

Lebanon Risk Update

Chris Shieff

30 July, 2024



- **Overflights risks of the OLBB/Beirut FIR are increasing. The outbreak of a larger scale conflict between Israel and Hezbollah is increasingly likely.**
- **Several airlines (Air France, Eurowings, Lufthansa, Swiss, Transavia and Middle East Airlines - the Lebanese flag carrier) have temporarily suspended flights to OLBA/Beirut airport.**
- **Canada has issued a new Notam (July 30) advising operators to avoid Lebanese airspace at all levels.**
- **Surface-to-air weaponry may be present capable of reaching aircraft at all altitudes.**

Risk to aircraft operating over Lebanon is increasing

There was a **significant escalation** in hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon over the weekend.

On July 27 a suspected Hezbollah rocket attack caused Israeli casualties in the Golan Heights region - although Hezbollah has been uncharacteristically quick to deny their involvement.

This was quickly followed by Israeli airstrikes well inside Lebanese territory.

The US Embassy has since issued an alert to citizens that scheduled flights to/from Beirut may change or be cancelled at short notice. They're also recommending anyone there develop a '**crisis plan**' to leave if the current situation escalates.

There is widespread concern that the two sides could imminently be drawn into a **full-scale conflict**. In which case the risk picture for aircraft in both the LLLL/Tel Aviv and OLBB/Beirut FIR could change dramatically.

Here is a brief summary of the situation.

Why are Israel and Hezbollah fighting?

The two have fought in several wars - the latest was in 2006. The background to these hostilities is beyond the scope and intent of this article - but you can read more about that [here](#).

The most recent cross-border fighting began almost immediately after the Hamas assault in Southern Israel which sparked the current war in Gaza.

The situation in Gaza has mobilised Iranian-backed militants across the region to act, and Hezbollah is widely considered one of the **most powerfully equipped**.

Hezbollah has said they will not stop hostilities against Israel until there is a cease-fire in Gaza.

So Far...

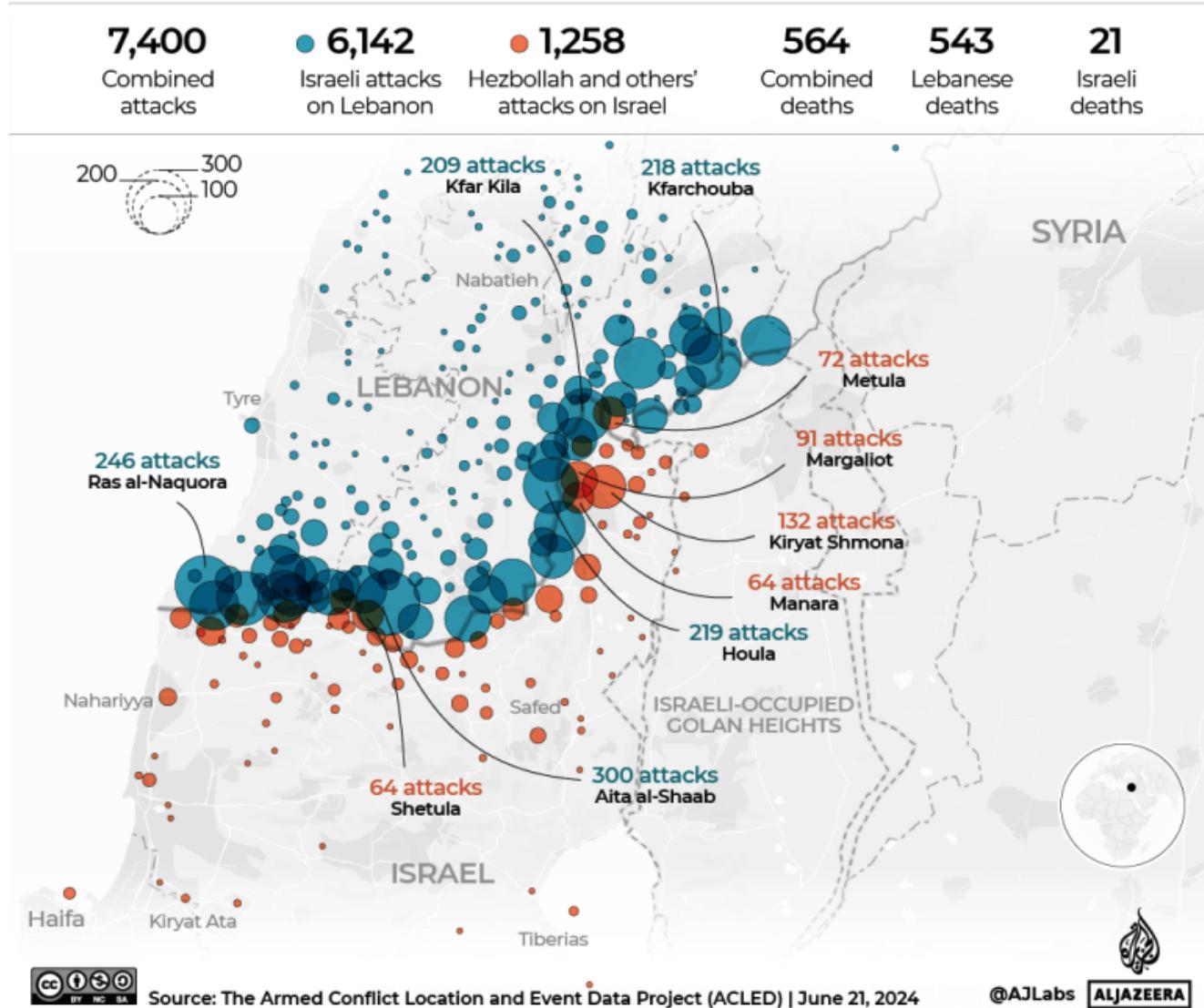
Since the start of the war in Gaza, sporadic fighting across the Israeli/Lebanese border has been almost a

daily occurrence. It is not immediately obvious in existing airspace warnings just how **frequent** these skirmishes have become.

Here is a statistic that may cause alarm to traffic regularly overflying – as of the end of June, the media reported 7,400 cross-border attacks between Israel and Hezbollah in the preceding nine months.

Israel-Lebanon cross-border attacks

October 7, 2023 - June 21, 2024



This has included artillery firing, rocket attacks, missiles, drones, and of most concern – air defense activations on both sides. Various instances of false identification have been reported.

This fighting has mostly been constrained. If a full-scale conflict develops as feared, things may get a lot worse.

In the skies

Just last month, Hezbollah reported targeting Israeli fighter jets using **surface-to-air missiles** for the first time. Existing airspace warnings for the OLBB/Beirut FIR **do not any mention level restrictions**.

There has been some credible concern recently that Hezbollah might possess more sophisticated surface-to-air weaponry. One report speculates this includes mobile Iranian made radar-guided SAMs which are capable of targeting aircraft as high as **90,000 feet** with range of up to 100kms (depending on the

variant).



Advanced surface-to-air missile range (100kms), as seen from a point along the Lebanese border.

The Wall Street Journal have also suggested another system may be present with similar capabilities supplied by Wagner Group mercenaries.

It is possible we have just not seen these types of weapons used by Hezbollah in this conflict to date.

While the LLLL/Tel Aviv FIR has arguably been a masterclass in how to maintain safe and informed overflights near a conflict zone in recent month, should a larger conflict arise it is **unlikely the safety of civil aircraft in the OLBB/Beirut FIR will be protected to the same extent.**

Existing Airspace Warnings

We maintain a Safe Airspace Risk Level of Two (Danger Exists) for the OLBB/Beirut FIR.

Here is a summary of existing state-issued airspace warnings for Lebanon:

- **Canada** Operators should not enter the OLBB Beirut FIR at all levels due to risk of military activity. CZQX Notam H3476/24. New, July 29.
- **US FAA** Exercise caution within 200nm of the Damascus FIR due to military activity. Possibility of GPS interference, communication jamming, and long-range surface to air missiles in the area. KICZ Notam A0009/18.
- **United Kingdom** Caution to UK operators in the OLBB/Beirut FIR due to potential risk from military activity. EGTT Notam V0025/24.

Why have these warnings not been upgraded?

History has taught us that we need to be more responsive to airspace threats – a danger may exist or develop before states publish official airspace warnings or restrictions. And all of that **takes time**.

The events of the past days have happened quickly, and extensive diplomatic efforts are now underway to prevent a larger-scale conflict in the Middle East, but it remains to be seen if one can be avoided. **We're monitoring the situation closely** – keep an eye on safeairspace.net for updates.



We Want to Talk to Lebanon

OPSGROUP Team
30 July, 2024



We want to talk to Lebanon, more specifically, someone in the Lebanese Aviation Authority (the DGCA).

But since they probably won't speak to us, we'll talk to you instead... with a little warning about operating

there.

What is this all about?

It is all about a tradition in Lebanon where **they fire guns about willy nilly**, often into the air, when they celebrate.

They do it at graduations, birthdays, weddings, and even funerals or when a political leader just talks on television (*although that one happens less now because a lot of folk there aren't so happy with the government*).

There was renewed attention from authorities in 2016, but reports of it occurring across Lebanon are still common despite the practice having been outlawed since then.

Reports suggest **OLBA/Beirut airport** sees an average of **7-8 incidents** involving indiscriminate gunfire per year.

New Year's Eve 2022 saw reports that **two MEA A320s** parked at OLBA/Beirut were **damaged by bullets** during the celebrations. A passenger was also almost hit as he left the terminal.

On Nov 10, 2022, a **stray bullet hit a commercial jet on the approach** to OLBA/Beirut.

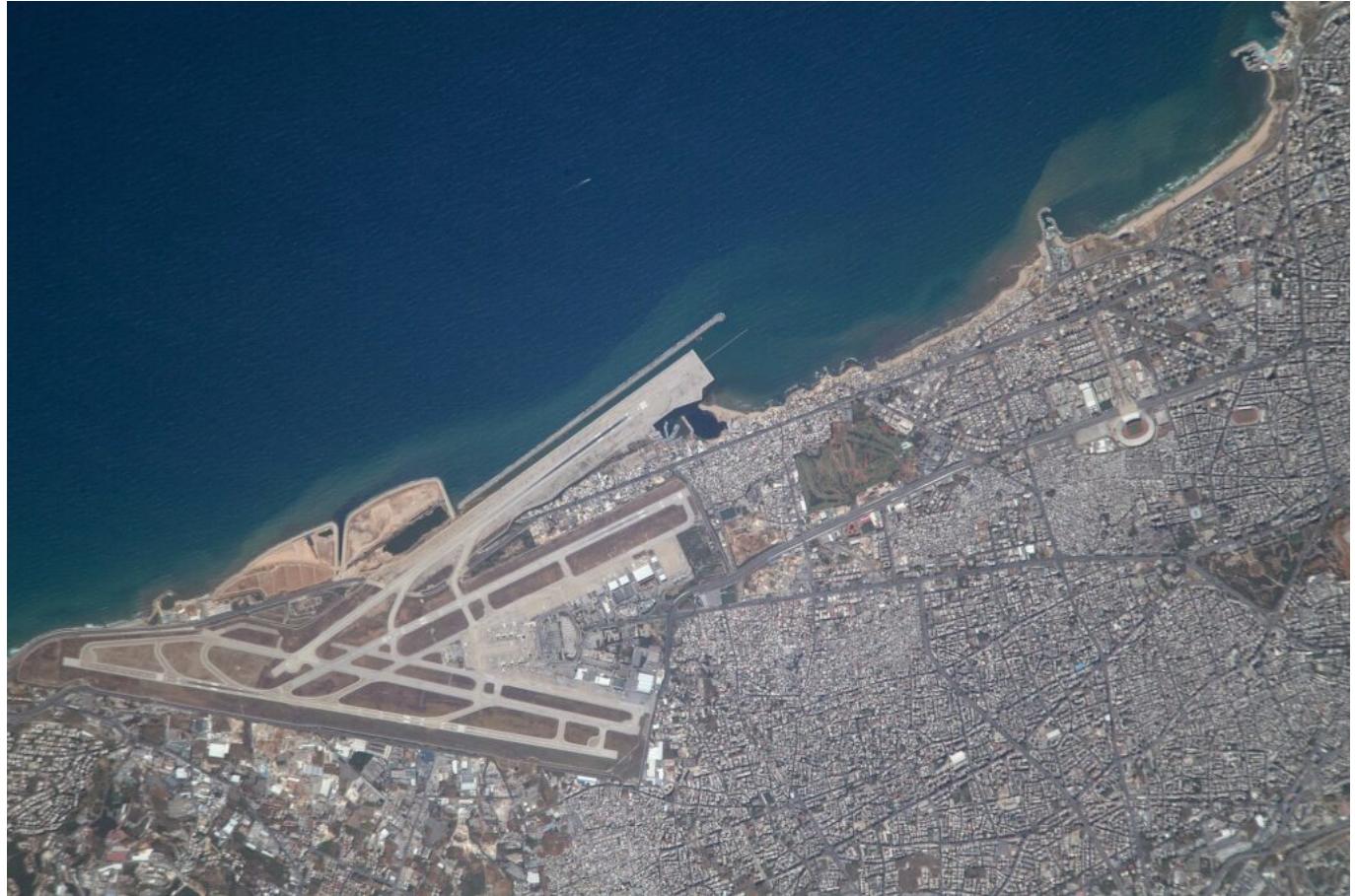
Two Middle East Airlines Airbus A321neos damaged by bullets fired during the New Year's celebrations while parked at Beirut International Airport. <https://t.co/8VotXyDDIK>
pic.twitter.com/Rw2O0f1wwz

— Breaking Aviation News & Videos (@aviationbrk) January 1, 2023

Why is there no security?

Actually, the reason Beirut airport seems to be at higher risk is as much to do with the fact it is the main international airport, as with the airport's positioning to the city and populated areas.

OLBA/Beirut's approaches both cross densely populated areas, and there is little separation between the airport area and land side areas. The final approach to runway 03 also passes over hotels along the coast where celebrations are often held.



What can you do about it?

Unfortunately, *person-with-gun spotting* on short finals probably isn't an ideal plan. There is **limited mitigation** for this without support of the authorities to improve security and safety.

- If you do spot anything then **report it immediately** to ATC
- **Be aware of the risk**, particularly if operating during holiday periods
- **Do not hold at low level** over populated areas of Lebanon (unlikely you will, but a reminder)
- **Consider climb performance** on departure (get up as quick as possible!)

Does this happen anywhere else?

Risk of low level weapons fire is usually associated with conflict zones. Here are a few, there are no doubt more (*and if you know of any, let us know. We'll add to the list so other operators have a heads-up too.*)

- **OPPS/Peshawar** The airport in Pakistan lies in close proximity to the mountainous region which borders Afghanistan. The mountains are a known region for rebel groups. Crew are advised not to hold or overfly the area due to the risk of gunfire. More info
- **ORER/Erbil** The Iraqi airport is the main airport for Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan region of Iraq. There is currently ongoing conflict in this region. The approach to Runway 18 / departure from Runway 36 both cross a region of high terrain where there have been multiple reports of gunfire risk. Crew are advised to avoid descending or holding, or crossing this region until they have reached a suitable altitude. More info

- In Sep 2022, a man was hit inside an aircraft flying at 3500', routing to **VYKL/Loikaw airport in Myanmar**. The bullet source was unconfirmed, but linked to conflict between rebel and government groups in the area. More info

Turkey and the Philippines also (sporadically) see a similar tradition occurring.

It's not the only threat in Lebanon

Lebanon has seen a period of **growing instability and unrest** because of political and economic turmoil. Riots and protests are a particular security concern in Beirut.

Lebanon's relationship with neighbour Israel has had its ups and downs. Lebanon has not yet followed in the footsteps of other countries in the region to improve ties (and airspace access) with Israel. **Saudi Arabia and the UAE have both entered a 'normalisation' agreement**, also known the Abraham Accords Peace Agreement, which opened up (some possibilities) for using Israel's airspace.

The country also sees increasing **spillover risk from the Syrian conflict**. The conflict often results in **Israeli fighter jets transiting their airspace with no clearance**. It is repeatedly a persistent issue, and raises concerns over airspace risk and safety in the border areas of Lebanon. The Israeli airforce sometimes target Syria from this region resulting in missile **attacks and airstrikes close to OLBA/Beirut**.

The primary risk in Lebanon's airspace (the OLBB/Beirut FIR) from the Syrian conflict is that **civil aircraft may be targeted in error**, or caught in crossfire during ongoing air attacks involving Israel, Russia, Iran. Missiles may erroneously lock on to civil aircraft. There is a risk to civil aircraft operating on **airways UL620, UW74, UR18, and UP62**.

Several countries have issued **airspace warnings for Syria**, banning operators from entering the OSTT/Damascus FIR. Many of these warnings include the note that there is a potential risk to aircraft within **200nm of the Damascus FIR which includes the OLBB/Beirut FIR**. There is also risk of GPS interference and communication jamming.

For a full briefing and information on current warnings visit Safeairspace:

- Lebanon
- Syria
- Israel

Back to our call to the DGCA

The risk of indiscriminate gunfire impacting flight operations is a growing concern and the DGCA need to put measures into place to better protect aircraft operating into the country, particularly at OLBA/Beirut International.

So, here is our call to them to do something.