

Partnership between the US and Iraqi Air Forces

One Airman's Perspective

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The US military has engaged in combat and training operations in Iraq for more than two decades. Most recently, our participation focused on building Iraq's capacity as a capable and credible military force—in other words, we formed a partnership. However, as of New Year's Day 2012, the US military will have assumed a very different posture in Iraq. In accordance with the security agreement signed by President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in 2008, virtually all US military members should have left Iraqi soil, as the United States makes good on its pledge to depart by 31 December 2011. Thus, as the fledgling Iraqi democracy continues to grow, so does the Al Quwwa al Jawwiya al Iraqiya (Iraqi air force [IqAF]), though now without direct assistance from the US Air Force (USAF). This article discusses some of the USAF's recent partnerships with the IqAF, addresses some challenges that the latter now faces, and speculates about the relationship between our air forces in the future.

The Partnership

I redeployed from Iraq in November 2011, having had the privilege of commanding the 52d Expeditionary Flying Training Squadron (the USAF's only such squadron), which included instructor pilots who trained IqAF pilots in Iraqi T-6s—the same aircraft the USAF uses for pilot training. The 52d was part of both the 321st Air Expeditionary Wing and the Iraq Training and Advisory Mission (ITAM), designed to

advise, train, assist and equip the [IqAF] and Army Aviation Command in developing foundational and enduring capabilities to maintain internal security and defend against external threats; to provide airfield operations in support of [United States Forces–Iraq]; to transition designated missions and functions to other US government agencies; and to reposture the force [in accordance with] the US-Iraq Security Agreement, in order to strengthen the US-Iraq partnership and promote regional stability.¹

Specifically, the 52d sought “to advise, train, and assist in building an [IqAF] with foundational and enduring capabilities in flying training while establishing a continuing relationship between the United States and Iraqi air forces.”² Simply stated, our mission was to train IqAF pilots to fly and become instructor pilots.³ Before the 52d rolled up our flag to leave Iraq in late October, we held a graduation at which 11 IqAF airmen formally received their instructor pilot rating. We also completed an operational handover to our counterpart, IqAF Squadron 203, which currently carries out both a primary pilot training and an instructor pilot mission. This fully organic IqAF operational mission in flying training is modeled after that of a typical flying training squadron in Air Education and Training Command (AETC). Despite the small number of IqAF instructor pilots at present, this young air force’s assumption of such a mission is quite an accomplishment, of which it is rightfully proud.

Regardless of Squadron 203’s operational autonomy, it has virtually no maintenance capability, primarily due to underdeveloped English-language and technical-training programs for its maintainers. Thus, for the foreseeable future, the IqAF will continue to rely on US contractors to complete basic and scheduled maintenance as well as daily flight-line maintenance for the T-6. Most likely this dependence will continue until the IqAF formalizes and then makes good on a strategic vision that includes addressing goals for aircraft maintenance and sustainment—something diligently advocated by USAF advisers under the ITAM organization.

In support of the US national security strategy and in accordance with the previously mentioned security agreement, USAF Airmen—as part of the ITAM—advised, trained, and assisted the IqAF at the request of the elected government of Iraq and at the direction of the US

government. Both Iraqi and US political and military leaders agreed on the mutual benefits and necessity of extending the training and advising partnerships into 2012, albeit involving much smaller numbers of US personnel. Most of them thought that our two governments would reach a similar security agreement that would allow a US military presence in Iraq—one that would continue priority training missions. Because this did not occur, however, US troops exited Iraq as originally planned in the 2008 security agreement framework. The small team of US forces that remains in Iraq is part of the US Embassy's mission in the Office of Security Cooperation, an arrangement similar to those in other US Embassy missions throughout the world.

As political and diplomatic ties between the United States and Iraq take root, military strategists and planners continue to examine ways of forging military relationships for the coming years. Leaders in both countries are concerned about Iraq's evolving democracy, especially in light of sectarian and ethnic divisions as well as the growing influence of Iran. Such issues raise questions about the future of USAF and IqAF relations, the IqAF's progress in its rebuilding effort, and that air force's capability 10 years from now. A brief look at the IqAF during the past two decades reveals not only its ability to field a credible air force but also the possibility that such an ability could deteriorate over time.

The Iraqi Air Force over the Last 20 Years

On the verge of the Gulf War of 1991, the IqAF was large and confident. Various reports estimated its readiness and air order of battle at between 700 and 950 fixed-wing assets. Undoubtedly, the IqAF's 40,000 airmen, 24 main operating bases throughout the country, and extensive infrastructure built to sustain conventional attacks gave it a prominent position among the region's air powers.⁴ Clearly, Iraq took pride in its air force, making it a national priority. Furthermore, the country's leaders were familiar with running and leading an air force, and the government valued a powerful air defense.⁵

During the first Gulf War, the coalition inflicted heavy losses on the out-matched IqAF but did not decimate it—witness the fact that Saddam Hussein continued to use his air components in bombing raids against his people in southern and northern Iraq. Appalled, the world community took action in the form of United Nations Security Council decrees that established no-fly zones to restrict the presence of Iraqi military aircraft in areas south and north of Baghdad. The effects of the war, the 12-year enforcement of the no-fly zones, and economic sanctions led to the IqAF's slow demise. By 2003, when the United States invaded Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom, the devastated IqAF did not launch a single fighter aircraft in the nation's defense. In 2004, as a new Iraqi democracy began to take shape, the IqAF also started the process of rebuilding.⁶

Rebuilding the Iraqi Air Force

Initially, the IqAF relied on the assistance of the USAF. Our air forces have collaborated on a number of matters over the past eight years—take, for example, the ITAM organization, which included hundreds of USAF Airmen serving in advisory roles, charged with training and assisting the IqAF at its bases throughout Iraq. The advisory efforts emphasized transforming the IqAF into a credible twenty-first-century air force by strengthening it in several traditional roles, such as command and control; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; airlift; ground attack; combat support; and the development of airmen. USAF advisers advocated formulation of long-term strategic visions, all the while building strong relationships between our airmen. At present the IqAF operates a small fleet of transport, reconnaissance, close air support, and training aircraft. As it continues to rebuild, the IqAF has made a priority of investing in air defense capabilities and adding light attack aircraft. To further assist Iraq in providing for its own security, the Obama administration approved the sale of F-16 aircraft to that country, and in September 2011 the government of Iraq spent more than \$1.5 billion to purchase the combat-proven F-16 advanced air defense fighter, as have 25 other nations.⁷ This acquisition and others will facilitate interoperability

not only with the USAF but also with many NATO and allied partners. Although a significant step towards renewing Iraq's air defense, the decision to field a new weapon system such as the F-16 carries with it many challenges. These include ensuring the proficiency of Iraqi personnel in English, offering follow-on technical training for IqAF pilots and maintenance crews, making decisions on weapons storage, executing bilateral government agreements for the release of sensitive information, investing for the long term in modernizing and building base infrastructure, and developing career paths. As a trusted partner, the USAF has pledged its assistance to the IqAF in meeting these challenges, as have US military members associated with the US Embassy's mission. Failure to renew the security agreement, however, has prevented implementation of further military assistance outside the embassy's framework at present.

Future Relationship

At this important time in the rebuilding of the IqAF, proper investment by the Iraqi government in its air force and airmen is critical. Despite historic achievements between the US and Iraqi militaries during the last several years, several concerns remained when we withdrew our forces in December, and the Iraqi government risks repeating mistakes of the past if it fails to devote adequate resources to address the needs of the IqAF. As tens of thousands of US troops left Iraq over the last quarter of 2011, specific questions still loomed regarding how and if that nation could operate its own air force. For example (and almost unbelievably), despite its position as one of the world's largest oil-producing countries and despite years of US advising, questions about military priorities remained unanswered: Will the IqAF be able to refuel its own aircraft? Can the Iraqi military offer adequate force protection and security for its bases? Can the IqAF provide airfield management services at its bases as they return to Iraqi control after eight years under US direction? Can the IqAF ensure simple power generation to keep facilities operating? Will the IqAF be able to develop and retain its airmen? Answers to these questions must come from the government of Iraq and the IqAF, but

continued advice and training from the USAF could have benefited Iraq in arriving at those solutions. Such ongoing assistance has prompted debate on Capitol Hill since the complete withdrawal of US military personnel devoted to training and assisting may have been more a political rather than a sound strategic decision.⁸ Only time will tell if we left too early; nevertheless, even without a renewed security agreement, the USAF can continue to stand alongside the IqAF.

Gen Norton Schwartz, the USAF chief of staff, has made a priority of building air-force-to-air-force partnerships and assisting in building partnership capacity, highlighting the latter as one of the USAF's core functions.⁹ The USAF has helped the IqAF build capacity and address the concerns mentioned above by hosting visits by its senior leaders to the United States. For example, in November 2011, I accompanied five IqAF officers to a T-6 users conference in San Antonio, Texas, where representatives from countries that fly this aircraft, as well as members of the USAF and US Navy, not only attended briefings and received information on the health of the T-6 fleet but also had opportunities to share lessons learned and take part in some of the processes involving foreign military sales. Additionally, the IqAF delegation visited the Defense Language Institute as well as several flying and training organizations at Randolph AFB, Texas, capably hosted by the 12th Flying Training Wing, the 37th Training Wing, and AETC's International Affairs Directorate. These visits showcased the professionalism of the USAF and furthered the building of relationships between our air forces by permitting the IqAF delegation to visit, ask questions, and see firsthand where many of their members will receive training in the United States as a result of future partnerships such as the one involving Iraq's purchase of F-16s. The delegation's senior officer commented that he was impressed by the openness and transparency of both the T-6 manufacturer and the USAF in discussing problems, mitigation plans, and the overall state of the aircraft program.

Before we stopped flying in Iraq and officially handed the reins of the squadron to the IqAF, we had the privilege of leading several fourships of its aircraft as part of the upgrade process for IqAF instructors—

some of that air force's brightest young pilots. I expect that these confident, capable individuals will become good coalition airmen-partners, flying missions in the region and around the globe as well as performing coalition exercises, humanitarian assistance / peacekeeping operations, and real-world contingency operations.

In a large sense, our future partnership with the IqAF remains unknown and in the hands of the two nations' political leaders. However, we do know that the USAF stands ready to continue its current partnership with the IqAF and to maintain the airmen-to-airmen relationships formed over the last several years. Hopefully, as our diplomatic relationships normalize along more traditional lines, I anticipate that our air forces' engagement, training, and partnerships will do so as well. Indeed, General Schwartz noted that "oftentimes, the military-to-military rapport is the centerpiece of the diplomatic relationship, including times when political winds shift, and the nation-to-nation connection cools. The more that our military-to-military connections remain vibrant, the stronger our strategic relationships can become."¹⁰ I hope that the government of Iraq recognizes the importance of continuing a partnership with the US military as well as with regional allies and that senior IqAF leaders formulate a strategic vision which will lead their airmen into the next decade. ★

Notes

1. Briefing, Sather AB, Baghdad, Iraq, subject: Iraq Training and Advisory Mission Brief, July 2011.
2. Briefing, Contingency Operating Base Speicher, Tikrit, Iraq, subject: 52d Expeditionary Flying Training Squadron Mission Brief, July 2011.
3. This mission seems quite ironic considering that in my previous three deployments, the US-led coalition mission ensured that no Iraqi military aircraft flew in zones north and south of Baghdad and that several of the IqAF pilots we trained in the 52d included some of the same individuals I prevented from flying in those zones—a situation that made for interesting discussions.
4. "Iraqi Air Force [IQAF]," GlobalSecurity.org, 7 September 2011, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/airforce.htm>.

5. Daniel L. Haulman, PhD, "What Happened to the Iraqi Air Force?," Air Force Historical Research Agency, 5 November 2009, 1, 7–8, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/aunews/archive/2010/0516/0516Articles/Haulman30514.pdf>.

6. See Catherine Dale, *Operation Iraqi Freedom: Strategies, Approaches, Results, and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report for Congress RL34387 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2 April 2009), <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf&AD=ADA500337>.

7. Adam Entous and Nathan Hodge, "Iraq Buys F-16s, Strengthening Its Air Force," *Wall Street Journal*, 27 September 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204422404576594900420928050.html>.

8. Donna Cassata and Lolita C. Baldor, "Panetta, Dempsey Spar with Senators over Iraq," *Army Times*, 15 November 2011, <http://www.armytimes.com/news/2011/11/ap-panetta-dempsey-spar-with-senators-over-iraq-111511/>.

9. Gen Norton Schwartz, "Strengthening Air Force Language Skills and Cultural Competencies" (remarks, Department of Defense Language and Culture Summit, Alexandria, VA, 26 January 2011), 4, 7, <http://www.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-110126-045.pdf>.

10. *Ibid.*, 8.



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