

Airspace Risk Warning - Ethiopia and Eritrea

Mark Zee

17 November, 2020



There is a new Conflict Zone in the east of Africa, which carries elevated risk to flight operations that may not be obvious from NOTAMs or other risk warning sources.

Some airways have been closed by the Ethiopian and Sudanese CAAs. Other airways that are still open are very close to the Conflict Zone. These are frequently used by international operators on the Europe- East Africa route. In particular: UN321, UG300 and UL432. **We are concerned that operators may be using these routes without being aware of the risk.**

OPSGROUP has today issued an Airspace Risk Warning to its members.



Airspace Risk Warning	
ETHIOPIA & ERITREA	HAAC FIR (ADDIS) HHAA FIR (ASMARA)

ISSUED: 17 NOVEMBER 2020

TO: OPSGROUP MEMBER AIRCRAFT OPERATORS

Notice to Flight Crew and Dispatch

There is a new Conflict Zone in the east of Africa, which carries **elevated risk to operations that may not be obvious** from NOTAMs or other risk warning sources.

Under the SafeAirspace tier system, this airspace is assessed as **Level 2 – Danger Exists**.

New Conflict Zone – Tigray

LEVEL 2 – DANGER EXISTS

The conflict between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the north of Ethiopia, Government forces, and a regional force that wants independence, called the TPLF. In the past week, there has been heavy fighting, multiple airstrikes, missiles launched, and a growing refugee crisis. A domestic conflict has become a cross-border war.

Danger – Airways near Conflict Zone

Some airways have been closed by the Ethiopian and Sudanese CAA. Other airways that are still open are very close to the Conflict Zone. **These are frequently used by international operators on the Europe-East Africa route.** In particular:

UN221
UG300
UL432



See full map on following page.

Guidance

Enroute – Overflight:
If you're transiting any airspace near or over Ethiopia, Eritrea, or Sudan, take a close look at the map and cross check the airways you are operating on. Several open airways are exceptionally close to the Conflict Zone. Just because they are open does not mean they are safe.

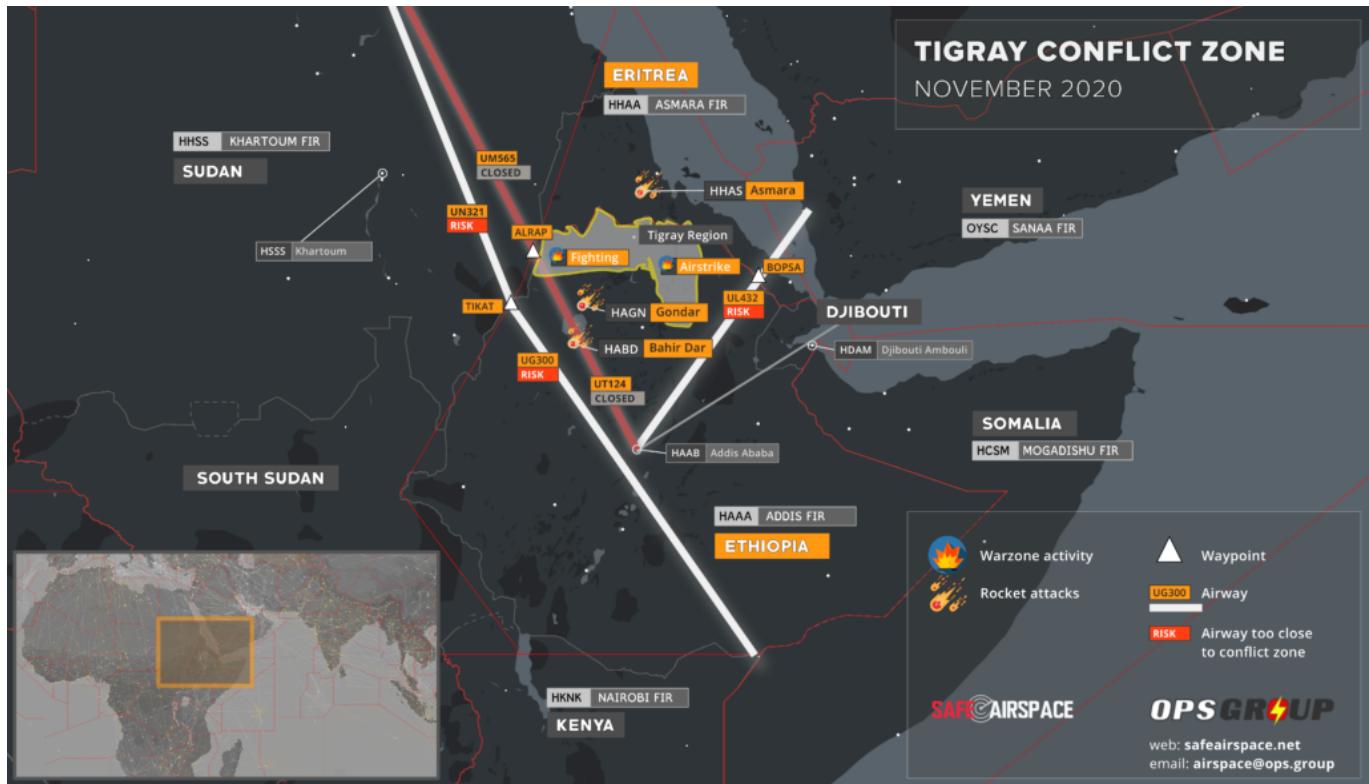
Landing – Airports:

Airports in the north of Ethiopia, including the Tigray and Amhara regions, are unsafe at present. Many are closed. There have been missile attacks on HABD/Bahir Dar, and HAGN/Gondar.

HHAS/Asmara in Eritrea should be avoided – missile attack on Nov 14, 2020.



Download OPSGROUP Airspace Risk Warning – Ethiopia/Eritrea (PDF)



Download Hi-Res version of this Conflict Zone map

Situation

The region being disputed is called Tigray. It's in the north of Ethiopia. Government forces are fighting a regional force that wants independence, called the TPLF. In the past week, there has been heavy fighting, multiple airstrikes, missiles launched, and a growing refugee crisis. A domestic conflict has become a cross-border war.

Our Concerns

There are many warning flags that point to previous shootdown incidents – not least MH17 and PS752. These are the reasons we are particularly concerned about the risk to civil aviation in this region:

Local NOTAMs are misleading

The NOTAMs issued by the Ethiopian CAA to close airways in the conflict zone (UM308, UT124) do not say why they are closed. NOTAMs issued to reroute traffic to adjacent routes (UN321, UL432) do not say why they are rerouted. The same applies to NOTAMs issued by the Sudan CAA to close airways and reroute traffic. Flight crews and aircraft operators are therefore not alerted to any conflict in the area by NOTAM.

Arbitrary Reroutes

Traffic is being rerouted to other airways by ATC, but it's not clear, or likely, that there has been any risk assessment. European flights are now using UN321/UG300, and UL432 – all of which come exceptionally close to the conflict zone. As we've learned from MH17 and PS752, just because airspace is open and available, does not mean it is safe.

Previous shootdowns

The Ethiopian Army shot down an Embraer 120 in May 2020, in Somalia. The Ethiopian Air Force shot down a US Learjet in August 1999 in the Eritrean border region. Both were misidentified.

No guidance to operators

No aviation authorities or official sources have issued any guidance or warnings to date via normal channels.

Rapid Escalation of Conflict

The situation has intensified rapidly, and is extremely unpredictable and unstable. The impact on aviation has not been widely reported.

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Information Sources

The Conflict Zone & Risk Database at SafeAirspace.net contains all current published warnings and alerts for Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Ethiopia

Risk Level: **Two - Danger exists**

[[about risk levels](#)]

Nov 2020: Major escalation of the conflict in the Tigray region, along the Ethiopia/Eritrea border. Some airways have been closed by the Ethiopian and Sudanese CAAs. Other airways that are still open are very close to the Conflict Zone. These are frequently used by international operators on the Europe- East Africa route. In particular: UN321, UG300 and UL432. Multiple airports have been targeted by rockets. Missiles were fired across the border into Eritrea, targeting HHAS/Asmara. Within Ethiopia, HABD/Bahir Dar and HAGN/Gondar were also targeted.

Sep 2018: Risk due to hidden ATC strike. Ethiopian ATC controllers went on strike, and the ECAA and Ethiopian Airlines recruited both retired and foreign controllers to pick up the slack. Ethiopia denied several times that there was in fact a strike happening at all. The strike ended September 7th. Many were not qualified to operate in Ethiopian airspace, due to inexperience.



The countries that issue the most relevant updates for unsafe airspace are:

- US (FAA) - through Notams and SFARs
- UK (DFT) - by Notam and then AIP
- Germany (BMVI) - by Notam
- France (DGAC) - by AIC

Note: Operators should not rely on EASA Conflict Zone Information Bulletins (CZIB)'s as a primary source of information. These serve only as pointers to the above sources, and often are not issued until several months after updates, if at all. Note that the Civil Aviation Authorities of the countries whose airspace is determined to be unsafe are unlikely to issue reliable guidance.

Group effort

This information is compiled from OPSGROUP member input, information, intelligence and analysis. If you have additional information to share, please send it to report@safeairspace.net.

Members: More information



Ethiopia: What are other operators doing?

⚡ 0 % with Avoid or Do Not Land policy

Avoid	0%
Do not land	0%
Specific routes only	0%
Case by case	0%
Unrestricted	0%
No policy	100%

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to receive Conflict Zone & Risk warnings.

We will alert you when there are significant changes, and send you updated summaries when

The screenshot shows the OPSGROUP platform interface. On the left, a sidebar lists navigation links: Dashboard, Briefings, Community, Airport Spy, Safe Airspace, Spy report, and APPS (Apps, Admin Tools). It also shows a Member Score of 195. The main content area features several modules: 'Airport Spy' (Reports from downroute, Launch button), 'GoCrow' (Route planning tool, Start button), 'Community' (Meet the others!, Go button), 'Safe Airspace' (Places to avoid), 'Briefings' (The latest changes, Read button), and a large 'Sign in' button. Below these are 'Latest Forum posts' and a 'New Conflict Zone - Ethiopia, Eritrea' post. On the right, a sidebar displays news items from other users: KZZZ USA (A quarantine-free travel corridor may soon be possible between New York and London), LFZZ France (A big military exercise happening in the LFMM/Marseille FIR from November ...), MXZZ Central America (Hurricane Iota is now a catastrophic Category 5 Hurricane, currently making land ...), PAYA Yakutat, USA (Bear alert! An Alaska Airlines 737 collided with a brown bear while landing on S ...), EQLL London Heathrow, United Kingdom (A large number of airport workers including firefighters, baggage handlers and e ...), LZZZ Slovakia (There are new entry requirements for all passengers. The rules are tricky, so he ...), HHZZ Eritrea (Two rockets fired from Northern Ethiopia reportedly hit the country's main air ...), ZMZZ Mongolia (All charter flights have been banned indefinitely. They were previously allowed ...), and SCZZ Chile (Borders will reopen to foreigners on November 23 for the first time in nine mont ...). The top right corner shows a globe icon and a red notification dot.

OPSGROUP Members: More information in the discussion in the Forum about Ethiopia/Eritrea:
 Forum > International Ops > New Conflict Zone Ethiopia/Eritrea

All links to further resources are there.

Ethiopia risking flight safety to cover up ATC strike

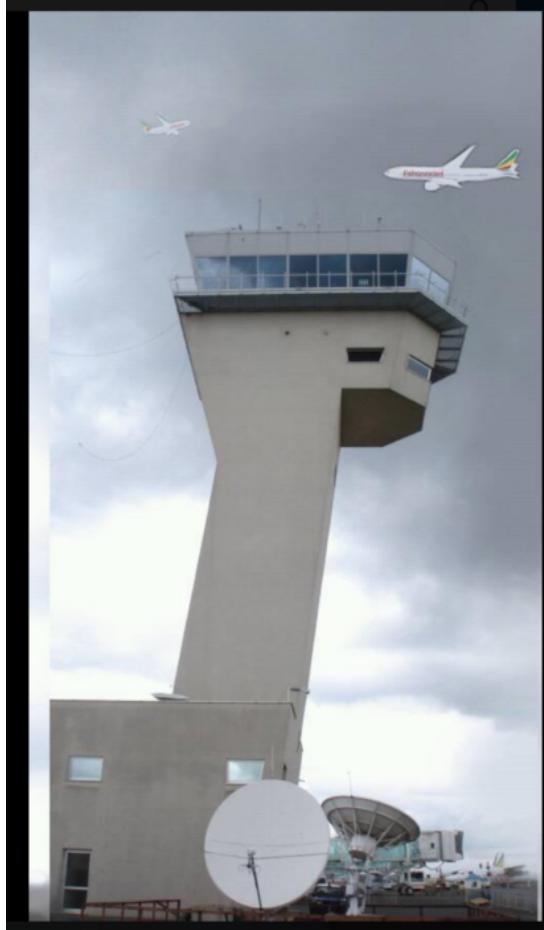
Mark Zee
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- **Ethiopian ATC on strike, no Notams, government hush up**
- **OPSGROUP alert for the Addis Ababa FIR**
- **Airspace risk - unrated controllers, some foreign and unfamiliar**

Air Traffic Controllers are on strike in Ethiopia, and Ethiopia would prefer that you don't know this. We, as OpsGroup, would prefer that you do.

Ethiopia would also prefer that it has no impact on the flight operations of its national carrier, Ethiopian Airlines. Therefore, they have drafted in foreign controllers to replace the strikers, issued no Notams, hushed any publicity, and proactively declared 'operations normal' (complete with bizarre, hand drawn airplanes).



Ethiopian Civil Aviation Authority Like This Page · 27 August · [...](#)

The air space management is well underway as usual at Addis Ababa Bole International Airport.

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Temesgen Kitessa The airspace of Ethiopia is in danger... It's false representation of the actual fact from ECAA [Like](#) [Reply](#) · 1d [2](#)

Ashe Man I am so pissed off, This is what happen working with UNEDUCATED managers and some decadent coworkers. it is so shame the managers choose this kind unmindfull decision and posting this. [Like](#) [Reply](#) · 1d [2](#)

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European airlines – and frustrated passengers – will watch with great interest, thanks to their own ATC strike woes: regular stoppages by French, Italian, and Greek controllers have this summer, once again, been the source of massive cancellations, reroutes, and delays. Has Ethiopia found the golden elixir, the magic solution to a long-running problem? **Is this how to handle a strike by your nations' Air Traffic Controllers?**

It absolutely is not. It is a catastrophic misjudgement, creating a safety risk in the Addis FIR and at Ethiopian Airports for pilots and passengers alike. Ethiopian airspace, this week, is most definitely not 'operations normal' – it is unpredictable and unsafe, staffed by unrated, inexperienced controllers, many from abroad – evidenced already by alarming reports of close calls from adjacent Area Control Centers – read on.

The facts are this: faced with an upcoming strike by ATC, Ethiopian Airlines – now Africa's largest airline – formed what in the boardroom might have seemed a workable plan: Recruit a bunch of controllers from other countries, fly them in to Addis, and have them do the work of the striking staff.

Planned Air Traffic Controllers Strikes Will Have No Effect on Ethiopian Airlines Operations

Addis Ababa, August 25, 2018

Ethiopian Airlines would like to inform its esteemed customers that the planned strike by Ethiopian Civil Aviation Authority Air Traffic Controllers (ATCs) in Addis Ababa on Monday August 27, 2018 will have no effect on its operations.

The airline has made provisions for adequate alternative measures enabling smooth conduct of its operations with no delays or flight disruptions, should the planned ATCs strike take place.

Ethiopian will ensure that, above all else, the interests of its esteemed customers are protected and their flights operate smoothly and on-time.

The first batch of foreign controllers came from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a small group described by the local controllers, unsurprisingly, as mercenaries. When the strike started at 7am this past Monday morning, they were ready to go. Not content with stopping there, the requests from ECAA – the Ethiopian Civil Aviation Authority – for more external controllers went out thick and fast, like an Ambien fuelled shopping spree on Amazon. 30 requested from Sudan, 24 from Kenya. More from Zimbabwe, Malawi. Finding those requests rejected, and resistance from other ATC agencies, the biggest request yet: 120 controllers from ASECNA.

The plan, commercially, is understandable. The wish to keep their airplanes flying is not endemic to Ethiopian Airlines. British Airways, Ryanair and Easyjet, have all made very public their frustrations with ATC strikes. An association, A4E, was formed to fight the problem at European level.

But here's why the Ethiopian solution doesn't work.

And as a former Air Traffic Controller, and Airline Pilot, I can tell you why.

Air Traffic Control is complex. That's not a secret. On average, it takes a controller three months to gain a 'rating', or qualification, for a specific piece of airspace; that's how long it takes to become comfortable with the 4D picture in front of you to provide a flawless ATC service. More complex airspace could take six months.

You have to learn each corner of your bit of sky. Learn the rules of the sector, learn the agreements you have with other centres about how you will receive and present traffic at the boundary. But the most important thing you learn is **how the traffic flows**.

ATC is not an aerial traffic battle whose landscape changes each day. It is not a web of complex contrails that, seen from the ground, appear to merge and diverge at random. The traffic flow is a largely predictable set of events, where the same airlines are operating on the same routes – providing a basis for us, as controllers, to learn the patterns of the flow, and to learn a trick for every trajectory.

This is key. It's been 15 years since I worked the North Atlantic flow in Shannon, but I remember the callsigns, the flows, and how to handle them, like an indelible challenge and response game in my mind.

"Shamrock 37J, airborne Shannon" : "direct to Strumble, climb him to 270".

"Belfast departure for Tenerife" : "stop him low, get him under the NAT traffic".

"Two converging at LIFFY" : "Drop the Speedbird, he's for Manchester".

Humans learn patterns. This is how ATC works. We fill a bucket full of "stuff we've seen before", leaving us free to concentrate on the few things we haven't. This is the flow. If you watch 737's fly up the Hudson on a hot summer morning, this is the La Guardia flow. Not an inch left or right. Heading into Amsterdam?

"Direct to Pampus, down to FL70". One after another.

This is why we need three months to learn the airspace. For the flow. And this is why, when I found myself in New Zealand, learning to operate as an Air Traffic Controller far away from Shannon, I was floundering, like one of those dreams where you running but standing still. **I am a controller, but I can't control.** I don't know the airspace, and I don't know the flow. Slowly, over the months, geography takes shape, traffic patterns show themselves, situations become seen. I start to get a sense of distance and time on my scope – or scopes, because New Zealand is long and thin I have to reorientate my thinking north-south, rather than east-west, as in Shannon. Out of the mist of training, I am a controller again, but it takes time. A lot of time.

Ultimately, I can reach the point where I can do my job – the real job of an Air Traffic Controller – to be familiar enough with the airspace and traffic that I have “the picture”. The full situational awareness, with most climbs, descents, speeds, and vectors being routine and familiar, means I can spot the something that's off, wrong, going to develop into a conflict, and do so intuitively, like a sixth sense. Air Traffic Control is an art, it's a dance. You don't do it by complex calculations in your head, you don't need a computer. It's the visual in front of you – radar or tower – coming to life in your brain, you feel it, and the solution becomes instinctive.

And this is why you can't bus in a set of replacement controllers, shuffle them down the corridor into the radar room, and up the stairs to the tower, and expect a safe, efficient, and orderly flow of traffic.

Controllers know the power of the strike. In most countries, it is used rarely, and fairly. They understand the impact on airlines and passengers. There are many other forms of industrial action a controller can take – like a training ban, an overtime ban – before reaching the point of actually stopping work.

Commerce will always find a way to continue. Safety is different, and delicate. It must be nurtured and protected. When the two collide head on – the commerce of keeping an airline flying, vs. the safety of an established, effective Air Traffic Control system – safety must take precedence. Here, safety means accepting the strike, as is – and working with the controllers, quickly, to find a solution. Let them be heard.

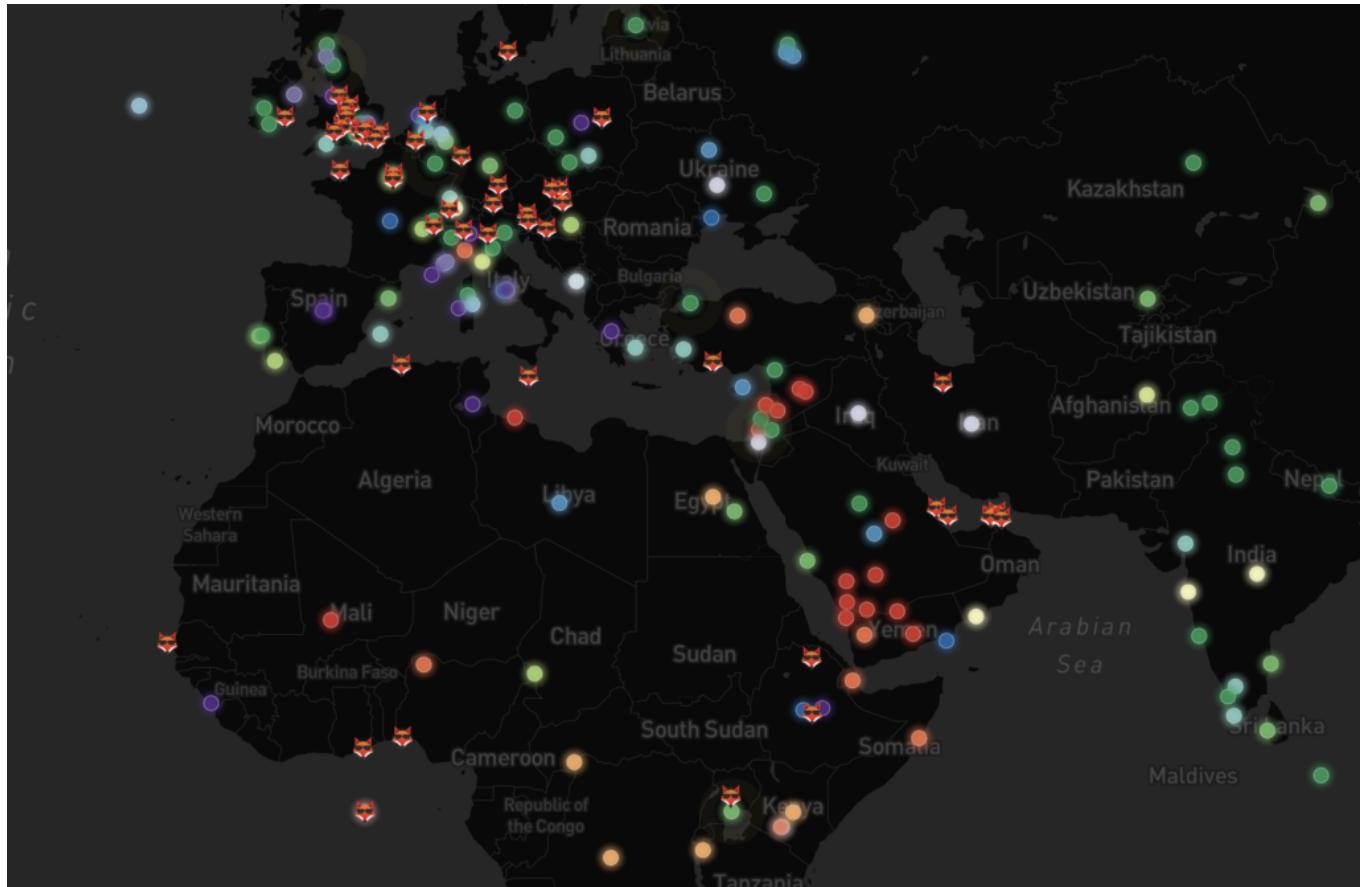


We'll keep this page updated with the latest situation on the Ethiopian ATC strike. Reports that we have received so far are as follows:

- Controllers in adjacent ACC's are reporting lack of adherence to Letters of Agreement - seeing aircraft with 4 minutes instead of 10 minutes separation.
- RA reported by Kenya ATC between two airlines on Wednesday.
- Kenya and Sudan reported loss of separation and poor coordination and transfer of traffic at their FIR boundaries with Ethiopia.
- Retired and Management controllers, who appear to have never rated or validated in position, are also being used, though unqualified for Addis.

We were first alerted to this issue by **a Fox**. Many of you know that we are Fixing Notams. The lack of Notams in this situation, is an exceptionally clear example of point 1 in the "Why" of the Notam Problem. Sometimes, we can't trust the state to tell the truth. And this is a clear example.

Thankfully, our network of Foxes - undercover ATCO's, pilots, and dispatchers - is growing, and reporting on things just like this, so that we can tell you what's really going on. Keep reporting.



Further reading

- Tell us anything additional we should know - news@ops.group
- Monitor #ops-alerts in your member Dashboard, and Slack.
- Contact the author: Mark Zee.