



An-225 landing at Basra airport, which has become a focal point for flights bringing in equipment to rebuild Iraq's infrastructure

UK RAF

THE LOST YEARS

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

BY TIM RIPLEY / BASRA

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