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IAF's most advanced UAV crashes on test flight

Israel's aerial superiority in danger, warns Maj.-Gen. Ido Nehushtan

• By YAAKOV KATZ

The Heron TP, Israel's most advanced unmanned aerial vehicle, crashed on Sunday morning during a test flight near the Tel Nof Air Force Base outside Rehovot.

The Israel Air Force opened an investigation. According to initial findings, the crash occurred after the UAV performed a maneuver beyond its capabilities, causing one of its wings to break off. The aircraft was flying with a new navigation component that, the IAF suspects, might have disrupted the drone's automatic flight systems.

The Heron TP is the largest UAV in the IAF. It has a 26-meter wingspan – the same as a Boeing 737 – and can stay airborne for up to 45 hours. It can carry a 1,000 kg. payload, making it capable of conducting a wide variety of missions.

According to foreign reports,

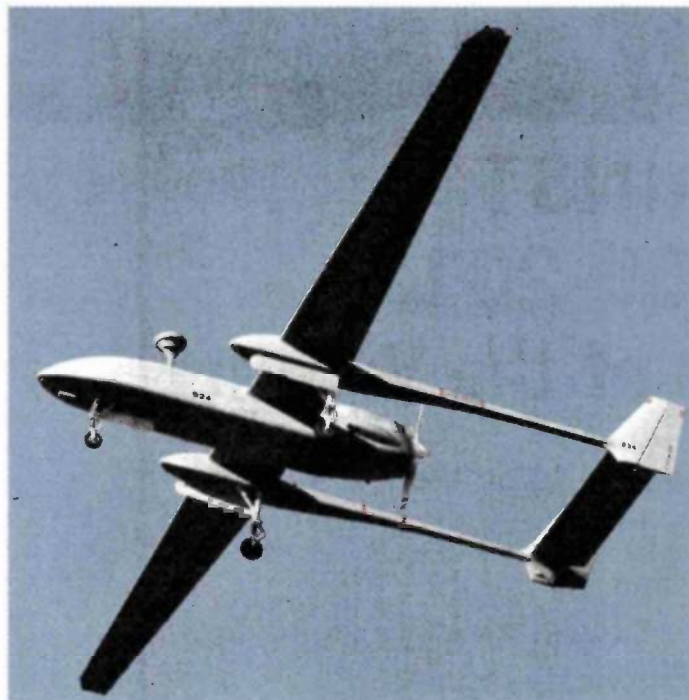
it can also fire missiles, and in Israel it is often referred to as the UAV "that can reach Iran."

The flight on Sunday was overseen by Israel Aerospace Industries and was held in conjunction with the IAF.

IAF commander Maj.-Gen. Ido Nehushtan said at a conference at the Fisher Brothers Institute for Air And Space Strategic Studies in Herzliya that IAI was testing a new technology on the drone when it crashed. The air force used UAVs for 25 percent of its annual missions, he said.

In July, Israel Aerospace Industries won a \$500 million contract from France, which decided to buy the Heron TP in the first export deal for the UAV. The deal is expected to lead to additional contracts for IAI as other countries, such as Germany, upgrade their UAV capabilities.

The air force established its first squadron of Heron TPs in 2010 and has been learning how to operate the drone and writing the appropriate operational doctrine. It had planned to declare the squadron operational in the coming weeks and it is possible that the crash will delay the move.



THE HERON UAV is often referred to as the drone 'that can reach Iran.' (Amit Dave/Reuters)

The IAF's use of drones has dramatically increased in recent years and they are used on all of Israel's fronts – in Lebanon, along the Egyptian border, in the Gaza Strip and off Israel's coast to protect natural gas installations.

Last year, the IAF decided to establish a new squadron made up of Heron 1 and Hermes 900 UAVs, which according to foreign reports is capable of firing missiles. Israel does not confirm that its UAVs have offensive capabilities.

During the conference, Nehushtan warned that in face

of the growing military buildup in the region and budget cuts in Israel, Israel's aerial superiority was in danger. He also warned of the possibility that weapons in Syria would make their way to terrorists if and when the Assad regime is toppled.

"2012 is a critical year since we could see significant, strategic and unprecedented changes," he said. "We need to implement a long-term plan to retain our military edge and we need to invest in the future since if we don't we could find ourselves weakened."