

Airlines cut capacity as ME conflict disrupts global travel plans

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Dhaka: Airlines around the world are scaling back flights and adjusting schedules ahead of the busy summer travel season, as ongoing instability in the Middle East continues to ripple across global aviation markets.

New schedule data comparing April filings with earlier February plans shows a sharp decline in capacity, particularly in the Middle East, where airlines have cut nearly 35 percent of flights for May. While a ceasefire has brought some cautious optimism, carriers are still operating under significant uncertainty and keeping schedules flexible.

The disruption is not confined to the region. Markets linked to Middle Eastern carriers are also feeling the effects. Eastern Europe has seen notable reductions, driven in part by cuts from airlines such as Air Arabia and flydubai, which have reduced their planned May capacity by

roughly one-third and over 40 percent respectively.

Asia has also been affected. Capacity is down nearly 10 percent in South Asia and more than 8 percent in Southeast Asia, reflecting both reduced connectivity and cautious demand forecasts. In contrast, Central Asia is emerging as a rare bright spot, with capacity up 10 percent in May. Indian carrier IndiGo is driving much of that growth as it expands its footprint in the region.

Looking ahead, airlines appear to be planning in short cycles. June projections show only modest growth in a handful of regions, including North Africa and Northeast Asia. By July, however, more markets are expected to rebound, suggesting that airlines are working with a rolling six-week planning window—allowing them to quickly restore flights if conditions stabilize.

Middle Eastern airlines remain the most affected overall, though many are still planning to operate at least two-thirds of their original schedules. Qatar Airways, for example, is projecting an 18 percent reduction in June capacity, a significant cut during what is typically a peak travel period.

Not all capacity changes are tied directly to the conflict. In the United States, Spirit Airlines has reduced its May capacity by 40 percent as part of an internal restructuring effort. Meanwhile, Vietnam's VietJet Air has cut nearly 30 percent of its capacity due to fuel shortages, a move expected to push up passenger load factors.

Industry analysts said, the data highlights how quickly airlines are adapting to external pressures. With geopolitical risks, operational challenges, and shifting demand all in play, flexibility has become essential.

Despite the disruptions, there is cautious hope for recovery. If conditions improve, airlines could restore much of their capacity in time for the peak summer season. For now, however, uncertainty remains the defining factor shaping global air travel.

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