

UAE opens airspace and borders with Qatar after nearly four years

At the GCC Summit on January 5, Saudi Arabia announced that it had reached a breakthrough in its rift and subsequent boycott of Qatar, which has been in place since mid-2017. The Kingdom immediately opened its land borders to the formerly isolated country, with an announcement that airspace, air and sea borders would open soon thereafter. Saudi Arabia stated it would restore diplomatic ties and that its allies would follow suit. Qatar Airways has already rerouted some flights through Saudi airspace; the first flight to travel over Saudi Arabia was a flight from Doha to Johannesburg, South Africa on Thursday.

On Friday January 9, the United Arab Emirates announced that it too would open its borders and airspace to Qatar, to take effect on Saturday January 10, though it suggested that its restoration of full diplomatic relations with Qatar would take longer, because the federation holds deeper concerns with Qatar than does Saudi Arabia.

This announcement was met with expressions of joy in the UAE, as many there have close ties with people and businesses in Qatar.

Regional connectivity

Egypt and Bahrain have also both announced plans to open airspace and ease the boycott, dependent on negotiations.

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) has stated that it welcomes the signing of the agreement that will see all borders open between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE and Egypt, paving the way for commercial airlines to resume regional connectivity, reducing flight times and providing essential air links to families and businesses across the region. Additionally, the reopening of Saudi and Emirati airspace to Qatar is critical as the country prepares to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

UAE airlines looking forward to recommencing flights

As of writing, UAE airlines have not announced any date to resume flights to Qatar, but Abu Dhabi's Etihad Airways made a forward-looking statement: "As airspace reopens, Etihad looks forward to recommencing services between Abu Dhabi and Doha and once again, supporting growth of trade and tourism between the two nations. Etihad will announce any developments when confirmed," said a spokesperson.

The president of the United Nations' civil aviation arm, Salvatore Sciacchitano, welcomed the easing of Gulf airspace restrictions on Thursday, saying the resolution would "help assure the important socio-economic benefits of international air connectivity can be better optimized."