

Russia halts flights to Egypt after air disaster

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Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered Friday that all civilian passenger flights between Russia and Egypt be halted pending further investigation into the disaster that killed 224 people October 31.

Metrojet Flight 9268 was bringing Russian tourists home to St. Petersburg from the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh when the plane exploded in midair and crashed into the Sinai desert, a few minutes after takeoff.

There are mounting reports, mainly derived from the intelligence agencies of imperialist powers like the United States, Britain and France, suggesting that the Islamic fundamentalist group ISIS placed a bomb on board the jetliner that was set to explode when the plane reached its cruising altitude of 31,000 feet.

French media reports, citing analysis of the black boxes from the Russian plane, said the cockpit voice recorder showed normal conversations among the crew until just before the disaster that brought down the plane. Then a loud explosion can be heard, followed by the flight data recorder stopping. France is one of five countries participating in the investigation, because the jet is an Airbus 321 whose final assembly was in France.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has claimed since the day of the disaster that it was responsible for bringing down the plane, in retaliation for Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war on the side of President Bashar al-Assad. But ISIS statements provided no evidence, and the group's Egyptian branch, which has conducted widespread terrorist attacks in the Sinai peninsula, is not thought to have anti-aircraft missiles that could reach an airliner at cruising altitude.

Press reports Friday, citing communications intercepts by British and US spy agencies, claimed that ISIS militants were heard gloating about the attack shortly after the airliner was destroyed. The *Times* of

London reported, "The tone and content of the messages convinced analysts that a bomb had been carried on board by a passenger or a member of the airport ground staff."

NBC News reported Friday night that at least one of these intercepts took place before the plane took off and included boasting that something big was about to happen in Sinai. This raises the possibility that US or British agencies knew about the threat to the Russian airliner but did nothing to alert Russia in advance.

While not making these intercepts public, British and American intelligence agencies reportedly did notify the Russian intelligence service Thursday night, leading to Putin's decision to suspend flights from Egypt by Russian airliners.

A spokesman for Putin emphasized that halting flights temporarily did not mean the Russian government has determined that the crash was the result of terrorism. Investigations into possible mechanical failures were ongoing. However, the decision came in response to a recommendation from the intelligence service, not the government agency responsible for airline safety.

There are 50,000 Russian tourists now in Sharm el-Sheikh, the most popular overseas vacation spot for Russians because of cheap rates and warm weather. The national airline Aeroflot is preparing charter flights to bring them home.

The British government was also proceeding on the basis of an imminent threat of terrorist attack to airliners leaving Sharm el-Sheikh, halting all scheduled flights to the resort city from Wednesday on.

There are at least 20,000 Britons vacationing there, and they will be brought back on specially chartered flights, allowed only take carry-on bags. Larger luggage, which would go through the baggage-handling system at Sharm el-Sheikh, is to be shipped on separate cargo flights, a clear indication that British officials

believe a bomb was placed inside or on top of luggage on Flight 9268.

There were tense scenes at the Sharm el-Sheikh airport, with airport workers, including ground crew and policemen, compelled to go through the same security checks as passengers, removing belts and shoes and passing through scanners. British tourists reportedly heckled the British ambassador to Egypt, John Casson, who put in an appearance, over the cancellation of numerous scheduled return flights.

Other countries or national airlines are making similar arrangements, including Ireland, Turkish Airlines, two subsidiaries of Lufthansa, and the Dutch KLM.

In Russia, officials said that luggage pulled from the wreckage of Flight 9268 was being tested for explosive residue. They also announced that Metrojet has suspended all flights by its four remaining A321 airbus jets, pending the results of the investigation. The airline is on the brink of liquidation, two months behind in paying pilots, flight crew and other workers.

The Obama administration has ordered stepped-up security screenings of flights bound for the United States from 10 Middle Eastern airports, including Cairo, Amman, Kuwait and Dubai.

US officials have been among the most insistent voices suggesting a terrorist connection to the Flight 9268 disaster, hoping that it will produce a political backlash in Russia against Putin's decision to intervene in Syria. In this, as in many other areas, there appears to be an overlap between the actions of ISIS and the political agenda of Washington.



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