

# OPSGROUP®

## NOTE TO MEMBERS

### #31 21 SEP 2018

ISSUED BY OPSGROUP

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**SUBJECT:**  
**EASTERN MED AIRSPACE RISK**  
**ISSUED:** 21 SEP 2018

**CIRCULATION:** OPSGROUP

## Situation/Event

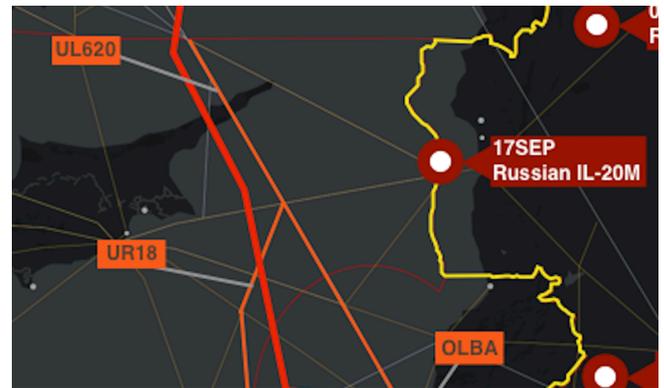
On Monday, September 17<sup>th</sup>, Syria shot down a Russian IL-20M transport category aircraft, mistaking it for an Israeli fighter. All on board died.

The position of the shutdown 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.

## Primary concerns

1. The shutdown 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 shutdown 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.



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

## Siberia 1812 lessons

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

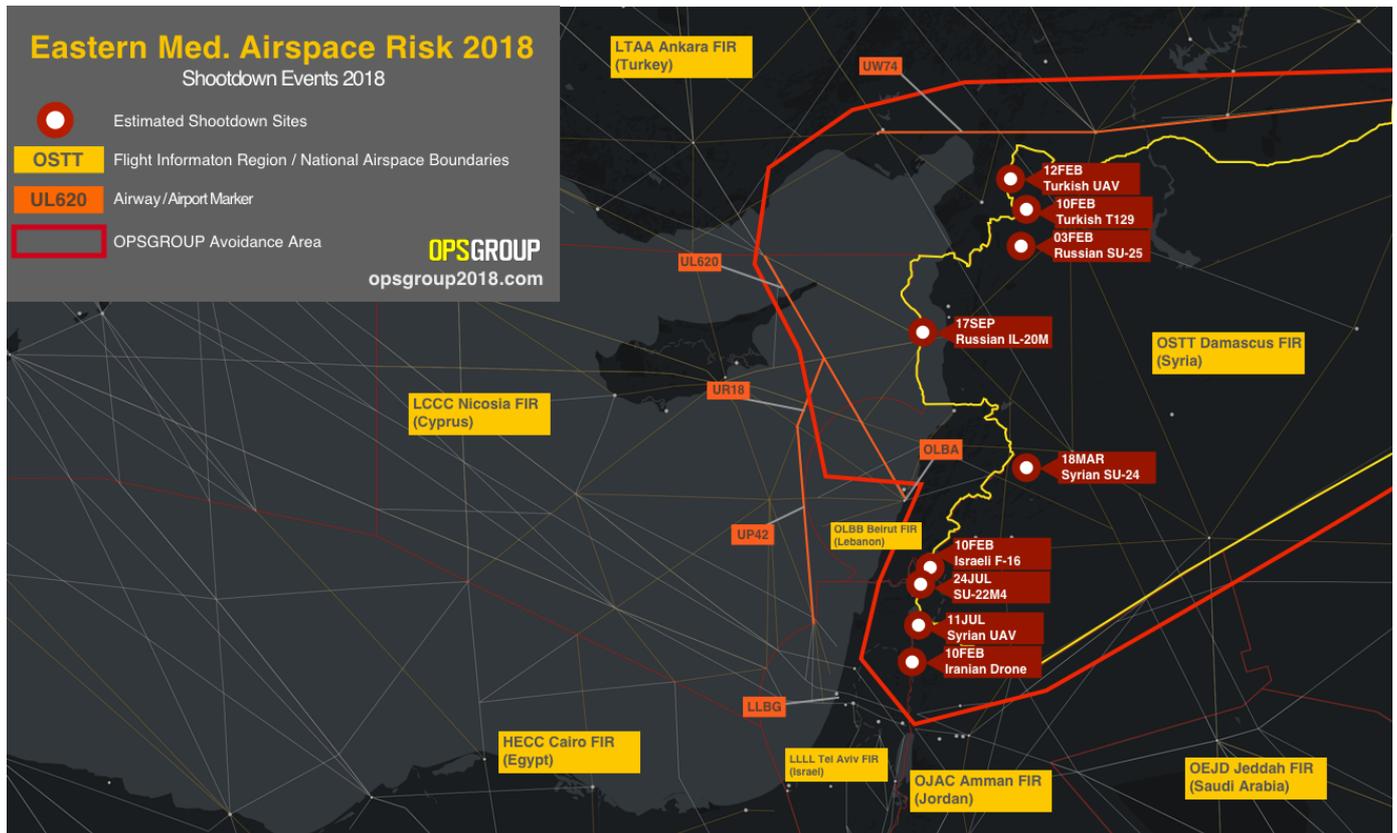
Ukrainian officials speculated that water interference caused the missile to veer off course.

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.



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2018 Eastern Mediterranean Risk Picture – shutdown sites, FIR boundaries around Syria.

**OpsGroup Avoidance Area**

Why did we draw the lines where we did? There are currently no warnings specifically listing the **Cyprus/Nicosia FIR**. And yet, this aircraft last Monday was shot down on their boundary. Below is the **FAA warning area** for Syria (Notam KICZ 9/18) – “Exercise caution when operating within 200nm of Syria”. That’s solid advice, but in practice not very useful. What is the risk and where is it highest?



We’ve drawn a **big red line** around the area that we consider to be highest risk. This is a *do not enter* line. The airways within this area are very close to Syria, in range of their missiles, and close to points where aircraft have already been shot down.

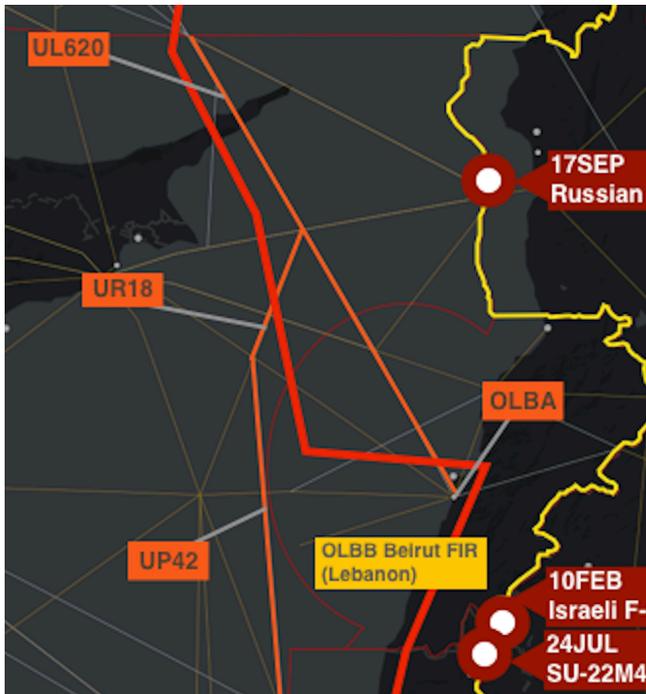
And since Monday, we now know that the risk of misidentification exists.

The risk picture is therefore two-fold:  
**misidentification** of your aircraft as a military one, and an **errant missile** launched at another aircraft that locks onto you instead.



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**Beirut arrivals**

If you operate to Beirut, you'll be close to Syria. However, you can reduce the risk in several ways. Avoid using **UL620** which comes close to the Syrian FIR, and aim for a straight in (right angle to the coast) arrival via ELIKA and G2. You may be vectored to the north for arrival, but monitor your own proximity to Syria.

**MH 17 parallels**

We are seeing a strong parallel between this situation and the lead up to the shutdown of MH17 in 2014.

**Lead up to MH17**

- 14 aircraft, all military, were shot down before MH17 – it was number 15.
- Civil war with civil aircraft operating overhead
- No specific guidance from Civil Aviation Authority
- Vague notams about "Military Airspace Reservations"
- Big airlines rerouting to avoid, but most continue to use risky routes

**Current Syria situation:**

- 9 aircraft, all military, were shot down already in 2018
- Civil war with civil aircraft operating very close by
- No specific guidance from any Civil Aviation Authority other than "Don't overfly Syria"
- Vague notams about "Military Airspace Reservations"
- Big airlines rerouting to avoid, but most continue to use risky routes

**Aviation Authority warnings**

At present (21 Sep 2018), there are **no specific warnings from the authorities** – EASA, UK, US, Germany, or France for:

- Nicosia FIR / Cyprus
- Beirut FIR / Lebanon
- Tel Aviv FIR / Israel
- Ankara FIR / Turkey

The last hint of a warning was in April during the most recent US airstrikes on Syria, when EASA issued a "rapid alert notification .. *due to the possible launch of airstrikes with air-to-ground and/or cruise missiles within the next 72 hours, and the possibility of intermittent disruption of radio navigation equipment, **due consideration** needs to be taken when planning flight operations in the Eastern Mediterranean/Nicosia FIR area* "

'Due consideration' doesn't help us much as dispatchers and pilots. This is why we're making a group summary to give you a usable map and picture of the risk, as best we can.

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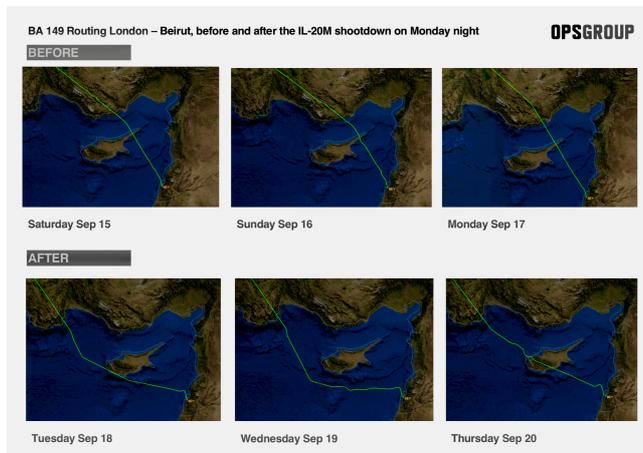
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## Airline reroutes

A telltale pointer to change in risk is when major airlines reroute. That's happening this week, as shown by the before-and-after *FlightAware* tracks for the below flight from London - Beirut. (Public domain info)



## Further References

- ❖ **ICAO Doc 10084 - Risk Assessment Manual for Civil aircraft flying over or near conflict zones** This was published this year, fully updated - read it!  
<https://www.unitingaviation.com/publications/10084/>
- ❖ **Safe Airspace**  
Managed by OpsGroup, this is our public repository and first point of warning for Airspace Risk for airlines, pilots, dispatchers, and aircraft operators. <http://safeairspace.net/>

## Feedback and Input

The group keep us strong! Tell us what you know – [team@ops.group](mailto:team@ops.group). All submissions are anonymous.

## About this Note

**Our mission:** Tell you, our members, in plain English, the changes and risks in International Flight Ops, so that you are fully informed. We'll give you the best advice we have, based on group consensus and what we're hearing on the ground – and in the air.

**OPSGROUP® is the heart of International Flight Operations: a group of 4000 Airlines, Pilots, Dispatchers, Controllers, Managers, and Problem-Solvers of International Ops.**

We monitor the world's airspace and airports for **International Flight Operations** risks and changes that affect our members. We publish a weekly [Operations Bulletin](#) to 50,000 readers. We produce [charts](#) and [guides](#). We keep [SafeAirspace.net](#) updated with Overflight Risk information.

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