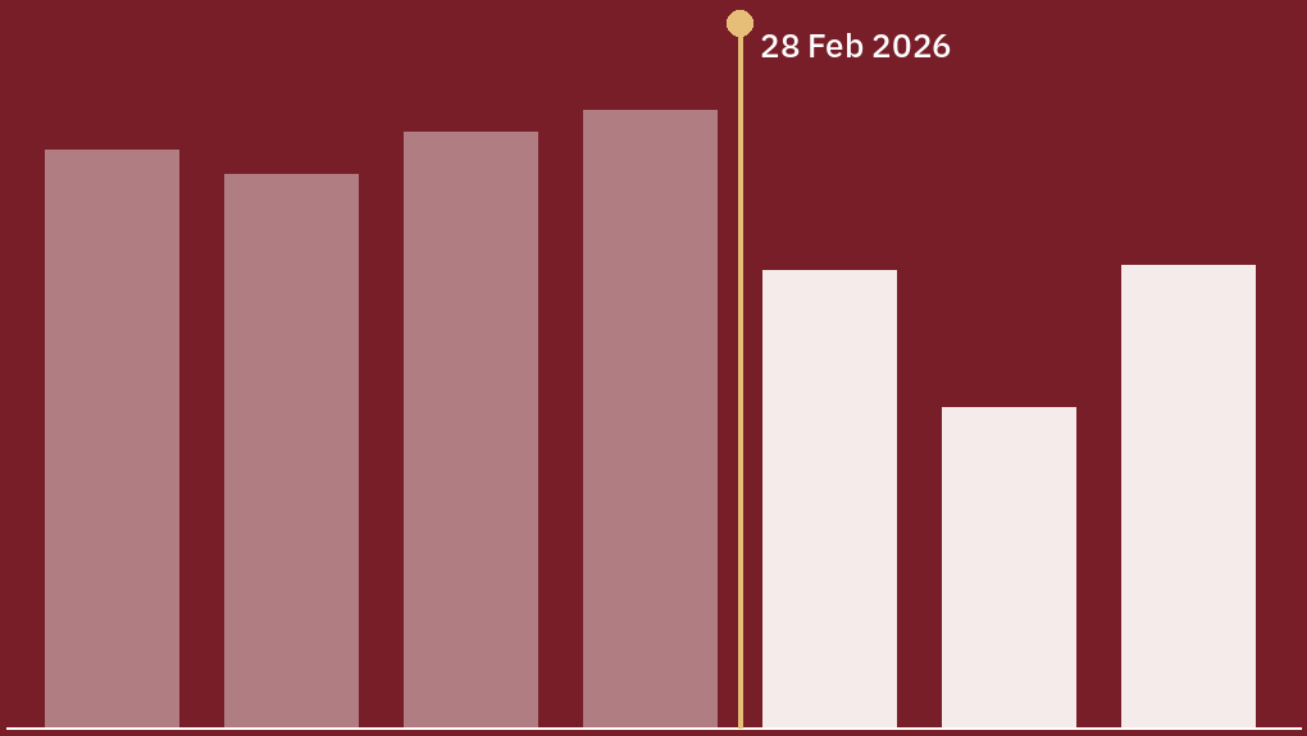
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POLICY PAPER · EPIC-PP-2026-045

Two Hubs, One Shock

UAE Aviation in the 2026 Regional Conflict, Dubai International and Zayed International

EPIC Research Team

November 2026

Two Hubs, One Shock: UAE Aviation in the 2026 Regional Conflict

Dubai International, Zayed International and the Connecting Model, 2025 to September 2026

EPIC – Emirati Perspectives and Insight Centre

EPIC-PP-2026-045 · Aviation & Air Connectivity · 17 November 2026 · EPIC Research Team

Abstract

Dubai International (DXB) handled 95.2 million passengers in 2025, the highest annual international traffic recorded by any airport, and was served by 108 international airlines (Dubai Airports 2026a). On 28 February 2026 the General Civil Aviation Authority announced the temporary and partial closure of UAE airspace as regional security deteriorated (WAM 2026). DXB traffic fell to 2.5 million in March, 65.7% below a year earlier (Dubai Airports 2026b), and to 50.4 million in the first nine months of the year, down 28.1% (Dubai Airports 2026d). By November DXB was served by 57 airlines (Dubai Airports 2026d).

The shock did not fall evenly. Emirates carried 21.8 million passengers in April to September 2026, 22% fewer than a year earlier, and the Emirates Group's half-year profit before tax fell 66% to AED 4.1 billion (Emirates Group 2026). Zayed International (AUH) in Abu Dhabi, by contrast, handled 8.45 million passengers in the third quarter, 1.2% more than a year earlier (Abu Dhabi Media Office 2026), and Etihad Airways said in September that it expected to break even for the year (The National 2026b). Middle Eastern airlines' international traffic, measured in revenue passenger kilometres, was still 7.5% below 2025 in September (IATA 2026i).

This paper sets out the scale of the two hubs before the shock, measures the fall and the partial recovery from airport, airline and industry data, and considers what the period implies for the transfer model and for the Al Maktoum International expansion. Air cargo and the wider logistics system are covered in EPIC paper 038 (trade-hub) and tourism in paper 037 (visitor-economy); they are not repeated here.

Keywords: UAE; aviation; Dubai International; DXB; Zayed International; AUH; Emirates; Etihad; air connectivity; transfer traffic; airspace closure; Al Maktoum International; DWC; IATA; 2026 regional conflict

1. Scope, sources and method

The paper uses the latest published figures available on 17 November 2026. Airport traffic comes from Dubai Airports' quarterly releases and from Abu Dhabi Airports' statements as published by the Abu Dhabi Media Office. Airline results come from the Emirates Group's half-year release for April to September 2026 and from reported statements by Etihad Airways. Regional airline traffic comes from the International Air Transport Association's (IATA) monthly Air Passenger Market Analysis for January to September 2026.

Some figures are derived. Dubai Airports did not publish a separate first-quarter 2025 total in the releases used here; EPIC derives it as the first-half 2025 total (46.0 million) minus the second-quarter total (22.5 million), giving 23.5 million (Dubai Airports 2025a). Such figures are labelled as EPIC calculations. Rounding in the source releases means quarterly figures may not sum exactly to annual totals.

Two cautions apply throughout. Airport passenger counts include arriving, departing and transferring passengers, while airline figures count passengers carried by that airline. The two series are not directly comparable. IATA's regional series covers airlines registered in the Middle East, not airports, and includes carriers outside the UAE.

2. The hubs before the shock

2.1 Dubai

DXB had its busiest year in 2025. It welcomed 95.2 million guests, up 3.1% on 2024, and December 2025 was its busiest month on record with 8.7 million (Dubai Airports 2026a). The fourth quarter, at 25.1 million, was also a record (Dubai Airports 2026a). By the end of 2025 DXB connected to 291 destinations in 110 countries and was served by 108 international airlines (Dubai Airports 2026a).

DXB's model rests on transfer traffic as well as visitors to Dubai. In May 2026 Dubai Airports said 22.4 million annual passenger journeys transferring through the Middle East flow through DXB, "one third of the transfer traffic across the region". Of 99.3 million transferring passengers whose journeys could route through the Middle East, it said, the region captures around 70% and DXB handles 32% (Dubai Airports 2026b).

2.2 Abu Dhabi

Zayed International grew faster from a smaller base. It handled a record 32.5 million passengers in 2025, up 12.8%, and Abu Dhabi's five airports together handled more than 33 million (The National 2026a; Abu Dhabi Airports 2026). Etihad Airways carried 22.4 million passengers in 2025, up 21% and the highest total in its history, with a load factor of 88.3% (The National 2026a).

2.3 The Al Maktoum plan

In April 2024 the Ruler of Dubai approved designs for a new passenger terminal at Al Maktoum International (DWC) at a cost of AED 128 billion (Dubai Media Office 2024). The plan provides for an ultimate capacity of 260 million passengers a year, 400 aircraft gates and five parallel runways, with a first phase of 150 million passengers a year to be ready within about ten years. All operations at DXB are to move to DWC "in the coming years" (Dubai Media Office 2024). Dubai Airports said DXB would remain the primary hub in the meantime, serving more than 100 million guests a year (Dubai Airports 2024).

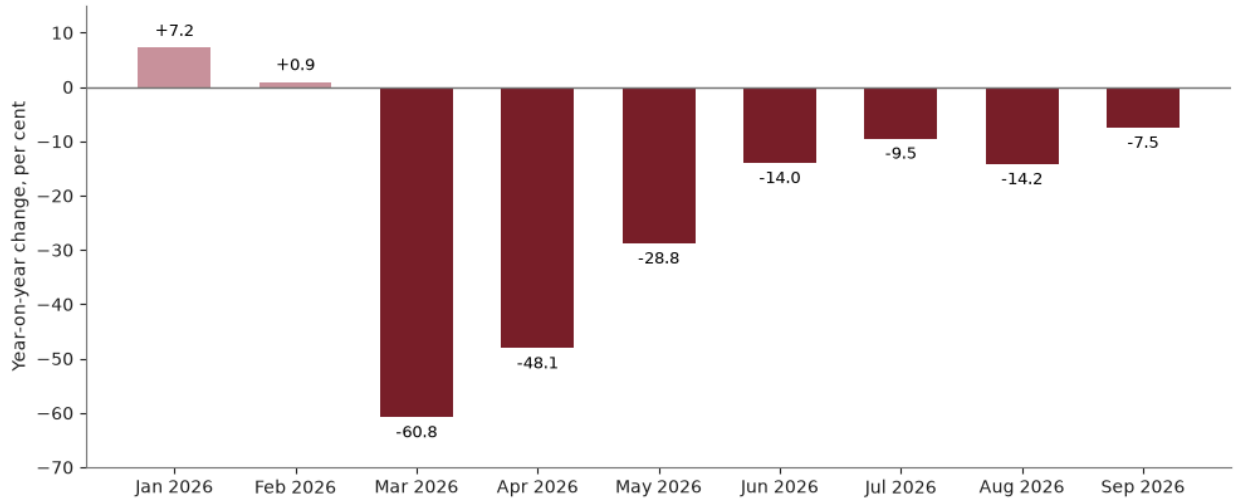
3. The shock

On 28 February 2026 the General Civil Aviation Authority announced "the temporary and partial closure of the UAE's airspace as an exceptional precautionary measure" amid "rapidly escalating security developments in the region" (WAM 2026). Restrictions intensified through March. DXB handled 2.5 million passengers that month, down 65.7% year on year, and 18.6 million in the first

quarter, down 20.6% (Dubai Airports 2026b). Between 28 February and 30 April Dubai's airports handled 6 million passengers, more than 32,000 aircraft movements and 213,000 tonnes of cargo (Dubai Airports 2026b).

The regional airline data show the scale. IATA recorded international revenue passenger kilometres (RPKs) of Middle Eastern carriers 7.2% above the previous year in January 2026 and 0.9% above in February. In March they fell 60.8%, followed by falls of 48.1% in April, 28.8% in May, 14.0% in June, 9.5% in July, 14.2% in August and 7.5% in September (IATA 2026a to 2026i). Figure 1 shows the series.

Figure 1. Middle Eastern carriers' international RPKs, change on a year earlier, 2026 (%)



International revenue passenger kilometres of airlines registered in the Middle East, including carriers outside the UAE.
Source: IATA 2026a to 2026i (Air Passenger Market Analysis, monthly, table "Air passenger market in detail", international).

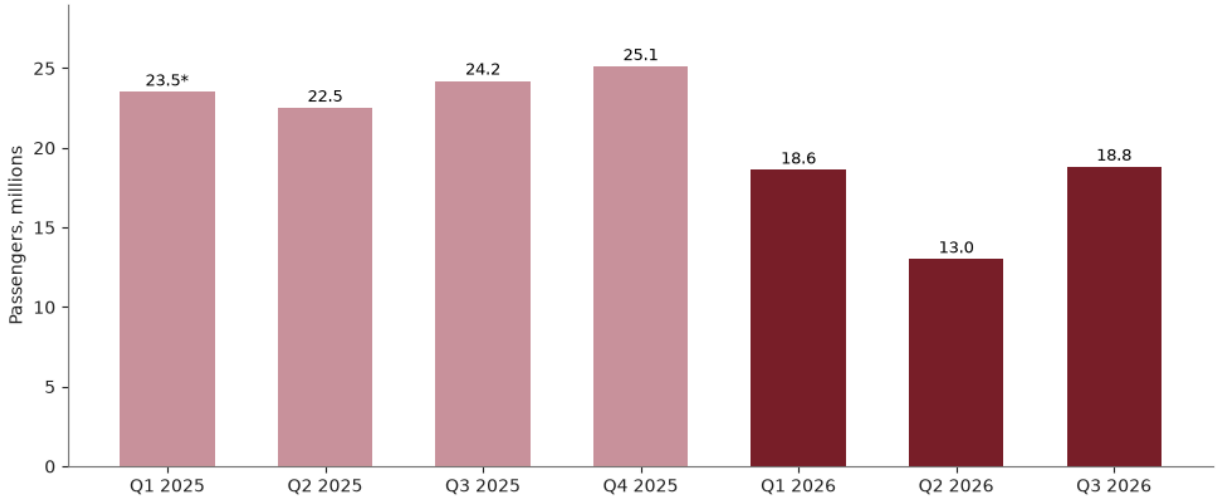
Figure 1. Middle Eastern carriers' international RPKs, change on a year earlier, 2026 (%)

By the time of Dubai Airports' statement of 4 May 2026, all precautionary restrictions on UAE airspace had been lifted, and the operator said capacity was "now primarily aligned to the availability of regional flight paths outside of the UAE" (Dubai Airports 2026b). That remained the binding constraint for the rest of the period: the hub could reopen faster than the surrounding airspace and the airlines' own schedules.

4. Dubai's recovery to September

DXB traffic rebuilt month by month: 3.5 million in April, 4.5 million in May and 5 million in June, for a second quarter of 13.0 million (Dubai Airports 2026c). First-half traffic was 31.5 million, 31.3% lower than in 2025, and aircraft movements fell 32.1% to 150,600 (Dubai Airports 2026c). The third quarter brought 18.8 million passengers, 22.1% below the record 24.2 million of the third quarter of 2025, with August the busiest month at 6.6 million (Dubai Airports 2026d; Dubai Airports 2025b). Figure 2 shows the quarterly path.

Figure 2. Dubai International passengers by quarter, Q1 2025 to Q3 2026 (millions)



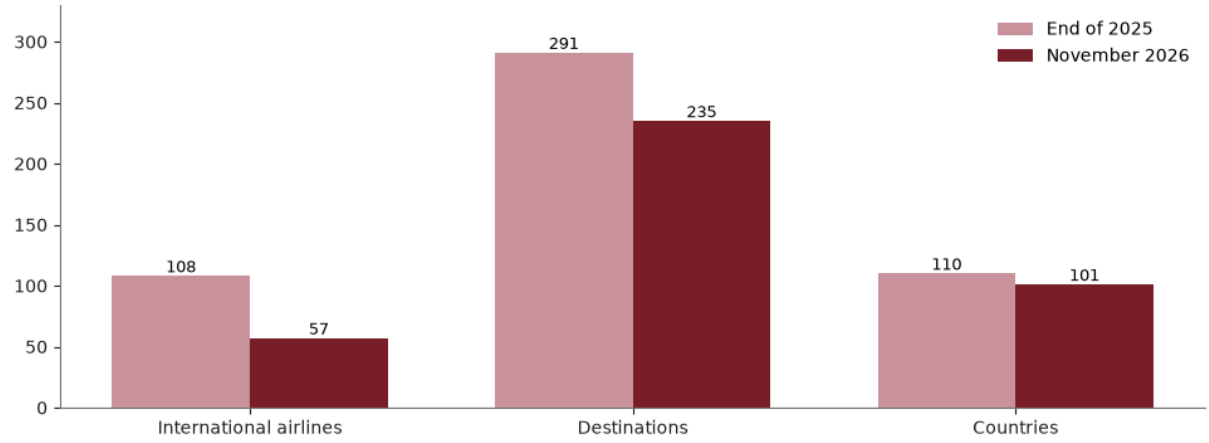
* Q1 2025 is an EPIC calculation (first-half 2025 total of 46.0 million minus second-quarter 22.5 million). Rounded figures as published.
Sources: Dubai Airports 2025a; 2025b; 2026a; 2026b; 2026c; 2026d.

Figure 2. Dubai International passengers by quarter, Q1 2025 to Q3 2026 (millions)

Over the first nine months DXB handled 50.4 million passengers, down 28.1%, 243,000 aircraft movements, down 27.6%, and 1,215,000 tonnes of cargo, down 23.2% (Dubai Airports 2026d). The same period in 2025 had brought 70.1 million passengers (Dubai Airports 2025b). The average load factor was 74%, three percentage points below 2025 (Dubai Airports 2026d). Dubai Airports expects "more than 70 million guests" for the full year (Dubai Airports 2026d), which on EPIC's calculation would be about a quarter below the 95.2 million of 2025.

The network shrank more than the traffic. At the end of 2025 DXB had 108 international airlines, 291 destinations and 110 countries; by the November 2026 release it had 57 airlines, 235 destinations and 101 countries (Dubai Airports 2026a; 2026d). Figure 3 compares the two dates. Returning carriers named by Dubai Airports include British Airways, Royal Air Maroc, SunExpress and Cebu Pacific (Dubai Airports 2026d). Skift reported that several other foreign airlines planned to return only in late 2026 or early 2027, and that the European Union Aviation Safety Agency's conflict zone bulletin for the region had been extended to 31 January 2027 (Skift 2026). Those dates are press reports and may change.

Figure 3. DXB network: airlines, destinations and countries served, end-2025 and November 2026



End-2025 figures count international airlines. November 2026 figures are as stated in the release of 17 November 2026 ("currently served by").
Sources: Dubai Airports 2026a; Dubai Airports 2026d.

Figure 3. DXB network: airlines, destinations and countries served, end-2025 and November 2026

The balance between local and connecting traffic held. In September 2026, 49% of DXB passengers were travelling to or from Dubai and 51% were connecting (Dubai Airports 2026d). This matters for the model: the connecting flows that Dubai Airports described in May as the core of its regional position were still present, though at lower volumes.

5. The airlines

5.1 Emirates

The Emirates Group's results for April to September 2026 measure the cost to the home carrier. Emirates carried 21.8 million passengers, 22% fewer than a year earlier. Capacity in available seat kilometres fell 17%, traffic in revenue passenger kilometres fell 25%, and the passenger seat factor fell from 79.5% to 72.0% (Emirates Group 2026). Group revenue fell 12% to AED 66.2 billion and profit before tax fell 66% to AED 4.1 billion (Emirates Group 2026).

Fuel added to the pressure. Emirates' fuel costs before hedging rose 60% even though fuel uplift fell 12%; hedging gains of AED 7.1 billion reduced the net increase to 13% (Emirates Group 2026). Cargo was the exception: SkyCargo's volume was 1% lower, but cargo revenue rose 52% as the conflict reduced airfreight capacity and pushed shippers away from disrupted sea routes (Emirates Group 2026). On 30 September Emirates was operating 91% of its pre-disruption network, to 150 airports in 78 countries and territories (Emirates Group 2026).

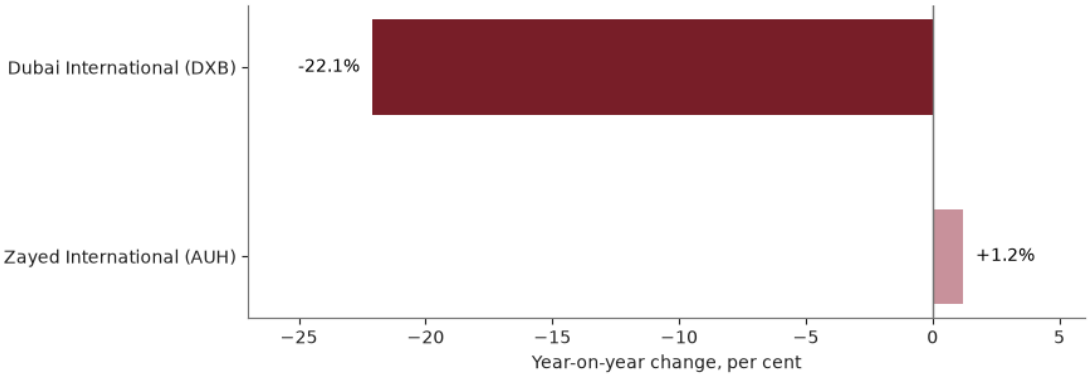
5.2 Etihad

Etihad's public figures are less complete, because it had not released half-year accounts in the sources used here. The National reported on 14 September 2026 that the airline expected to break even in 2026, reversing a June forecast of a possible annual loss; that it had recorded a profit in August; that it had added 15% capacity year on year in July; and that it planned to increase its 320 daily flights to around 400 by the end of 2027 (The National 2026b).

6. Abu Dhabi's divergence

Abu Dhabi Airports reported 8.61 million passengers across its five airports in the third quarter of 2026, up 1.4% on the same quarter of 2025, with 8.45 million at Zayed International, up 1.2% (Abu Dhabi Media Office 2026). AUH served 124 destinations, against 112 a year earlier, after new routes by Etihad and Air Arabia Abu Dhabi and partnerships with Condor, Royal Jordanian, Air India Express and Oman Air (Abu Dhabi Media Office 2026).

Figure 4. Third-quarter 2026 passenger traffic, year-on-year change: DXB and AUH (per cent)



DXB: 18.8 million passengers in Q3 2026. AUH: 8.45 million. Airport passenger counts; not directly comparable with airline figures.
Sources: Dubai Airports 2026d; Abu Dhabi Media Office 2026.

Figure 4. Third-quarter 2026 passenger traffic, year-on-year change: DXB and AUH (per cent)

The contrast in Figure 4 is sharp, but it should not be over-read. Abu Dhabi Airports' rolling 12-month total to September 2026 was 30.2 million (Abu Dhabi Media Office 2026), below the more than 33 million it handled in calendar 2025 (Abu Dhabi Airports 2026). On EPIC's reading this implies that Abu Dhabi also lost traffic in the spring and that its third-quarter growth was a recovery to above the 2025 level rather than uninterrupted expansion. The data published do not show AUH's March to June figures, so the size of its spring fall cannot be measured here.

Several explanations for the divergence are possible, including differences in the two airlines' network choices, the share of foreign carriers at each airport and the speed of their return. The sources used here do not allow these to be separated, and the paper does not attempt to rank them.

7. What the period implies

7.1 For the transfer model

A hub whose value depends on routing passengers between other regions is exposed when the airspace around it closes, because transfer passengers can choose other routes. IATA's September report notes continued weakness on Middle East to Asia routes (IATA 2026i). The UAE carriers' response was to rebuild their own networks faster than foreign airlines returned: by 30 September Emirates was at 91% of its pre-disruption network (Emirates Group 2026), while DXB had about half its 2025 number of airlines (Dubai Airports 2026d). The home carriers carried the hub through the shock; foreign carriers' return will decide how fast DXB's full connectivity comes back.

7.2 For capacity planning

The DWC programme was sized for long-run growth: 150 million passengers in a first phase and 260 million ultimately (Dubai Media Office 2024). One year of lower traffic does not change that arithmetic by itself. DXB was expected to handle more than 100 million guests a year before DWC took over (Dubai Airports 2024), and 2026 is expected to end at a little over 70 million (Dubai Airports 2026d). What 2026 adds is evidence that capacity is only one constraint. Airspace and airline confidence can bind first.

7.3 For measurement

The hubs publish quickly and in detail, and this paper could be written because they did. Two gaps remain. Monthly passenger data for AUH in the spring were not available in the sources used, and neither operator publishes a breakdown of transfer traffic by origin and destination region. Both would help measure how much traffic moved to other hubs and how much has come back.

8. Policy implications

Track foreign carrier returns as a headline indicator. The number of airlines and destinations is a better guide to restored connectivity than passenger totals, which home carriers can lift on their own. Dubai Airports already reports these numbers; a monthly series would make the recovery easier to follow.

Treat airspace as infrastructure. The binding constraint after April was the availability of regional flight paths, not airport capacity (Dubai Airports 2026b). Coordination with neighbouring air navigation providers and with regulators such as the European Union Aviation Safety Agency, whose bulletins guide many foreign airlines, is part of hub resilience.

Keep cargo in view. Emirates' cargo revenue rose 52% while passenger numbers fell (Emirates Group 2026). Air freight capacity helped carry the airline through the shock, and the case for dedicated freighter capacity is stronger after 2026.

Publish comparable data across both hubs. A common monthly format for DXB and AUH, covering passengers, transfer share and airlines served, would let policymakers see the national aviation system as a whole.

9. Limitations

The figures are from operators and airlines and have not been independently audited. Some are derived by EPIC, as noted. Etihad figures are from a press report rather than published accounts. Statements about foreign airlines' return dates and the EASA bulletin come from a trade publication and may change. The paper does not cover air cargo in detail, safety and security of operations, or the effect on tourism, which other EPIC papers address. Coverage ends with data published on 17 November 2026; links were checked that day.

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Sources: EPIC-PP-2026-045

All links checked 17 November 2026 (Asia/Dubai). "Route" records how each source was obtained.

Dated source log

Date checked	Key	Route	Status
17 Nov 2026	Dubai Airports 2024	Opened	Retrieved; dated 28 Apr 2024
17 Nov 2026	Dubai Airports 2025a	Opened	Retrieved; dated 29 Jul 2025
17 Nov 2026	Dubai Airports 2025b	Opened	Retrieved; dated 19 Nov 2025
17 Nov 2026	Dubai Airports 2026a	Opened	Retrieved; dated 11 Feb 2026
17 Nov 2026	Dubai Airports 2026b	Opened	Retrieved; dated 4 May 2026
17 Nov 2026	Dubai Airports 2026c	Opened	Retrieved; dated 26 Aug 2026
17 Nov 2026	Dubai Airports 2026d	Opened	Retrieved; dated 17 Nov 2026
17 Nov 2026	Dubai Media Office 2024	Opened	Retrieved; dated 28 Apr 2024
17 Nov 2026	Abu Dhabi Media Office 2026	Opened	Retrieved; dated 4 Nov 2026
17 Nov 2026	Abu Dhabi Airports 2026	Opened (rendered page; plain request met a bot check)	Retrieved; dated Jan 2026
17 Nov 2026	Emirates Group 2026	Opened	Retrieved; dated 5 Nov 2026
17 Nov 2026	IATA 2026a to 2026i	Opened nine monthly reports	Retrieved; January to September 2026 editions
17 Nov 2026	WAM 2026	Opened (rendered page)	Retrieved; dated 28 Feb 2026
17 Nov 2026	The National 2026a	Opened	Retrieved; dated 29 Jan 2026
17 Nov 2026	The National 2026b	Opened	Retrieved; dated 14 Sep 2026
17 Nov 2026	Skift 2026	Opened	Retrieved; dated 17 Nov 2026
17 Nov 2026	AGBI, Etihad analysis	Requested	Not retrieved: HTTP 405. Not used

Calculations by EPIC

- DXB passengers, first quarter of 2025: 46.0 (first half) less 22.5 (second quarter) = 23.5 million.

- DXB passengers, third quarter of 2026: 50.4 (nine months) less 18.6 (first quarter) less 13.0 (second quarter) = 18.8 million, matching the published figure.
- Full-year 2026 guidance against 2025: 70 / 95.2 = 0.735, about a quarter below.
- DXB network, end-2025 to November 2026: airlines 108 to 57 (down 47%); destinations 291 to 235 (down 19%); countries 110 to 101 (down 8%).