

Pro-Iran militias warn of 'very cruel' response after Israeli strike on Palmyra

Author:

Thu, 2021-10-14 23:40

AMMAN: Iran-backed forces in Syria said on Thursday they would respond forcefully to an Israeli strike over Syria's Palmyra area in the province of Homs on Wednesday evening in the second such strike within a week.

The Syrian Defense Ministry said in a statement that one soldier was killed in the attack that took place at 11:34 p.m. (2034 GMT) and targeted a communications tower and caused some material losses.

Israel has kept silent about the strikes that came days after Damascus reported its air defenses intercepted an Israeli missile attack above the Homs countryside, wounding six Syrian soldiers and causing some material damage.

Israeli missiles flew over Jordanian airspace above US forces based in the Tanf area at the Syrian-Iraqi border, the Syrian ministry statement said.

The latest strikes are part of an escalation of what has been a low-intensity conflict in recent years that has seen hundreds of Israeli raids whose goal was to slow down Iran's growing entrenchment in Syria, Israeli and regional military experts say.

Tehran-backed forces including Lebanon's Hezbollah have built a presence since deploying to help President Bashar Assad in the Syrian conflict that erupted in 2011.

A statement by the so-called operations room of Assad's Iran-backed allies said the response to the strike would be "very cruel," adding casualties would have been much higher had its forces not been well spread across the desert area.

"As a result of this attack a number of martyrs and injured from our Mujahedeen brothers have fallen," the statement said without elaborating.

"We have taken a decision to respond to this attack in revenge for the martyrs and the blood of the injured and the response will be very cruel," said the statement published on pro-Iranian news outlets whose authenticity Reuters verified.

A senior military source who requested anonymity said the strikes hit among other targets the T4 airbase where Iran-backed militias launched drone strikes in recent months against US bases in northern Syria.

The source said unidentified drones believed to be Israeli also hit this week

Tehran-backed bases in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor along the Iraqi border, a strategic supply route for Iranian-backed militias who regularly send reinforcements from Iraq into Syria

Israel's Defense Minister Benny Gantz earlier last month accused Tehran of providing foreign militias with drone training at an airbase in Iran.

Two military sources familiar with the affair say the site that was hit on Wednesday was near a secret facility that Tehran was using to transfer "know-how" on unmanned aerial vehicles technology.

The Palmyra area where the strikes were conducted is close to a major concentration of Russian bases and where its troops conducted in recent days maneuvers with Syrian troops, military experts say.

Israel wants Iranian and Iran-backed forces kept away from its border and more broadly, removed from Syria entirely.



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Syrian war monitor says Israeli strike near Palmyra kills 9

Tunisia's President Saied revokes predecessor's passport

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Thu, 2021-10-14 22:27

TUNIS: Tunisia's President Kais Saied said Thursday he had decided to withdraw the diplomatic passport of his predecessor Moncef Marzouki. Tunisian media suggested that Saied was irked by Marzouki's demands that France end its support for the Tunisian government. The decision on the passport was made public in a communique.

"Some have gone abroad to undermine the interests of Tunisia," Saied said, referring to Marzouki who was president from 2011 to 2014.

Days ago, Marzouki participated in a demonstration while in Paris, during which he had urged French decision-makers "not to endorse a totalitarian system."

In July, Saied sacked Tunisia's prime minister, suspended parliament and assumed executive authority, saying it was because of a national emergency. His critics called it a coup.

Last month, Saied issued presidential decrees bolstering the already near-total powers he had granted himself.



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Thousands protest against Tunisia leader Kais Saied

[Ankara, Baghdad fight against Daesh may be stepped up in wake of Iraqi elections: Experts](#)

Thu, 2021-10-14 21:45

ANKARA: Turkish and Iraqi counterterrorism operations to eliminate Daesh from the region could be stepped up following parliamentary elections and the recent capture of one of the group's senior leaders, experts have claimed.

A recent joint intelligence operation between the two countries in northwestern Syria led to the apprehension by Iraqi security forces of Sami Jasim, deputy to the late former Daesh leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.

An Iraqi national, Jasim was also known to be a close aide to the current leader of the terror group, Abu Ibrahim Al-Hashimi Al-Quraishi. Turkey's influence in Syria's northwest, where for years it has had troop observation points, and its close ties with rebels in the region helped in the success of the operation.

A number of Iraqi Daesh members hiding in the region are believed to have been inspiring group affiliates in other war-torn countries such as Afghanistan.

Analysts now reckon that closer cooperation between Ankara and Baghdad would not only help eradicate the last remnants of Daesh but establish a new layer of trust between Turkey and the US on counterterrorism issues.

America had offered \$5 million for information on Jasim and considered him as being "instrumental in managing finances for ISIS' (Daesh) terrorist operations."

Last year, Turkey's Financial Crimes Investigation Board signed a deal with its Iraqi counterpart Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism.

Goktug Sonmez, director of security studies at Ankara-based think-tank Orsam,

said Turkey's Iraq policy was primarily focused on counterterrorism.

He told Arab News: "Initially this focus was limited with the fight against the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and then it was expanded to the counterterrorism efforts against Daesh with Turkey becoming an integral part of the global coalition to fight against it."

Parliamentary elections were held in Iraq on Oct. 10, and experts think the result of the elections will have direct repercussions on counterterrorism efforts depending on regional alliances.

Sonmez said: "Pro-Iranian Shiite segments have emerged as the biggest loser of the elections, while the Kurdistan Democratic Party significantly increased its share of votes. Following the election results, Ankara may boost its anti-Daesh operations with Iraqi central government.

"With the decrease of Iranian influence on Iraq, such cooperation between the two countries may also contribute to Washington's efforts to sustain its links of alliance with the region.

"Both Gulf countries and Turkey can help the Baghdad government in this process by using the security card as a sustainable avenue of cooperation.

"From the perspective of military assistance and security collaboration, I expect Turkey will further provide Iraq with new military equipment for better identifying Daesh hideouts," he added.

In August, Iraqi Defense Minister Juma Anad Saadoun announced that his country was considering buying Turkish drones, T129 tactical reconnaissance and attack helicopters, and electronic military hardware.

"Turkey has so far compiled a very comprehensive list of tens of thousands of foreign fighters who are or may be linked with Daesh. Following the recent elections, Turkey and Iraq can deepen their counterterrorism efforts based on Ankara's strong documentation about the Daesh network in its neighborhood," Sonmez said.

Turkey recently arrested several Daesh members on its home soil. In mid-September, security forces arrested three people in southern Turkey with alleged links to Daesh and the PKK, along with several documents and digital materials.

"Turkey's domestic operations against Daesh go hand-in-hand with its cross-border operations. The data that Turkish security officials have obtained and the networks that have been uncovered with such operations have helped authorities in revealing the jihadists' foreign contacts in countries of the region," Sonmez added.

Between 2014 and this year, Turkey carried out more than 5,855 operations against Daesh, capturing and arresting more than 1,200 of the group's members.

Meanwhile, Turkey's National Intelligence Organization and police have

arrested eight people, including two Iranian spies, over an attempt to kidnap a former Iranian soldier, state-run Anadolu Agency reported on Wednesday.



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[2 missing after Lebanese training plane crashes into the Med](#)

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1634162029239685700

Thu, 2021-10-14 00:52

BEIRUT: A civilian training plane that belonged to the Lebanese Aviation Club crashed into the Mediterranean Sea on Wednesday morning and the two people on

board are missing, the Lebanese Army announced.

The crash site is off the coast of Halat near Byblos where search operations continue for the pilot, Ali Hajj Ahmed, and a student pilot, Pascale Abdel Ahad.

The Cessna 172 plane took off from Beirut-Rafic Hariri International Airport at 10:06 a.m. local time on Wednesday, according to the Directorate General of Civil Aviation in Lebanon. Less than 20 minutes later, the plane disappeared from air navigation radars over the sea in the Halat area.

"The captain of the plane did not contact the control tower and did not give a distress signal, which is strange," Kris Kashouh, of the Lebanese Plane Spotters, told Arab News.

The Lebanese Navy, Air Force, and Civil Defense have joined the search operations.

"The search concentrated on a wide area at a distance of one kilometer away from Halat beach and at depths ranging between 30 and 35 meters," a Lebanese Civil Defense source said. "Divers from the civil defense took turns in the search operations in very delicate conditions, due to the tides and winds in the area."

Unconfirmed reports indicated that Abdel Ahad had contacted the control tower because the pilot of the plane suffered a health condition.

But Lebanese Aviation Club board member Michel Abboud dismissed that claim.

"The planes are usually in continuous contact with the control tower and there were no defects reported by those who were on board the plane," he said.

The Lebanese Aviation Club, which was created in 1923, is one of three aviation learning centers in Lebanon that train private pilots and provide licenses. The Cessna 172 plane that crashed is what is typically used for training flights and cannot hold more than three people, including the pilot. A similar accident occurred on July 8, when a Cessna 172 with three people on board crashed in the Ghosta region, 36 kilometers north of Beirut, after having deviated from the approved flight plan. That plane was owned by Open Sky and the flight was for tourism. The pilot and two passengers on board were killed.

"In the Ghosta accident, the captain also did not contact the control tower which adds to the peculiarity of the situation," Kashouh said. "The results of that investigation have not been released."

Lebanese Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi traveled by boat to the crash site where he was briefed on the rescue operations of the Lebanese Army and Civil Defense teams.

"Rescue boats split the crash area into squares so that the divers could scan the whole area," Mawlawi said. "There is a large number of volunteers with their equipment who are helping in the rescue mission."

Mawlawi also urged the Lebanese Ministry of Public Works to take additional measures in inspecting all aviation training planes.

"As part of ensuring public safety, so that these accidents do not get repeated," he said.



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[Tunisia, Morocco hoteliers eye an end to COVID-19 downturn](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-10-14 00:46

HAMMAMET, Tunisia: The October sun warms the sands of Hammamet beach on Tunisia's east coast, but the coronavirus pandemic still casts a shadow and visitor numbers are yet to bounce back.

After two ruined seasons in a row, operators in Tunisia and Morocco are licking their wounds and hoping the lifting of travel restrictions will spell better days.

This year was better than the last, "which was really a terrible season. But (2021) was still only half as good as 2019," said Haykel Akrouf of the Bel Azur hotel.

The luxury facility, with swimming pools overlooking rows of deckchairs along the shore, had to halve its capacity of 1,000 beds in July as a spike in coronavirus cases battered Tunisia.

The country found itself on European nations' red lists, making it virtually impossible for holidaymakers from major markets including France, Germany and Italy to visit.

But as restrictions have begun to ease, some have managed to reach the North African country.

Elena Bakurova flew in from Vladivostok in the east of Russia to celebrate her 44th birthday and "discover Africa."

Yanis Merabti, from France's Lyon, said he had chosen a holiday in Tunisia for the price and the weather.

"France isn't like this in October. You can't get to the beach or enjoy the sun, it's cold," he said. "It's so nice here."

Akrout said the hotel was at around 30 percent capacity, with Russians making up roughly half that number.

"We are talking about survival – it's nowhere near profitable," he said.

Dora Milad, head of the FTH hoteliers' association, said the "catastrophic" 2020 season had battered the sector, with hotel stays down by 80 percent.

This year saw an 11 percent uptick, she said. "That's very slightly better ... but it's still far from normal."

In a good year like 2019, Tunisia registers about 9 million hotel stays, and the tourism sector accounts for up to 14 percent of gross domestic product – providing livelihoods to around 2 million Tunisians.

Nearby Morocco also depends heavily on visitors to its coastal resorts and historic inland cities.

This season saw a modest influx of tourists when the country reopened its borders in June following months of closure.

Roughly 3.5 million visitors had entered the country by the end of August – up from 2.2 million the year before.

But that is still far short of the 13 million registered in the same period of 2019.

Facing its own spiking COVID-19 caseload, Morocco was forced to impose new restrictions, such as limiting travel to the tourist hot spots of Marrakech and Agadir.

"The recovery has been focused on the coastal cities, but it has been slowed down by the restrictions imposed in August," said Hamid Bentahar, the president of the country's tourism federation.

In neighboring Algeria, the sector depends largely on domestic tourism, also hit hard by the pandemic.

National Hoteliers' Federation chief Ahmed Oulbachir said facilities were operating at just a quarter of their normal rate.

Tunisia has seen its coronavirus cases tumble since their mid-year peak, and finally has had some good news on the tourism front too.

Key markets the UK and France have both removed the country – along with Morocco and Algeria – from their travel red lists.

For the Bel Azur, “it’s already too late,” said Akrouit.

“But at least it lets us save the 2022 season, as we can sign contracts with tour operators.”

Hotels in Hammamet are now preparing for a recovery.

But Akrouit says it is time to rethink the sector beyond the cliches of “camels and the beaches.”

“Mass tourism has shown its limits. It’s time to make use of magnificent sites that are totally unexploited,” he said.

Milad of the Tunisian hoteliers' association agreed.

The sector has “sat on its laurels” since the 1960s and failed to fully exploit country’s desert south, spectacular interior and the ancient ruins of Carthage, near Tunis, she said.

She also pitched the capital Tunis as a destination for weekend city escapes.

Since the start of the last century, “Tunisia has been a destination for winter breaks in the sun, and to treat lung conditions,” she added.

“That could be an opportunity, after Covid, to regenerate and get out in the fresh air.”



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