

Israel to use pilot ID system to foil suicide hijack

By Dan Williams

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JERUSALEM (Reuters) - Israel will this year issue all commercial airlines that fly to its territory with a locally invented pilot identification system designed to prevent September 11-style attacks, Israeli officials said on Tuesday.

Planes without the "Code Positive" system, which will be distributed free of charge as of May, will be turned back from Israeli airspace on pain of being shot down, an official said.

Israel is widely considered to have the world's most sophisticated aviation security. Such expertise has been in high demand abroad since al Qaeda squads hijacked American commuter jets and rammed them into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. The hijackers are assumed to have killed the pilots.

Danny Shenar, head of security at the Transportation Ministry, described Code Positive as a credit card-size device that is personally and exclusively assigned to each pilot, and carried aboard their flights. "Using this card, it will be possible to verify that the person flying the aircraft is indeed the person qualified to fly it," Shenar told Israel's Army Radio. "This system was developed to prevent aviation mega-terror over Israel, in the form of a plane coming through one of the borders and crashing into a target in Israel," he said. "The system should be operational by the end of the year.

"Code Positive was developed by Israeli firm Elbit Systems Ltd.. Shenar declined to elaborate on the specific technology involved for security reasons. But he said it would be impossible for a hijacker to force a pilot to hand over identifying details, or otherwise pose as a legitimate member of the flight crew. "You can't bluff this system," Shenar said. It was unclear from his remarks whether the system would send an alert if a pilot remained at the controls but was forced to follow hijackers' orders.

The U.S. government inquiry into the September 11 attacks said ground radio overheard orders apparently given by hijackers to their captive passengers over aircraft public address systems. Aviation security experts have speculated that the U.S. military might have responded to the threat more quickly were it not for delays such as in the time it took to determine that the voices were not those of the original pilots.

An Israeli security official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said a deadline would be set for all airlines that travel to Israel to ensure their pilots had Code Positive. "If they don't, their planes will not be allowed into our airspace, and we will respond accordingly to any planes that don't turn back in time," the official said, referring to Israeli regulations allowing suspected enemy aircraft to be fired upon.