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IAF pilot says Malaysia jet did not malfunction

BY ANSHEL PFEFFER JERUSALEM

► "WHOEVER DID what was done there, he certainly knew what he was doing," said Eran Ramot, head of aviation research at the Fisher Institute for air and space strategic studies in Israel.

"The fact that both the transponders and Acars [automated air-ground reporting system] were shut off before the plane changed course is proof that whatever happened there wasn't the result of technical malfunction," added Lieutenant-Colonel (reserve) Ramot, a former combat pilot with the Israeli Air Force and commercial pilot for El Al. Lt-Col Ramot flew the Boeing 777-200ER, the same model as the Malaysian Airways MH370 flight that has been missing for almost two weeks, along with 239 passengers and crew members.

While mystery still shrouds the identities and motives of whoever caused the plane to break off contact and change course, one detail is now clear: The Boeing flew back, westwards, over Malaysian territory before continuing on an unknown course over the Indian Ocean, outside radar coverage.

Before disappearing, it appeared on the radar screens of Malaysian Air Force installations but, for some reason, the presence of a large, unidentified object in their airspace set off no alarm bells. Neither was any contact made between military and civilian air traffic controllers regarding a missing airliner until much later.

Such an oversight would be unthinkable in the airspace of any Western country, certainly in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, when one of the first

actions by the al-Qaeda hijackers was to switch off the transponders that broadcast the identity and location of civilian aircraft to air-traffic control centres.

"In Israel, and other Western countries, civilian and military controllers sit back-to-back in the same control towers and the information from both primary and secondary radars is fused into the same system," said Pinny Schiff, former head of the security division at the Israel Airports Authority.

Aircraft approaching Israel's coast are monitored hundreds of kilometres away and fighters are on 24-hour alert to intercept unidentified planes. If after establishing visual contact, a suspicious plane continues flying towards Israel, emergency procedures are in place so that authorisation can be obtained to shoot it down.



A Vietnam Air Force officer scans the sea during the search operation

PHOTO: AP