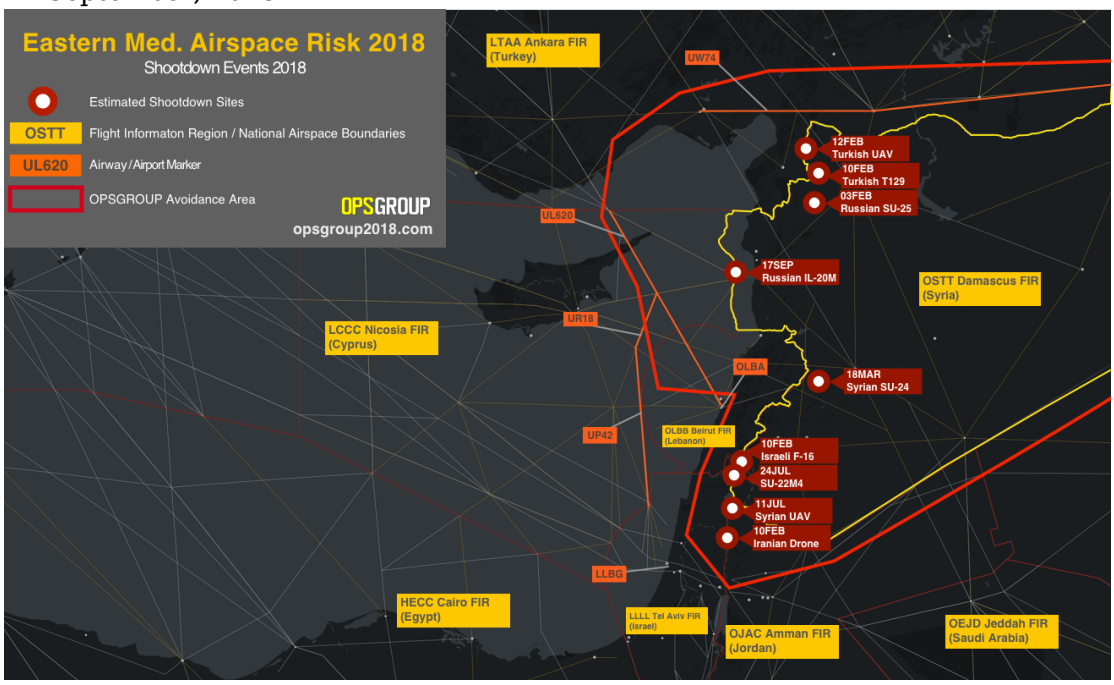
Why are we still flying airline passengers over war zones?

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 Israel 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.

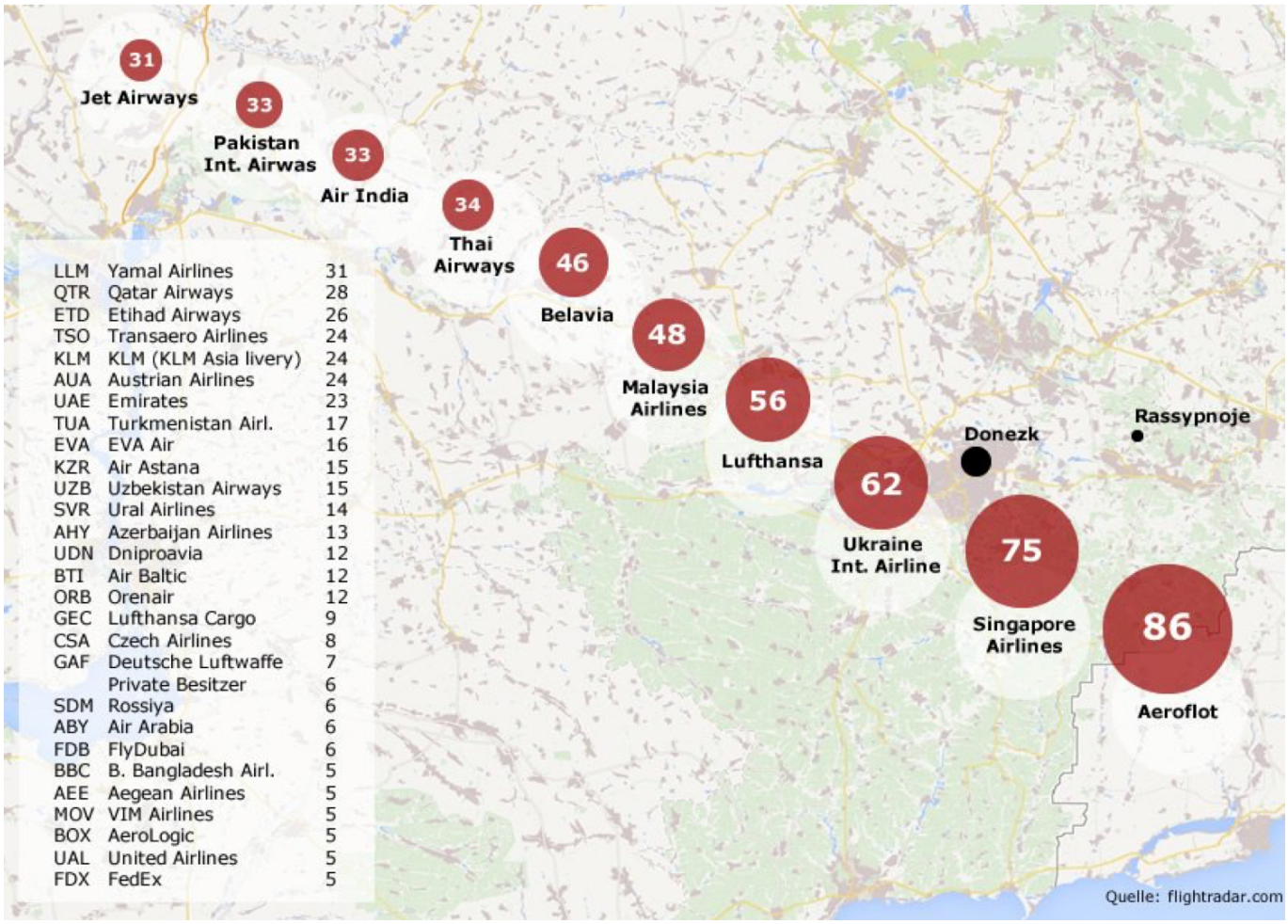


Image: Der Spiegel

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.

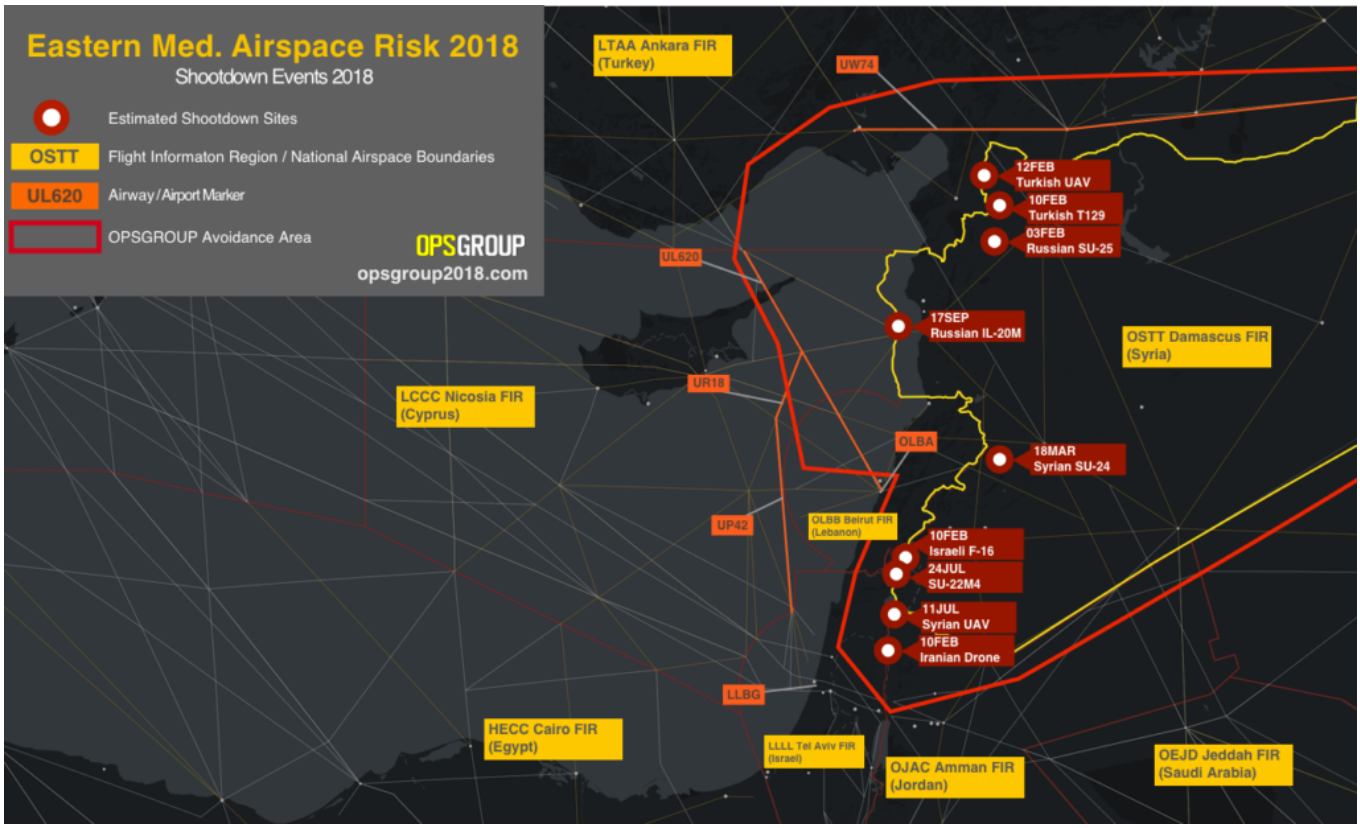
If you're a big airline, that's probably fine. You'll make your own decisions about where to fly, anyhow. But what about everybody else?

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**.



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**

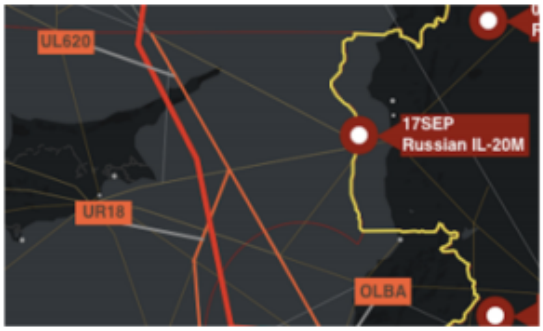
CIRCULATION: **OPSGROUP**

Situation/Event

On Monday, September 17th, 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.