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Israel shoots down Syrian jet over occupied Golan Heights

In a marked escalation of Israeli and US aggression aimed against Syria and Iran, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) shot down a Syrian plane near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights Tuesday.

The plane, which was attacked with two US-supplied Patriot missiles, was involved in an offensive by Syrian government forces to wrest from Western-backed Islamist militias Syria's Daraa and Quneitra provinces, near the Israeli border.

According to the Syrian government, the plane fell inside Syrian territory. It said the plane's first pilot, identified as Omran Muri, died in the attack, while the fate of the second pilot was unknown.

"The Israeli enemy confirms its support for the armed terrorist groups and targets one of our warplanes, which was striking their groups in the area of Saida, on the edge of the Yarmouk Valley in Syrian airspace," the Syrian news agency SANA reported, quoting a military source.

Defending the shooting down of the airplane, Danny Danon, Israel's ambassador to the UN, said: "Israel will not allow any violation of our sovereignty." He added, "We seek no escalation in the region"

Danon's every word is a lie. There is no evidence that the Syrian warplane ever violated Israeli airspace, much less that the IDF perceived its operations as a threat to the Israeli population.

The IDF's own statement appeared to acknowledge that the plane was engaged in operations inside Syria. "Since morning hours, there has been an increase in the internal fighting in Syria, including an increase in the activity of the Syrian Air Force," it said.

The operations were reportedly directed against ISIS forces operating in the border area. An Israeli military spokesman said that the plane was targeted after approaching the area at a "relatively high speed" and allegedly entered two kilometers into Israeli airspace.

What the IDF means by "Israeli airspace" are UN-monitored "buffer zones" separating Syria from the occupied Golan Heights, which were seized from Syria in 1967 and annexed by Israel in 1981. There is no evidence that the plane even crossed into these zones, and Damascus insists that it was shot down in Syrian airspace.

Syrian forces have returned to the border area for the first time since the onset of the Western-backed war for regime change. Israel has provided logistical support for ISIS and other Islamist militias operating in the area, including arms, ammunition and supplies, as well as medical care for wounded fighters.

According to the IDF, the plane had taken off from the T-4 airbase near Palmyra in central Syria, a base that has been repeatedly hit by Israeli airstrikes purportedly aimed at Iranian advisers stationed there.

The attack itself is bound up with increasingly aggressive Israeli operations aimed against Iranian targets inside Syria. This has included recent airstrikes far to the north of the border, including near the city of Aleppo.

The shooting down of the Syrian jet came just one day after Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and the country's armed forces chief, General Valery Gerasimov, flew to Jerusalem for talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. A Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman described the meeting as "urgent and important."

Israeli sources claimed that Lavrov presented Netanyahu with a proposal that Russia would assure that Iranian advisers and Iranian-backed militias are kept at least 100 kilometers from Syria's southern border. According to these sources, Netanyahu rejected the offer, demanding the expulsion of all Iranians and Iranian-backed forces from Syria.

Iran has insisted that its advisers are in Syria at the invitation of the Syrian government and that it has no intention of withdrawing them.

In advance of the meeting, Netanyahu said he would tell the Russians that "Israel insists on the separation of forces agreement between us and Syria being honored, as they were honored for decades until the civil war in Syria broke out."

He also stated that “Israel will continue to act against any attempt by Iran and its proxies to entrench militarily in Syria.”

A Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Tuesday denied Israeli accounts of the meeting, stating “Israel’s leadership highly assessed Russia’s efforts on the establishment of a de-escalation zone in southwestern Syria, which envisaged withdrawal of all non-Syrian armed groups from that area.”

Netanyahu had met in Moscow with Russian President Vladimir Putin on July 11 in advance of the Helsinki summit, where both Putin and US President Donald Trump indicated that they had discussed Syria and Israel’s security.

The provocative attack on the Syrian warplane was apparently carried out with Israeli knowledge that the Russian-made Sukhoi aircraft was not a Russian-piloted aircraft. Russian and Israeli military commands have established communications that have allowed Israeli warplanes to strike Syrian and alleged Iranian targets inside Syria without facing threats from sophisticated Russian anti-aircraft systems.

Israel has also been given a green light for its attacks from Washington, which is aggressively escalating its confrontation with Iran. Trump tweeted his all-caps threat Sunday night that Iran would “SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED” if it “EVER” dared to “THREATEN” Washington again with retaliation for illegal US sanctions that constitute acts of war.

While the Syrian government has largely succeeded in reasserting its control over Syrian territory, and Washington acknowledges that ISIS—the supposed reason for its intervention in the country—is defeated, US troops are continuing to occupy the country, and Israeli provocations are setting the stage for a dramatic escalation of the Middle East conflict, where a relatively minor incident could erupt into a war that draws in major regional and world powers.