

Archive: Article[return to list](#) | ◀ article 1 of 1 ▶**The lost years**

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BY TIM RIPLEY / BASRA**How do you go about rebuilding an aviation system shattered by sanctions, air strikes and looting? That is the task facing Iraq's post-war administrators**

At Basra International Airport in Iraq, flights from Madrid, Ankara, Athens and Abu Dhabi are still posted on the arrivals board, but they are a ghostly reminder of the airport's former glory. Outside the arrival hall, British soldiers stand guard at a sandbagged security post and military transport aircraft fill the airport's large apron.

Restoration of civil aviation in Iraq is a high priority in the reconstruction plans developed by the US-run administration in Baghdad, but the security situation means major international airlines have yet to begin passenger or cargo service.

US and UK contractors are now on the ground at three of Iraq's main civil airports repairing their facilities. The first phase of work is due to be finished by the end of the year, when a multi-million dollar programme to rehabilitate the civil aviation sector in Iraq is set to start.

In its heyday in the 1980s, Iraqi Airways flew to several major capitals around the world using its fleet of Boeing 727s and 747s. Saddam International Airport, on the south western fringes of Baghdad, boasted opulent VIP lounges befitting one of the Arab world's richest and most populous countries, while a new airport eight miles outside Basra, Iraq's second city, was being constructed by German contractors.

Iraq's aviation industry was brought to its knees following the 1990 invasion of Kuwait and more than a decade of United Nations sanctions. Several Iraqi Airways aircraft were flown to Iran during the 1991 Gulf War to escape US bombing and were seized by the Tehran government as reparations for the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.

For most of the 1990s international flights were grounded because of sanctions and internal flights were severely disrupted by US- and UK-imposed no-fly zones. When sanctions began to fray in the late 1990s, routes were opened to Amman in Jordan and several other destinations. Iraqi Airways led the way on these routes with wet-leased aircraft and a few minor airlines ventured to Baghdad, but no major international carriers risked breaching sanctions by opening services to Iraq.

In an act of defiance against the US and UK air patrols of the southern no-fly zones, two flights a week were started from Baghdad to Basra in November 2000. An air strike then destroyed Basra airport's radar when it was suspected of helping Iraqi air defences target US and UK aircraft. As war approached earlier this year, some Iraqi Airways aircraft and equipment was moved to Amman for protection.

Outbreak of war

The three-week-long US assault on Iraq came to a climax on 4th April when US Army tanks stormed Baghdad airport and were filmed driving past the burned-out remains of Iraqi Airways aircraft. Within days Saddam Hussein's government had collapsed.

Even before the final fall of the Iraqi government, US Army engineers had repaired the bomb craters in the runway and US Air Force Lockheed Martin C-130 Hercules transports were landing to help the military build-up for the final assault on the capital. Further south, British Army Challenger tanks were crashing through the perimeter fence at Basra airport and had soon turned the largely undamaged terminal building into the UK headquarters in southern Iraq.

In the immediate aftermath of the fall of the old government, US, UK and Australian forces moved to establish control of Iraq's main airports to allow them to support the occupation effort and allow the delivery of humanitarian aid.

Immediately behind the combat troops came units specially trained and equipped to get "austere" airfields up and running. The USAF's 447th Air Expeditionary Wing took over the now-renamed Baghdad International Airport and turned it into a major transport hub to support the thousands of US troops trying to bring law and order to the Iraqi capital. Construction teams from the 1st Expeditionary Red Horse Group and the Civil Engineer Maintenance, Inspection and Repair Team repaired the runway and established an airport lighting system.

A constant stream of Hercules, Boeing C-17 and Lockheed C-5 Galaxy aircraft were now landing at the airport, along with the first flights of aircraft chartered by non-governmental organisations and aid agencies. Royal Australian Air Force air controllers took over the air traffic control for the airport.

Other USAF units opened up airfields at Tallil in the south, Mosul and Kirkuk in the north and several remote sites in the western desert. These were predominately used by military aircraft. At Basra a 500-strong team of RAF personnel set up a deployed operating base to run the airport as a transport hub for UK forces in the Middle East. Soon, between 20 and 50 fixed-wing and 50 helicopter flights a day were using the airport. Most of these were military, but they also included a large number of charter flights carrying troops and humanitarian aid, the latter category including a high profile visit by Virgin Atlantic boss Sir Richard Branson in one of his 747s.

The US and UK military moved quickly to set up a system of navigation aids at the airports under their control, installing ground radar and providing limited approach coverage. There is no countrywide radar coverage and all air traffic is control procedurally by the Regional Air Movements Control Centre (RAMCC) at Al Udeid airbase in Qatar. The RAMCC staff issue "time slots" and transponder codes to aircraft intending to land at Iraqi airfields. The RAMCC negotiated overflights procedures for entering Iraqi airspace from Kuwait, Jordan, Syria and Turkey.

Infrastructure collapse

While the main terminal and other facilities at both Baghdad and Basra airports were largely undamaged in the war, the collapse of Iraq's power, telephone and sewage systems meant that the military had to bring in almost every resource they needed to run flight operations.

US and UK officers who inspected the airports after the end of the war say their biggest problems stemmed more from the decade-long lack of maintenance due to UN sanctions than because of war damage. The collapse of law and order resulted in hundreds of troops having to be diverted to guard these airports to prevent them being looted. Drastic security measures, including ground surveillance radars and machine gun positions, were established around the airports.

With the arrival of US tanks in the heart of Baghdad on 9th April, Iraq's government melted away, as did the senior management personnel of Iraq Airways. What was left of Iraq's civil aviation sector disappeared overnight. The Ministry of Transport, which controlled Iraq's civil aviation authority, was looted, as were the offices of Iraq Airways.

Early this summer the US and UK governments formed the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), headed by Ambassador Paul Bremer, to run the country. Bremer set up teams of foreign experts to run Iraqi ministries and government agencies. As such, the CPA is responsible for all of Iraq's infrastructure, its aviation administration and its state-owned airline.

Civil aviation in Iraq is now being overseen by Frank Hatfield, the US Federal Aviation Administration's eastern region air traffic manager. Hatfield is dubbed "senior advisor for civil aviation to the Iraqi ministry of transport". Iraq's memberships of the International Civil Aviation Organisation and International Air Transport Association are in limbo, however, until a functioning government in Baghdad is re-established.

Fortunately both Baghdad and Basra airports were secured by US and UK troops and were therefore not totally stripped by looters. However, several of Iraq Airways' 23 aircraft - including Boeing 727s, 747-200Cs, a 747SP and an Ilyushin Il-76, along with some ground handling equipment - were looted before military control was firmly established.

To get Iraq's airport open the CPA was able to draw on \$150 million allocated to the Ministry of Transport to fund emergency repair work. As part of its multi-billion deal to repair Iraq's infrastructure, the US construction giant Bechtel was contracted, via the US Agency for International Development, to begin emergency projects at both Baghdad and Basra airports.

The work at Baghdad airport included installing an emergency power generation system, refurbishment of Terminal C, restoring sewage and water supplies, installing security check points, passenger handling facilities, air conditioning and refurbishment of the air traffic control tower and fire station.

A similar programme was contracted for Basra, including renewing the power supply, heating, air conditioning, sewage and constructing a new runway. At both airports satellite terminals and radio communications are being installed. Project manager Bechtel is under contract to finish the work by the end of the year

Facilities manager

In May, the CPA contracted airport facilities management company Skylink Air and Logistic Support to assess and manage the running of civil aviation at five airports in Iraq. Under the \$2.5 million contract, SkyLink and its partner Serco will also look at opening Mosul and two other airports for civilian use.

These initial efforts are considered only the first stage of the rehabilitation of Iraq's civil aviation industry. US Congress is assessing George Bush's request for \$87 billion for Iraqi restoration during 2004, which includes \$835 for transport projects, including rebuilding three airports. If the supplemental budget is passed, far more significant work can be expected to get under way next year. The CPA announced in September that it was opening all Iraqi state-owned assets for foreign investment, but the US-led organisation has yet to announce a detailed plan for the future of Iraqi Airways.

While the war and 12 years of sanctions have taken their toll on Iraq's aviation infrastructure, the human resources of the country's aviation industry have also been severely depleted.

UK RAF officers who have been running Basra airport since last April tell Flight International that a major effort needs to be put into training Iraqis to international standards. Hundreds of Iraqis who used to work at the airport have offered their services to its new "managers" although they have had little if any internationally recognised training for more than 12 years, according to the officers.

"People who worked here were not properly trained," says Grp Capt Tony Gunby, RAF commander of Basra airport. "There will be a huge bill to bring them back on line [to international standards]."

Iraqis are slowly being brought back to work at their country's airports, with Basra's meteorological staff working alongside RAF personnel. According to UK officers a major emerging problem is that Iraq has missed the information technology revolution, with most aviation industry personnel requiring crash courses in IT to make them computer literate.

US and UK military commanders, however, say they want to manage this process carefully to ensure any local staff are properly security screened to prevent sabotage attacks against airport facilities

In the early summer, CPA aviation chiefs asked commercial airlines to submit applications to open fee-paying passenger services to Baghdad. In June, the US Department of Transportation granted Kalitta Air, Northwest Airlines and World Airways permission to fly to Baghdad. American Airlines, Delta Air Lines and United Airlines have authority to serve Iraq. KLM was also keen to fly to the capital. British Airways looked at the possibility of serving Basra, where there are 10,000 UK troops and hundreds of aid workers. Back then, airlines thought they would be able to do good business serving international military contingents, support workers helping the reconstruction efforts and transporting some of the five million exiled Iraqis wishing to return home.

Hindered progress

This enthusiasm soon waned over the summer months as attacks on US and UK troops increased. Commercial operators got cold feet after US C-130s operating out of Baghdad airport were fired at by

guerilla fighters armed with shoulder-launched man-portable surface-to-air missiles and the US military issued security warnings. Plans to open commercial services to Baghdad and Basra were put on indefinite hold.

One consolation was the opening of the upper airspace over Iraq for transit traffic early last month. A resurgence of economic activity in Iraq will undoubtedly lead to a surge in demand for air travel to the country, particularly if the oil industry returns to its former strength.

With construction efforts at Iraq's airport gathering pace, the future of civil aviation in Iraq is totally dependent on improving the security situation.

Source: Flight International

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◀ back | to top | article 1 of 1 ▶



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