

Saudi Arabia opens airspace to Israeli flights

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Dhaka: Saudi Arabia announced on September 2 that it would allow any flights going to and from the United Arab Emirates to fly over its territory, a move that would give Israel access to some of the kingdom's airspace for the first time.

The announcement, made at the request of the United Arab Emirates, came days after the first direct flight from Israel to the emirates – a symbolic move as the two nations begin normalising relations.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, in a video statement delivered while standing in front of a map of the region, called the announcement a “tremendous breakthrough”.

“Flights will be cheaper and shorter, and it will lead to robust tourism and develop our economy,” Netanyahu said, while tracing the route between Tel Aviv and Abu Dhabi with his finger on the map.

He also said the route would allow Israelis to save time and money when travelling

east to Asia. “These are the benefits of a peace that is genuine,” he added.

The flight from Tel Aviv to Abu Dhabi on August 31 passed through Saudi airspace, the first time the kingdom had explicitly allowed an Israeli commercial jet to pass over its territory.

Air India had earlier received approval to fly directly to Israel, and in 2018 established a direct route from New Delhi to Tel Aviv that passed over the kingdom.

Saudi Arabia’s decision to officially allow flights to and from Israel from the United Arab Emirates makes the route more commercially viable, cutting a nearly seven-hour journey in half.

The flight on August 31 was the latest sign of growing diplomatic and commercial ties between Israel and the United Arab Emirates that some hope will lead to similar moves in other Arab nations that have long refused to recognise the Jewish state.

A landmark agreement came after six weeks of indirect talks between Israel and the emirates, with Jared Kushner, President Trump’s son-in-law and senior adviser, playing a central role.

Netanyahu thanked Kushner and Mohammed bin Zayed, the crown prince of the emirate of Abu Dhabi, for the “important contribution” toward opening up the airspace, adding that there would “be a great deal more good news to come”.

The Saudi announcement in the country’s official press agency refers to allowing “all flights” to pass through its airspace, but makes no direct reference to Iran or Qatar, two nations currently banned from flying over the kingdom.

The announcement appears to refer only to the commencement of commercial flights between Israel and the emirates, and said the decision was a response to a “request by the UAE”.

Saudi officials were quick to affirm that the change in rules in its airspace did not signal any departure from its current stance on the Israel-Palestinian issue.