Beat: Politics

Turkish fighter jet shoots down Syrian helicopter after airspace violation

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USPA News - A Syrian military helicopter crashed in northwestern Syria on Monday after it crossed into Turkish airspace and was targeted by a Turkish fighter jet, officials said, but it was not immediately clear if the crew survived. Syria said its aircraft had strayed into Turkish airspace by accident.

The Syrian Mi-17 helicopter was detected by Turkey`s Combined Control and Warning Center (BIKIM) at 1:41 p.m. local time when it was in Syria`s Idlib province, approximately 26 nautical miles (48.1 kilometers) from the border with Turkey. It continued to approach the border from an easterly direction before making a turn to the south that took it adjacent along the Turkey-Syria border. The Turkish military said its warning center in Diyarbak?r warned the Syrian aircraft that it was approaching Turkish airspace when it came within 5 nautical miles (9.2 kilometers) of the border. But no response was received and the air force ordered two F-16 fighter jets from a base in Malatya to intercept the helicopter. Soon after, at approximately 2:25 p.m. local time, the Syrian aircraft crossed about 1.2 mile (2 kilometers) into Turkish airspace and continued flying adjacent to the wrong side of the border. One of the F-16 fighter jets approached the area moments later and targeted the Syrian helicopter when it was about 0.6 mile (1 kilometer) from the border, causing it to crash in Syria`s Latakia province. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davuto?lu defended Turkey`s downing of the aircraft, calling it a "punitive action" and warning that Turkey would not accept any violation of its borders. He said the incident was justifiable in terms of international law and said Turkey would provide a detailed report to NATO and the United Nations (UN) Security Council. But a statement issued by the Syrian military blamed the government of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdo?an of seeking to escalate tensions along the border area. It said its aircraft had mistakenly entered Turkish airspace and had already been ordered to return to Syrian airspace, but the helicopter was fired at by the fighter jet before it could leave Turkish airspace. The Syrian military said the aircraft had been tasked with carrying out a reconnaissance flight to observe rebel positions near the town of Bidama in Latakia province. The Britain-based activist group Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (OHR), however, claimed the helicopter had attacked rebel strongholds in Latakia province, but a map released by Turkey showed the chopper was originating from a different direction. "Fighters from the area stated that the pilot was captured by rebel fighters and that they are still searching for the other pilot," the activist group said, giving no other details. The information could not be independently verified, and Syria`s military did not comment on the condition of the helicopter`s crew. The crisis in Syria began as a pro-democracy protest movement in March 2011, similar to those across the Middle East and North Africa. The Syrian government violently cracked down on the protests, setting off an armed conflict between pro-Assad forces and anti-government forces. The United Nations estimates that more than 100,000 people, many of them civilians, have been killed and millions more have fled to neighboring countries since the start of the uprising that escalated into a full-blown civil war. Opposition groups estimate the number of deaths is far higher, but those figures cannot be independently verified. Turkey is a fierce critic of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and its government has repeatedly advocated military intervention in Syria, but plans by Western countries to take such action have been put on hold after Syria agreed to a Russia-U.S. deal that will require Assad`s government to give up its chemical weapons. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen warned in October 2012 that the military alliance would be ready to defend Turkey should it be necessary. He was speaking days after mortar shells from Syria hit the Turkish border town of Akçakale in ?anl?urfa province, killing five people and injuring ten others. As more mortar shells landed in Turkey, Turkish military forces responded to them, killing as many as 70 people.

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