

Debka: Conflict's Drudge Report?

<http://www.wired.com/politics/law/news/2001/10/47325?currentPage=all>

April 23, 2013

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The Iraqis are training Osama bin Laden's troops in chemical and biological weapons; Russian commando units packing newly acquired American arms are poised to storm Afghanistan; Israel is about to be charged with damaging the mosques on Jerusalem's contested Temple Mount.

Stories like these are making the free-wheeling Israeli news site Debkafile an increasingly popular destination for Americans looking for the inside scoop on the conflict with terrorism.

Offered in Hebrew and English, [Debkafile](#) offers a blend of anonymous tips, unsubstantiated rumors and chilling, detail-laden stories on Middle Eastern military, intelligence, diplomatic, and terrorist matters.

The result isn't much to look at, but Debkafile is beating out big-name American and international news sources on several key stories and attracting flocks of new readers in the process.

Daily visitors to the site have increased threefold in the last month to 120,000, according to Debkafile editor -- and former *Economist* foreign affairs reporter -- Giora Shamis. Americans now make up over 60 percent of Debka's audience, as opposed to less than 45 percent before the current crisis began.

"There's so much confusion, so many parts of the story, and so much we don't know that you've got to be aware of unusual sources like Debka," said Sreenath Sreenivasan, a new media professor at Columbia University's [School of Journalism](#).

John Ghazivinian, an editor at news professionals' site [Mediabistro](#), added, "There's a real strong sense that the mainstream media have scaled back their operations so much that they're basically incapable of covering this from the ground."

Debkafile -- based in the Jerusalem neighborhood of French Hill, equidistant from both Palestinian villages and the walls of the Old City -- has shown an ability to get that kind of coverage. *USA Today*, CNN and NBC all reported last Friday that American and British forces were in Afghanistan scouting out terrorist hiding places; Debkafile had the same story days earlier, and included details about Russian intelligence officers and German commandos joining in the incursions.

On the Saturday before, Debkafile ran a story that Saudi Arabia had refused to let the U.S. use its air bases to stage attacks on Afghanistan; it took *The New York Times* another two days to report this information.

Like the Drudge Report, which it resembles, Debkafile clearly reports with a point of view; the site is unabashedly in the hawkish camp of Israeli politics and has partnered with the far-right news site WorldNetDaily for a weekly, \$120 subscription product.

That slant, combined with Debkafile's breakneck pace -- its eight-person staff updates the site as often as 5 or 6 times per day with terse, one-line tips and sparse news briefs -- means it often airs unfounded, inaccurate rumors while breaking legitimate news.

On Thursday at 10:47 a.m. EDT, Debkafile trumpeted in a headline that "U.S. Pentagon Sources Report Siberian Airways Tel Aviv-Novosibirsk Flight Crash Thursday Was Caused by Missile Fired

from Russian Ground by Terrorists."

Mainstream outlets, such as the Associated Press and CNN, shied away from the terror angle when reporting the plane crash. MSNBC said that there may be "indicators" that the flight "might" have been downed by terrorists.

Less than two hours later, at 12:20 p.m. EDT, Debkafile had changed its tune.

"A Misfired Ukrainian Missile or Projectile Appears Now to Have Caused the Siberian Airways Tel-Aviv-Novosibirsk Flight to Plunge into the Black Sea Thursday," the Debka headline stated. "The Disaster Occurred as the Ukrainian-Russian Navies Conducted a Sea Exercise off Crimean Coast. This Latest Report Lays to Rest Wild Rumors of Terrorist Attack Causing the Tu-154 to Crash."

Such missteps don't seem to bother the site's increasingly loyal band of readers.

"Not everything Debka says is going to be confirmed, but I guarantee you three days later you'll find at least one item in *The New York Times*," said Greg Clayman, a New York City Internet marketing executive. "When (White House press secretary) Ari Fleischer tells the mainstream media, 'Watch what you say,' you've got to look for other sources."