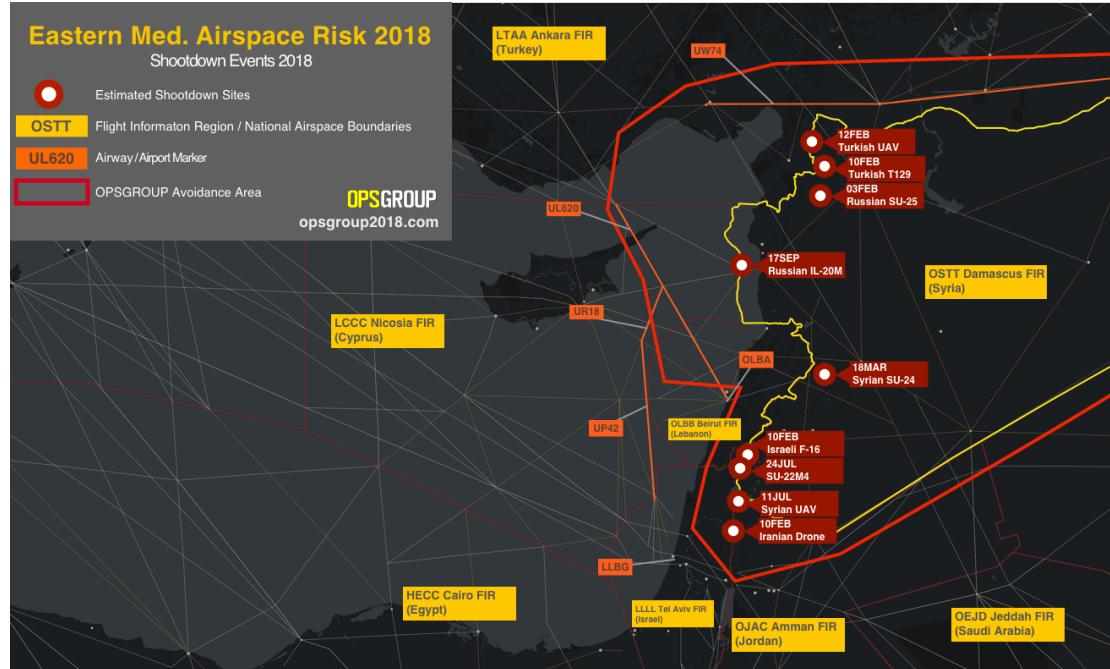


# Why are we still flying airline passengers over war zones?

Mark Zee

24 September, 2018



Here's the level of inconsistency we've reached in international air transport: we take each passenger, scrutinize their booking, check the no-fly-list, watch them on CCTV, pull them apart at TSA, remove anything sharper than a pen, question them, x-ray the bags, run Explosive Trace Detection tests, screen the hold baggage, background check every member of the crew, and then, once they've all boarded, **fly this ultra-secure airplane straight into a war zone.**

Welcome to the Eastern Mediterranean. It's an active conflict zone. The Russian naval build up there this month is the largest since Moscow's intervention in Syria began in 2015. Over Syria, 9 aircraft have been shot down this year.

**The most recent was on Monday night this week**, when Syria came under attack from Israeli fighter jets, and started firing indiscriminately at anything off the coast that looked like a threat. They wanted to shoot something down, and they did—except it was a friend, not foe. They took out a Russian Ilyushin IL-20M transport category airplane. Even on the worst radar, that doesn't look anything like an Israeli F-16.

50 miles away from where the Russian aircraft plunged into the sea on Monday night is the international airway UL620, busy with all the big name airline traffic heading for Beirut and Tel Aviv. If Syria can mistakenly shoot down a Russian ally aircraft, they can also take out your A320 as you cruise past.

And yet, most airlines continue to operate. Are we really so comfortable with operating in conflict zones again?

**The lessons of MH17 seem to be fading fast.** It's a little over four years since 298 people lost their lives over Ukraine one summer afternoon, thanks to an errant missile fired during a civil war at an aircraft that they thought was a military threat. "Why were they over a war zone", everyone cried afterwards.

Well, we all were. Me too. I was a pilot for Austrian Airlines at the time. I recall one morning in Vienna, some months before MH17. Boarding the last of the passengers, my BBC news app flashed up a story

about a helicopter being shot down in eastern Ukraine .

## Ukraine army helicopter shot down near Sloviansk, 12 dead

⌚ 29 May 2014 | [Europe](#)

 Share



Amateur footage posted online appears to show the aftermath of the helicopter being downed, as the BBC's Mark Lowen reports

Pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine have shot down a military helicopter near Sloviansk, killing 12 people, the Ukrainian military says.

It says the rebels used a Russian-made anti-aircraft system, and that an army general was among the dead.

The town of Sloviansk, Donetsk region, has seen

### Ukraine crisis

[Witnessing clashes outside Kiev parliament](#)

[Life on street dividing Ukraine and Russia](#)

[Putin shows who is boss](#)

As we were headed east, with my colleague in the cockpit, we quickly plotted the position on our enroute chart, and noted that it was really close to our route. Maybe 30 miles north. “We might see something interesting!”, we said, and pushed back. We didn’t, nor did we think much more about it.

Do you see the thought process though? Before MH17, we didn’t consider the risks to our aircraft from war zones. Especially being so high. Helicopters might be getting shot down, but we’re at 35,000 feet. No problem.

This is why all of these airlines—mine, at the time, included—operated on the route.

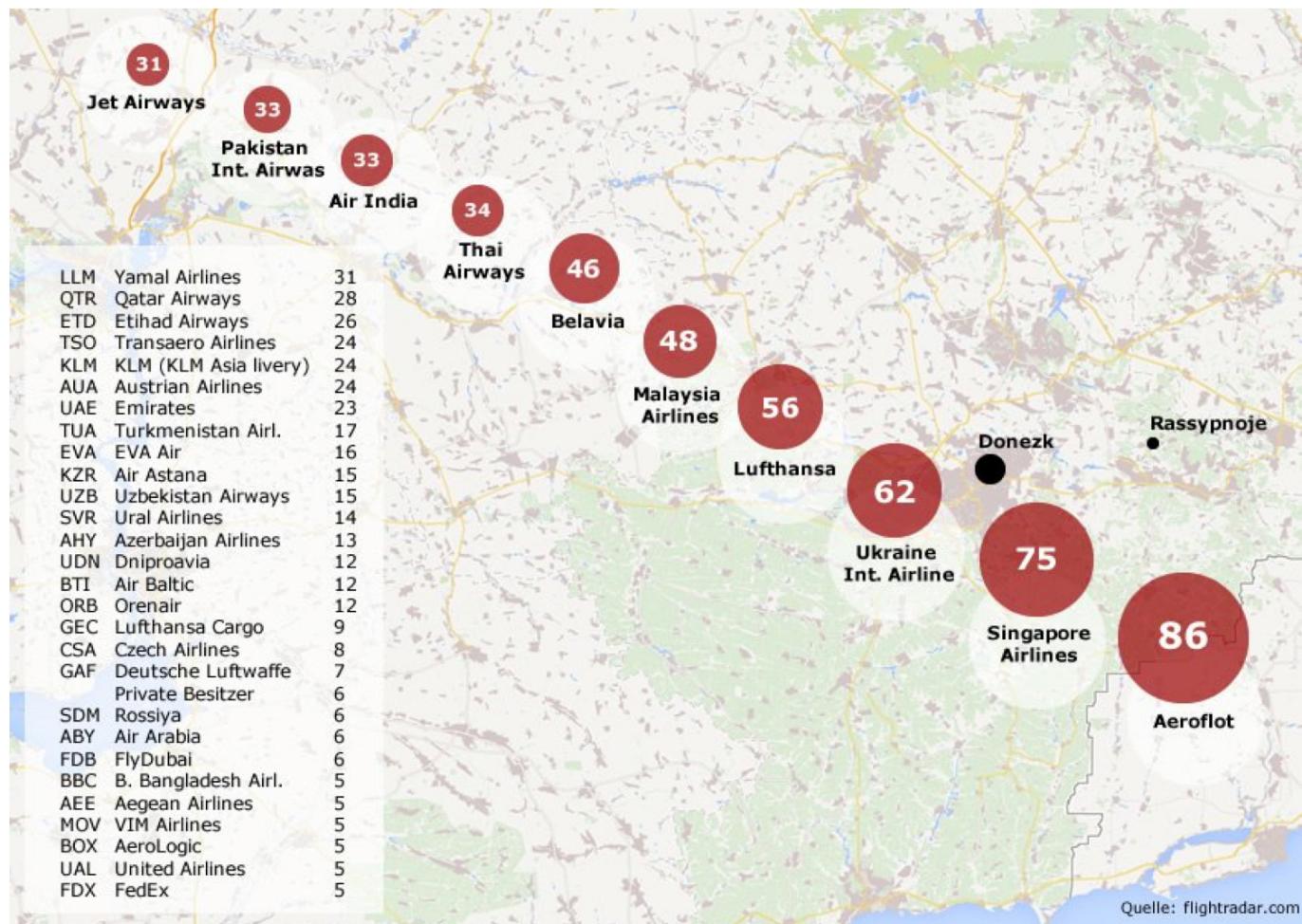


Image: Der Spiegel

And then it happened, and none of us could quite believe it.

But we learned. “Conflict Zone” became a buzzword. We had task forces and committees, whitepapers and promises, and—myself included—talked at length about how this happened, why, and how to avoid it in the future.

And yet, here we are flying unsuspecting passengers along the Syrian border. If you’re unsuspecting enough, and buy a SkyTeam codeshare ticket—you’ll actually overfly Syria on the Honey Badger airline of the region, Middle East Airlines.

Here we are flying passengers in the Eastern Mediterranean war zone. Why is this happening?

My guess: because we don’t think anything bad is going to happen, because the airspace boundary lines on the charts make that little bit of sea near Cyprus feel different from that little bit of sea near Syria, but mainly because there is **no clear guidance from Aviation Authorities**.

Let’s start with Cyprus. The Nicosia FIR has a big chunk of unsafe airspace. The Russian aircraft on Monday

was shot down on the Nicosia FIR boundary. What do the Notams say? Take a look. There are 97 of them. Mostly about fireworks at local hotels. Critical stuff indeed. Then there are 20 or 30 about “Russian naval exercises”. A clue, perhaps, but where is the black and white **“An Aircraft was Shot Down on our Border on Monday?”** . Or, since we are still using teletype to communicate Notams to crews, “AN AIRCRAFT WAS SHOT DOWN ON OUR BORDER ON MONDAY”. Wait, we have to abbreviate that, and use codes, for some reason. “ACFT SHOT DOWN ON FIR BDY 17SEP”. That’s better.

What about Turkey? Anything on the Eastern Mediterranean risk? Let’s have a look. Nope, just 132 Bullshit Notams, and something about an AWACS aircraft. See you back here in 30 minutes when you’ve read them all.

**Remember, I’m being a pilot, an airline, a dispatcher, trying to find information on the Risk in the Eastern Mediterranean. And this is how hard it is.**

EASA (European Aviation Safety Agency), how are you doing? Let’s start here, at the **“Information on Conflict Zones”**. Paragraph 2 tells us that ICAO have a Central Repository on Conflict Zones, launched in 2015.

No, they don’t. That died—quite a long time ago. This is where it used to live. So, there is no ICAO Central Repository on Conflict Zones. There is a new ICAO document with guidance on managing Conflict Zone risk (and it’s a bloody good one, too)—but where is the picture of current risk?

Let’s plough on through the EASA site. Aha! Seems we have a Conflict Zone alerting system, and Conflict Zone bulletins. Here they all are: <https://ad.easa.europa.eu/czib-docs/page-1>

The last one on Syria was issued on April 17th. But it seems to be just a list of Notams issued by other states. And these are out of date. The German Notam has expired, the French AIC has been replaced.

And there’s no guidance. No Map. No routes to avoid. Nothing about Cyprus, or Beirut. No mention of the Russian shootdown. No mention of the 9 aircraft shot down this year.

How am I supposed to know, as an operator, or pilot, what the risks are and where to avoid. We’re getting closer to the point here. **You’re not supposed to rely on the Aviation Authority. That is their message.** You must conduct your own risk assessment. You must research and find out about the risks yourself.

You are on your own.

If you’re a big airline, that’s probably fine. You’ll make your own decisions about where to fly, anyhow. But what about everybody else?

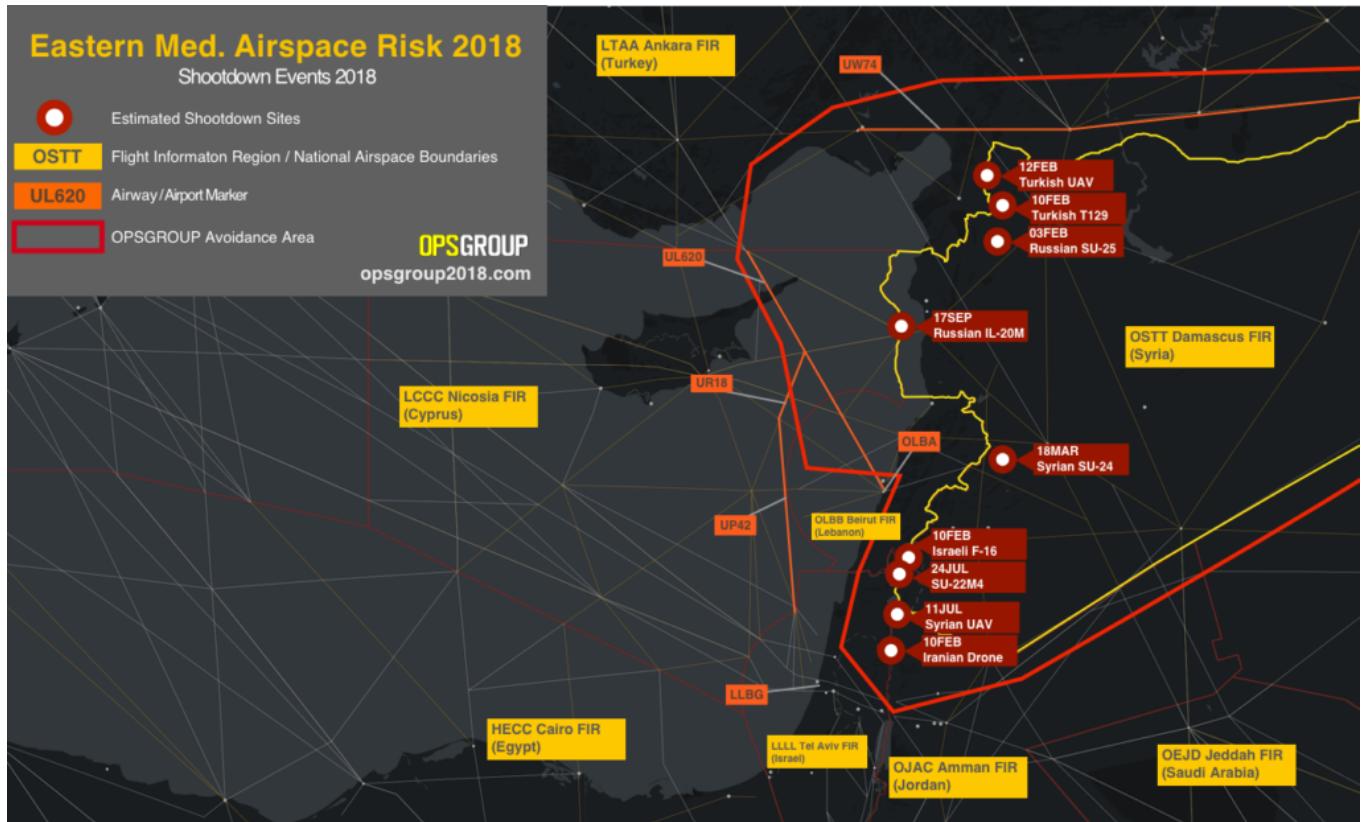
While OpsGroup works hard to get information out to our members—and we spend a lot of time researching risk—I would greatly prefer that we didn’t have to.

**Aviation Authorities must issue better guidance for the aircraft entering their areas.**

Let me remind you. Airlines are operating 50 miles from a position where an airplane was shot down at night, by a missile type that’s already taken out a passenger airliner by mistake, fired by a beleaguered Syrian defence post, at a friendly aircraft that they did not take time to identify.

And the guidance to operators from Authorities: **NIL**.

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Opsgroup has now published Note 31: Airspace Risk in the Eastern Mediterranean. **There is a clear risk to civil aircraft operating on airways UL620, UW74, UR18, and UP62. In simple terms, if you find yourself planned overwater east of Cyprus, reconsider your route.**

OPSGROUP.

**NOTE TO MEMBERS**  
**#31 21 SEP 2018**

ISSUED BY OPSGROUP

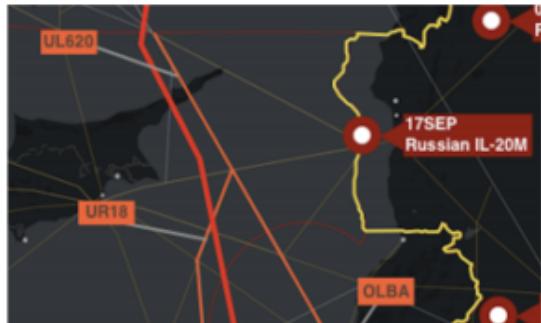
SITA HNLFSXH AFTN KMCOXAAL  
WEB OPSGROUP2018.COM  
EMAIL TEAM@OPS.GROUP
**SUBJECT:**  
**EASTERN MED AIRSPACE RISK**  
**ISSUED: 21 SEP 2018**
**CIRCULATION: OPSGROUP**

### Situation/Event

On Monday, September 17<sup>th</sup>, Syria shot down a Russian IL-20M transport category aircraft, mistaking it for an Israeli fighter. All on board died.

The position of the shootdown was – according to Russia Mil - 35°19'N 35°41'E – on the Nicosia (LCCC) / Damascus (OSTT) boundary, over international waters 20nm off the coast of Syria.

This event significantly changes the risk picture for civil aircraft operating in the vicinity of Syria. There is a **clear risk to civil aircraft** operating on airways UL620, UW74, UR18, and UP62. In simple terms, if you find yourself planned **overwater east of Cyprus**, reconsider your route.



*Shootdown location of Russian IL-20M. Full Eastern Mediterranean Risk Picture on next page.*

### Primary concerns

1. The shootdown of the Russian IL-20M on Sep 17 was a **mistake**. The Syrian defences were under attack by Israel, and assumed it was another attack aircraft. Russia is an ally for them, so this was a friendly aircraft. If Syria can make this magnitude of mistake, it can clearly also misidentify civil aircraft operating in the vicinity.
2. The position of the shootdown is only **50nm away** from UL620 – still heavily in use by civil traffic inbound to Beirut. UR18 is also very close.
3. The missile used by Syria was a Russian S-200 SAM, which was the **same missile type** that brought down Siberian Airlines Flight 1812 in 2001. The missile can lock on to the wrong target, and this **risk is higher over water**.

### Siberia 1812 lessons

In 2001, Ukraine shot down, by accident, a Siberian Airlines Tupolev 154, killing 78 passengers and crew.

Ukrainian officials speculated that water interference caused the missile to veer off course.

US assessment indicated the S-200 missile overshot its target drone - and instead of self-destructing, locked on to the passenger aircraft about 134nm further away and detonated 50 ft over the aircraft.

**Further reading:**

- ICAO Doc 10084 - Risk Assessment Manual for Civil aircraft flying over or near conflict zones. This was published this year, fully updated - read it!
  - Safeairspace. Managed by OpsGroup, this is our public repository and first point of warning for Airspace Risk for airlines, pilots, dispatchers, and aircraft operators.
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## Strike cancelled at Tel Aviv Airport

David Mumford  
24 September, 2018



**Update 1800z Nov 30: A strike by airport workers at LLBG/Tel Aviv which was originally planned for this weekend has now been cancelled.**

The Airports Authority says the strike was canceled after the government intervened and were able to reach a deal with the workers' union to delay any strike action this weekend.

We'll keep this page updated with any more news as we get it.

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## Midweek Briefing: Oceanic and Remote Procedures Update, Rome Airport Closed

# Friday

Cynthia Claros  
24 September, 2018

## INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN

### ISSUED BY FLIGHT SERVICE BUREAU

SITA HNLFSXH AKLFSXH AFTN KMCOXAAL  
EMAIL INTL.DESK@FSBUREAU.ORG



**Oceanic and remote procedures updated:** 12OCT The FAA this week issued a significantly updated version of their “**Oceanic and Remote Airspace**” procedures document. There’s a lot of good stuff here, even if you’re not operating an N-reg. Take a look at the PDF.

**Rome Airport to close Friday** 12OCT A reminder that LIRA/Rome Ciampino will close fully from Friday, for two weeks, as a result of urgently required runway maintenance. You can use LIRF/Fiumicino instead, but with significant restrictions.

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**LLBG/Tel Aviv** starts winter runway maintenance work on 01Nov until 17Nov – Runway 21 will become primary landing runway, associated restrictions, not available as alternate during this time – check AIC 3/16.

**LOWI/Innsbruck** starting December 14th, the airport will introduce parking restrictions for private flights every week from 1800Z Weds until 1800Z Sunday.

**TXKF/Bermuda** Tropical Storm Nicole is approaching, expect some disruption and check before using as an alternate over the next few days.

**HAZZ/Ethiopia** The Ethiopian government has declared a six month State of Emergency from 9 October 2016. While details of emergency arrangements are not formalised, measures to restrict communication, movement and political expression are expected. Carry identification, avoid all large gatherings and protests, monitor the media for details on the application of the State of Emergency and follow all instructions issued by local authorities.

**SPIM/Lima** radar will be off the air on Friday from 19-21Z for repairs, procedural control, expect enroute delays.

**EGGX/Shanwick**. An exercise to test to the Volcano eruption response is underway, you may see multiple

references to an eruption in Iceland – it hasn't happened, it's just a test. Stand down. Katla is also back to code Green.

**UZZZ/Russia** Karymsky volcano in the Kamchatka peninsula is active with colour code Orange, check before operating.

**OKAX/Kabul FIR** continues to have comms issues in the north east portion of Afghanistan airspace, VHF comms are not working on 118.3 or 128.5. There are some "Nordo" procedures, refer to AIP ENR 1.6-1.

**MUFH/Havana** has a couple of new entry points to the FIR – FUNDI and IKBIX – but they're not for use yet, so don't.

**OPRN/Islamabad** If operating to OPRN, be aware that on Saturdays and Mondays ATC will be practising non-radar procedural approach from 0500-0900Z until the end of the year.

**SPJC/Lima** has overnight parking restrictions from 14-21NOV, check with Airport company or handler prior to operating.

**FZZZ/Democratic Republic of the Congo**: the security picture is uncertain following recent political protests and there have been calls for further protests in Kinshasa, including on 19 October; you should follow travel advice and monitor local media for updates

**SPZO/Cusco** will not allow overnight parking from 10-20OCT.

**FOZZ/Gabon** Following the results of recent elections in Gabon, further strikes or demonstrations could occur in the capital Libreville and in Port Gentil. Avoid demonstrations, large crowds and rallies as they may turn violent.

**UAZZ/Kyrgyz Republic** Multiple embassies located in Bishkek have issued warnings to their citizens of an increased threat of a terrorist attack in the Kyrgyz Republic, possibly involving kidnapping and hostage taking, against Kyrgyz authorities and foreign diplomats during October 2016.

**TQPF/Anguilla** has introduced a ban on visitors from Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, with a view to mitigating Ebola risk. Anyone who has been to those three countries in the last 21 days will not be allowed to enter.

**VTSP/Phuket** is suffering from ramp congestion, and will not allow non-scheduled flights to stay overnight until the end of the year.

**WSSS/Singapore Changi** has a couple of closures on 18 and 19 OCT due to a military exercise, check local Notams.

**ZUUU/Chengdu** has a new speed restriction inbound – fly 183 knots from IAF to IF, then 160 knots to 4nm. Notam U2748/16.

View full International Bulletin 12OCT2016

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## Israel moves closer to Eurocontrol

Declan Selleck  
24 September, 2018



Israel has signed an agreement with Eurocontrol to work more closely together in flight planning.

Air traffic between Israel and Europe has been growing at over 9% a year for the past three years. This growth poses ongoing challenges to international civil aviation and underlines the need to improve ties between regions in order to ensure flight efficiency and safety in airspace and airports that are growing more crowded every year.

Israel is now the second country to sign the “Eurocontrol Comprehensive Agreement”.

#### **What does this mean for operators?**

The existing process is complex and multi-step: flights that transit Europe from Israel require filing at least 3 hours in advance to the Tel Aviv Coordination Centre, who then liaise with Eurocontrol to verify that the routing is RAD compliant. Changes are often then made by Eurocontrol and back down the line to the operator.

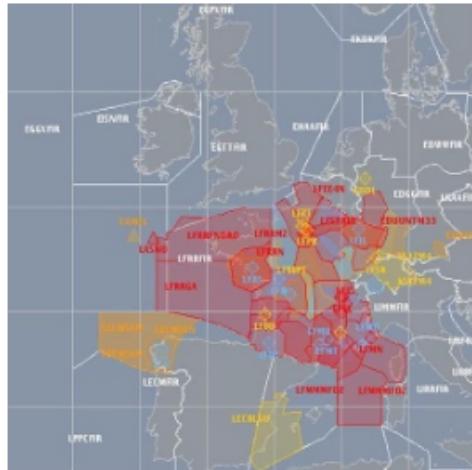
The implementation date is to be confirmed, but FPL filing out of Israel will now be the same as for any other European country, with immediate ACK from Eurocontrol.

Other benefits of this agreement are improved crisis management, more efficient traffic flows between Israel and Europe, more predictable day to day operations, improved safety and possibly airspace redesign and management.

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## **Midweek Briefing 01JUN: EASA Updates 'Suspect Aircraft' Guidelines, 8th French ATC Strike**

Cynthia Claros  
24 September, 2018



**EASA Updates 'Suspect Aircraft' Guidelines** 01JUN EASA has published new guidelines for inspectors to assess which aircraft should be prioritised for SAFA ramp checks in Europe and SAFA compliant states. Read the article.

**8th French ATC strike this weekend** 01JUN Notification has been given by French ATC Unions of a Three Day Strike this coming weekend from Friday-Monday, starting at 0400Z Friday 03JUN. Read the article.

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**ZZZZ/China** The new 144 hour visa-free rule is extended to Nanjing Lukou Airport of Jiangsu, Hangzhou Xiaoshan Airport of Zhejiang, and all air, sea and railway ports of Shanghai, including Pudong Airport, Hongqiao Airport, Shanghai Port International Cruise Terminal, Wusong Passenger Transport Center and all railway stations in Shanghai.

**CYMM/Fort McMurray** is scheduled to reopen 10JUN to regular commercial operations. The airport has been closed to normal traffic due to a significant forest fire.

**MMAA/Acapulco** after an outage lasting several years the ILS for RWY 10/28 is operational again.

**KSEA/Seattle** has runway 16C/34C closed until 27JUN for repairs. ATC initiatives possible through the construction.

**EINN/Shannon** and **EICK/Cork** will be testing a new "Remote Tower" system from 06JUN until September, where at quieter times the controller in Dublin will provide the ATC service to flights at Shannon and Cork. The IAA says airspace users will not notice the change. We think you might.

**LFLL/Lyon** will be re-numbering their runway to 17/35 from 18/36 in September.

**VOTP/Tirupati** will begin International operations beginning the end of June with flights to the U.S. The airport had recently upgraded their customs systems and other procedures.

**LZZZ/Mediterranean** Despite some reports, NATO operations in Libya appear unlikely. There are several new airspace NOTAMs, but is anyone still flying to Libya?

**LFZZ/France** due to ongoing protests at french oil refineries and fuel shortages the French CAA has

advised to tanker in as much fuel as possible to help mitigate any issues. Please check with local handlers for any specific fuel constraints.

**SPZZ/Ecuador** Volcano Sangay is producing ash that extends up to 20,000 feet. Movement is towards the west at 10 knots. Please check with the Washington VAAC for the latest advisories.

**LLBG/Tel Aviv**, Israel On 26-27MAY strike action in the form of a work go-slow took place. The slowdown has primarily affected outgoing flights by increasing the time between takeoffs, but it has been reported that if the slowdown continues it will begin to affect incoming flights.

**NVZZ/Vanuatu** 27MAY a 5.0 magnitude earthquake struck west of Vanuatu. The quake was centered approximately 60 mi/95 km northwest of Port Vila and was measured at a depth of about 6 mi/10 km. No tsunami warning has been issued.

**DAZZ/Algeria** At 0054 local time (2354 UTC) on 28MAY, a magnitude 5.2 earthquake struck approximately 35 mi/55 km southeast of Algiers, the capital of Algeria. The epicenter of the earthquake registered a depth of approximately 7 mi/ 12 km. Following the quake, there were no reports of injuries or damage.

**FNZZ/Angola** A yellow fever outbreak has caused 301 deaths so far this year. The number of suspected cases is 2,536. The outbreak began in Luanda and has since spread to areas throughout the country, particularly along the coast and in the central regions, despite a large-scale vaccination program.

**VDPP/Cambodia** Political tensions are high in Cambodia following contested national elections in 2013. Arrest warrants have been issued for the leaders of the opposition CNRP party and the situation is unpredictable. On 30 May police blocked roads in southern Phnom Penh to prevent opposition CNRP supporters from carrying out a planned protest march. Further disruption is possible if the remaining leader is arrested. The opposition party has announced it will hold mass, non-violent, demonstrations and a number of unions have said they will strike in support.

**LFZZ/France** Despite recent strikes, the French government has stated it will not back down from labor reforms despite street protests and refinery blockades. The CGT Union has threatened to disrupt the upcoming Euro 2016 soccer tournament if the government does not back down; however, after meeting with representatives of the oil industry, government officials stated that the situation at fuel depots is improving.

**Ramadan** starts on 06JUN, for one month. If you are operating to any Islamic countries, expect the usual slowdown in work, longer processing times for permits, and closures.

**OEZZ/Saudi FIR** Saudi Arabia has intercepted a ballistic missile that was fired from Yemen, after which Saudi aircraft bombarded the missile's platform. A Saudi official stated that the country may reconsider the kingdom's truce with Yemen, as a result of the strike. The missile launch was the second strike in May.

**RCZZ/Taiwan** On 31MAY, a 6.1 magnitude earthquake struck approximately 70 mi/115 km northeast of Taipei. The quake was measured at a depth of about 150 mi/240 km. There were no reports of damage, and no tsunami warning was issued.

**UKZZ/Ukraine** On 29MAY, attacks by pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine, violating the ceasefire signed in February 2015, killed five Ukrainian military officers and wounded four others. The latest attacks follow a 24 May report released by Ukrainian authorities, stating seven soldiers were killed on that day, making it the deadliest day for Ukrainian forces since August last year.

**KZZZ/USA** The State Dept has issued a warning to arriving travellers this summer to make sure that they have all necessary documents to enter the United States - there have been multiple changes to the rules this year (see Active Bulletins below for more on this).

[View the full International Bulletin 01JUN2016](#)