



International Civil Aviation Organization

MIDANPIRG/23 & RASG-MID/13 Meetings

(Cairo, Egypt, 14 – 18 June 2026)

Agenda Item 5.6: ATM-SAR

THE PROTECTION OF AVIATION PERSONNEL IN CONFLICT ZONES
IN THE MIDDLE EAST REGION

Presented by

The International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Associations (IFATCA)

Africa and Middle East (AFM) Region

SUMMARY

This paper highlights the escalating threats to aviation personnel and infrastructure in the Middle East due to ongoing armed conflicts. It underscores the psychological and physical toll on Air Traffic Controllers (ATCOs), their legal vulnerability under International Humanitarian Law, and the critical need for harmonised protective measures to ensure their safety and service continuity.

Action by the Meeting: Actions by the meeting are presented in paragraph 3 of this Working Paper

References: ICAO Doc 10084, ICAO Annex 17, ICAO Doc 9985, Geneva Conventions, IFATCA Technical and Professional Manual (TPM)

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE

This working paper is related to the ICAO Strategic objectives of **Safety, Air Navigation Capacity Enhancement, and Security**

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Air transport is a cornerstone of global mobility and economic progress, particularly in the Middle East (MID) region, where it serves as a vital transit corridor connecting Europe and Asia. The safety of this network depends on the skill and vigilance of ATCOs and the integrity of supporting Air Traffic Management (ATM) infrastructure.

1.2 Despite the protection afforded to civilians and civilian facilities under International Humanitarian Law (IHL), recent escalations in Middle East conflicts have demonstrated an increasing disregard for these norms. ATCOs are frequently caught in the crossfire of military activities, including missile strikes and electronic warfare, yet they continue to provide safety-critical services under extreme duress.

2. DISCUSSION

2.1 Escalating Threats and Vulnerability in the MID Region;

The Middle East is currently facing unprecedented airspace challenges. Recent military strikes (e.g., February 2026 strikes involving the U.S., Israel, and Iran) have made the entire affected airspace vulnerable to spill-over risks, miscalculation, and failure of interception procedures. Specific incidents, such as the devastating airstrike on the Sana'a Control Tower in Yemen (December 2024), which injured controllers and destroyed the tower cab, highlight the physical danger faced by ATCOs

operating in conflict zones.

2.2 The Legal Dilemma: "Military Objective" Status;

While IHL generally protects civilians, a dangerous ambiguity exists. Under Article 52 of the Additional Protocol to the Geneva Convention, civilian objects may be categorised as "military objectives" if their nature, location, or use makes an effective contribution to military action and their destruction offers a definite military advantage. This leads belligerents to increasingly target civil aviation facilities, placing ATCOs at risk of being affected as "collateral damage".

2.3 Excessive Workload and Operational Pressure

Airspace closures in the Middle East have forced massive rerouting into adjacent sectors. This has led to:

- Capacity Saturation: Some airspaces in the Middle East have recorded traffic increases of over 25%,
- Network Distortion: Re-routings to avoid conflict areas result in an additional 206,000 km flown daily, increasing traffic complexity and unplanned workload for adjacent sectors. (European Aviation Trends, 2026)

2.4 The Psychological Toll and Mental Health Risks

The psychological impact on ATCOs in high-threat environments is cumulative and safety-critical, which manifests in the following ways:

- Acute Stress and Fatigue: ATCOs experience fear of direct exposure to imminent danger, leading to anxiety, hypervigilance, and sleep disturbances.
- Cognitive Fatigue: Prolonged high-workload saturation induces persistent mental fatigue as controllers mobilise additional reserves to maintain safety despite deteriorating functional states.
- Long-term Effects: Without timely intervention, these stressors can lead to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), burnout, and chronic functional impairment.

2.5 Professional Resilience

Despite these challenges, ATCOs have shown remarkable bravery. In Yemen, injured controllers continued to provide essential services to arriving aircraft immediately following a strike at the control tower, underscoring their commitment as neutral actors delivering safety-of-life services.

3. ACTION BY THE MEETING

3.1 The meeting is invited to note the information contained in this paper.