

Downed Hezbollah drone may have relayed intel on secret IDF sites

Contributed by RT
Sunday, 14 October 2012
Last Updated Sunday, 14 October 2012

The IDF shot down a Hezbollah-piloted drone over the northern Negev desert earlier this month after it possibly captured images of secret Israeli military sites. Earlier, Tel Aviv praised the IDF for its rapid response to the security breach.

The drone was launched from Lebanon and crossed into Israeli airspace on October 6, and stayed airborne for three hours before being intercepted, the Sunday Times reported.

Sources in the region claimed that the unmanned aircraft traveled more than 300 kilometers, and transmitted pictures of preparations for Israel's joint military exercise with the US, the newspaper said. The aircraft also reportedly spotted ballistic missiles, airfields and likely the nuclear reactor in Dimona.

The British newspaper said that the first missile an Israeli F-16 fighter jet shot at the drone missed its target. After the incident, Israeli leadership praised the country's air forces for their "sharp and effective" response to the violation of the country's airspace.

The drone is the new Iranian Shahed-129, operated by Iranian Revolutionary Guard technicians with the help of the Hezbollah, the report said.

Earlier, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah took credit for the aerial infiltration, saying that the aircraft was designed by Iran and assembled in Lebanon.

He said the drone was deployed in response to what he called Israel's repeated violations of Lebanese airspace since 2006. He identified the Dimona reactor as the mission's main target.

"This flight was not our first will not be our last, and we give assurances we can reach any point we want. We have the right to dispatch recon planes over occupied Palestine at any time," Nasrallah said.

Iranian Shahed-129 drone. Screenshot from YouTube user itnnews.

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Hezbollah claims Iranian-built drone over Israel

Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah said his party sent an Iranian-built drone that was shot down over Israel last week. (AFP photo)

The head of Lebanon's Hezbollah boasted Thursday that his Shiite militant group sent a sophisticated unmanned drone over Israel last week, saying the device was built by the Jewish state's arch foe Iran.

Hassan Nasrallah's acknowledgement of the drone which Israel shot down on October 6 came shortly after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pointed at Hezbollah and vowed to defend his country against further "threats."

"A sophisticated reconnaissance aircraft was sent from Lebanese territory ... and travelled hundreds of kilometers [miles] over the sea before crossing enemy lines and into occupied Palestine," Nasrallah said on television.

"It overflew sensitive and important installations for dozens of kilometers until the enemy spotted it near [the nuclear site] Dimona," Nasrallah added on Hezbollah's television Al-Manar. He did not identify the installations.

Nasrallah insisted that "possession of such an aerial capacity is a first in the history of any resistance movement in Lebanon and the region."

"It's not the first time [that a drone was sent], and it will not be the last. We can reach all the zones" of Israel, said Nasrallah, referring to a less sophisticated drone sent by Hezbollah during its 2006 war against Israel.

He said the latest drone was "Iranian built and assembled in Lebanon."

An Israeli official questioned by AFP in Jerusalem said he was not surprised that the drone was made in Iran. "The fact that Hezbollah weapons come from Iran does not surprise anyone," the official said on condition of anonymity.

The Israeli premier earlier accused Hezbollah of launching the previously unidentified drone and vowed to protect Israeli borders against further intrusions.

"We are acting with determination to protect our borders... as we prevented last weekend an attempt by Hezbollah," Netanyahu's office quoted him as saying. "We shall continue to act aggressively against all threats."

Air force jets on Saturday shot down the unarmed drone over southern Israel's Negev desert after it entered the country's airspace from the Mediterranean Sea.

At the time the Israeli military dispelled the notion that the drone might have been launched from the Gaza Strip, and was looking into the possibility that Hezbollah militants may have dispatched it.

In July 2006, the Israeli military shot down an unarmed drone operated by Hezbollah over the Jewish state's territorial waters.

And on April 12, 2005, another pilotless Hezbollah aircraft succeeded in overflying part of northern Israel without being downed.

On Wednesday, army radio and the top-selling Yediot Aharonot daily said the air force had only managed to shoot down the drone on the second attempt last Saturday.

Both reports said that the first missile fired by the F-16 jet missed the drone which was eventually brought down by a Panther missile, the military's most advanced air-to-air projectile.

A senior air force source quoted by Yediot played down the incident saying it was not unreasonable given the drone's small size.

"This is not a failure, no other army in the world with Israel's aerial defense systems could prevent the infiltration of such aircraft," he said.

-AFP