EGYPTIAN AIR CRASH SETS OFF ALARMS OVER SECURITY AT BEIRUT AIRPORT

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A year ago I was waiting with a friend on the gangway to board a flight from **Beirut**'s Rafik Hariri International **Airport** to London Heathrow. There was the usual passenger bottleneck as well as what appeared to be an unusually large number of airport personnel milling around. The short delay in our progress to the aircraft was enough for both of us to reach the same paranoid conclusion: that it wouldn't be difficult for a determined member of the ground crew or even the security services to place an explosive device on board a plane. We laughed at our stupidity and decided that it really wasn't helpful to dwell on the matter. Anyway, what could we do?

Over the past week I wondered if any of the passengers waiting at Sharm El Sheikh airport to board Metrojet 9268 bound for St Petersburg experienced similar fears that were also quickly banished from their minds, comforting themselves with the statistic that you are more likely to be killed by your goldfish than by flying in a commercial jet.

But 25 minutes into that flight, a time when nervous passengers begin to relax, the aviation industry's worst nightmare came to pass. For if, as it is looking increasingly likely, the Airbus A321 was brought down by a bomb placed in the hold, security procedures around the world are going

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to be overhauled, making global travel even more exhausting and stressful. The challenges for the Arab civil aviation authorities will be even greater and they will all have to man up to the new reality if their tourist industries, in Egypt and Lebanon in particular, are to avoid extinction.

Not only is it hard to see how the popular North African destinations will recover in the short term – Sharm El Sheikh may never shake off the tragic association – but the many security consultants and so-called experts who have been wheeled in by the global media are advising travellers to not just mug up on the country they want to visit, but to also look at the region as a whole. Ouch.

Airport security in the Arab world is an elastic concept, ranging from the draconian to the downright slack. I am always warier of flying out of Beirut on a foreign carrier, working on the, admittedly flimsy, theory that Middle East Airlines, Lebanon's national carrier, is less likely to be a target than a BA, Air France or even Lufthansa aircraft. (You're probably pretty safe with Alitalia, even if your bags aren't.)

But it's what happens on the ground that is cause for the greatest concern. I wrote a few weeks back about the hassle of actually getting on board a plane at Beirut. There may be as many as seven security and passport checks (including an encounter with a mysterious hand-held device that claims to read swabs for traces of high explosives) but by international standards Beirut's airport security is controversial to say the least.

It's an open secret that Hizbollah, the militant Shia party with arguably the world's finest non-state army, one that is currently fighting on behalf of the Syrian regime alongside its Russian allies in a bid to push back opposition forces including ISIS, runs the show. So strong is the party's grip on the airport that in 2008, when the government tried to remove Hizbollah's security cameras at the VIP terminal and sack the head of airport security, the party sent its gunmen on to the streets and the state backed down.

There are two problems here. Firstly, it is hardly fitting, even if it isn't completely unusual in the Middle East, that a political party pulls the strings behind a civil aviation authority. But secondly, and potentially more alarming, is the fact that a Hizbollah-run airport is a juicy target for Sunni jihadists, and after recent events the potential threat cannot be dismissed. Western security agencies will be twitchy.

That was then, but October 31 was the game-changer and Lebanon will feel the economic fallout unless the airport security becomes less politicised and more transparent with security protocols to reassure the modern traveller and their governments.

09 NOVEMBER 2015

SOURCE: THE NATIONAL
ARTICLE LINK:
https://mfa.50skyshades.com/news/airports-routes/egyptian-air-crash-sets-off-alarms-over-security-at-beirut-airport

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