

# Gulf countries rise to the challenge

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**Greenfield projects and upgrades continue in Gulf Co-operation Council countries.**  
*Peter Shaw-Smith and Neelam Mathews report*

Strong air traffic demand in the Middle East shows no signs of abating after growth of 50% since the start of the decade, and a hunger for air connectivity could see the regional market grow by 258 million passengers per annum until 2036, if predictions from the International Air Transport Association are borne out.

The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) foresees a 5.2% annual increase in aircraft movements in the Middle East by 2030, with airports in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) region expected to handle a combined 450 million passengers by 2020.



*Going up: the two international airports serving Dubai are predicted to handle a combined total of about 240 million passengers per year in the near term (pictured are lifts at Dubai International Airport). (Getty Images)*

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The pace of growth poses a challenge for airport operators and aviation authorities in the region, as higher passenger and flight volumes place the onus on ensuring that traffic continues to flow smoothly. For example, the General Civil Aviation Authority (GCAA) processes a daily average of 1,500 aircraft movements for Dubai International alone, and it

expects to handle 1.85 million flights per annum (or more than 5,000 per day) by 2030 across the UAE.

### **Landmark deal**

Traffic growth in the region could be further accelerated by the first aviation agreement between a GCC member country and the EU, when Qatar finalised a comprehensive air services deal on 4 March.

Not only does the open skies agreement permit unlimited access between Qatar and EU member countries (including daily cargo flights), but it also lays down a single set of rules and standards for future EU-Qatar co-operation on aviation safety, security, and air traffic management (ATM). The deal additionally commits both parties to improved social, labour, and other goals.

Noting that the wide-ranging text will “raise the bar globally” for air transport agreements, EU Transport Commissioner Violeta Bulc said it was “a major upgrade compared to the existing framework [of open skies deals], and our joint contribution to making aviation more sustainable”.

The deal includes provisions to open the emirate gradually to the five European countries that have not yet fully liberalised their direct connections to Qatar: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands.

### **Oman ambitions**

The Public Authority for Civil Aviation (PACA) in Oman continues to plan airport expansion projects and airspace management reforms, CEO Mohammed bin Nasser bin Al-Zaabi told *Jane's* in January.

While flag carrier Oman Air expands its route network and adds new aircraft to its fleet, PACA is budgeting more than USD6 billion over the next five years for major terminal developments at Muscat and Salalah international airports, plus completion of new regional airports at Sohar, Ras Al Hadd, Adam, and Duqm.

The control tower at all six airports is equipped by Indra. This commonality of equipment and services across all these airports “makes life easy”, Al-Zaabi said, in terms of system integration, maintenance, and running costs.

The new-look Muscat International Airport opened in March 2018, and it was followed by a 9,600 m<sup>2</sup> new passenger terminal building at Al Duqm in January 2019. The airport is a gateway to the coastal city of Duqm, which is being developed as a major industrial and shipping hub for Oman with a Duty Free Zone (DFZ). “The DFZ is part of our initiative for not just relying on oil as a main stream of revenue,” Al-Zaabi commented.

The terminal was built by Larsen & Toubro with ADPi as project engineers and Egypt-based Hamza as design architects. Security fencing was provided by Hanjin Heavy Industries and Construction Co. of South Korea. “It is designed to be ‘easy in-easy out’, with the latest

specifications of security including cameras, customs screening machines , baggage scanners, and body scanners,” said Al-Zaabi.

“While this [airport] is not as big as Muscat, it has the capacity to handle half-a-million passengers... [and it] can be extended to two million passengers.”

There is a 38 m-tall air traffic control (ATC) tower, a 4,000x75 m runway with two taxiways, an air cargo terminal with capacity for 25,000 tonnes per year, and apron parking space for four narrowbodies.

PACA also plans a new terminal and long-term operations management lease for Sohar Airport. “We are in direct talks and testing the market,” Al-Zaabi noted. “We will decide as soon as possible as we are eager to complete this project.”

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