

Qatar Airways joins Gulf carriers off US laptop ban list

July 6 2017, by Jon Gambrell



In this Jan. 15, 2015, file photo, a new Qatar Airways Airbus A350 approaches the gate at the airport in Frankfurt, Germany. Qatar Airways joined two other major long-haul Gulf carriers on Thursday, July 6, 2017 in getting off a U.S. ban on laptops and large electronics in airplane cabins, despite facing logistical challenges amid the country's diplomatic dispute with several Arab nations. (AP Photo/Michael Probst, File)

Qatar Airways joined two other major long-haul Gulf carriers on Thursday in getting off a U.S. ban on laptops and large electronics in

airplane cabins, despite facing logistical challenges amid the country's diplomatic dispute with several Arab nations.

Doha-based Qatar Airways, Abu Dhabi-based Etihad, Dubai-based Emirates and Istanbul-based Turkish Airlines all have put security procedures in place to satisfy American authorities. U.S. officials instituted the ban in March across 10 Middle East cities over concerns Islamic State fighters and other extremists could hide bombs inside of laptops.

Qatar Airways said that with "immediate effect, all personal electronic devices can be carried on board all departures from Hamad International Airport to destinations in the United States." Hamad in Doha is the hub of Qatar Airways.

"Safety and security are always our highest priority," Qatar Airways CEO Akbar al-Baker said in a statement. "They are expressed throughout all of our corporate values and must never be compromised."

The airline did not respond to questions about its new procedures. Michael England, a spokesman for the U.S. Transportation Security Administration, said Qatar Airways had been removed from the ban list, but declined to elaborate on what it did to satisfy American concerns.



Passengers check into a flight at Abu Dhabi International Airport in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, Tuesday, July 4, 2017. Travelers bound for the U.S. now enjoy something many others flying out of the Middle East can't—walking onto an airplane with their laptop. But what has changed in Abu Dhabi remains unclear as the laptop ban still affects nine other regional airports, including the world's busiest for international travel in nearby Dubai. (AP Photo/Jon Gambrell)

The U.S. laptop ban still applies to nonstop U.S.-bound flights from six airports in Amman, Jordan; Kuwait City; Cairo; Jeddah and Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; and Casablanca, Morocco. Saudi Arabian Airlines has said it hopes to be off the ban list "on or before July 19."

While Gulf airlines have not commented on security procedures, Turkish officials say they use CT scanners to take cross-section images of electronics just before passengers board airplanes heading to the U.S. Istanbul airport now also restricts U.S.-bound flights to two departure gates, apparently for better security.

Etihad, the flag carrier of the United Arab Emirates, already has a U.S. Customs and Border Protection facility at its Abu Dhabi hub that allows passengers to clear screening they'd otherwise have to go through when landing in America.

There is a precedent for concern over laptops being used as bombs. Somalia's al-Qaida-linked al-Shabaab said it planted a bomb inside a laptop-like device that exploded on a plane leaving Mogadishu in February 2016, killing only the bomber.



- In this March 22, 2017 file photo, an Emirates plane taxis to a gate at Dubai International Airport in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Dubai-based Emirates airlines says the U.S. has exempted it from a ban on laptops in airplane cabins. (AP Photo/Adam Schreck, File)

However, the security concerns also come amid a wider dispute between Gulf airlines and American carriers, which accuse the Middle East airlines of flooding the market with flights while receiving billions of dollars of unfair government subsidies. The Gulf carriers all vigorously deny that.

The laptop ban, coupled with the Trump administration's travel ban on six predominantly Muslim countries, has hurt Middle Eastern airlines. Emirates, the region's biggest, said it slashed 20 percent of its flights to America in the wake of the restrictions.

Meanwhile, Qatar Airways has seen its flight paths over many of its neighbors cut off since Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE cut diplomatic ties to Qatar on June 5. The airline has since been putting more flights over Iranian and Turkish airspace while appealing to a United Nations agency overseeing air travel to reopen those routes. Qatar Airways also has announced it wants to buy 10 percent of American Airlines, which would cost about \$2.4 billion and possibly further open the U.S. market to the carrier.

Qatar's foreign minister on Wednesday said he didn't believe Qatar Airway's delay in getting off the laptop ban list had anything to do with the dispute.

"This is an ongoing process and I think irrelevant to the entire" political crisis, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani said in London.



In this Jan. 10, 2017 file photo, Turkish Airlines aircrafts are stationed at Ataturk International Airport covered in snow, in Istanbul, Tuesday. Istanbul-based Turkish Airlines tweeted early Wednesday that it had been exempted from a ban on laptops in airplane cabins. (Faik Kaptan/Depo Photos via AP, File)

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