Middle East: Syrian-Israeli Clash

Syrian and Israeli forces fought a minor 3-hour sea-and-air battle in and around the Sea of Galilee August 15. [See 1966 Middle East: Israeli Jets Raid Syria]

Each side blamed the other for the incident and gave conflicting claims of damage incurred in the clash.

According to the Israeli version: Syrian soldiers based between the Syrian villages of Moussadiye and Dikke opened fire on an Israeli patrol boat that had run aground about 30 yards from the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. 2 Israeli boats came to the aid of the first stranded vessel and were also subjected to Syrian ground fire. 4 Israelis were wounded. The firing ceased after UN observers informed the Syrians that the Israelis were engaged only in salvage operations. Then, 35 minutes before UN observers were scheduled to reach the scene, 4 Syrian planes fired at the Israeli boats. Israeli planes were sent to counter the Syrian aircraft. One Syrian plane, a MiG-17, was shot down by machine-gun fire from one of the Israeli boats; another Syrian plane, a faster MiG-21 flying cover, was pursued. 15 miles into Syria by an Israeli plane and shot down. Other Israeli planes destroyed 2 Syrian coastal batteries on the Sea of Galilee.

Syrian authorities gave the following account of the clash: An Israeli patrol boat opened fire on a Syrian position on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee; 2 other Israeli boats, and Israeli planes entered the fray when the first vessel was hit by Syrian fire. Syrian Defense Minister Hafez Assad claimed August 16 that 50-100 Israeli sailors had been killed, 11 patrol boats destroyed and Israeli port facilities wrecked. (The number of Israeli boats claimed destroyed was raised to 72 August 25.)

In a statement spurning future UN mediation, Syrian Deputy Premier-Foreign Minister Ibrahim Makhous said August 16: Damascus would "no longer go to international forums to submit her complaints but will reply to each Israeli aggression mercilessly within the occupied area."

Lieutenant General Odd Bull, head of the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), was reported August 16 to have sent written appeals to Israel and Syria to observe UN Security Council cease-fire resolutions. Bull said he felt both sides had violated such resolutions.

Major parts of the MiG-17 shot down in the Sea of Galilee August 15 were put on public display by Israeli army officials August 27. Israel said the plane had been smashed to bits but that it had recovered the bullet-riddled wing, part of the under-carriage and other fragments of the Syrian aircraft shortly after the August 15 clash. The Israeli action seemed to refute an August 25 Damascus claim that Syrian frogmen August 23 had recovered the body of the pilot and the MiG-17's wreckage in a secret commando operation. (In its August 25 statement, the Syrians said the plane had crashed as a result of mechanical failure and showed no marks of Israeli gunfire.) During UN-conducted negotiations on salvage procedures, Israel had rejected Syrian demands that Syria be allowed to bring out the submerged plane wreckage. Israel instead offered to turn the damaged aircraft over to Syria. Under a partial agreement worked out by the UN mediators, Israel was permitted to recover the patrol boat sunk in the Sea of Galilee; salvage operations were completed August 26.

Israeli protests to the UN Security Council August 16 and 27 blamed Syria for starting the incident. In the August 27 protest, Israeli delegate Michael S. Comay wrote that Syria had been engaging in "open incitement to war." Comay cited official Syrian statements advocating military action against Israel and Damascus' unofficial sanction of commando raids in Israel.

Israeli Premier Levi Eshkol warned Syria August 21 that Israeli forces would take "effective counter measures" against any Syrian military provocation.