Beat: Politics

U.S. bans airlines from flying over Syria due to civil war

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USPA News - The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) issued an order Monday prohibiting American airlines from flying over Syria, saying the civil war in the country poses a "serious potential threat" to civilian aircraft due to the presence of anti-aircraft weapons. The emergency order, communicated in a Notice To Airmen (NOTAM), replaced a previous notice which strongly advised American airlines against flying in the Damascus Flight Information Region, which includes all of Syria.

It is not believed any American airlines have recently used Syrian airspace. "Based on an updated assessment of the risk associated with such operations and the lack of any requests from operators wishing to fly in this airspace, we believe it prudent to prohibit U.S. operators from flying into, out of, and over Syria," said FAA spokeswoman Laura Brown. "The ongoing armed conflict and volatile security environment in Syria poses a serious potential threat to civil aviation." Syrian rebels have used anti-aircraft weapon systems in recent years to shoot down a number of military jets, and the shootdown of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine on July 17 has renewed safety concerns for civilian aircraft which utilize airspace over conflict zones. "Armed extremist groups in Syria are known to be equipped with a variety of anti-aircraft weapons which have the capability to threaten civilian aircraft," Brown said. Mikael Robertsson, co-founder of flight tracking website Flightradar24, said last month that no major airlines have been seen operating over Syria for more than a year. "There are some local flights going over to Iraq and Lebanon and Jordan, but they are not big airlines or transcontinental flights," he said. "I know that Iraqi Airways and Syria Air are flying over Syria sometimes. No big airlines." The emergency order issued on late Monday said the FAA would re-evaluate the situation by the end of the year, but it does not prohibit pilots from using Syrian airspace in the event of an emergency. "In an emergency that requires immediate decision and action for the safety of the flight, the pilot in command of an aircraft may deviate from this NOTAM to the extent required by that emergency," it said. Last month, Malaysia Airlines faced intense criticism after one of its airliners flew over parts of Syria, including hotspot areas such as Homs, just days after Flight MH17 was shot down over eastern Ukraine. The plane, which was flying on a route from Kuala Lumpur to London, appeared to have opted for the route over Syria to avoid Ukrainian airspace.

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