

Malaysia Airlines flight over war-torn Syria draws fresh criticism

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USPA News - A Malaysia Airlines passenger plane flying from Kuala Lumpur to London flew over Syria on Sunday, flight data showed, sparking a new wave of criticism for the airline just days after one of its airliners was shot down over a conflict zone in eastern Ukraine. The log details published by flight tracking website Flightradar24 showed the flight path of Malaysia Airlines flight MH4, an Airbus A380 which departed Kuala Lumpur on early Sunday.

The log showed the aircraft flying over Syria, which is in the midst of a raging civil war, from about 1:20 p.m. local time, flying close to the city of Homs. Reports about Flight MH4 flying over Syria garnered the responses of thousands of people on the social networking website Twitter, where the vast majority described the airline's route as irresponsible. It appeared Flight MH4 was routed over Syria after airspace over eastern Ukraine was closed following the shootdown of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 last week. No airspace restrictions are in place over much of Syria, but the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and other organizations have warned airlines for more than a year to avoid the entire country. "Information from the International Civil Aviation Organization and open source reports of surface-to-air missile firings," the FAA said in a notice last year, describing the risk to civilian flights as "significant." "There are some local flights going over to Iraq and Lebanon and Jordan, but they are not big airlines or transcontinental flights," said Flightradar24 co-founder Mikael Robertsson. "So Malaysia Airlines was the first flight I've seen going over there for like a year. ... I know that Iraqi Airways and Syria Air are flying over Syria sometimes. No big airlines." Responding to the criticism, Malaysia Airlines released a statement in which it said Flight MH4 flew in accordance with the International Civil Aviation Organization's approved routes. "As per the notice to airmen (NOTAM) issued by the Syrian Civil Aviation Authority, the Syrian airspace was not subject to restrictions," the statement said. A spokesman for the airline refused to say whether Malaysia Airlines will continue to fly over Syria, or whether it will choose to fly over neighboring Iraq which is considered to be safe for civilian airlines. Flightradar24 said most flights between Europe and Asia fly over Iraq because there are no other routes available. During Monday's flight, MH4 avoided Syria by flying over Iraq, but it was not clear whether the airline had chosen a different route because of the criticism of Sunday's flight. "Malaysia Airlines maintains that the safety of its passengers and crews is of utmost priority," the airline's e-mailed statement added. In April 2013, Russia's aviation watchdog Rosaviatsia banned Russian airlines from flying through Syrian airspace after a NordWind Airlines plane carrying 159 passengers came under fire over Syria. The crew said they were forced to take evasive action to avoid being hit by two ground-to-air missiles, which exploded near the aircraft. No one was injured. "The Federal Agency for Air Transport believes that the commercial interests cannot outweigh the issues of security of citizens using the services of Russian airlines," Rosaviatsia said at the time. Other incidents were also reported in Syria in which munitions were directed at planes landing at and taking off from Damascus International Airport. Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 crashed near the city of Torez in eastern Ukraine on late Thursday afternoon, killing all 298 passengers and crew members in the world's deadliest aviation disaster since the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States. It is believed the aircraft was downed by a surface-to-air missile that was fired from separatist-controlled territory.

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