

Photo: European Air Transport Leipzig / DHL Boeing 757 at Leipzig/Halle · MarcelX42 · CC BY-SA 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons

OSINT · SITUATION ASSESSMENT

CLOSED ON A SIGHTING

Since 2018, drone reports have closed some of Europe's busiest runways for hours at a time, and in August 2026 an explosive-laden drone reached the apron at Leipzig/Halle. The striking pattern is not that airports lack ways to shoot drones down. It is that they often cannot say for certain whether a drone was there at all. This report looks at why, and at what an airport needs to know in the first five minutes.

REPORT DETAILS

PUBLISHED	SUBJECT	SOURCE BASE
October 2026	Why drone sightings close airports, and what airport detection lacks	Incident records and press reporting, government statements, FAA testing programme
METHOD	**VERDICT**	**CONFIDENCE**
Compare incidents by what was detected, confirmed and recovered	The common failure is confirmation, not interception	Moderate
AUTHOR		
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BOTTOM LINE

Airports close for drones because they cannot tell, quickly and with confidence, whether a drone is there and where it is. At Gatwick in 2018, about 140,000 passengers were stranded by sightings that produced no photograph, video or recovered drone. In autumn 2025 a wave of reports closed Copenhagen, Oslo, Munich, Brussels and other airports; nine months later Danish police said they could neither prove nor rule out the Copenhagen drones. Then in August 2026 a real drone carrying explosives reached the apron at Leipzig/Halle, reportedly unseen by the airport's anti-drone system. In every case, the airport needed to confirm and locate a drone within minutes, with sensors that did not depend on the drone transmitting.

≈ 140,000

PASSENGERS HIT BY GATWICK'S 2018 DRONE CLOSURE

◆ NO DRONE EVIDENCE EVER PRODUCED

≈ 9,500

PASSENGERS AFFECTED BY MUNICH'S TWO CLOSURES

◆ 2 AND 3 OCTOBER 2025

9 months

BEFORE COPENHAGEN POLICE SAID THEY COULD NEITHER PROVE NOR DENY THE DRONES

◆ SEPTEMBER 2025 SIGHTINGS

KEY QUESTIONS

Why do airports close when drones are reported?

Because a collision with an aircraft on approach or take-off could be catastrophic, and most airports cannot quickly confirm or rule out a drone. Without reliable detection and location, the safe response to a credible sighting is to stop flights.

Can airport anti-drone systems miss a drone?

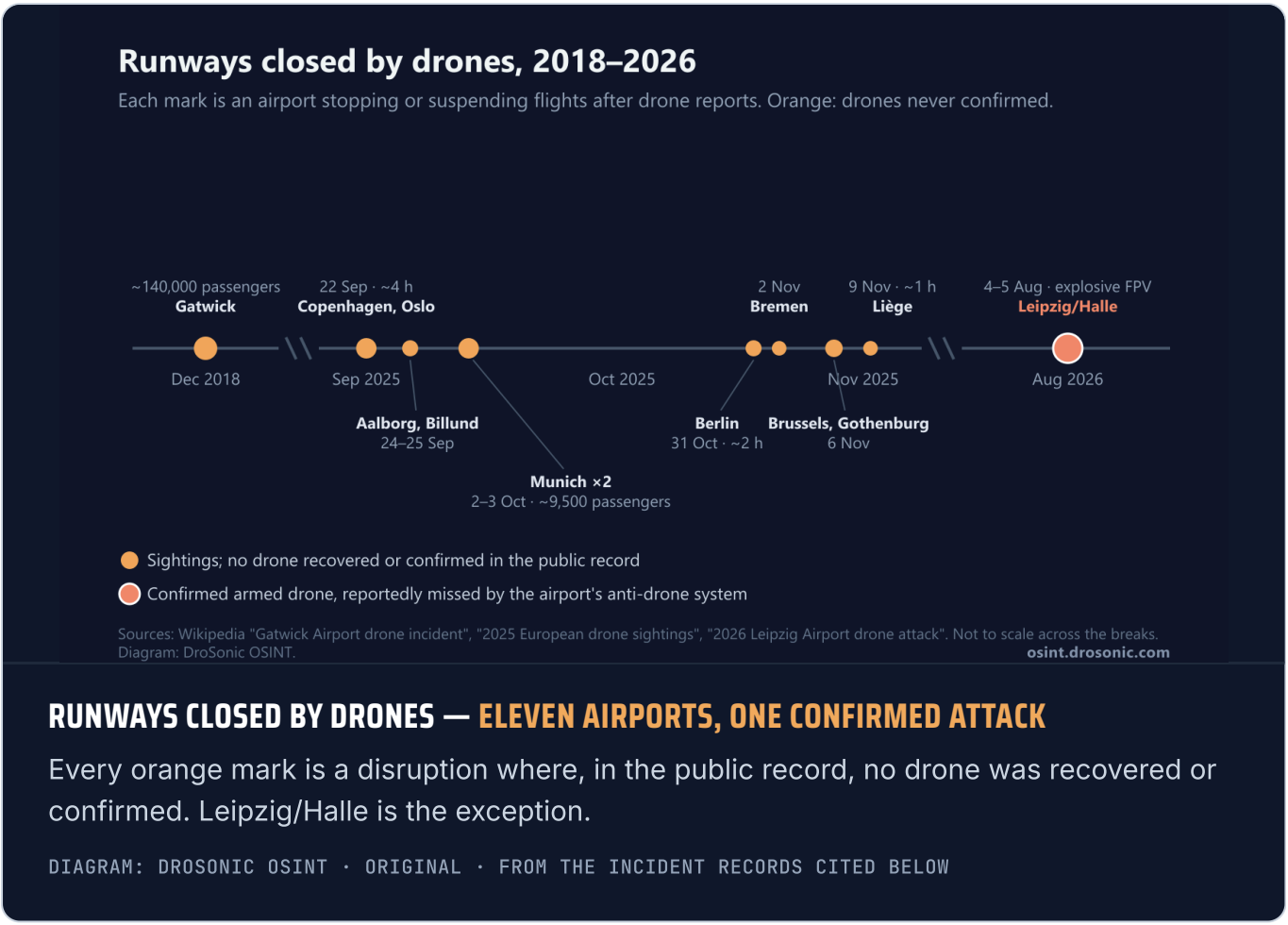
Yes. At Leipzig/Halle in August 2026, reports say a drone flew over the airport undetected because a SIM card made it look like an ordinary mobile phone to the airport's anti-drone system. Systems that listen only for drone radio links miss drones that don't use them.

THE RULER — THE WHOLE ARGUMENT

Four airports, one failure

INCIDENT	WHAT HAPPENED	WHAT COULD BE CONFIRMED
GATWICK DEC 2018	Runway closed on and off over three days; ~1,000 flights affected	Visual sightings only; no drone evidence produced
COPENHAGEN AND OSLO SEP 2025	Copenhagen closed about four hours; Oslo closed the same night	Police later could neither prove nor deny the drones
MUNICH OCT 2025	Two closures in 24 hours; ~3,000 then ~6,500 passengers affected	No drone identified or recovered
LEIPZIG/HALLE AUG 2026 NEW	Explosive drone found by a Ukrainian An-124; a freighter struck on approach	A real attack, reportedly missed by the airport's anti-drone system

THE FIRST CONFIRMED ARMED DRONE AT A EUROPEAN AIRPORT IN THIS SAMPLE · SOURCES BELOW



RUNWAYS CLOSED BY DRONES — ELEVEN AIRPORTS, ONE CONFIRMED ATTACK

Every orange mark is a disruption where, in the public record, no drone was recovered or confirmed. Leipzig/Halle is the exception.

DIAGRAM: DROSONIC OSINT · ORIGINAL · FROM THE INCIDENT RECORDS CITED BELOW

FIELD 01 — THE PATTERN

Sightings without confirmation

The template was set at **Gatwick**. Between 19 and 21 December 2018, reported drone sightings closed the runway repeatedly, affecting about 1,000 flights and 140,000 passengers. The reports were visual, from security staff and police. No photographs or video of a drone emerged, and the investigation closed without identifying anyone responsible. [Wikipedia↗] Gatwick then spent about £5 million on counter-drone equipment.

Autumn 2025 repeated the pattern across northern Europe. **Copenhagen** suspended flights for nearly four hours on 22 September after reports of large drones; **Oslo** closed the same night; **Aalborg** and **Billund** followed within days. **Munich** stopped flights twice in 24 hours on 2 and 3 October, affecting about 3,000 and then 6,500 passengers.

Berlin, **Bremen**, **Brussels** and **Liège** were disrupted in October and November. Wikipedia↗ Danish authorities called the activity a likely hybrid operation. Yet in June 2026 Copenhagen police said they had been unable either to prove or to deny that drones were over the airport on 22 September. Wikipedia↗

> **Each closure was the safe call. Each one also showed an airport that could not see what it was closing for.**



GATWICK — CLOSED FOR THREE DAYS IN 2018

Britain's second-busiest airport, then the world's busiest single-runway airport.

PHOTO: MIKE MCBEY · CC BY 2.0 · WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



COPENHAGEN — FOUR HOURS, SEPTEMBER 2025

Nine months later police could neither prove nor deny that drones had been there.

PHOTO: THOMAS WOODTLI · CC BY 2.0 · WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



VIDEO: PLAY IT IN THE ONLINE REPORT

A DRONE OVER THE APRON — MELBOURNE AIRPORT, 2020

Footage published under the title "Airport drone flight at Melbourne Airport in restricted airspace", filmed in April 2020 when the airport was nearly empty. It shows how close a small consumer drone can get to parked airliners. We show it as an illustration of the risk, not an endorsement.

VIDEO: BISON UNITED · CC BY 3.0 · WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

FIELD 02 — THE REAL THING

Leipzig/Halle, August 2026

On the night of 4–5 August 2026, a quadcopter FPV drone carrying explosives was found on the grounds of **Leipzig/Halle Airport** near an empty Ukrainian An-124 cargo aircraft. A second object struck a freighter that had aborted its landing because the runway was closed. Germany's interior minister called it a "new quality of danger". Al Jazeera↗ On 1 September Germany formally blamed Russia, saying investigators had proof the operators worked on behalf of Russian state entities. Moscow rejected the accusation. Al Jazeera↗

The detection detail matters most. According to reporting compiled on the incident, the drone was controlled over the mobile network through a SIM card, which made it look like an ordinary phone to the airport's anti-drone system, and the system reportedly failed to detect it.[Wikipedia↗] A sensor that looks for drone radio links is blind to a drone that doesn't use them, the same gap fibre-optic drones exploit on the battlefield.



MUNICH AIRPORT — TWO CLOSURES IN 24 HOURS

In October 2025 drone sightings stopped flights twice in two days, affecting about 9,500 passengers in total.

PHOTO: VASYATKA1 · CC BY-SA 4.0 · WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

FIELD 03 — WHY IT IS HARD

The airport sensing problem

An airport is close to the worst place to find a small drone:

— **Radar is tuned for aircraft.** Airport surveillance radars track large, cooperative aircraft; a bird-sized drone below a few hundred metres is exactly what they filter out (see Parts 2–5 of our radar series).

— **RF detection depends on the drone transmitting.** It catches consumer drones on standard links. It misses drones using mobile networks, fibre-optic cable or pre-programmed routes. Leipzig showed the first; the war in Ukraine shows the others.

— **Witnesses disagree.** Lights, aircraft, stars and other drones produce credible-sounding reports that cannot be checked in the dark.

— **The perimeter is huge.** Approach and departure paths extend kilometres beyond the fence, over land the airport does not control.

In the United States, the FAA has been testing drone-detection systems at airports, including Atlantic City, JFK, Denver and Dallas/Fort Worth, with the aim of setting minimum performance standards for any system used in or around U.S. airports.[Vertical Magazine↗] Since July 2026, trained U.S. state and local police can also be certified to detect, and in some cases disable, drones under the SAFER SKIES Act, passed with the FY2026 defence bill (our report Allowed to Listen, Not to Shoot explains what it permits).[Crowell & Moring↗]

FIELD 04 — WHAT AN AIRPORT NEEDS

The first five minutes

Our assessment of what an airport needs when a drone is reported:

1. **Confirmation.** Is there a drone? A second, independent sensor turns a sighting into a fact, or rules it out, and keeps runways open on false alarms.
2. **Location and track.** Where is it, how high, and where is it heading? That decides whether approaches must stop or just one runway.
3. **Classification.** Is it a small hobby quadcopter, a fixed-wing, something heavier?
4. **Sensors that don't need the drone's cooperation.** Detection that works whether the drone uses standard radio, a mobile network, fibre or autopilot. That means radar tuned for small targets, optical/infrared and acoustic sensing. Passive sensors have a further advantage at an airfield, because they add no transmitter to its crowded radio spectrum.
5. **A record.** Data that investigators can use afterwards, so the next Copenhagen does not end with "neither proved nor denied".

CONFIDENCE

How sure we are, and what would change it

High confidence in the incident record (dates, closures, passenger numbers) from multiple press and official sources.

Moderate confidence in the Leipzig detection details: reporting says the airport's anti-drone system missed the SIM-controlled drone, but the official investigation has not published its findings, and accounts differ on some details.

Our assessment is that confirmation and location, not interception, is the main capability gap at airports.

DROSONIC — OUR APPROACH

Confirmation in the first five minutes

The failure this report describes is an inability to confirm what was seen. DroSonic builds networked passive acoustic sensors that detect, classify and locate drones by sound, using neural networks on low-cost edge hardware. They only listen, so they add no transmitter to an airfield. DroSonic↗ Around a runway, a sound classification is a second, independent check on a sighting or a radar track.

DroSonic's U.S. provisional patent application covers detection, classification, localisation and tiered defeat cueing. DroSonic↗ A prototype was tested against live drones at the DIRT Days 26.04 field exercise in September 2026. DroSonic↗ No airport trial has been published.



DIRT DAYS 26.04 — A SECOND CHECK ON A SIGHTING

DroSonic's test position at the field exercise. At an airport, the question is the same: is that really a drone?

PHOTO: DROSONIC · FIELD-TEST WRITE-UP

CLOSE — WHAT IT MEANS

Keep the runway open by knowing

Every closure in this record was a reasonable decision made in the dark. The cost of that darkness is counted in diverted flights and stranded passengers, and at Leipzig it came close to being counted in aircraft. Before any weapon, what an airport needs is a way to confirm, locate and classify a drone within minutes, whatever its control link.

Passive acoustic sensors are part of that picture. They hear drones that transmit nothing, emit nothing that could interfere with airport systems, and can ring a perimeter or an approach path cheaply. Our explainer What a Microphone Can Hear covers their range and limits. At DroSonic we build them for exactly this kind of critical-infrastructure perimeter.

ABOUT DROSONIC

DroSonic builds passive acoustic drone detection: networked sensors that listen for drones instead of their radio signals, using acoustic AI and edge computing. DroSonic OSINT is our open-source research into the threat that technology is built to meet.

THE RECORD SO FAR

OCT 2026	Joined the SOF RACER consortium, which connects USSOCOM with commercial technology companies
SEPT 2026	Prototype tested against live drones at DIRT Days 26.04, a field exercise supported by CMI2 with U.S. Central Command and U.S. Army DEVCOM
SEPT 2026	Technical presentation at NDIA's Emerging Technologies for Defense conference on detecting fibre-optic and radio-silent drones
SEPT 2026	Filed U.S. provisional patent 64/148,522 on passive acoustic detection, classification, localisation and defeat cueing
JUL 2026	Pitched to the U.S. Space Force at Space Systems Command's Reverse Industry Engagement Day, Colorado Springs

How DroSonic detection works → · Where it is used → · Talk to the team →

THIS REPORT ONLINE

https://osint.drosonic.com/assessments/airport-drone-detection-gap.html

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DroSonic OSINT: open-source assessments on drones and counter-UAS from DroSonic, passive acoustic drone detection. drosonic.com · sudo@drosonic.com



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Ghulam Mujtaba, Ph.D., is the founder and CEO of DroSonic and leads its work on passive acoustic drone detection. A computer engineer with 13 years of experience building machine-learning systems for edge hardware, he holds a Ph.D. in computer engineering from Gachon University in South Korea, was an NSF postdoctoral fellow at West Virginia University in the United States, and is an Assistant Professor of AI and Data Science at Regis University in Denver, Colorado. An IEEE Senior Member, he has published more than 20 papers on deep learning, computer vision and multimedia for edge devices.

PROFILE ↗ LINKEDIN ↗ ORCID ↗

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