

Israel To Deploy Drones in Azerbaijan. Preemptive Strike on Iran?

By [Xinhua](#)

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Israel plans to use unmanned drones it deployed in Azerbaijan to preemptively strike Iranian missile sites in the event of a war, the London-based Sunday Times reported.

The report comes amid mounting speculations that Israel may launch a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities next year, in which case the latter would retaliate by firing Shahab-3 and other long-range missiles at the Jewish state, while Lebanese militia Hezbollah and Gaza militants would follow suit.

Ahead of a possible strike, Heron drones armed with Hellfire missiles would take out the missiles before they leave the ground, the paper said.

According to the report, the Nevatim airbase in Israel's Negev desert houses a U.S.-made X-band radar capable of detecting Iranian missiles loaded on launching pads 1,000 miles to the northeast, giving the Israelis 13 minutes' early warning.

"We'll try to 'kill' them at the booster stage, the moment their engines are ignited," the newspaper quoted "a well-informed" Israeli military source as saying.

"If that happens, and it isn't as easy as it sounds, then the remaining missiles will be finished off by our Air Defense Command," the source said.

Israel denies having armed UAVs, known in the U.S. military as Predator or hunter-killer drones, but independent experts say it has used such hardware on numerous occasions, including to strike targets far beyond its borders, such as arms convoys bound for the Gaza Strip.

Several reports over the past year have suggested that Azerbaijan, located beside the Caspian Sea and bordering Iran from the north, is slated to play a pivotal role in an Israeli airstrike on Tehran's nuclear program — whether as a safe haven from which Israeli jets could take off and land for refueling, or for ground operations to rescue downed pilots and drone strikes.

Both Israeli and Azeri officials have dismissed the reports.

The Heron TP II drone, delivered to the Israel Air Force in February 2010 and reportedly slated to attack the Iranian missiles, is a fourth-generation, all-weather craft with a cruising altitude of 14,000 meters.

With a wingspan of 26 meters, the size of a Boeing 737, it can carry nearly 5 tons of payload and remain aloft for 36 hours. Its range is classified, but Israel Aerospace Industries, which developed the craft, has previously said its linkup to satellite communication enables it to fly great distances and reach any country in the region.

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