Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV), nicknamed "Eitan." For reasons yet unknown the UVA's wing broke before it went down near Kibbutz Hafetz Haim by the town of Gedera. Preliminary investigations indicated that the accident was caused by a technical malfunction.

Israel Aerospace Industries officials who inspected the $5-million UAV's remains declared it a "total loss," but still hope to reuse several of the components that remained intact.

IAF commander Maj. Gen. Ido Nechushtan called the crash a "regretful event." Nechushtan, who was speaking in Herzliya at the International Ilan Ramon Space Conference sponsored by the Fisher Institute For Air and Space Strategic Studies, said that "the UAV was handed to the IAI for new technological development. It is the latest of a series of UAVs being used by Israel. It's a large drone, with many capabilities and has a promising future. I believe we'll find out what caused the problem and fix what needs to be fixed."

The "Eitan" has been operated by the air force since February 2010, and is considered the forces' most advanced UAV, capable of remaining in the air for 36 hours, reach a maximum height of 45,000 feet and carry over a ton of cargo. According to various sources it can fly up to 20 hours, and can carry missiles.

This type of UAV is set to replace most manned fighter jets in the future, mostly in reconnaissance missions. At present its main use has been for intelligence purposes, but foreign sources say that it was already used to attack weapons convoys in Sudan. According to IAF data, the Eitan and another drone – the smaller Shoval – take up to a quarter of all the air force's flight hours.

Olivier Fitoussi

The Eitan drone at an air force base.