

FAA Background Information Regarding U.S. Civil Aviation in the Kabul Flight Information Region (OAKX)

The combination of ongoing military operations and extremist/militant activity has resulted in a fragile security situation across Afghanistan posing a risk to U.S. civil flight operations. There are increasing risks to U.S. civil aviation operating in the Kabul Flight Information Region (FIR) (OAKX) at altitudes below Flight Level 330 (FL330), particularly for aircraft operating at low altitudes, including during the arrival and departure phases of flight. For this reason, on 28 March 2020, the FAA published Notice to Airmen (NOTAM) KICZ A0038/20, which advised U.S. civil aviation to exercise extreme caution during flight operations when operating into, out of, within, or over the Kabul FIR. Additionally, the NOTAM advises U.S. civil operators and civil airmen, to the maximum extent possible, to operate on established air routes, minimize flight operations below FL330, and minimize ground time in Afghanistan. The NOTAM also provides that, to the maximum extent possible, operators must provide the FAA with specific flight details of planned fixed wing flights into/out of airports in the Kabul FIR at least 72 hours in advance of the operation. This information helps refine the FAA's understanding of the risk exposure of U.S. civil aviation in Afghanistan and improves the agency's ability to communicate with operators, as appropriate, regarding risk concerns that may be relevant for particular planned flights.

The primary risk to U.S. civil aviation comes from indirect fire targeting airports and from surface-to-air fire targeting aircraft operating at low altitudes, including during the arrival and departure phases of flight. Airports and airfields in Afghanistan have been targeted frequently by direct assault and/or indirect fire and are also susceptible to insider threats. Flight operations at airports have been disrupted by, and aircraft have been damaged by, rocket or mortar fire attacks, as demonstrated by a late-September 2017 high-profile indirect fire attack on Kabul International Airport (OAKB), when multiple munitions impacted within the airport perimeter and disrupted flight operations. Bagram Airfield was targeted by indirect fire on multiple occasions in March 2020. In October 2019, an unprecedented number of rockets were used in an attack on the coalition base at Lashkar Gar, a tactic that could be replicated against coalition airfields with little or no warning. Operations at Bagram Airfield were affected by a direct assault on a facility adjacent to the airfield on 10 November 2019. The insider threat risk also remains a concern, as demonstrated by the September 2017 suicide bomber attack at an entry control point at Bagram Airfield, and a November 2016 insider attack that killed four people, also at Bagram.

While operating at low altitudes, including during the arrival and departure phases of flight, aircraft are primarily at risk of encountering small-arms fire, rocket-propelled grenades, and anti-aircraft fire. U.S. and Afghan military aircraft and Government-contracted civil aircraft operating at low altitudes have encountered a multitude of anti-aircraft fire incidents. There is also a risk from shoulder-fired man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) when operating at altitudes below FL330. Although, to date, MANPADS have only been fired at military aircraft, there is a potential that they may be used against civil aviation with little or no warning. Some MANPADS are capable of reaching a maximum altitude of 25,000 feet above ground level.

The FAA is closely monitoring the security conditions in Afghanistan to determine whether further action is necessary to minimize risk to U.S. civil aviation operations in the Kabul FIR.

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