

Sign of the Times: U.S., Europe Halt All Flights to Israel as War Rages

U.S. air carriers Delta Air Lines, American Airlines Group and United Airlines on Tuesday halted flights to Israel under directions from the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration to ensure passenger safety, as turmoil in the region has intensified.

The U.S. moves were swiftly followed by flight stoppages from European carriers, including Germany's Lufthansa, Air-France and Dutch airline KLM. Air Berlin, Germany's second-largest carrier, said it halted its flights through Wednesday, citing the situation on the ground in Tel Aviv.

Norwegian Air, Europe's third-largest budget airline, is also suspending flights to Tel Aviv until further notice, a company spokeswoman told the Norwegian news agency NTB.

Scandinavian Airlines was suspending a flight from Copenhagen later on Tuesday, and another one from Stockholm scheduled for Wednesday. The airline will decide early on Wednesday whether to cancel more flights, a company spokeswoman told NTB.

The FAA said it told the U.S. carriers that they were prohibited from flying to or from Ben Gurion International Airport in Tel Aviv for up to 24 hours. Ben Gurion shares space and facilities with Israel's Lod Air Force Base. In a statement, the FAA said its notice, which applies only to airlines, was issued in response to a rocket strike that landed about a mile from the airport on Tuesday.

"The FAA immediately notified U.S. carriers when the agency learned of the rocket strike," the agency said in a statement. It also said updated instructions would be provided.

The text of the FAA notice cites “the potentially hazardous situation created by the armed conflict in Israel and Gaza” in prohibiting the flights by U.S. carriers.

Delta and United said in separate statements that they have suspended flights to and from Tel Aviv “until further notice.” Casey Norton, a spokesman for American Airlines, also said both an inbound and outbound flight operated by its US Airways unit between Philadelphia and Tel Aviv were canceled. The flight stoppages came after Hamas, the militant group that dominates in the Gaza Strip, and its allies fired more rockets into Israel. One hit a town on the fringes of Ben-Gurion International Airport, lightly injuring two people, officials said.

Many of the airlines said customers affected by the halts could change their travel plans without penalty.

The non-U.S. airlines said their stoppages reflected safety concerns in the absence of specific directives.

“This decision was taken because of the precedence that the safety of passengers and crew takes at all airlines, even though there are currently no additional travel warnings from the relevant authorities,” Lufthansa, which normally flies to Tel Aviv seven to 10 times weekly, said in a statement.

Yisrael Katz, Israel’s Transportation Minister, called on airlines to return to their normal routes. “Ben Gurion is safe for takeoffs and landings and there are no security concerns for aircraft and passengers,” he said in a statement. “There is no need for U.S. carriers to suspend flights and reward terrorism.”

British Airways, which flies to Tel Aviv twice daily, said its flights continue to operate as normal.

Israel launched an offensive earlier in July to halt missile salvos out of Gaza by Hamas, which was angered by a crackdown

on its supporters in the occupied West Bank as well as economic hardship due to an Israeli-Egyptian blockade.

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