



U.S. Air Force photos

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As air force grows, so does Iraqis' pride

Once-mighty fleet ruined in Gulf War

By Jim Michaels
USA TODAY

KIRKUK, Iraq — In his crisp flight suit, sunglasses and polished boots, Lt. Gen. Kamal Barzanji looks every inch the fighter pilot he once was as he strides onto the flight line here.

But the planes lined up on the tarmac at the air base here resemble a local flying club. A single row of Cessna single-engine propeller planes are lined neatly in a row, bearing the markings of the Iraqi air force.

It's not easy hiding his frustration. "The Iraqi people are waiting to see an F-16 or F/A-18 flying with an Iraqi pilot in the sky," says Barzanji, Iraq's air force chief, referring to iconic American combat planes. "Now it is the weakest air force in the Middle East.

At its peak, Iraq had one of the largest air forces in the region and the sixth-largest in the world. By the end of the 1980-88 war with Iran, Iraq's air force had grown to 1,000 combat aircraft, mainly Soviet-made MiGs and French Mirage warplanes. Its pilots were hailed as national heroes.

Iraq's pilots weren't always the best trained, and a shortage of spare parts and poor maintenance meant some planes never got off the ground. Most of

Iraq's air force was destroyed during the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War with the United States and its allies. In a desperate effort to save what remained of his air force at the time, Saddam Hussein ordered some of his jets to Iran. They were never returned.

To Iraq and other governments in the Middle East, fast planes are a source of national pride as much as a fighting force. "Iraq's air force was a symbol for the nation," says Lt. Col. Mustafa al-Bayati, a former Iraqi fighter pilot.

Iraqi residents and politicians are disappointed by the lack of jets, Barzanji says. He says the public believes "Americans always give their friends airplanes. It looks like we are not friends to the United States." He says he hears the same from Iraqi government officials.

The United States, which has supplied many of the propeller airplanes and helicopters that make up Iraq's tiny air force, did so with the goal of creating a force capable of helping Iraq's army fight a counterinsurgency, the country's immediate threat, says Air Force Brig. Gen. Bob Allardice, commander of the Coalition Air Force Transition Team. That means slow, less glamorous, aircraft capable of conducting surveillance and supporting Iraq's ground forces in the fight against insurgents.

The first order of business is to defeat insurgents. Allardice says he has resisted Iraq's demands for a supersonic air



U.S. Air Force handout

Flight school dedication: A Cessna flies over the inauguration of a new school at Kirkuk Regional Air Base on Nov. 29. The school plans to train 130 students in helicopters and fixed-wing planes by the end of next year.

force. "You could go buy jets, but you would just be parking them," Allardice says. It takes years to build the training and maintenance base to support jet fighter and attack planes. Barzanji said Iraq plans to bring jets into its air force by 2012.

Meanwhile, Iraq's fleet remains small. The country has about 55 helicopters and planes and about 1,100 servicemen, including more than 200 former pilots who have rejoined since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. The U.S. military expects to increase the size to about 6,000 airmen by the end of next year. The flight school based here has about 10 students now, including former pilots and new officers. It plans to be



U.S. Air Force handout

In the classroom: Iraqi pilots are trained at the base in Kirkuk, Iraq, in October. The pilots' current combat mission is focused on surveillance.

training 130 students in helicopters and fixed-wing planes by the end of next year.

The main combat mission of Iraq's fixed-wing aircraft is surveillance. The slow-moving prop planes have been fitted with sophisticated equipment capable of monitoring enemy activity on the ground. Some helicopters are armed, and there are plans to bring

more attack capabilities, such as rockets, into the force next year.

Iraqi officers were initially humiliated and demoralized in the early days of rebuilding the force, Allardice says. It was a tough adjustment for many former fighter jocks who had to squeeze into the cockpits of single-engine propeller aircraft that buzz around the sky.

Morale has since turned, he says. Iraq's air force has started conducting combat surveillance missions to support Iraqi army operations. Iraq's old air force rarely worked jointly with its ground forces. "Even though they are not flying fighters upside down, they have a mission now," says Air Force Lt. Col. John Cairney, a U.S. adviser. "They're fighting bad guys."

Interviews with Iraqi pilots seem to confirm a growing pride in their capabilities and recognition that Iraq's path to a powerful air force will take time. Lt. Col. Abdul Kareem, a former jet pilot who flew his plane to Iran during the Gulf War, says the partnership with the United States has brought the latest training and doctrine. "We had been isolated," he says. "We knew of no developments."

He said he recognizes it will take time to rebuild. "We have hope now," he says.

DISCUSSION

- ▶ What does the Iraqi Air Force symbolize for the people and government of Iraq?
- ▶ Why is the Iraqi Air Force a shadow of its former self?
- ▶ Why is Air Force Brig. Gen. Bob Allardice opposed to giving Iraq a supersonic air force at this time? What is your opinion on the issue?
- ▶ Why was morale low among pilots when the Iraqi Air Force was first being rebuilt? Why has morale improved?
- ▶ How has Iraq benefitted from its relationship with the U.S. Air Force?
- ▶ If you were Allardice, what signs might tell you that the Iraqi Air Force no longer needed American intervention?

VOCABULARY

iconic
counterinsurgency
insurgents
supersonic
demoralized
doctrine

ACTIVITY Turn to the editorial page in the back of the News section of USA TODAY. Read "Today's Debate" — a feature that gives USA TODAY's view and an opposing view on a current issue. Note the techniques each side uses to persuade readers of their point of view. Now, imagine that you are going to write a Today's Debate for an Iraqi newspaper about whether or not the U.S. should help Iraq develop a supersonic air force. First, jot down arguments from the perspective of Lt. Gen. Kamal Barzanji, writing for Iraq. Then, jot down the arguments that Air Force Brig. Gen., Bob Allardice might use to counter Barzanji's points. Finally, decide which side has the stronger case and write a persuasive argument from that perspective.