



**Introductory address
by the Council President
of the International Civil Aviation Organization,
Mr. Salvatore Sciacchitano,
to the Celebration of the 25th Anniversary
of the Founding of the Arab Civil Aviation Organization**

(Recorded virtual message, 7 February 2021)

H.E. Mr. Ahmed Aboul Gheit (Secretary General – The Arab League)

H.E. Sheikh Salman Humoud Al Sabah (President, ACAO)

Eng. Abdennabi Manar, Director General (ACAO)

Dear Directors General of Civil Aviation,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great honour to speak to you today, and on this most special of occasions.

This celebration marks, after all, not only Arab Civil Aviation Day for 2021, but also the 25th Anniversary and first quarter century of successful cooperation you have achieved together through the Arab Civil Aviation Organization (ACAO).

I would like to begin today by applauding the recent agreement reached with the Al Ula Declaration and the consequent lifting of Gulf airspace restrictions. This remarkable development is fully consistent with the principles and objectives of the Chicago Convention, as well as ICAO's mandate to ensure more open skies globally, and continuously improving levels of aviation safety, security, and sustainability.

More liberalized and open skies among ICAO Member States only serves to augment the important and shared socio-economic benefits which derive from optimized international air connectivity.

I am very pleased with this achievement and on behalf of the Council of ICAO I wish to congratulate the States that have been working so diligently to attain this result. At the same time, I very much regret that COVID-19 doesn't allow me to meet you physically to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of ACAO live and in person.

Unfortunately, aviation's skies have never been as dark as we have seen over the past year.

International passenger traffic fell by 98% last April, as the COVID-19 pandemic impacted societies everywhere and disconnected the world.

By the end of the year, international passenger totals plummeted to 26 per cent of their pre-pandemic levels, whilst domestic passenger declined to 40 per cent.

While many will focus on the 2.7 billion fewer passengers this figure represents, we must also appreciate the tremendous achievements of regulators, public health officials, and airline and airport operators working together so that 1.8 billion people, almost a quarter of the earth's population, could still travel safely by air in the face of such challenging circumstances.

As States and industry continue to combat the effects of COVID-19 on air transport, the alignment of their aviation response efforts is also continuing to improve due in no small part to your individual efforts in your respective States, and to the ICAO Council Aviation Recovery Task Force guidance.

But as we now confront the more contagious COVID variants emerging, and see public health consideration again being directed to the possibility of more stringent travel restriction measures, we must also face the fact that a full recovery for international civil aviation is still likely some years away.

The CART Task Force reconvened for its third session last month, and the Council expects it to deliver new recommendations on some of the new highest priority issues we are now faced with, including test result validation and vaccine certification.

The Council of ICAO clearly recognizes the urgency of this work, and I wish to assure you that it will be completed, assessed, and endorsed as quickly as the technical due diligence and diplomatic governance permits.

Throughout the pandemic, and underscoring everything the Task Force has set out and achieved, the solidarity of our sector has remained key to its response and recovery successes.

This reminds us of the value of cooperation and mutually-agreed international objectives in everything we undertake in international aviation, and of the importance of your Arab Civil Aviation Organization in supporting the collective aspirations of Arab States in the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific.

It also reminds us of the diplomatic trust and appreciation we work so hard to achieve together through ICAO, and how this provides the core foundation for the solidarity and recognition of mutual benefits which supports everything we aspire to in global air transport.

This basic trust and solidarity are as important to our effective responses to a global pandemic, as they are to achieving the open skies and increased liberalization which can take Arab aviation to new heights of connectivity and prosperity once we have defeated COVID-19.

I would suggest that a key near-term priority should be the formalization of a multilateral agreement similar to what was recently set out among Latin American countries, establishing 7th freedom traffic rights for cargo flights transporting COVID-19 vaccines.

In concluding now, dear friends and colleagues, let me please commend your Organization for its numerous achievements over the past 25 years, and in particular in these times of hardship.

ICAO will continue to collaborate productively with the ACAO in accordance with the Memorandum signed by our Organizations in 2010, and to address alongside it both our current challenges and the exciting future of more efficient and sustainable air mobility which is now emerging.

Happy 25th birthday ACAO, and may I wish you sunny skies and strong tailwinds over your next quarter century!

Thank you.