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Transit in Limbo: When the Gulf Aviation Hub Becomes a No-Fly Zone

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Sharique Umar

Transit in Limbo: When the Gulf Aviation Hub Becomes a No-Fly Zone[1]

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We have long understood the Suez Canal as the world's primary economic artery, a narrow strip of water where the grounding of a single vessel, the *Ever Given*, froze $10 billion in daily trade and paralyzed global supply chains for six days in 2021. But since February 28, 2026, when the U.S. and Israel attacked Iran, we are witnessing the suspension of an even more important, albeit invisible, choke point, i.e., Gulf aviation hubs. The unprecedented scale of this military disruption is delivering a staggering blow to global movement in real time. In the first week of the conflict alone, over 23,000 flights were cancelled, and more than 30,000 transit passengers were stranded across terminals in Doha, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi.

GCC countries, primarily Qatar, the UAE, and their neighbors, have the highest share of all connecting traffic. They act as a transit point for the majority of the world's population. By forcing the closure of this airspace, the war has interrupted connections between East and West and trapped thousands of passengers at airport terminals across the region. The escalation of the ongoing war shows that these hubs have transitioned from regional airstrips into global common utilities, and, for this reason, their security has become synonymous with global stability.

The Gulf Aviation Hub

The development of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states in the 21st century is based on statecraft in which economy and infrastructure take centre stage. GCC countries, such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, have constructed some of the world's busiest super-hubs by positioning their national carriers at the core of global aviation. The airline sector is a cornerstone of the UAE's non-oil economy and accounts for 18.2% of national GDP. Similarly, the aviation sector in Qatar, which is the bedrock for the Third National Development Strategy (2024–2030), contributes around 11 percent of the country's GDP.

In order to get a bigger picture of the scale of the ongoing problem, we ought to look at the volume of international travel that these aviation nodes handle. In the year 2025, Dubai International Airport (DXB) processed a record 95.2 million passengers, while

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Hamad International Airport (DOH) in Doha handled around 54.3 million, and Zayed International Airport (AUH) in Abu Dhabi recently crossed the 33 million mark. In these "hub-and-spoke" economies, transit passengers play an important role in national diversification strategies. At DOH, 74% of all passengers are transfer traffic, while at DXB, nearly half of all travelers are connecting through the hub. Transit passengers also represent "captive retail," i.e., a segment that drives the world's highest duty-free revenues. Every year, millions of passengers transiting through these terminals utilize high-value services, from retail and hospitality to finance and cargo logistics. In 2025, DXB's Duty Free generated an estimated US$2.378 billion, while the revenue at DOH was around $977.2 million.

Lately, the strategy of these countries has shifted towards converting transit into short-stay tourists through digital stopover visas. In Qatar, a successful stopover program is estimated to save travelers 8.1% in airfare compared to Dubai. The country is encouraging millions of transiting individuals to exit the terminal and spend in the local hospitality, retail, and entertainment sectors.

Due to the consistent flow of passengers, airlines operating in the region enjoy some of the highest profit margins in the world. Before the conflict began, the carriers in the region were expected to deliver a projected return of 9.3% for 2026. An interrupted airspace, for these reasons, is close to a direct assault on the economic sovereignty of these countries.

The Hub as a Liability

The Gulf carriers have developed a global aviation architecture into an efficient hub-and-spoke model with an aim to minimize the obstacle of distance. Nonetheless, the current conflict demonstrates that this efficiency is built upon a foundation of structural dependency. In the case of an event such as what we are witnessing currently, when high-centrality nodes like Dubai or Doha are removed from the network, the system experiences a phase of shock. In this sense, the GCC's unique asset, its status as the world's crossroad, has also become its systemic liability. Because the global "Space of Flows," to borrow from Manuel Castells, has been so heavily channelled through these specific geographic coordinates, the militarization of this airspace risks de-integrating the global circuit. Besides that, there are thousands of passengers currently stranded in these terminals. The ongoing crisis has turned the transit lounge from a luxury retail space into an anxiety lounge.

For decades, the international community operated under a tacit consensus that the transit corridors of the Gulf were a neutral utility, in other words, a high-altitude global common. This was the invisible trust that allowed

a passenger in London to book a ticket to Sydney with a 90-minute layover in Doha without a second thought about the geopolitics of the region. However, as this consensus erodes, we are likely to see a significant "de-hubbing" of global routes, as travelers would increasingly opt for more expensive, less efficient routes that bypass the Middle Eastern corridor entirely.

Nevertheless, the response from these hubs has been noteworthy in crisis management. Since the start of the war, DXB and DOH coordinated the emergency placement of passengers into local hotels, while Qatar and the UAE bypassed standard immigration protocols to extend visit visas by one month and removed any fines for overstaying. Airlines like Emirates and Qatar Airways deployed additional ground staff specifically to manage the "limbo" of the terminal and provided complimentary meals daily to those caught in the conflict. Saudi authorities also played an important role in alleviating the pressure on the network by facilitating the land transit of thousands of travelers from Qatar to Riyadh. From there, passengers were able to continue their journeys via King Khalid International Airport.

Conclusion

The paralysis of the Gulf's flight corridors is a direct challenge to the economic sovereignty of the GCC. These countries have spent decades developing the Gulf hub to serve as a bridge between East and West. They have embedded the aviation sector into a core pillar of national development. The UAE's "We the UAE 2031" and Qatar's "Third National Development Strategy" have made these hubs the engines of a post-oil future. However, the disruption has proven that the GCC's centrality is a double-edged sword. While it has brought unprecedented prosperity, it has also turned the region into a global focal point of risk.

This vulnerability is, in part, a failure of global responsibility. It is reckless of the United States to have initiated the escalation with a disregard for the world's primary transit arteries. By prioritizing its political objectives without weighing the interests of the Gulf states or the resulting chaos for millions of global travelers, it has undermined its own standing as a guarantor of international stability. However, the response to this crisis shows that GCC countries are committed to maintaining this super-connector status. If the Gulf is to remain the global common of the 21st century, the international community must recognize that the security of these skies is now synonymous with the stability of the global economy.

GULF AIR TRAFFIC BEFORE

GULF AIR TRAFFIC AFTER

About the author

Sharique Umar is a PhD candidate and a graduate assistant at the Gulf Studies Program at Qatar University.

About the Gulf Insights series

The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff PhD and MA students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

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