Alleged Israeli air strike in Sudan fits into long tradition

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Reports this week of an alleged Israeli air strike two months ago on a Gaza-bound arms convoy in Sudan, fits a pattern of long-distance military operations that Israel has undertaken over the past three decades.

According to foreign news media, Israeli planes hit the truck convoy in January, just after the three-week war with Hamas in Gaza. The convoy was said to bear arms from Iran for Sudan, from where they would transferred to Egypt and then smuggled into Gaza. The weapons reportedly included long-distance rockets capable of hitting the Tel Aviv metropolitan area, and possibly anti-aircraft missiles.

The Sudan Tribune web site quoted Sudan's Highway minister, Mabrouk Mubarak Saleem, as saying the trucks bore arms and that all the vehicles were destroyed. However, Saleem later changed his story, saying the trucks were transporting 800 Africans seeking to migrate to Europe and that all of them had been killed. However, Sudan did not made such a claim after the air attack.

Officials in Jerusalem on Thursday refused to confirm or deny Israeli involvement in the attacks. But in a later statement, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert appeared to provide indirect confirmation when he said, "we operate in many places, near and far, and carry out strikes in a manner that strengthens our deterrence."

Political observers suggested that Olmert was sending a pointed message to Iran that Israel was capable of a tough response if Teheran pursued its nuclear ambitions much further.

Perhaps Israel's most notable long-distance operation was the rescue in 1976 of some 100 hijacked air passengers from Entebbe Airport in Uganda where they were being held prisoner by a band of Palestinian and German militants. Some 200 commandos were flown in four Hercules aircraft some 2,300 miles (3,800 kilometers) in the successful nighttime rescue.

Chronology of operations

In 1981, eight Israeli F-16s traveled 560 miles (900 kilometers) across the desert to destroy Saddam Hussein's nuclear reactor south of Baghdad just before it was activated. All of the aircraft returned safely from the mission.

In 1988, a few months after the outbreak of the first Palestinian Intifada, Israeli naval commandos landed on a beach in Tunis, some 1400 miles (2,300 kilometers) from Tel Aviv,

to assassinate in his home Abu Jihad, the PLO operations officer who was coordinating the uprising. Ehud Barak, then deputy chief of staff and now defense minister, commanded the operation from a naval boat offshore.

Israel engaged again in a tense rescue operation when it undertook in Operation Solomon in 1981 to fly 14,500 African Jews from Ethiopia to Israel in 36 hours in a hastily assembled air fleet of 34 planes. With a rebel Ethiopian army preparing to enter Addis Ababa, and fears that the situation would spark anarchy in the city, Israel flew in a commando force in civilian dress but with rifles in their backpacks. In the end, the operation was completed without the firing of a single shot.

In January 2002, Israeli naval commandos intercepted in the Red Sea a vessel carrying a large supply of arms for Palestinian forces in the Gaza Strip.

A year ago, a car bomb killed one of the most secretive men in the Middle East, Imad Mughniyah, the security chief of Hezbollah. The Mossad was widely said to have been responsible for the assassination.

Last September, Israeli warplanes struck a building under construction in northern Syria said to be a nuclear reactor being built with North Korean assistance.

Iran's nuclear facilities are about 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers) from Israel but the Israelis have made clear repeatedly over the years that distance does not necessarily make the heart grow fonder, or fainter.

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