# Airlines adapt to escalating conflict risks with new route strategies and safety concerns



Airlines are facing unprecedented challenges as global conflicts escalate, creating a complex landscape for commercial aviation. Industry executives have warned that rising tensions have not only strained operations but also impacted profitability. Issues such as missile and drone threats, simultaneous airspace closures, and navigation disruptions are leading to increased operational costs and a loss of market share due to flight cancellations and costly rerouting.

In particular, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which intensified in October 2023, has forced airlines to navigate airspace fraught with the danger of missile strikes. Reports indicate that these missile barrages have at times come disturbingly close to commercial flights, alarming passengers and crews alike. This precarious situation has been exacerbated by the volatility of regions already known for conflict, including Russia, Ukraine, parts of the Middle East, and Africa. Guy Murray, the aviation security leader at TUI Airlines, noted that "flight planning in this kind of environment is extremely difficult," emphasising that the airline industry thrives on predictability—a precious commodity increasingly hard to come by.

The pressures are mounting with the significant reduction in viable air corridors. Mark Zee, founder of OPSGROUP, a network for aviation professionals, highlighted that more than half of the countries typically overflown on Europe-Asia routes now require careful scrutiny before a flight can proceed. This raises the spectre of costly delays and financial strain on airlines that must now recalculate operational strategies.

In addition to these logistical hurdles, the aviation industry is also confronting significant safety concerns. Accidents, such as the December downing of an Azerbaijan Airlines flight by Russian defence systems, serve as stark reminders of the threats in conflict zones. IATA’s Director General, Willie Walsh, has emphasised the urgent need for greater information-sharing among governments to bolster aviation safety, especially as the risk landscape continues to change.

Financial repercussions are also being felt across the industry. With airspace closures impacting not only Western carriers but also airlines from China and India, the competitive disadvantages are stark. Airlines like Singapore Airlines have been compelled to alter their flight paths multiple times in just over a year to navigate these turbulent environments, an indication of the fluidity of risk assessments. As flight operations become increasingly complicated, the costs associated with extended routes and delayed schedules continue to rise.

Moreover, the rights of flight crews are coming to the forefront in discussions about safety over conflict zones. Paul Reuter, vice president of the European Cockpit Association, expressed concern that commercial pressures could overshadow critical safety decisions. The current landscape presents a dilemma for airlines; while they need to remain operational, they also have a responsibility to ensure the safety of their crew and passengers. “Most airlines... do not want crew on an aircraft if they don't feel comfortable flying,” said IATA security head Nick Careen, reinforcing the importance of crew welfare amidst these evolving conditions.

The complications extend beyond individual flights or airlines. Major players like TUI and Lufthansa have seen their share prices drop amidst ongoing safety concerns and route adjustments. The European Union Aviation Safety Agency has issued non-binding recommendations, leading to a patchwork of safety policies that vary significantly among airlines, further complicating the situation.

As geopolitical tensions continue to rise, the aviation industry finds itself at a critical juncture. The balance between maintaining operational efficiency and ensuring robust safety protocols will be imperative for carriers navigating this new reality. Industry leaders, while faced with unprecedented challenges, advocate for urgent collaboration and coordination to safeguard aviation in increasingly hostile environments.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/airlines-airspace-closures-missile-threats-b2764152.html), [[2]](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/expanding-missile-threats-airspace-closures-are-straining-airlines-2025-06-04/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/airlines-airspace-closures-missile-threats-b2764152.html), [[2]](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/expanding-missile-threats-airspace-closures-are-straining-airlines-2025-06-04/), [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/diversions-disruptions-aviation-grapples-with-middle-east-escalation-2024-10-02/)
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* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/airlines-airspace-closures-missile-threats-b2764152.html), [[2]](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/expanding-missile-threats-airspace-closures-are-straining-airlines-2025-06-04/), [[6]](https://africa.businessinsider.com/transportation/irans-missile-attack-forced-some-flights-to-turn-around-hours-into-their-trips-to/p6wcjpf)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/airlines-airspace-closures-missile-threats-b2764152.html), [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/airline-pilots-crews-voice-concerns-about-middle-east-routes-2024-12-11/), [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/diversions-disruptions-aviation-grapples-with-middle-east-escalation-2024-10-02/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/airlines-airspace-closures-missile-threats-b2764152.html), [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/global-airlines-address-trade-war-net-zero-uncertainties-annual-summit-2025-05-30/), [[6]](https://africa.businessinsider.com/transportation/irans-missile-attack-forced-some-flights-to-turn-around-hours-into-their-trips-to/p6wcjpf)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/airlines-airspace-closures-missile-threats-b2764152.html), [[2]](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/expanding-missile-threats-airspace-closures-are-straining-airlines-2025-06-04/), [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/global-airlines-address-trade-war-net-zero-uncertainties-annual-summit-2025-05-30/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/airlines-airspace-closures-missile-threats-b2764152.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/expanding-missile-threats-airspace-closures-are-straining-airlines-2025-06-04/> - Airlines worldwide are grappling with increasing operational and financial strain due to escalating global conflicts, airspace closures, and threats from drones and missiles. The security environment has led to frequent flight diversions, increased fuel and crew costs, and disrupted schedules, undermining the predictability vital to the aviation industry. Significant closures around Russia, Ukraine, the Middle East, and parts of Africa have left carriers with limited routing options. A rise in GPS spoofing and navigation interference further complicates flight safety. Recent incidents, such as the shoot-downs of passenger and cargo aircraft in Kazakhstan and Sudan, underscore the growing risks. Civil aviation authorities and industry leaders stress the need for better global information sharing and coordination to enhance safety in conflict zones. Airlines are forced to make tough risk calculations, with diverging routes becoming common, as seen with Singapore Airlines' alterations to its Europe-bound flights due to unrest in Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) highlights that although flight accident rates have decreased, security-related threats require urgent attention. Crew safety concerns are also mounting, as staff reserve the right to decline flights they deem unsafe, underscoring the challenging balance between operational demands and flight safety in volatile regions.
3. <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/global-airlines-address-trade-war-net-zero-uncertainties-annual-summit-2025-05-30/> - Global airline leaders will convene in New Delhi for the International Air Transport Association’s (IATA) annual summit to address pressing industry challenges, including trade tensions and sustainability concerns. Although global air travel demand has rebounded post-pandemic, airlines face rising operational costs, aircraft delivery delays, and geopolitical disruptions—particularly the evolving U.S.-led trade war that has disrupted previously tariff-free aerospace trade. While European and Asian carriers report robust demand, U.S. airlines are experiencing a downturn in travel, making passenger forecasting difficult amid inflation and reduced consumer confidence. Compounding the situation are detours around conflict zones, such as recent Indian tensions with Pakistan, and growing safety concerns following air accidents and issues with U.S. air traffic control. Another key agenda item is the aviation industry's commitment to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050, primarily through a switch to expensive and scarce sustainable aviation fuel (SAF). Airlines are increasingly skeptical about meeting these targets due to limited SAF supply, delays in delivery of fuel-efficient aircraft, and insufficient regulatory support. IATA’s leadership signals potential reevaluation of climate goals, although no immediate policy change is expected. The summit, hosted by India’s IndiGo, underscores Asia’s pivotal role in future air travel growth.
4. <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/airline-pilots-crews-voice-concerns-about-middle-east-routes-2024-12-11/> - Airline pilots and crew members are increasingly concerned about flying over Middle Eastern airspace, especially amid growing regional tensions between Israel and Iran. In September, a Wizz Air pilot questioned flying over Iraq, which his airline had recently classified as safe despite prior warnings. The pilot’s concerns were seemingly validated when Iraq closed its airspace following an Iranian missile attack on Israel in October. Wizz Air and other airlines assert that safety is their top priority and make their route decisions based on extensive risk assessments. However, some staff feel these reassurances are insufficient and have called for the right to refuse dangerous routes. Safety debates are more vocal in Europe due to union protections for pilots. Concerns echo the tragic downings of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 and Ukraine International Airlines PS752. The airspace over the Middle East remains a critical and congested corridor, with some airlines opting to temporarily avoid high-risk zones despite increased costs. The European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) provides non-binding safety bulletins, leading to varied airline policies and causing fear and mistrust among aviation staff.
5. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/diversions-disruptions-aviation-grapples-with-middle-east-escalation-2024-10-02/> - Tensions in the Middle East have severely disrupted global air travel, causing airlines to divert or cancel flights, with significant delays at regional airports such as Lebanon, Israel, and Kuwait. The escalation, marked by Iran's missile attack on Israel and subsequent threats of retaliation, has led to rerouted flights and avoidance of certain airspaces, particularly Iranian airspace. European airlines, including TUI and Lufthansa, saw significant share drops. Safety advisories recommend avoiding Israeli and Lebanese airspace. Major airlines like British Airways and Air France-KLM have extended flight cancellations to Tel Aviv until mid-October, with others following suit. The conflict poses additional challenges to an already strained aviation industry, affecting airport operations in hubs like Abu Dhabi, Tel Aviv, and Amman.
6. <https://africa.businessinsider.com/transportation/irans-missile-attack-forced-some-flights-to-turn-around-hours-into-their-trips-to/p6wcjpf> - In response to Iran's missile attack on Israel, airspace above Iran, Israel, Jordan, Iraq, and other countries in the region was closed, causing airlines to change their flight paths to keep passengers and crew safe. In some cases, planes were diverted en route to their destination to avoid restricted airspace. According to FlightRadar24, at least three flights operated by German carrier Lufthansa bound for India and Dubai turned around before reaching Iranian airspace.
7. <https://www.mightytravels.com/2024/10/impact-of-drone-warfare-on-air-travel-new-flight-restrictions-over-ethiopia-and-ukraine-reshape-major-aviation-routes/> - Turkish Airlines is facing a financial setback due to the ongoing conflicts impacting global air travel. They've reported a $43 million loss, a direct result of having to extend flight times to avoid conflict zones. These reroutings, largely due to new airspace restrictions over Ethiopia and Ukraine, add roughly an hour to typical flight durations. For each flight, these extended routes translate into an additional cost burden exceeding $7,000. To stay operational while navigating these flight restrictions, airlines like Turkish Airlines have opted for alternative flight paths, often using airspace over places like Egypt and Azerbaijan. This adds to flight time and also significantly increases expenses.