

**War in Ukraine**

## **Russia deploys 'Albatross' made in Iran-backed drone factory**

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Facility at centre of Russo-Iranian UAV partnership has recruited specialist engineers and Farsi speakers

**Chris Cook** in London, **Max Seddon** and **Anastasia Stognei** in Riga, **Felicia Schwartz** in Washington and **Nikolaj Houmann Mortensen** in Copenhagen 10 HOURS AGO

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Russia's covert drone partnership with Iran has included close co-operation on a new factory in the Russian province of Tatarstan, where Moscow has converted an agricultural unmanned aerial vehicle maker to supply its war effort in Ukraine.

Albatross, the company operating on a key site for Russo-Iranian collaboration, has produced reconnaissance drones for President Vladimir Putin's defence ministry, with roughly 50 delivered for combat in eastern Ukraine.

The factory is at the centre of an expanding tech partnership with Tehran, whose expertise Moscow has relied on to establish a domestic drone-building capability to support its [invasion](#) and further skirt western sanctions.

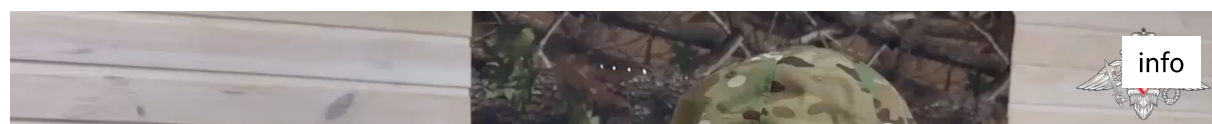
Activity at the Russian facility has increased in recent months, with the business park where it is based launching a recruitment drive for UAV engineers and Farsi speakers able to translate "technical documents", according to adverts and social media posts.

Albatross, a Russian group that previously specialised in farming tech, built its new factory inside the Alabuga special economic zone in Tatarstan — a site the US has claimed is the centre of the Tehran-supported effort to develop [Russia](#)'s capacity in making drones.

In a video released last month, Russia's Ministry of Defence showed soldiers in Ukraine launching reconnaissance drones, which it referred to as "Albatross" drones. In a statement to Russian state media, the company said they had supplied 50 M5 drones. The drones appear identical to ones being built at the Alabuga factory.

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## An official Russian video shows reconnaissance drones being launched in Ukraine





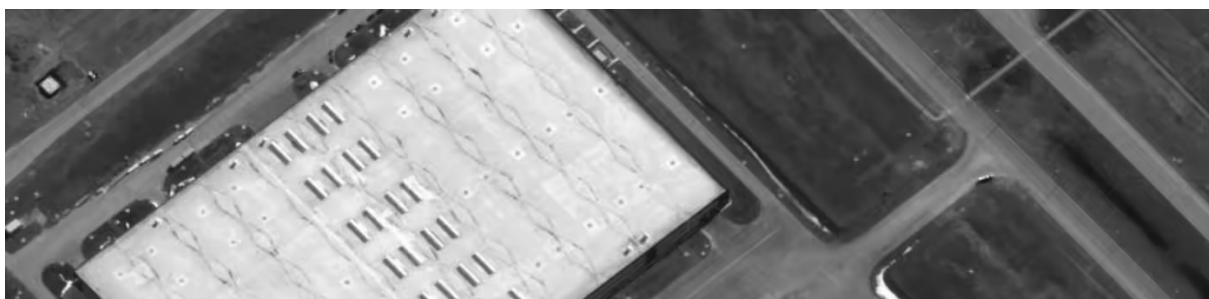
© Russian Ministry of Defence

Airwars, a conflict monitoring group based at Goldsmiths, University of London, discovered that the business park, which is near the town of Yelabuga, has posted dozens of job ads including for positions such as “UAV production director”, “UAV designer” and “UAV chief technologist” since October 2022.

Some explicitly state the role involves co-ordinating with Russia’s defence ministry on design. Several of the ads for UAV-related jobs cite a requirement to understand “reverse-engineering processes”. Key components in Iran’s drone programme, including engines, have benefited from analysis of technology bought or captured from other countries.

Since April, the business park has also posted advertisements for Farsi interpreters who will be required to travel, perform simultaneous translation and translate technical documents.

In June, the White House [issued satellite photographs](#) that identified two buildings in the Alabuga zone area as a key part of Iran’s attempts to help Moscow increase its drone capacity. “We are also concerned that Russia is working with Iran to produce Iranian UAVs from inside Russia,” said John Kirby, the US National Security Council spokesperson.





A satellite image of Russia's Alabuga special economic zone, showing the buildings where the US says drones are being made © Maxar/Avецilla Amado E NGA APXA USA GOV

The Financial Times and Airwars have identified Albatross as the drone-builder in one of those buildings. Statements by Albatross on the floor space of their facilities match the official dimensions of one of the buildings. In addition, an address listed on Albatross's website seems to correspond to the location identified by the US photograph.

Samuel Bendett, an expert on autonomous weaponry at the Center for Naval Analyses, said: "If Russia wants to do something covert with Iran, this is an advantageous location. It's on the river that flows into the Volga, so you can bring parts by ship from Iran covertly."

"It is very close to Kazan, one of Russia's high-tech manufacturing hubs," he added. "All you have to do is take a boat cruise."





Iran has supplied Russia with hundreds of Shahed “kamikaze” loitering drones, which have been flown in swarms into Ukrainian infrastructure and neighbourhoods. FT and Airwars have not, however, found proof that a Shahed drone is being manufactured at the plant. According to US intelligence, Moscow has procured hundreds of the suicide drones from Tehran.

The White House claimed Alabuga was a still-expanding industrial site where an Iranian-Russian drone plant could become fully operational early next year. Photos and videos from Russian social media and local media outlets indicate Albatross commenced some drone production at the site in January.

Albatross described itself as a maker of commercial drones for agricultural purposes and mapping. But Ilya Voronkov, the company’s co-founder, has admitted in interviews to supplying the military. He has also acknowledged buying carbon fibre from Alabuga-Fiber, a neighbouring company that was later hit with sanctions by the US for its role in Russia’s military programmes.

Voronkov has said 70 per cent of Albatross’ components are Russian-made, while other parts such as the engine are from China. The drone manufacturer’s website advertises cameras, electronics and other equipment from European, US and Asian companies.





Iran has supplied Russia with hundreds of Shahed 'kamikaze' loitering drones © Sobhan Farajvan/ZUMA/Alamy



A Russian soldier launches an Albatross M5 drone in Ukraine © Albatros/YouTube

Iran's drone programme has been growing steadily since the 1990s. Bendett, from the Center for Naval Analyses, said: "The Iranians already have a mature, proven technology. Iranian drones are in that sweet spot between those very expensive drones that can range very far and those smaller drones that don't fly more than 100km. It's a fairly sophisticated enterprise."

Iran has supplied UAVs to proxies and partner countries since the early 2000s, both through direct weapons transfers and through the provision of UAV assembly kits.

Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro confirmed in 2012 that his government bought drone manufacturing technology, as well as infrastructure, from the Iranian regime.

One of those drones, the ANSU-100, was unveiled last year during a presidential parade in Venezuela — and is essentially a carbon copy of the Mohajer-2, an Iranian drone, apparently fitted with Venezuelan-sourced armaments.

In 2022, Iran set up a drone manufacturing facility in Dushanbe, the capital city of nearby Tajikistan. This factory reportedly only manufactures the Ababil-2, a lightweight drone that has not yet been identified in Ukraine.

Iranian UAVs — including earlier versions of the Shahed drones — have been used by the Houthi rebels in Yemen and by the Ethiopian government against Tigrayan rebels in 2021.

Iran's foreign ministry spokesperson, Nasser Kanaani, last month said the Islamic republic had not provided any sides at the war with weapons and called the allegations “politically motivated”.

“Those who make these claims have not shown any evidence to prove their claims,” he said.

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