US BLACKLISTS TWO BRITISH BUSINESSMEN FOR 'HELPING IRANIAN AIRLINE BEAT SANCTIONS'

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Mahan Air is accused of providing lifeline to Syria's Bashar al-Assad and ferrying elite Quds force to Damascus.

Two British businessmen have been blacklisted by the American government for allegedly helping an Iranian airline – accused of carrying arms and fighters to Syria – flout US terrorism sanctions.

The US Department of the Treasury said it was placing Jeffrey Ashfield, 65, of Sissinghurst, Kent, and John Meadows, 57, of Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex, on its sanctions list.

They are accused of assisting Mahan Air buy engines and spare parts, and to secure millions of dollars in financing.

Under the sanctions, their US assets will be frozen and American firms banned from doing business with the two men or their companies Aviation Capital Solutions and Aircraft, Avionics, Parts & Support (AAPS).

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Forces loyal to President Assad have a deliberate policy of targeting civilians in areas beyond government contr

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Mahan Air is accused of providing a lifeline to Syria's embattled Bashar al-Assad

The airline is one of the few operating flights in and out of Damascus, where it has been described as providing a lifeline to Bashar al-Assad throughout five years of civil war.

Aviation analysts say its flights observe no set timetable and often do not advertise their final destination.

It is not subject to European sanctions, and flies into Milan, Athens and other airports. But it remains on a US blacklist even after the nuclear deal in Vienna last year lifted restrictions on most other Iranian airlines.

It is accused by the US administration of shipping arms to the Syrian government, carrying members of the Quds Force, the foreign operations unit of the Revolutionary Guard, and helping transport Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia militia which Washington has designated as a terrorist organisation.

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An undated file photograph of Qassem Suleimani, retrieved from the web in 2011

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The Iranian Revolutionary Guard's Qassem Suleimani: ?the single most powerful operative in the idle East today". Photo: Seyed Shahaboddin Vajedi

“Mahan Air also continues to support the Iranian government’s destabilising actions in the region by conducting flights to Syria in order to transport fighters,” said the Treasury in its designation.

It said Mr Ashfield, and his company, had negotiated the purchase of American aircraft engines for Mahan Air.

AAPS, of which Mr Meadows is the UK director, had worked to provide aviation parts and millions of dollars in financing to the airline.

Both companies are listed at the same address in Bexhill and neither could immediately be reached for comment.

They are both also under investigation by the US for their alleged role in re-exporting two Boeing 737s from The Gambia to Caspian Airlines, another Iranian carrier, via Romania.

The latest sanctions demonstrate a shift towards a tougher stance on Iran, and came at the same time as the US announced computer hacking charges against seven Iranians working for firms linked to the Iranian government, accusing them of infiltrating dozens of American banks and a major New York dam.

In making the announcement, Adam J Szubin, Acting Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, said: “We will continue to use all of our tools to counteract Iran’s ballistic missile program and support for terrorism, including through sanctions.”

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