

Israel downs Iranian drone and strikes Syria, F-16 crashes

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FILE - In this Monday, Nov 25, 2013, file photo, technicians inspect an Israeli air force F-16 jet at the Ovda airbase near Eilat, southern Israel.

Jerusalem: The Israeli military shot down an Iranian drone that infiltrated the country early Saturday before launching a large-scale attack on at least a dozen Iranian targets in Syria. Israel called it a severe and irregular violation of Israeli sovereignty.

The military said its planes faced massive anti-aircraft fire from Syria that forced two pilots to abandon an F-16 jet that crashed in northern Israel. One pilot was seriously wounded and the other lightly.

The military called the drone infiltration a severe and irregular violation of Israeli sovereignty and said Iran would be held responsible for its outcome, marking a dramatic escalation in tensions along its northern border.

"This is a serious Iranian attack on Israeli territory. Iran is dragging the region into an adventure in which it doesn't know how it will end," Israel's chief military spokesman, Brig. Gen. Ronen Manelis, said in a special statement. "Whoever is responsible for this incident is the one who will pay the price."

The Israeli military then carried out what it called a large scale attack against Iranian and Syrian targets in Syria.

The military said it struck 12 targets including three aerial defense batteries and four Iranian targets that are part of Iran's military establishment in Syria. During the attack, anti-aircraft missiles were fired toward Israel jets triggering sirens that were sounded across northern Israel.

Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman was convening the top brass at military headquarters in Tel Aviv to discuss a further response.

Israeli military spokesman Jonathan Conricus said Iran was responsible for this severe violation of Israeli sovereignty and that the military was fully prepared for further action.

Syrian state TV quoted a military official saying Syrian air defenses hit more than one Israeli plane. The official said the Israeli raids hit a base in the country's central area, and called it a new aggression.

Later, Syria state TV said its air defenses responded to new Israeli raids near the capital Damascus.

Israel has long complained about the involvement of archenemy Iran, and Iranian proxy Hezbollah, in the Syria war. The Shiite allies have sent forces to back Syrian President Bashar Assad, who appears headed toward victory after years of fighting. Israel has said it will not accept a permanent military presence by Iran and its Shiite allies in Syria, especially near the Israeli border.

Israel has mostly stayed out of the fighting in Syria, wary of being drawn into fighting between forces that are all opposed to it.

Israel has been warning of late of the increased Iranian involvement along its border in Syria and Lebanon. It fears Iran could use Syrian territory to stage attacks or create a land corridor from Iran to Lebanon that could allow it to transfer weapons more easily to Hezbollah.

The Israeli Cabinet recently held a meeting on the Golan Heights near the border with Syria to highlight to new threats.

Israel has shot down several drones that previously tried to infiltrate its territory from Syria. The targeting of Iranian sites in response, however, mark an escalation in the Israeli retaliation. The military confirmed that the initial target in Syria â€” the unmanned aircraftâ€™s launch components â€” was successfully destroyed. Israel says it has the Iranian drone in its possession.

Iranâ€™s Foreign Ministry declined to comment.

- AP