

Armenian Plane Traveling to Syria Searched in Turkey

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Turkey ordered an Armenian plane flying to the Syrian city of Aleppo to land and searched its cargo Monday, the latest move to prevent its airspace being used to supply the Syrian military.

The plane was allowed to continue on its way after the search in the eastern Turkish city of Erzurum confirmed that it was carrying humanitarian aid as stated by Armenian officials, a Turkish deputy prime minister said.

"The plane was ordered to land, and it was inspected. It was clear that the declaration was correct, and the plane was given permission to take off," Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc told reporters.

On Wednesday, Turkey forced down a Syrian airliner that had come from Moscow, and Turkish officials said they had found Russian munitions on board destined for Syria's armed forces.

NATO member Turkey has become increasingly assertive in challenging Syrian President

Bashar Assad in the face of growing tensions along the border. It banned all Syrian aircraft from its airspace in the wake of that incident.

A Foreign Ministry spokesman said Turkey has the sovereign right under the Chicago Convention on Civil Aviation to require planes crossing its airspace to make a "technical landing," but he did not say whether this right would be exercised in the future.

Armenia said it knew beforehand that the plane would be searched.

"The landing of the airplane in Turkey was planned, and it was carried out according to a previously reached agreement. The airplane is delivering humanitarian aid to Syria," Armenian Foreign Ministry spokesman Tigran Balayan said.

Last week's decision to force down and search the Syrian plane traveling from Russia infuriated Moscow and Damascus.

Russia has said that there were no weapons on the plane and that it was carrying a legal cargo of radar equipment. But Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov later said the incident would not hurt the countries' "solid" relations.

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said over the weekend that Turkish airspace had been closed to Syrian planes. Syria has also banned Turkish planes from flying over its territory.

The confrontation between Turkey and Syria has escalated in the last two weeks because of cross-border shelling, with Ankara retaliating after five Turkish civilians were killed when a Syrian shell hit a Turkish border town.

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