

Mystery Shrouds Israeli Jetfighters' Mission in Syria

Contributed by Naharnet-AFP-Reuters-Jpost-Debkafile
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Damascus said its air defenses opened fire on Israeli warplanes which violated Syrian airspace at dawn Thursday, escalating tension between the neighboring foes. Israel withheld comment.

A Syrian cabinet minister warned that the nation's leadership was considering its response to the Israeli "aggression" while in Israel the military declined any comment.

"Enemy Israeli planes penetrated Syrian airspace from the Mediterranean Sea heading towards the northeast, breaking the sound barrier," a Syrian army spokesman told the official SANA news agency.

"Our air defenses repulsed them and forced them to leave... after the Israeli planes dropped munitions, without causing human or material loss," he said, without giving further information on what exactly was dropped.

Syria's allegations came amid a war of words with Israel, with each blaming the other for stoking regional tensions and for failure to revive peace talks that have been stalled for seven years.

Information Minister Mohsen Bilal told pan-Arab satellite television Al-Jazeera that Syria's leadership was "giving serious consideration to its response... to this aggression."

In Israel, the military refused to comment on Syria's claims, saying: "We do not comment on such reports."

Former major general Uzi Dayan said the military's silence was an indication of Israel's eagerness not to allow the incident to stoke tension with Syria.

"Israel is active on many fronts in the Middle East but we have no intention to bring about a deterioration of the situation. That is why the Israeli reaction was so short and restrained," he told private Channel Two television.

A Syrian minister admitted to Al-Jazeera's English-language channel that it remained unclear whether the Israeli aircraft had actually carried out an attack.

"They intervened in our airspace... which they should not do -- we are a sovereign country and they should not come into our airspace," Expatriate Affairs Minister Bussaina Shaaban said.

"We do not know yet" if the aircraft dropped anything. "The investigation is still proceeding on the ground," she said.

In June 2006, Israeli warplanes flew over President Bashar Assad's palace in northern Syria while he was inside, an action Damascus condemned as an "act of piracy."

Over the past few months, Israeli and Syrian leaders have both said their countries do not want a war, but were preparing for any possibility while each side has accused the other of arming for a conflict.

Syria and Israel remain technically in a state of war, and peace talks broke down in 2000 over the fate of the Golan Heights, the strategic plateau captured by Israel in the 1967 Six Day War and annexed in 1981.

The previous over flight by Israel in 2006 came amid high tensions in the Middle East after the Jewish state launched a massive military offensive on the Gaza Strip to try to retrieve a soldier captured by Palestinian militants.

The Gaza action was followed just a few weeks later by a devastating Israeli war in Lebanon against the Shiite Muslim Hizbullah militia, after two soldiers were captured in a raid by the guerrillas.

Syria shelters a number of radical Palestinian groups, and is home to Khaled Meshaal, the exiled leader of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) who tops Israel's most wanted list.

Last month, Israel said it was reducing its military presence on the Golan Heights and lowering its level of alert.

However, it said it will continue to conduct regular training on the plateau as part of its training following the Lebanon war against Hizbullah, which revealed major shortcomings in the army's conduct.

And Israel continues to carry out occasional flights over neighboring Lebanon, triggering protests from Beirut and concern from the United Nations peacekeeping force monitoring a ceasefire there.(AFP)

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<http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&932FA9160E569275C225734E00440590>

Syria says Israel bombs territory as Israel silent
By Khaled Yacoub Oweis

DAMASCUS - Syria accused Israel of infiltrating its airspace and bombing its territory on Thursday and warned it could respond.

The Israeli military said it would make no comment on the report, which spoke of no casualties or damage being caused.

After months in which talk of reviving long-stalled peace negotiations has mingled with speculation on both sides that the other was preparing a surprise attack, Syrian officials hit out.

"This shows that Israel cannot give up aggression and treachery," Syrian Information Minister Mohsen Bilal told al-Jazeera television.

Another Syrian official said: "They dropped bombs on an empty area while our air defenses were firing heavily at them."

The Israeli military spokesman's office said in a statement: "It is not our custom to respond to these kinds of reports."

The office has typically commented on such reports. But a security source said the government had imposed a news blackout on the issue. A spokeswoman for Prime Minister Ehud Olmert also said there would be no comment beyond the military statement.

A Israeli military source told Reuters the air force has conducted a major exercise this week. Israeli aircraft often train over Turkey, a Muslim nation friendly to the Jewish state.

An Israeli analyst familiar with defense matters said he believed Israel had been probing Syria's air defenses recently.

The Syrian official news agency SANA said Israeli aircraft "infiltrated Syrian airspace through the northern border coming from the direction of the Mediterranean and headed towards northeastern territory, breaking the sound barrier."

"The Syrian Arab Republic warns the government of the Israeli enemy and reserves the right to respond according to what it sees fit," SANA added.

Local residents said they heard the sound of five planes or more above Tal al-Abiad area on Syria's border with Turkey, around 160 km (100 miles) north of the Syrian city of Rakka.

NO HOSTILE INTENTIONS

Tensions between the two neighbors have been high in recent months, with some Israeli intelligence officials suggesting President Bashar al-Assad's administration might be ready to try to take by force parts of the Golan Heights, which Israel captured in the war of 1967.

Syrian officials have said Syria is seeking peaceful means to liberate the territory, although some have also indicated that force remained an option if diplomacy failed.

Olmert, who launched his forces against Syrian-allied Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon a year ago, has been at pains to stress that he has no hostile intentions toward Damascus.

Some Israeli military officials have expressed alarm at what they say are reinforcements of Syrian positions and arms purchases. But Olmert has spoken out against alarmist comments.

He has also said he would like to reopen peace negotiations that have been stalled for seven years. Syrian officials, too, have said they would like peace. But there has been little sign of any concrete steps towards rapprochement.

Syria last said it fired at Israeli warplanes in June 2006, when Israeli aircraft buzzed a Syrian presidential palace.

Israeli officials said at the time the flyover was a message to cease support for Hamas after the Palestinian militant group abducted an Israeli soldier.

Israel has long warned Syria to stop supporting militant Palestinian groups and the Lebanese movement Hezbollah. - Reuters

Israel 'prepared' for conflict after Syria alleges IAF flyover
Yaakov Katz and Herb Keinon , THE JERUSALEM POST Sep. 6, 2007

Israel is "fully prepared" for the possibility of a conflict in the North, defense officials said late Thursday, after Syria alleged it had fired on a pre-dawn IAF flight over the coastal city of Latakia.

The IDF officially refused to comment on reports from Syria that its air defenses fired on a formation of IAF warplanes that entered Syrian airspace from the Mediterranean.

In addition, fears mounted that Hizbullah would use the escalating tensions along the Golan Heights as an excuse to initiate its own conflict with Israel.

Despite these fears, troops and tanks were not massing in the North, and the top defense brass carried on with their regular schedules, attempting to broadcast an air of "business as usual." The IDF's Northern Command released a statement reassuring northern residents that there was "no cause for concern."

Syrian Vice President Farouk Shara, speaking in Italy, said his country was not interested in being drawn into a war with Israel.

Syrian officials reported Thursday afternoon that at around 1 a.m., four or five IAF aircraft broke the sound barrier and dropped fuel tanks over deserted areas in northern Syria, along its border with Turkey. Witnesses said the incident occurred in the Abyad area.

A Syrian military spokesman said that Syrian air defenses then opened fire on the IAF aircraft.

"The Israeli enemy aircraft infiltrated the Arab Syrian territory through the northern border, coming from the Mediterranean, heading toward the eastern region, breaking the sound barrier," the spokesman said. "Air defense units confronted them and forced them to leave. We warn the Israeli enemy government against this flagrant aggressive act, and retain the right to respond in an appropriate way."

The incident came as Syria was pursuing an unprecedented arms buildup and amid growing fears of an impending war. Since the Second Lebanon War, Military Intelligence has warned that while Syria is not really interested in an armed conflict with Israel, a lack of communication between the two countries could cause a war to erupt if a diplomatic resolution were not reached beforehand.

Both the Prime Minister's Office and the Foreign Ministry maintained a complete blackout on any information relating to the incident. Officials declined to answer queries either on or off the record, and would only repeat the IDF Spokesman's Office response on the matter that it was "not accustomed to responding to such reports."

Likud MK Tzahi Hanegbi, chairman of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, said that the IDF response reflected the reality that Israel had no interest in getting into a confrontation with Syria.

In a Channel 2 interview, Hanegbi said Israel's interest was clear: "To reduce the tension and calm the situation."

Adding to the concern in Israel was an announcement by Syrian Information Minister Mohsen Bilal, who said Syria would "find the way" to respond to the Israeli aerial infiltration.

Bilal said the government was "seriously studying the nature of the response," but refused to indicate in an interview with Al-Jazeera whether the reaction would be on the military or diplomatic level. He would not give any more details about the incident, but said it proved Israel's policies were based on hostility.

"Israel, in fact, does not want peace. It cannot survive without aggression, treachery and military messages," he said.

Counterterrorism expert Boaz Ganor said that if Thursday's flyover did occur, it was possible that Israel was "collecting intelligence on long-range missiles" deployed by Syria in the North.

Imad Fawzi Shoaibi, a Syrian political analyst, speculated that Israel may have been probing Syria's new air defense systems, provided by Russia, at a time when tension was running high between the two countries.

Israel has acknowledged making routine flights over Lebanon, but it is unclear how often the IAF flies over Syria, if at all. At the beginning of the Second Lebanon War last summer, warplanes buzzed the palace of Syrian President Bashar Assad in what analysts called a warning to Damascus. In June of the same year, they also flew over Assad's summer home in Latakia, near the border with Turkey, after Hamas terrorists abducted Cpl. Gilad Schalit in Gaza.

AP contributed to the report.

This article can also be read at

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1188392553869&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

DEBKAFfile Reports: Alert declared in Israeli Air and Air Defense Forces after Syria claimed Israeli jets penetrated its air space
September 7, 2007, 12:26 AM (GMT+02:00)

Leaves have also been canceled at IDF bases as Israel braces for a possible Syrian reaction to the incident in the coming hours.

Israeli official spokesmen declined to comment on the Syrian News Agency claim that Israeli warplanes entered its air space from the Mediterranean Sea Wednesday night and flew opposite Al Raqqah in northeastern Syria, breaking the sound barrier. Syria fire forced them to leave without causing casualties, says the report.

The Israeli jets "dropped ammunition" over deserted areas of northern Syria early on Thursday, said a Syrian military spokesman. He warned "the Israeli enemy against repeating its aggressive action" and said his government reserved the right to respond in an appropriate manner.

A Western diplomat in Damascus said Thursday night: It appears that the Israeli planes were on a reconnaissance mission when they got caught by Syrian defenses and were forced to drop their bombs and extra fuel tanks.

DEBKAFfile military sources speculate that Damascus may be seeking to raise military temperatures already high between the two countries for its own purposes, or else fabricating a pretext to go on the offensive directly against Israeli targets on the Golan or indirectly through its allies.