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Qatar Airways Is Flying Smoothly Through the Storm

Ted Reed Jun 8, 2017 11:15 AM EDT



Qatar Airways Airbus A350

It may be heavily subsidized and it may have a CEO who is not widely loved, but today **Qatar Airways** deserves our praise.

The airline is operating smoothly during a storm created by neighbors who suddenly decided to shut off access to airspace that normally is assured by longstanding treaties.

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Even through all the years of dispute with the United States, Cuba kept its airspace open. But not Qatar's neighbors.

"Qatar Airways is operating the Doha Airlift," said aviation consultant Bob Mann, recalling the late 1940s when the Soviet Union blockaded Berlin and Western countries organized the Berlin Airlift to bring in supplies including food. Qatar "provides a lifeline to an economy," he said.

On Monday, four neighbors -- Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain -- severed relations with Qatar and closed their airports to its flag carrier's flights. *CNN* reported that Qatar Airways is losing more than 50 flights a day, accounting for an estimated 18% of its capacity.

Not only can the airline not operate in the four countries, but also it cannot fly within their airspace, a far bigger problem because the four countries largely surround Qatar. *CNN* said the airline must use alternative, longer routes -- primarily routes over Iran -- for flights to Europe and North America.

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From all reports, Qatar is not only operating smoothly but also "it appears to be taking very good of its booked passengers, rerouting them on other carriers when necessary," Mann said. "Not every airline does that."

Qatar newspaper *The Peninsula* reported Wednesday that Qatar Airways chartered **Oman Air** to operate three flights to bring its passengers to Doha from Saudi Arabia via Muscat. Qatar Airways also arranged for **Kuwait Airlines** to carry remaining passengers to Doha via Kuwait.

"Qatar Airways has worked tirelessly to ensure that all passengers were brought home safely to Doha within 24 hours of the flight cancellations," said CEO Akbar Al Baker in a prepared statement. "Our global operations are continuing to run smoothly and remain unaffected.

As far as we are concerned, it is business as usual," Al Baker said.

It isn't business as usual, but the remark seems to typify Al Baker, who is known for being outspoken and confrontational. Travel writer Joe Brancatelli called him "brash {and} willing to say anything;" Aviation consultant Addison Schonland called him "forthright and prickly."

In 2016, Al Baker became involved in a dispute with **Delta (DAL)** as Qatar began Doha-Atlanta service. He said the route would "rub salt in the wounds" of Delta, which has led opposition to the government subsidies that enable Qatar, **Emirates** and **Etihad** to operate.

Qatar Airways' Doha-Atlanta route began June 1, 2016. In anticipation, Delta ended Atlanta-Dubai service in February. "The cancellation of nonstop service between Atlanta and Dubai comes amid overcapacity on U.S. routes to the Middle East operated by government-owned and subsidized airlines," Delta, said in announcing the cancellation.

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Schonland said Qatar faces severe operational challenges in Doha. Because of the now limited access, inbound and outbound planes must fly toward one another. They compensate with timing and by flying at different elevations.

"Normally, traffic is flowed in a direction where there's no conflict," Schonland said.

A second problem, he said, is that Qatar Airways long-haul flights arrive with less reserve fuel in their tanks. "They don't have the same margin for error," Schonland said. "If you're coming in to land after a very long flight such as Auckland-Doha, you don't want less margin."

On the positive side, in terms of air traffic control operations, the refusal of several airlines to fly to Doha means fewer flights to manage. "When it's quiet, it's fine," Schonland said. "When it gets busy, it gets dicey."

Richard Aboulafia, aerospace consultant for Teal Group, said Qatar Airways' ability to operate smoothly despite major obstacles "is pretty astonishing."

But Aboulafia noted the airline "is easily the least transparent of the three Gulf carriers." Additionally, Aboulafia said, subsidies enable it to absorb the cost of maintaining operations despite fewer passengers.

"Qatar Airways is owned by the state," Aboulafia said. "The state has a very patient long-term view. It does not require returns soon if ever."

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