Israel Lost a Jet, but Proved it would Win the War

Maj. Gen. Amos Yadlin & Ari Heistein / February 13, 2018

It was no surprise when two strategic vectors clashed this weekend on Israel's northern front: The Iranian determination to build an advanced military force in Syria collided with Israeli determination to prevent that from happening.

On a broader strategic level a conflict of this sort was expected, though the timing and tactics were set by the Iranians in the latest round. The context of this particular incident was the Iranian led-axis' rising self-confidence in light of its success in the Syrian civil war, and this led Teheran to field test a new UAV (based on reverse engineering a U.S. model) as well as Israeli air defense by sending the drone into Israeli skies.

The battle on Saturday had four different stages. First, the Iranian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) penetrated Israeli airspace and then it was detected and destroyed by Israel forces. Second, Israel attacked the caravan from which the UAV was piloted at the T-4 airbase deep in Syrian territory. Third, the Israeli F-16 was downed over Israeli territory by an outdated Syrian SA-5 missile. And finally, Israel launched an extensive strike that focused on Syrian air defenses and Iranian forces in Syria.

Numerous unprecedented events took place in a single day of fighting: It was the first time an Iranian UAV penetrated Israeli airspace under direct Iranian control; it was also the first time that Israel launched a direct strike on Iranian forces in Syria; and it was the first time that an Israeli fighter jet was brought down by an SA-5 over Israeli territory. As to the last point, this was truly an exceptional incident as prior to it not a single Israeli plane had been brought down by enemy fire since 1982, and the Israeli strike last Saturday also constituted the largest Israeli attack on anti-aircraft batteries since the operation to destroy SAM sites in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon in 1982.

However, Hezbollah's celebrations and the handing out of sweets on the streets of Damascus on account of the downing of the F-16 indicate either lack of understanding of the events or a successful disinformation campaign by the regime. Even Israeli news commentators were shaken by the events, and they went so far as to declare that the day signified that "Israel's air superiority had been cracked."

In fact, what happened on Saturday indicates exactly the opposite. Israel demonstrated excellent capabilities in defending its airspace by intercepting and downing the advanced UAV – its design based on a U.S. model that fell into Iranian hands several years ago – and it established its ability to leave Damascus exposed

after destroying major components of the Assad regime's air defense system. By launching precision strikes on Iranian targets in Syria, Israel also proved its superior intelligence and operational capabilities.

But the most important message Israel sent that day was the one directed to Moscow and Tehran about their "project to save the Syrian regime" from collapse. Through its actions, Israel indicated that provocative Iranian steps infringing on Israeli red lines and threatening its national security place the Assad regime at risk.

Indeed, the attacks made it clear that taking on Israel will not be like the long and grinding war the regime is fighting against the amateurish Syrian opposition because the Israeli Air Force can strike the Syrian regime and its military forces overnight in ways that can shake their very foundations.

It appears that this message was understood rather quickly by decision-makers in Iran, Russia, and Syria and that led to subsequent efforts to contain the incident's repercussions through diplomatic and media channels.

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