

Newsletter Thursday August 2, 2018

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| Israeli airstrike kills 7 ISIS terrorists on Syrian border

Terrorist cell eliminated just 200 meters from Syria-Israel border fence • Israeli troops recover explosive belts, assault rifle nearby • Defense Minister Lieberman: It is in Assad's interest to keep border calm • PM Netanyahu cancels trip to Colombia.

News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

The aftermath of an Israeli strike in Syria | Screenshot: Channel 12

An Israeli airstrike on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights border has eliminated seven terrorists, the IDF Spokesperson's Unit said Thursday.

According to available information, Israeli Air Force aircraft were scrambled to target the cell after its members were spotted approaching the security fence. Israeli troops later found several explosive belts and an AK-47 assault rifle near the border.

IDF Spokesman Brig. Gen. Ronen Manelis issued a statement on Thursday saying, "An operation was undertaken overnight in the Golan Heights. At around 10:30 p.m., IAF aircraft targeted seven terrorists we identified as armed and on the move. We monitored them over time."

According to Manelis, the terrorists were identified as members of the Islamic State terrorist organization and were hit a mere "200 meters from the border fence."

Manelis stressed that "at no point was there any threat to any [Israeli] soldiers or communities. We had them at a far enough distance from the border that they posed no threat to the troops, and certainly not to communities.

"The IDF remains on high alert and is ready to defend the Israeli public."

Meanwhile, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a U.K.-based war monitoring group, said early Thursday that clashes were continuing between the Syrian army and Islamic State militants in that area.

There was no immediate Syrian government response to the Israeli statements.

Commenting on the recent developments in Syria, where Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces are now again in control of the area near the Israeli border, Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman said Syria's return to its pre-civil war situation was "a given."

Lieberman also predicted that the Golan Heights frontier would be calmer with Assad's rule restored.

Before the Syrian civil war began in 2011 and throughout the seven years of fighting, Israel and Syria have mostly been careful to observe the 1974 cease-fire agreement between them.

The conflict has seen several small flare-ups between the two enemy states, but both have sought to contain tensions.

"From our perspective, the situation is returning to how it was before the civil war, meaning there is someone in charge, a central ruler," Lieberman told reporters.

Asked whether Israelis should be less wary of potential flare-ups on the Golan, he said, "I believe so."

But he then qualified that with, "We remain ready and willing and we will prove our abilities at the moment of truth. We will not compromise when it comes to our security interests."

Israel has been adamant about preventing Assad's ally, Iran, from entrenching itself militarily in Syria. Russia, the superpower that sided with Assad in 2015, effectively ensuring his survival, has presented Israel with guarantees that Iranian-backed forces will remain 85 kilometers (53 miles) from the border.

Israel insists this measure still falls short and demands the removal of all the Iranian-backed forces from Syria, something Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has called "unrealistic."

Lieberman stressed Thursday that "Syrian soil cannot be used as an Iranian front against Israel and Syria cannot be used as a conduit for weapons smuggling to Hezbollah."

He reiterated his assessment that, with Assad firmly back in power, the Golan Heights border will once again be calm, saying, "He [Assad] knows what will happen otherwise. It's in his interest [to keep the border calm] and he will have to make his own considerations."

Commenting on the tensions on the Israel-Gaza Strip border, Lieberman said that Hamas has been using children to send incendiary balloons over the border into Israel, and its operative have been using civilian homes and venues as cover for the terrorist cells.

The Palestinian arson campaign has been wreaking havoc on Israeli border towns for three months and has caused millions of dollars in damage.

Residents of Israeli communities near the Gaza border, as well as several cabinet ministers, have demanded that the government handle kite terrorist cells with the same lethal force it does rocket launching cells. But top defense officials have been wary of such a move, saying that directly targeting kite and balloon cells, which mostly comprise

teenagers and children, would lead the already volatile situation on the border to spiral out of control.

"We have to target those [Hamas leaders] who give the flaming balloons cells their orders, not the pawns," Lieberman said.

Also on Thursday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu canceled a trip to Colombia planned for next week due to the situation around the Gaza Strip.

Netanyahu had been scheduled to visit the Latin American country from Aug. 6-9 to attend the inauguration ceremony of President-elect Ivan Duque Marquez.

Numerous Latin American states are expected to attend the Aug. 7 ceremony in Bogota. Netanyahu was expected to hold a series of meetings with the leaders of Guatemala, Honduras, Argentina and Chile, among others, in an effort to bolster Israel's standing in the region.

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As economy falters under US pressure, Iran's parliament summons president
With first round of U.S. sanctions on Iran to be introduced Aug. 7, parliament for the first time demands President Hassan Rouhani answer for economic woes • Lawmakers give Rouhani one month to prepare, as hard-liners press him to reshuffle cabinet.

News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani | Photo: Reuters

Iranian lawmakers have given President Hassan Rouhani one month to appear before parliament to answer questions on his government's handling of Iran's economic struggles, state media reported on Wednesday.

It is the first time the Iranian parliament has summoned Rouhani, who is under pressure from hard-line rivals to reshuffle his cabinet following a deterioration in relations with the United States and Iran's growing economic difficulties.

Lawmakers want to question Rouhani on topics including the rial's decline, which has lost more than half its value since April, weak economic growth and rising unemployment, according to the semi-official ISNA news agency.

Rouhani, a pragmatist who reduced tensions with the West by striking the 2015 nuclear deal, is facing a growing backlash since U.S. President Donald Trump pulled out from the pact in May and said he would reimpose sanctions that will throttle Iran's economy, including its lifeblood oil exports.

The first round of new sanctions is set to be introduced on Aug. 7.

ISNA said lawmakers also want Rouhani to explain why, more than two years after the landmark deal, Iranian banks still have only limited access to global financial services.

The nuclear accord curbed Iran's nuclear program in return for lifting most international sanctions.

Rouhani's summoning coincides with further shows of public discontent. A number of protests have broken out in Iran since the beginning of the year over high prices, water shortage, power cuts, and alleged corruption in the Islamic republic.

On Tuesday, hundreds of people rallied in cities across the country, including Isfahan, Karaj, Shiraz and Ahvaz, in protest against high inflation caused in part by the weak rial.

Parliamentary Speaker Ali Larijani was quoted by state television as saying that Rouhani will have one month to attend a parliamentary session and address the issues.

Rouhani canceled an interview on state television last week, a move that seems to have encouraged many lawmakers to question him about his economic records in the parliament.

Although 80 lawmakers submitted their questions for Rouhani, Vice President for Parliamentary Affairs Hosseinali Amiri called the process "unconstitutional."

"Some lawmakers, who were convinced to take back their questions, were encouraged by other members of parliament to submit the questions again," Amiri was quoted as saying by Tasnim news agency.

Trump said on Monday he would be willing to meet Rouhani without preconditions to discuss how to improve relations, but senior Iranian officials and military commanders rejected the offer as worthless and "a dream".

Hesamoddin Ashna, a Rouhani adviser, said in a tweet on Wednesday addressed to the U.S.: "You launched an economic war against us by imposing sanctions. First stop this war and then ask for talks. Without preconditions means without sanctions."

Israeli Regional Cooperation Minister Tzachi Hanegbi said Wednesday that Trump's offer of talks was a "ladder" to safety for a ruling system on the point of collapse, but he was not surprised that Iran rejected it.

"It is hard to see the Iranians ... being agreeable to such a meeting with someone who only a few weeks ago basically sank an agreement with which they were so pleased. But this is the right kind of process with the Iranians," Hanegbi told Israel Radio.

Rouhani appointed a new central bank governor last week and accepted the government spokesman's resignation on Tuesday, suggesting that he accepts a need to reshuffle his economic team.

In a letter to Rouhani on Wednesday, 193 lawmakers welcomed the changes "as a good starting point" and asked for the "maximum shake-up" in the government.

Hard-line general prosecutor Mohammad Jafar Montazeri said on Wednesday Iran's enemies were trying to divide government and people by creating economic hardship. He vowed that those who follow the "enemies' plot" would face the "harshest punishment."