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Officials: Israeli drone strike kills 5 in Egypt

By ASHRAF SWEILAM

8/9/2012

An Israeli drone strike inside Egypt killed five suspected Islamic militants and destroyed a rocket launcher Friday, two senior Egyptian security officials said, marking a rare Israeli operation carried out in its Arab neighbor's territory.

The strike, coming after a warning from Egypt caused Israel to briefly close an airport Thursday, potentially signals a significant new level of cooperation between the two former foes over security matters in the largely lawless Sinai Peninsula after a military coup ousted Egypt's president. Egypt long has maintained that it wouldn't allow other countries to use its territories as hotbeds to launch attacks against other countries.

Residents heard a large explosion Friday in el-Agra, an area in the northern region of the Sinai close to Egypt's border with Israel. The officials said the Israeli attack was in cooperation with Egyptian authorities.

The two officials spoke on condition of anonymity to The Associated Press because they were not authorized to speak to journalists. The Israeli military said it was looking into the report after being contacted by the AP.

A statement later posted on the official Facebook page of Col. Ahmed Mohammed Ali, an Egyptian military spokesman, said there had been two explosions in el-Agra, south of Rafah, and that security forces were investigating. Egypt's official MENA news agency said an explosion destroyed a rocket launcher set near the border to launch attacks against Israel. The agency said at least five jihadis were killed.

The Egyptian officials told AP that the drone had been flying over the site of the attack since early Friday morning.

Egypt's military and security forces are engaged in long battle against Islamic jihadis in the largely lawless peninsula. Islamic militants also have been stepping up attacks against security forces on the peninsula, raising fears that extremists could exploit the anger over the July 3 ouster of President Mohammed Morsi to spread their insurgency.

The drone strike comes after Israel briefly prevented landings at an airport in the Red Sea resort of Eilat on Thursday. While Israeli officials would only say the closure came out of unspecified security concerns, an Egyptian security official told the AP that officials warned Israel about the possibility of rocket strikes. The official said Egyptian authorities received intelligence suggesting terrorist groups planned to fire missiles Friday at Israel, as well as at locations in northern Sinai and the Suez Canal.

That official spoke on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak with journalists. He also said that Egyptian authorities planned to start air patrols Thursday night over the Naqab desert in the Egyptian Sinai, where officials believe the militants are based.

While Egypt signed a peace deal with Israel in 1979, the country has long been suspicious of the Jewish state's intentions while annually celebrating its own military exploits against Israel in the Sinai. Allowing an Israeli drone strike inside its own territory represents military cooperation otherwise never seen before.