Yet Another Israeli Provocation in the Middle Eastern Skies

While using a civilian airliner as cover, four Israeli F-16 fighters approached the outskirts of Damascus and launched an attack on local residential areas late night on February 6. There’s no disputing that by adopting such tactics the Israeli Air Force endangered the civilian aircraft - an Airbus A320 owned by the private Syrian Cham Wings Airlines, arriving at Damascus from Najaf International Airport (NJF) in Iraq with 172 passengers on board. This Syrian airliner was running late and it’s clear from data provided by FlightrRadar24, that Israeli military aircraft were clearly expecting the arrival of yet another A320, owned by SyrianAir due to arrive from Tehran, hoping to provoke local air defence units into destroying the liner by mistake.

If it weren’t for the prompt actions of the flight dispatchers of Damascus International Airport and its efficient automated air traffic control system, this civilian airliner would have been in peril, but thankfully it managed to escape the kill zone, landing safely at the nearest available airfield, the Russia's Hmeimim air base.

The situation is painfully similar to September of 2018, when 4 Israeli F-16s launched missile strikes against unknown targets in Syria's Latakia province, using Russia’s Il-20 reconnaissance aircraft with 15 crew members aboard as cover. Predictably enough, the Israeli jets provoked a response from Syrian anti-aircraft units resulting in the destruction of the Russian aircraft. All people on board were killed.

On December 26, 2018, another Syrian airline Cham Wings Airlines plane was bound to land at Damascus
International Airport, but in a bid to escape a similar provocation staged by the Israeli Air Force, it detoured and landed at Russia’s Hmeimim airbase. On that day a total of two civilian airliners had to change their flight routes as a result of the Israeli Air Force, which threatened innocent civilians in what that can only be described as a provocation. In both cases near Damascus, the jets were operating from the airspace of a third country – Lebanon, justifying their actions by alleging to attack Iranian warehouses and convoys that were said to be used for military operations against Israel.

In both cases, passengers aboard civilian airliners were at risk as local air defense units were bound to open fire to repel the Israeli missile attacks, risking civilian aircraft approaching Damascus International. In other words, on more than one occasion a situation similar to the tragic incident with the Iranian downing of the UIA Boeing 737, traveling from Tehran to Kiev was deliberately staged by the Israeli Air Force. As for the downed Boeing the Iranian authorities officially recognized that it was mistakenly shot down by air defence units of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), which resulted in the untimely demise of 167 passengers and nine crew members – citizens of Iran, Ukraine, Canada, the UK, Sweden and Afghanistan. This tragedy inflicted significant political, economic and PR damage on Iran. In this regard, the clearly distinguishable similarities of the provocative attacks in Iran and Syria are obvious, which raises reasonable questions regarding the strategic command that must be planning such attacks.

It is also noteworthy that the Israeli Air Force chose the SyrianAir flight arriving from Tehran as its target, with Israel explaining all of its recent aggressive actions in Syria and the Middle East through the prism of countering the rising influence of Iran.

Thus, the Israeli General Staff conducting military operations in Syrian airspace using civilian aircraft carrying passengers as a cover is now something of a trademark of the Israeli Air Force, which isn't afraid of putting the lives of hundreds of innocent people at risk to achieve its ends.

Acting in this way, striking from cover, like highway robbers, the Israeli Air Force seeks to avoid getting caught violating Syrian airspace or even being hit by Syrian anti-aircraft missile systems. They strike Syrian territory, appearing in the sky, for example, over Lebanon, leaving Damascus’ hands tied. If Syrian air defenses shoot down an Israeli plane over Lebanon failing to officially invade Syrian airspace, then Damascus will be framed by Israel, the United States and its allies as an aggressor attempting to provoke war in the Middle East. In addition, geographical features surrounding Damascus play a huge role here. Israeli military jets would typically launch strikes against targets within Syrian territory from the Bekaa Valley, covered from all sides by mountains. They seem to appear from nowhere from behind the mountains and disappear just as rapidly, while still managing to hit various targets.

For these reasons, there can be no objective assessment regarding the efficiency of the Russian S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems delivered to Syria to allow Damascus to defend its air space.

At the same time, looking at the provocative and frankly aggressive actions of Israel who has repeatedly launched missile attacks against civilian targets inside Syria, it can be confidently said that it has already crossed the “red line” and Damascus may at any time retaliate against these aggressors, which will add one more conflict to the long list of the existing armed conflicts within the region.

The Syrian Foreign Ministry has raised the issue of Israeli air strikes on Damascus via official UN statements, while pointing out that such attacks are only possible due to US support and the UN Security Council remaining silent about them. As indicated in one of the most recent messages of the Syrian Foreign Ministry, such treacherous actions fit within the framework of Israel’s attempts to prolong the crisis and derail Damascus’ anti-terror efforts and to raise the morale of the remnants of terrorist groups. Thus Israel is acting as their supporter. In addition, this is yet another attempt made by the Israeli government to avoid discussing the most pressing regional problems including the peaceful settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which only leads to an increase in anti-Israeli sentiments across the region and the world.

At the same time, the stubborn silence of the international community and the United Nations regarding such Israeli actions is truly surprising, when civilians, including foreign citizens, passengers of civilian aircraft arriving in Syria every day, may perish in similarly provocative attacks carried out by the Israeli Air Force in the future.

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