

Israel strikes Iranian targets in Syria; 11 reported killed

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Damages are seen inside a house in Damascus, Syria in this handout released by SANA on November 20, 2019. (Reuters)

Jerusalem: The Israeli military said it struck dozens of Iranian targets in Syria on Wednesday, carrying out a "wide-scale" strike in response to rocket fire on the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights the day before.

A Britain-based war monitoring group said the Israeli airstrikes killed 11 people, including seven non-Syrians who are most likely Iranians. Syrian state media only reported that two civilians were killed.

The Israeli military said its fighter jets hit multiple targets belonging to Iran's elite Quds force, including surface-to-air missiles, weapons warehouses and military bases. After the Syrian military fired an air defense missile, the Israeli military said a number of Syrian aerial defense batteries were also destroyed.

The death toll of 11 was reported by Rami Abdurrahman, who heads the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition activist group with a network of activists across Syria.

The Observatory said the airstrikes targeted arms depots belonging to the Quds Force in the Damascus suburbs of Kisweh and Qudsaya. Abdurrahman added that several other areas were targeted in Wednesday's strikes, including the Mazzeh airbase in western Damascus where air defense units are stationed.

Syria's state SANA news agency said the two civilians were killed by shrapnel when an Israeli missile hit a house in the town of Saasaa, southwest of Damascus. It said several others were wounded, including a girl in a residential building in the suburb of Qudsaya, also west of the Syrian capital.

It claimed that Syrian air defenses destroyed most of the Israeli missiles before they reached their targets.

Wednesday's strikes on Syria were the most intense since Jan. 21, when Israel claimed responsibility for a series of airstrikes on Iranian military targets in the Arab country, including munition storage facilities, an intelligence site and a military training camp, in response to an Iranian missile attack the previous day.

Israel had said the missile, fired by Iranian forces in Syria, was intercepted over a ski resort on the Golan Heights and that there were no injuries. The Iranian launch followed a rare Israeli daylight air raid near the Damascus International Airport.

The latest strikes further burst into the open what's been a long shadow war between Israel and its archenemy Iran. The two foes have increasingly clashed over what Israel says is Iran's deeper presence along its borders.

"Yesterday's Iranian attack towards Israel is further clear proof of the purpose of the Iranian entrenchment in Syria, which threatens Israeli security, regional stability and the Syrian regime," the military said in a statement, adding that it would "continue operating firmly and resolutely" against Iran in Syria.

Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus, a military spokesman, said the significance of the operation was the "multitude of targets" hit.

Several important targets were struck, he said, including what he described as the Iranian headquarters at Damascus airport where senior Iranian officials are based and which is used to coordinate shipments from Iran to its allies in Syria and beyond. He added that Israel also holds Syria responsible for hosting the Iranians.

Tuesday's rocket fire on the Golan was the sixth attempt by Iran to attack Israeli targets since February 2018, and all have been thwarted, Conricus said.

While Israel faces tensions with Iranian proxies along its borders, Iran's regional influence is also being challenged by unprecedented, economically-driven mass protests in Iraq and Lebanon — two countries where Tehran wields major influence. The protests are creating unrest that Tehran fears would spark a backlash against Iran-backed proxy militias in those countries.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has issued a series of warnings recently about Iranian aggression throughout the Middle East and has vowed to respond firmly.

"I made it clear: whoever harms us, we will harm them. That's what we did tonight," he said early Wednesday. "We will continue to aggressively protect Israel's security."

Israel's new hard-line defense minister, Naftali Bennett, issued an equally firm statement.

"The rules have changed: whoever fires on Israel during the day will not sleep at night," he said. "Our message to the leaders of Iran is simple: you are no longer immune. Any place you dispatch your tentacles, we will chop them off."

The rare rocket fire came a week after an Israeli airstrike against a top Palestinian militant based in Syria. Akram al-Ajouri, a member of the leadership of the militant Islamic Jihad group who is living in exile, survived the attack but his son and granddaughter were killed.

Israel frequently strikes Iranian interests in Syria. But last week's airstrike appeared to be a rare assassination attempt of a Palestinian militant in the Syrian capital. It came the same day as another Israeli airstrike killed a senior Islamic Jihad commander in Gaza, settling off the fiercest round of fighting there in years.

Iran has forces based in Syria, Israel's northern neighbor, and supports Hezbollah militants in Lebanon. In Gaza, it supplies Islamic Jihad with cash, weapons and expertise.

Netanyahu also has claimed Iran is using Iraq and far-off Yemen, where Tehran supports Shiite Houthi rebels at war with a Saudi-led coalition backing the government, to plan attacks against Israel. Hamas also receives some support from Iran.

- AP