EGYPT FINALLY COMES CLEAN: TERRORISTS DOWNED THAT RUSSIAN PLANE

News / Airlines

After months of denial, Egypt has finally admitted that the Russian airliner downed in the Sinai last year was indeed targeted by terrorists.

In a speech on Egyptian television Wednesday, former military general turned President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said the plane was attacked to damage Egypt's tourist sector and harm its relationship with Russia.

"Whoever downed the Russian plane, what did he mean? He meant to hit tourism, and to hit relations with Russia," Sisi said. ""Has terrorism ended? No it has not but it will if we unite."

The Metrojet flight 9268 left the Egyptian resort town of Sharm al-Sheikh on October 31 and crashed 23 minutes later into the Sinai desert, killing all 224 passengers and crew on board.

Wilayet Sinai, Egypt's Islamic State affiliate, immediately claimed responsibility for the attack.

"Take the crashed plane and search it, take the black box and analyze it," said a representative of the Islamic State's Sinai-based affiliate in an audio message titled "We Downed It, So Die in Your

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Rage," released one day after the plane went down. "Tell us what you found in your investigation, show us your expertise and prove, if you can, that it wasn't us who took the plane down or how it fell."

A separate video, released by the Islamic State's affiliate in Nineveh, Iraq, also claimed responsibility. That video featured Russian-speaking members of the Islamic State, and reiterated that the attack was revenge for Russian airstrikes against Islamic State positions in Syria.

"I would like to congratulate our brothers from the Sinai peninsula for the downing of that cursed plane of the *Kafirs* (unbelievers) from Russia," a man says in Russian in the Ninevah video.

"I would like to address you Putin, you pig," the man says, raising a knife. "I would like to tell you that when you send your planes here, your people and your equipment to destroy our state and us, that you were deeply mistaken that you would not regret this and that your people would not regret this, and this plane is confirmation of that."

Three weeks later, the Islamic State released a picture of the device it said took down the plane in its Dabiq magazine.

In the aftermath of the incident, Moscow stopped all civilian flights to Egypt, a popular destination for Russian tourists. Russian President Vladamir Putin blamed the Islamic State for the attack and vowed to exact "retribution" on the group.

But, in December, Egypt's internal investigators claimed that no evidence existed to back up the IS-claim of responsibility.

"The technical investigative committee has so far not found anything indicating any illegal intervention or terrorist action," Egypt's Ministry of Civil Aviation reported at the time.

That assessment was directly contradicted by European, US, and Russian intelligence officials who said the evidence clearly pointed to an on-board bomb.

Egyptian media, which is closely monitored by the State, peddled a series of bizarre theories in the aftermath of the crash, suggesting the plane was taken down as part of an international conspiracy to undermine Egypt's standing in the world. Contradicting the government's official version of events on national security stories is a crime in Egypt that carries a fine of at least $25,000.

The bombing of the plane was the most visible sign that Egypt's longstanding campaign against IS was not going well. But the government goes to great lengths to portray that effort as a success — it regularly releases photos of corpses it says belong to IS militants, and is wary of admitting the group has the capabilities to bring down an international jet.

Egypt's Civil Aviation Authority, which was responsible for investigating the bombing, has yet to amend its report. But Wednesday's comments are the first indication that Egypt is open to changing its tone on the plane crash.

Such an admission may carry some consequences for the Egyptian government. Acknowledging that IS took down the plane is not only an admission of the group's strength — it also may open the door for victims families to seek compensation from Egypt, if the country's notoriously lax airport security carelessly allowed a bomb onboard the jet.

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