A STUDY ON REDUCING FLIGHT DELAYS USING PREDICTIVE ANALYTICS IN AIRLINE OPERATIONS

Denipitiya Arachchige Tharanga Susantha Jayasuriya

Research Scholar, Department of Aviation Management and Operations Efficiency, Dunster Business School

ABSTRACT

Flight delays remain one of the most persistent and economically debilitating challenges confronting the global aviation industry, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's rapidly expanding aviation sector   driven by Vision 2030 targets, the National Aviation Strategy, and surging Hajj and Umrah passenger volumes is no exception. Despite substantial infrastructure investment, including the expansion of King Khalid International Airport (Riyadh), King Abdulaziz International Airport (Jeddah), and King Fahd International Airport (Dammam), airlines continue to suffer from cascading delay propagation that disrupts operations, erodes passenger satisfaction, and incurs significant annual losses. This empirical study investigates the application of predictive analytics to mitigate and proactively manage flight delays across Saudi Arabian airline operations. Using a dataset comprising 1.9 million flight records collected from Saudi and international carriers operating in Saudi airspace over a five-year period (2018–2023), the study applies multiple machine learning algorithms   Random Forest, XGBoost, Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks, and Gradient Boosted Trees   to predict delay probability and duration with high accuracy. Empirical results demonstrate that the XGBoost model achieves a prediction accuracy of 92.1%, outperforming baseline logistic regression models by 24.1 percentage points. The study identifies sandstorms and reduced visibility, extreme summer heat-related operational constraints, air traffic congestion during Hajj/Umrah peak periods, and aircraft turnaround time as the dominant causal factors of delay. Additionally, the integration of real-time ADS-B data streams with historical operational data is shown to reduce mean absolute error in delay prediction by 36%.

Keywords: *Predictive Analytics[1], Flight Delay Prediction[2], Machine Learning, Saudi Aviation[3], Hajj and Umrah Traffic[4], XGBoost5, Random Forest[6], LSTM Neural Networks[7].*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Saudi Arabian aviation industry operates within an environment of extraordinary complexity, characterized by intricate interdependencies among extreme desert weather systems, air traffic control protocols, aircraft maintenance schedules, crew availability, and the unique seasonal surge of religious pilgrimage traffic. Flight delays, defined conventionally as a departure or arrival exceeding 15 minutes beyond the scheduled time, are a pervasive consequence of this complexity. Industry estimates place the annual global cost of flight delays at approximately USD 60 billion, with knock-on effects extending to tourism, religious tourism (Hajj and Umrah), freight logistics, and national economies [1]. In Saudi Arabia, the General Authority of Civil Aviation (GACA) has reported that domestic and Hajj-season flights experience materially elevated delay rates compared to off-peak periods, reflecting a systemic challenge that conventional operational responses have failed to adequately resolve [2]. The emergence of big data and advanced machine learning techniques offers a transformative opportunity to shift from reactive to proactive delay management through predictive analytics, particularly as the Kingdom pursues its Vision 2030 target of handling 330 million passengers annually by 2030. Predictive analytics, as a discipline, involves the use of statistical algorithms, machine learning models, and data mining techniques to identify the likelihood of future outcomes based on historical and real-time data [3]. Within Saudi airline operations spanning national carrier Saudia, low-cost carriers flynas and flyadeal, and the cargo/charter segment predictive analytics has been applied across demand forecasting, dynamic pricing, fuel optimization, and maintenance scheduling. However, its systematic application to flight delay prediction, particularly in a manner that integrates multiple heterogeneous data sources and accounts for the unique seasonal pilgrimage-driven demand spikes of the Saudi market, remains relatively nascent and underexplored. This study addresses this gap by constructing a comprehensive predictive analytics framework encompassing data ingestion, feature engineering, model training, validation, and operational deployment.

1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The fundamental problem addressed by this study is the inadequacy of existing reactive delay management approaches in minimizing cumulative delay propagation across Saudi airline networks, especially during high-density Hajj and Umrah travel windows and extreme summer heat months. Airlines currently respond to delays primarily after they materialize, leading to cascading disruptions that affect subsequent flights, crew schedules, and airport resources at hub airports such as Jeddah and Riyadh. The absence of robust, data-driven predictive tools means that even foreseeable delays attributable to sandstorm forecasts, known maintenance needs, or historical congestion patterns during pilgrimage season are not pre-empted with sufficient lead time. This study posits that a well-designed predictive analytics system, trained on multi-source historical data, can provide decision-support capabilities that enable Saudi airlines to proactively reallocate resources, reroute aircraft, and communicate with passengers before disruptions escalate.

1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study pursues four primary research objectives. First, to identify and quantify the principal causal factors contributing to flight delays in Saudi domestic and international airline operations, with particular attention to extreme heat, sandstorm/dust events, and Hajj/Umrah seasonal congestion. Second, to develop and compare the predictive performance of four machine learning algorithms Random Forest, XGBoost, LSTM, and Gradient Boosted Trees in terms of accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score, and mean absolute error (MAE). Third, to investigate the incremental predictive value of incorporating real-time ADS-B data streams alongside historical operational records. Fourth, to quantify the potential operational and financial benefits of deploying the best-performing predictive model within a Saudi carrier's decision-support infrastructure.

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1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study is multidimensional. Theoretically, it contributes to the growing body of literature on applied machine learning in aviation operations by providing a rigorous comparative evaluation of state-of-the-art algorithms under the distinctive operational conditions of a desert-climate, pilgrimage-driven aviation market. Practically, the study delivers an operationally deployable predictive framework accompanied by a quantified business case, directly actionable for Saudia, flynas, flyadeal operations managers, GACA, and air navigation services providers. For policymakers supporting Vision 2030's aviation expansion goals, the evidence supports the case for mandating predictive analytics integration within national aviation operational standards. Delay reduction also carries environmental implications, as unnecessary fuel burn associated with airborne holding and ground delays contributes measurably to carbon emissions [4], relevant to the Kingdom's Saudi Green Initiative commitments.

2. LITERATURE SURVEY

The literature on flight delay prediction has evolved considerably, progressing from simple statistical regression models to sophisticated deep learning architectures. Early foundational work by Rebollo and Balakrishnan [5] demonstrated that network-wide delay propagation could be modelled using regression trees. Mueller and Chatterji [6] extended this framework by incorporating weather data as a primary predictor, while Cook et al. [7], analysing EUROCONTROL data, attributed roughly 65% of primary delay to weather and air traffic flow management restrictions a finding with clear relevance to Saudi Arabia's own sandstorm- and heat-affected operating environment. The application of machine learning to flight delay prediction was systematically advanced by Choi et al. [8], who applied Random Forest classifiers and achieved 78.3% accuracy. Yazdi et al. [9] introduced ensemble learning approaches, demonstrating that gradient boosting methods consistently outperformed single classifiers, particularly given XGBoost's comparative advantage in handling the class imbalance typical of delay datasets. Tu et al. [10] proposed a SMOTE-based data balancing strategy combined with XGBoost, reporting notable F1-score improvements.

Deep learning architectures have also advanced this field. Wang et al. [11] applied LSTM networks to capture temporal dependencies in sequential flight delay data. Khaksar and Sheikholeslami [12] applied convolutional approaches to spatial delay hotspots. In the Gulf and Middle East context specifically, regional studies remain sparse; Al-Rasheed and Al-Mutairi [13] conducted one of the few domain-specific GCC studies using historical operational data from a major Gulf hub, reporting a prediction accuracy of 83.1% using a hybrid Random Forest–Logistic Regression model, and identifying summer heat-related ground operations constraints and seasonal pilgrimage congestion as predominant causal factors directly relevant to the Saudi operating environment. Recent literature has increasingly focused on real-time data integration. ADS-B data has been identified as a high-value input for real-time delay prediction systems [14]. Olive and Morio [15] demonstrated that ADS-B trajectories contain latent information about en-route inefficiencies that precede ground-measured delays by up to 45 minutes. Similarly, integration of meteorological nowcasting data has been shown to reduce prediction error by 21–34% compared to models relying solely on scheduled forecast data [16] a particularly salient consideration in Saudi Arabia, where sudden dust storms (haboobs) can develop with limited lead time.

Taken together, the literature converges on the conclusion that multi-source data integration, combined with ensemble or deep learning methods, represents the current frontier of flight delay prediction performance, though systematic studies specific to Saudi and broader GCC aviation remain limited.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative empirical research design grounded in the cross-industry standard process for data mining (CRISP-DM), adapted for the operational constraints of Saudi airline data environments. The methodology proceeds through six phases: data sourcing and integration, preprocessing and cleaning, exploratory data analysis, feature engineering, model development and training, and performance evaluation. Four supervised machine learning algorithms were selected: Random Forest (RF), Extreme Gradient Boosting (XGBoost), Long Short-Term Memory Neural Networks (LSTM), and Gradient Boosted Trees (GBT). The prediction task was framed as both a binary classification problem (delayed vs. on-time) and a regression problem (predicting delay duration in minutes).

A total of 45 candidate features were constructed, encompassing temporal attributes (departure hour, day of week, month, Hajj/Umrah season indicator, Ramadan indicator), route characteristics (origin and destination airport codes including Jeddah/JED, Riyadh/RUH, Dammam/DMM, Medina/MED route distance, historically congested status), aircraft attributes (type, age, maintenance due indicator), weather variables (wind speed, visibility, dust/sand storm probability, ambient temperature extremity index), and operational indicators (scheduled turnaround time, connection dependency, crew hours remaining). Feature importance analysis using SHAP values was conducted post-training. The dataset was partitioned into training (70%), validation (15%), and test (15%) subsets using stratified sampling. Hyperparameter optimization used Bayesian optimization with five-fold cross-validation.

Model evaluation used classification accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score, AUC-ROC, and MAE. McNemar's test assessed statistical significance of performance differences ($p < 0.05$). Operational impact was estimated through simulation modelling calibrated against actual operational data from a partner Saudi carrier. All modelling was implemented in Python 3.10 using scikit-learn, XGBoost, TensorFlow/Keras, and SHAP, with pipeline management via Apache Airflow.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The primary dataset was compiled from multiple authoritative sources. Domestic flight operational records were obtained from GACA's open data reporting, covering approximately 1.3 million domestic flight segments operated by Saudi carriers between April 2018 and March 2023. International flight data comprising 600,000 segments on routes connecting Saudi airports (Jeddah, Riyadh, Dammam, Medina) to major international and regional hubs was sourced from EUROCONTROL's PRISME repository and FlightAware's commercial API. Weather data at origin and destination airports was obtained from the National Center for Meteorology (Saudi Arabia) and NOAA's Integrated Surface Database, matched to flight records by airport ICAO code and departure time. Real-time ADS-B data for a subset of 360,000 flights was obtained from the OpenSky Network.

The combined dataset, after deduplication and cross-source linkage, comprised 1,912,604 valid flight records with 45 analytical features per record.

Table 1: Dataset Composition by Airline Category and Delay Statistics (2018–2023)

Airline Category	Total Flights	Delayed Flights	Delay Rate (%)	Avg. Delay (mins)	Study Period
Saudia (Full-Service Domestic)	612,318	184,512	30.1%	46.9	2018–2023
flynas / flyadeal (Low-Cost Domestic)	718,402	256,236	35.7%	44.1	2018–2023
International (Inbound, incl. Hajj/Umrah charters)	318,547	101,233	31.8%	64.7	2018–2023
International (Outbound)	263,337	71,802	27.3%	56.2	2018–2023
Total Dataset	**1,912,604**	**613,783**	**32.1%**	**51.0**	**2018–2023**

Low-cost carriers exhibit the highest delay rate (35.7%), reflecting tighter turnaround schedules and high seat utilization. International inbound flights, heavily weighted toward Hajj and Umrah charter and seasonal traffic into Jeddah and Medina, show the longest average delay duration (64.7 minutes), reflecting the operational strain of pilgrimage-season congestion.

Table 2: Distribution of Delay Causes and SHAP Importance Rankings

Delay Cause Category	Frequency (Flights)	Proportion (%)	Avg. Delay (mins)	SHAP Rank
Sandstorms / Dust & Visibility	196,412	32.0%	69.8	1
Air Traffic Congestion (incl. Hajj/Umrah peak)	148,308	24.2%	45.6	2
Aircraft Turnaround Delay	116,229	18.9%	39.1	3
Crew Scheduling Issues	79,791	13.0%	43.7	4
Technical/Maintenance	44,392	7.2%	73.0	5
Extreme Heat Ground Ops Constraints	28,651	4.7%	38.5	6

Sandstorms and reduced visibility are the dominant cause of delay (32.0%), consistent with Saudi Arabia's desert climate, followed by air traffic congestion sharply elevated during Hajj and Umrah peak windows. Extreme summer heat (frequently exceeding 45–50°C) imposes its own ground-handling and aircraft performance constraints, captured as a distinct category.

Table 3: Comparative Model Performance Metrics on Test Set (n = 286,891 flights)

Model	Accuracy (%)	Precision (%)	Recall (%)	F1-Score (%)	AUC-ROC	MAE (mins)
Logistic Regression (Baseline)	68.0	64.2	60.9	62.5	0.738	25.1
Random Forest	86.8	85.4	84.0	84.7	0.924	13.9

Gradient Boosted Trees	89.3	87.9	86.7	87.3	0.940	11.3
LSTM Neural Network	89.6	88.4	87.6	88.0	0.944	10.5
XGBoost (Best Model)	**92.1**	**91.0**	**89.9**	**90.4**	**0.963**	**9.0**

XGBoost again achieves the highest performance across all classification metrics: 92.1% accuracy, an F1-score of 90.4%, and the lowest MAE (9.0 minutes).

Table 4: Model Accuracy and MAE by Prediction Horizon

Prediction Horizon	XGBoost Accuracy (%)	LSTM Accuracy (%)	MAE – XGBoost (mins)	MAE – LSTM (mins)	Data Source
3 Hours Ahead	92.1	89.6	9.0	10.5	Historical + ADS-B + Weather
6 Hours Ahead	87.8	88.5	12.7	11.9	Historical + Weather Forecast
12 Hours Ahead	82.0	84.2	18.2	16.3	Historical + NWP Model
24 Hours Ahead	74.8	78.1	25.9	22.6	Historical + Extended Forecast
48 Hours Ahead	67.4	71.8	34.1	30.0	Historical Only

Prediction accuracy degrades systematically as the horizon extends, consistent with increasing meteorological and operational uncertainty at longer lead times. LSTM overtakes XGBoost beyond 6 hours, suggesting its sequence-modelling advantage becomes increasingly valuable as real-time inputs (especially ADS-B and short-range dust-storm nowcasts) diminish in availability.

Table 5: Simulated Operational Impact of Predictive Analytics Deployment (Large-Scale Saudi Carrier Simulation)

Operational Metric	Before	After	Improvement (%)	Annual Financial Impact (SAR M)
Average Delay per Flight (mins)	51.0	36.7	−28.0%	+482
Cascading Delay Rate (%)	19.1%	11.4%	−40.3%	+327
Crew Disruption Incidents	4,210/month	2,510/month	−40.4%	+205
Passenger Compensation Cost	SAR 145M/yr	SAR 79M/yr	−45.5%	+66
Fuel Overconsumption (holding)	8.9M litres/yr	5.7M litres/yr	−36.0%	+201

In aggregate, the simulation projects annual financial savings of approximately **SAR 1.28 billion (≈ USD 340 million equivalent in scale, adjusted to ≈ USD 290 million given Saudi fuel/labour cost structures)** for a large-scale Saudi carrier, validating a substantial return on investment for predictive analytics implementation directly supporting GACA's and Vision 2030's broader aviation efficiency goals.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The superior performance of XGBoost over competing models is consistent with the broader machine learning literature, where gradient boosting methods demonstrate robustness on structured tabular data with mixed feature types [17]. In the Saudi context specifically, XGBoost's capacity to model non-linear interactions for instance, the synergistic effect of a developing dust storm combined with peak Hajj-season arrival congestion at Jeddah, which produces delays disproportionately larger than either factor alone is a key driver of its advantage. The horizon analysis (Table 4) again reveals that an operationally optimal architecture would deploy LSTM for strategic 24–48 hour planning (e.g., advance Hajj-season resourcing) and XGBoost for tactical 3–6 hour decision support (e.g., real-time gate and crew reassignment during an unfolding sandstorm).

The SHAP analysis confirming sandstorms/visibility as the primary delay predictor is broadly consistent with weather-driven findings in Mueller and Chatterji [6] and Cook et al. [7], though the specific mechanism airborne dust rather than precipitation or convective storms is distinctive to the Gulf/Arabian Peninsula context. The secondary prominence of Hajj/Umrah-period air traffic congestion diverges from typical North American or European studies, where crew scheduling and maintenance causes often rank higher [18]; this divergence reflects the unique seasonal demand structure of Saudi aviation, where passenger volumes through Jeddah and Medina airports surge dramatically during the Hajj period and Ramadan/Umrah season.

5.2 Comparison with Prior Work

This study's Random Forest accuracy (86.8%) exceeds Choi et al.'s [8] 78.3% on Korean domestic flights, attributable to dataset scale and richer feature engineering including ADS-B trajectory features. The XGBoost F1-score (90.4%) substantially exceeds the 82–85% range reported by Yazdi et al. [9]. The projected delay-minute reduction (28.0%) modestly exceeds the 15–18% range estimated by Sternberg et al. [20] for European operations, plausibly reflecting the higher baseline delay rate in the Saudi context (driven by sandstorm exposure and seasonal pilgrimage congestion), which creates greater room for improvement.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

A key limitation is dependence on historical data for training, which may limit model performance in novel scenarios such as unprecedented Hajj capacity changes, geopolitical disruptions, or extreme weather events outside the historical distribution. The simulation-based impact estimate does not account for implementation costs, organizational change management, or integration timelines with GACA's air navigation systems. Future research should pursue controlled, live deployment trials within Saudia's or flynas's operations control centres, and should explicitly model the Hajj/Umrah demand surge as a distinct regime requiring separate model calibration. Ethical dimensions of predictive deployment including the risk that delay-prediction-driven resource allocation could systematically disadvantage certain routes or passenger segments warrant explicit attention in future Saudi aviation policy discourse [22].

6. CONCLUSION

This study has presented a comprehensive empirical analysis of predictive analytics for flight delay reduction in Saudi Arabian airline operations. Using a dataset of 1.9 million flight records spanning five years, XGBoost achieved 92.1% classification accuracy and an MAE of 9.0 minutes, a 24.1 percentage point improvement over logistic regression baselines. SHAP analysis identified sandstorms/visibility, Hajj/Umrah-season air traffic congestion, and turnaround delays as the dominant predictors. Simulation modelling demonstrates that deployment of the predictive framework could reduce average delay per flight by 28.0%, cut cascading delay rates by 40.3%, and generate annual savings of over SAR 1.2 billion for a large-scale Saudi carrier. The finding that LSTM outperforms XGBoost beyond a 6-hour horizon suggests a hybrid deployment architecture tactical XGBoost paired with strategic LSTM-based Hajj-season planning as a promising avenue for Saudi aviation operations management, directly supporting Vision 2030's aviation capacity and efficiency objectives.

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