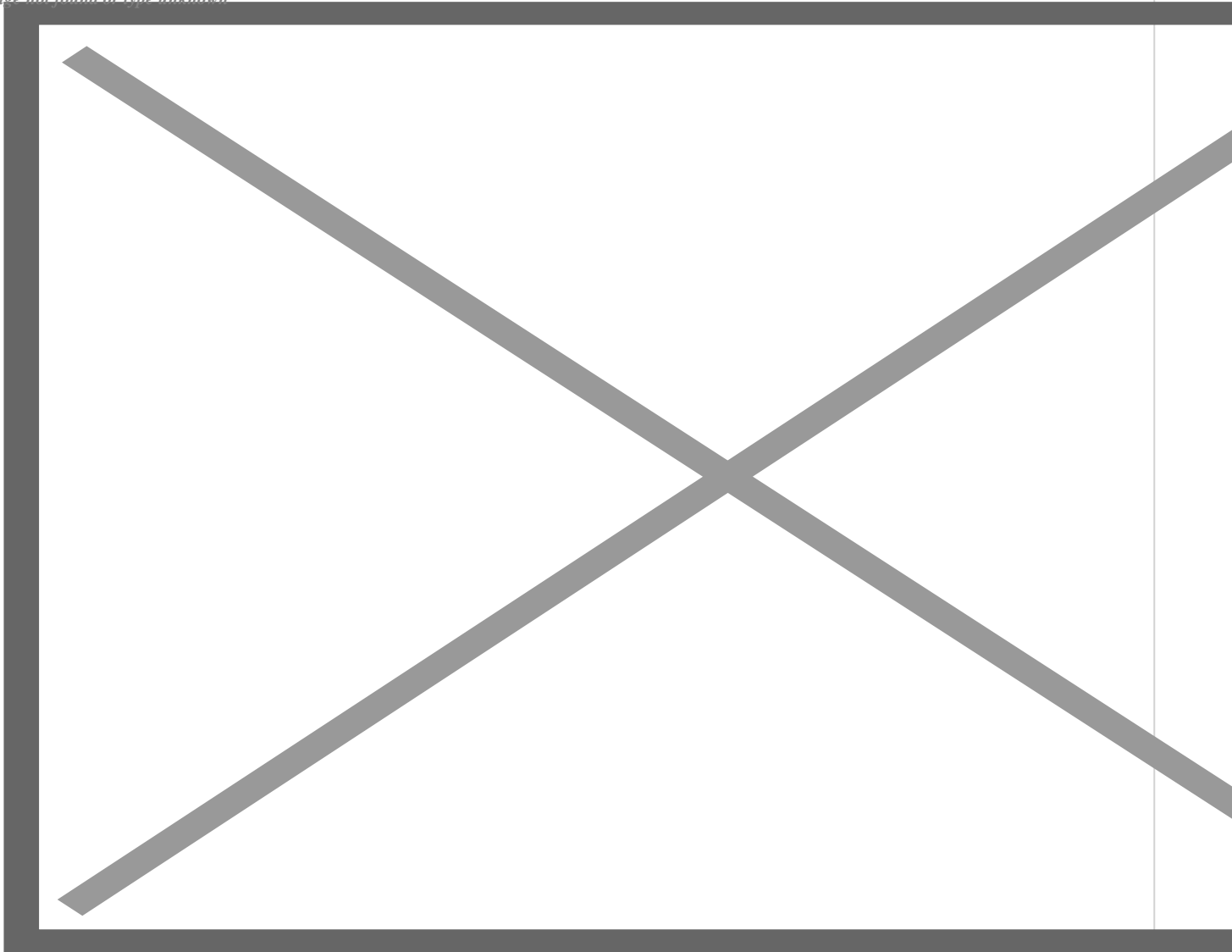


Israeli air force holds ‘surprise’ drill near Lebanon border

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An Israeli F-15 I fighter jet launches anti-missile flares during an air show near the southern Israeli city of Beer Sheva. (Photo: Jack Guez/AFP)

Tel Aviv, February 16 (RHC)-- Israel's air force has begun a "surprise exercise" to improve combat readiness along the United Nations-demarcated Blue Line between it and Lebanon, according to its

military.

The military said on Monday that the drill, which will last until Wednesday, would result in increased air traffic throughout the country and that explosions may be heard in northern Israel.

It said the "exercise simulates combat scenarios in the northern front and will test all components in the (air force's) core missions, including maintaining aerial superiority, protecting the country's skies, as well as attacking and gathering intelligence."

Israeli aircraft have been accused of violating Lebanese air space in recent months. On February 1, Lebanese armed movement, Hezbollah, said it shot down an Israeli drone that flew over the Blue Line.

The announcement came as Syria's army announced on Monday that the country's air defences intercepted "Israeli aggression" over the capital, Damascus, without giving details of what was hit. Israel's armed forces also did not immediately comment on the latest raid.

Israel has escalated its campaign in Syria to prevent its arch-foe Iran, a close ally of President Bashar al-Assad, from establishing a significant military foothold along its border. It has concentrated its attacks on the Syrian city of al-Bukamal, the border checkpoint on the main Baghdad-Damascus highway.

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