Armed Conflict



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MENA Analysis: Tehran on September 23 threatens neighboring countries' airports if they comply with US sanctions on Iranian aviation; constitutes escalation dynamic, will increase risk to aviation in region

Executive Summary:

- As of September 23, multiple countries have been adhering to the US's new sanctions regime against Iran's aviation sector, prompting Iranian officials to threaten the aviation sector in the Persian Gulf region in response.
- The Iranian threats are likely credible. They reflect Tehran's concern and need to deter its neighbors from adhering to the measure, amid the intensification of Iran's economic crisis.
- While direct Iranian attacks against flying commercial aircraft are an unlikely scenario, this will increase Iran's proclivity to target international airports in the Gulf region, aimed at disrupting the region's aviation sector as reciprocal measures.
- Attacks against airports could be launched by Iran itself and/or Iran's regional allies and proxies, primarily the Houthis and Iraq-based Shiite militias, who have demonstrated their capacity to target critical infrastructure with precision throughout the Gulf. Additional possible Iranian measures could include increased GNSS signal disruptions in the region and cyberattacks against critical infrastructure.
- **Remain cognizant of elevated risks to airports in the Gulf region. Conduct repeated, timely risk assessments before using commercial airports. Monitor flight-tracking**

platforms to identify anomalies in air traffic. Limit your footprint at airports as much as possible and consider taking extra security measures to protect assets and personnel at these sites.

Current Situation:

- On September 23, Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Mohsen Rezaei warned that if neighboring countries implement US sanctions on Iranian airlines, "Iran will ensure their airports cannot function."
- On September 23, former advisor and member of Iran's negotiating team, Mohammed Marandi, stated that "Iran is more than prepared to move up the escalation ladder. Any move against the Islamic Republic will have very painful consequences. Soon Iran may completely shut down all airports in the UAE and Qatar. Force will be used if necessary."
- As of September 23, multiple countries have suspended Iranian flight operations after the US Treasury Department announced that its sanctions against Iran's airlines will take effect on September 23.

States implementing US sanctions

- In Asia, Georgia and Azerbaijan have reportedly suspended all Iranian flights to and from their airports.
- According to reports, one of Iran's largest carriers, Mahan Air, has suspended flights to Oman effective September 17 and Turkey on September 21.
- Additionally, Iraqi authorities have reportedly suspended Iranian-operated flights to Baghdad International Airport, beginning September 23.
- Reports indicate that flights to other destinations, including China and Russia, remain operational.
- Several Turkey-based air carriers, including Turkish Airlines, AJet, and Pegasus, have canceled all Iranian flights. Turkish Airlines and AJet have reportedly suspended Iranian-bound flights until March 2027.
- Multiple international airlines have also reportedly suspended flight operations to and from Iran. Qatar Airways has reportedly suspended flights to Iran until November 29, which remains subject to change. The UAE-based airline Emirates has reportedly also suspended flights to Tehran.

Source: Fars News Agency

Assessments & Forecast:

1. This development constitutes an escalatory dynamic between the US, its allies, and Iran and is a direct result of the US Treasury's Operation Economic Outcast, aimed at isolating and crippling Iran's economy. It specifically follows the sanctions the US Treasury Department implemented against all of Iran's airlines, an unprecedented move reflecting Washington's resolve. Secretary Bessent's designation of September 23 as the enforcement date further underscores Washington's resolve and intent. This is likely based on the high political and reputational stakes involved in the effort to cripple Iran's economy and make it cave to the US's demands amid the war, which is still a top priority for the Trump administration. This is also likely why sanctions appear to be cascading, as reflected above, suggesting that third parties worry about potential American secondary sanctions if they fail to adhere to the Treasury's designations.
2. The fact that Iranian officials have begun threatening neighboring states against compliance with the US measure further lends credence to the notion that Tehran is concerned about these sanctions amid the intensification of its domestic economic crisis. Iran is likely resorting to threatening messages to deter compliance, based on the belief that Iran's regular sanctions

evasion tactics it usually implements as responses to US sanctions are more complicated to implement in the aviation sector. As a result, the measure will likely cause significant economic losses and travel disruptions for Iran.

3. **FORECAST:** Amid the high stakes, Iran's need to respond to the US measure, and its desire to contribute to political losses for the Trump administration and the Republican Party ahead of the midterm elections in the US in November, renders the latest Iranian threats likely credible and suggests a growing proclivity to consider actions against the Gulf's aviation sector.
4. **FORECAST**: In this context, direct kinetic attacks against flying commercial aircraft remain an unlikely scenario. What is more likely, given Iran's usual modus operandi, and as hinted in the latest threats, is a transition to target airports more consistently in the region. This may be carried out through regional allies and proxies, if Tehran wishes to retain some degree of plausible deniability. This primarily includes the Houthis, who have already targeted airports in Saudi Arabia and threatened the kingdom's aviation sector in retaliation against the alleged Saudi aerial blockade over Houthi-controlled territories in Yemen. This Houthi threat has not yet fully materialized, and Houthi attacks have concentrated on southern Saudi airports. Nevertheless, the Houthis' latest attack against a fuel depot next to Riyadh's King Khalid International Airport constituted a show of force and a signal that the Yemen-based movement is capable of extending its attacks to adversely impact Saudi Arabia's aviation sector.
5. **FORECAST**: In addition, Iran's major proxies in Iraq, who have also launched major aerial attacks against neighboring Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, are equipped to conduct such attacks against critical aviation infrastructure. Moreover, Iran itself has also demonstrated in the past that it may not show restraint, especially vis-a-vis Gulf states that are considered weak. This was most significantly highlighted in the UAV attack against the Kuwait International Airport that prompted casualties in June. Iran may also increasingly engage in GNSS signal disruption activities to disrupt aerial and maritime navigation in its surroundings, which will further prompt disruptions and risks at a time when aviation and shipping crews are facing increasing numbers of such disruptions globally. Lastly, given that Iran has consistently worked to develop its cyberattack capabilities, as was shown in operations it conducted against critical infrastructure in the US, UK, and other states, attempted cyber action against international airports in the region also cannot be excluded in the short-to-medium term. This is despite the fact that there have not been any credible, successful Iranian cyberattacks against aviation infrastructure.

Recommendations:

1. Throughout the region, conduct timely risk assessments, refresh security protocols and business contingency plans (BCPs) for short-notice escalation scenarios, and continuously confirm travel itineraries.
2. Avoid all travel to **Iran, Kuwait, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria,** and **Iraq** at the current juncture.
3. Conduct only business-critical travel to **Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Jordan,** and **other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states** at the current juncture and reconsider the necessity of currently planned trips.
4. In **Jordan**, avoid all travel near military bases and reconsider travel to Aqaba, given the potential for Iranian attacks against these areas.
5. Remain cognizant of elevated risks to airports in the region. Conduct repeated, timely risk assessments before using commercial airports in these countries. Monitoring flight-tracking platforms to identify anomalies in air traffic. Limit your footprint at airports as much as possible and consider taking extra security measures to protect assets and personnel at these sites.
6. Try to secure flexible flight tickets and confirm travel itineraries regularly.
7. Remain cognizant of plausible GNSS/GPS jamming and spoofing that could affect aviation and shipping in the region. Stay apprised of relevant maritime and aviation security notices. Train flight crews to routinely validate GNSS data against alternative navigation sources. Ensure personnel can recognize indicators of spoofing or jamming, such as sudden loss of GPS signal or erratic position jumps.

8. Continuously monitor official alert systems.
9. Avoid all travel to military installations in the region, especially those hosting US personnel.
10. Avoid all travel to major energy and heavy-industry facilities (particularly oil and gas and petrochemical facilities), as well as major ports across the region, and implement precautions at such sites due to the continued threat to this infrastructure posed by Iran.
11. Avoid sharing photos and footage of interceptions, falling debris, and military assets on social media, as such content is often illegal in Gulf states and may lead to prosecution.
12. Consider accommodations with underground parking lots that may provide a bolstered protected area in times of need. Refrain from staying above the sixth floor. Identify protected areas in hotels/accommodations, such as shelters. If these do not exist, identify basements and interior stairwells, away from windows, exterior walls, and balconies. Verify emergency procedures with hotels. Opt for hotels away from strategic targets and international airports.
13. Companies and businesses in at-risk sectors are advised to review security procedures and install adequate security systems, including cybersecurity measures, particularly in the Gulf region's aviation industry. Remain cognizant of the increased potential for Iranian cyberwarfare action against related critical infrastructure.
14. **MAX Security has strong on-the-ground capabilities across several arenas in MENA, including secure transportation, the provision of safe havens, and contingency consultation and planning. Contact us at operations@max-security.com or +44 20-3540-0434.**
15. **Contact us at intel@max-security.com for tailored, timely risk assessments and/or tactical monitoring services.**