



UAE'S TOP AVIATION AUTHORITY URGES PRESERVATION OF EUROPEAN AIR DEALS AHEAD OF AIRLINE ACCESS TALKS

News / Airlines



The **UAE's top aviation authority** on Tuesday stressed the need to **preserve bilateral air deals in Europe** while discussions over a broader aviation package are under way.

The European Commission is set to ask member states for a mandate to initiate airline access talks with Arabian Gulf countries when it presents an aviation package on December 2.

Gulf carriers fear pressure from some rival European airlines and their governments could mean that the planned aviation package becomes a tool to tackle what they allege to be unfair subsidies.

They want to ensure that their flying rights under existing bilateral agreements with European countries are not thrown into jeopardy by a new aviation policy.

A delegation including the UAE General Civil Aviation Authority, led by Sultan Al Mansouri, the Minister of Economy, last week met with officials at the European parliament in Brussels amid growing fears that regional carriers have been distracted by their ongoing spat with US rivals while

a potentially bigger storm is brewing in Europe.

“The UAE recognises the tremendous economic benefits of international air transport and hopes that EU institutions will continue to foster its air transport relations with the UAE,” said Laila Hareb, the assistant director general for strategy and international affairs at the UAE General Civil Aviation Authority.

She said the government was committed to achieving a “fully liberal, open comprehensive EU aviation agreement” and that it would in parallel continue to “aim to enhance our existing bilateral air services arrangements independently ... as the economic benefits arising out of enhanced connectivity should not be suppressed”.

The rapid growth of Emirates Airways, Qatar Airways and Etihad Airways across Europe and the United States has triggered tensions with some of their biggest competitors on either side of the Atlantic. Both sides have spent heavily on engaging lobbyists to further their agendas. All three Gulf carriers deny that they benefit from government subsidies.

For the last year the main focus has been on the US, but in recent weeks regional carriers have become increasingly alarmed over the possibility that their flying rights in Europe might be curtailed.

Those fears came to a head at the Dubai Airshow last week when Akbar Al Baker, the outspoken chief executive of Qatar Airways, said rivals such as Germany’s Lufthansa and Air France-KLM feared competition.

“They don’t want competition because the competition is with higher quality than the product they have,” he said.

The European transport commissioner, Violeta Bulc, sought to assuage the concerns of regional governments and their carriers when she arrived in Dubai last week for a series of meetings where she also flagged up potential cooperation and partnerships in the rail and maritime sectors.

But that did not distract from the real focus of her discussions with officials.

In an exclusive interview, she said she wanted Arabian Gulf carriers to be part of a single European skies policy but that they would have to “play by the rules”.

Worries that the new aviation package could threaten existing routes has already provoked a response from Emirates.

The Dubai-based airline wrote to several European governments to express concern that its flying rights could be frozen if the European Commission was permitted to use aviation negotiations as a platform to challenge alleged subsidies, Reuters reported on Sunday.

In a letter to Hungary, Tim Clark, the president of Emirates, said handing power to the commission to initiate talks “on the wrong terms” would undermine connectivity and tourism growth in Europe, Reuters reported.

An Emirates spokesperson said on Tuesday: “Emirates regularly engages with government organisations around the world on various matters, and we do not wish to discuss details of specific communications. Today, we connect over 30 cities in the EU28 to the UAE and beyond, offering European travellers more than 200 unique direct connections to Dubai and other destinations in our global network, and we remain committed to developing with European

connectivity.”

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