

“Get ‘em in the Air”

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Once the strongest airpower in the Middle East, the Al Quwwa al Jawwiya al Iraqiya, or the Iraqi Air Force (IQAF), was powerless when the US invaded Iraq in 2003. After realizing the importance of the IQAF for Iraq’s future, the US began to rebuild it from scratch in 2004. Since then, the IQAF has made significant strides with help from the Coalition Air Force Training Team (CAFTT): the IQAF’s functional output has grown exponentially; Iraqi officers are commanding their own units; and Iraqi pilots are being recruited and trained. However, CAFTT struggled to effectively overcome many challenges, including American-perceived cultural barriers as well as an ongoing counterinsurgency (COIN) battle. Circumstances beyond US and Iraqi control caused these challenges. However, a lack of preparation by both players also fueled these struggles. Through a primarily American lens, this paper paints a panoramic picture of the new IQAF by analyzing CAFTT’s strategy, achievements, and failures. Specifically, personal interviews with US military officials offer insight into the less tangible difficulties that the US faced in rebuilding the IQAF. This insight enables a more in-depth critique, leading to the conclusion that the IQAF’s future remains gravely uncertain. Furthermore, it shows that the IQAF is neither independent nor sustainable, and it will rely on the US military for many years.

On March 9, 2012, US Air Force (USAF) and IQAF commanders gathered at Laughlin Air Force Base in Texas to award silver wings to 23 of Iraq’s newest pilots.¹ Marked by decorated uniforms and proud congratulation, the ceremony was reminiscent of the former IQAF’s pride and power. The novice pilots will serve with the new IQAF, which can once again satisfy the main intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) needs of the government of Iraq (GOI). However, circumstances in Iraq during US occupation, observed cultural barriers between US troops and Iraqis, and an ongoing counterinsurgency (COIN) war have led to lingering challenges for the IQAF. As a result, the nascent air force remains in a fragile state and will depend on US assistance until at least 2020.

The Iraqi Air Force: Context

Founded on April 22, 1931 while still under British rule, the IQAF played a relatively minor role in the nation’s early existence. However, by the 1980s, Saddam Hussein had bolstered the IQAF to become the region’s premier aviation power. At its prime in the late 1980s, the IQAF consisted of 40,000 soldiers, was hardened by the long Iran-Iraq War, and possessed over 500 of the most advanced aircraft in the world. However, the IQAF did not enjoy its status for long. The US and Britain permanently crippled its fleet during the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

¹ 2nd Lt. Angela Martin, “Iraqi Air Chief Sees Son Graduate U.S. Air Force Pilot Training,” U.S. Air Force, last modified March 11, 2012, <http://www.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123293473>.

Furthermore, the IQAF suffered from Saddam Hussein’s purges of the Iraqi military during the 1990s and from US-enforced no fly zones and UN sanctions. When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, the IQAF was essentially nonexistent – not a single aircraft acquired under Saddam Hussein remained in service.²

Beginning on March 20, 2003 with the launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the nation of Iraq witnessed the downfall of Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship followed by the birth of a fledgling democracy. Though the future of Iraq is certainly uncertain, today Iraq is working towards its ultimate goal of sovereignty, security, and the long-term well being of the Iraqi people. Perhaps the most essential requirement to meet Iraq’s goals is the reconstruction of an effective Iraqi military that has the ability to maintain internal peace and protect the country’s borders.

With this in mind, the USAF began the task of rebuilding the IQAF in 2004 with only 35 Iraqi personnel.³ Since then, the USAF has advised IQAF soldiers and Iraqi Ministry of Defense personnel on how to operate effective airpower – a key to securing the new Iraqi state. From flight training, to tactical and strategic instruction, to the renovation of Iraqi airfields, the US has tried to provide the IQAF with the tools, resources, and advisors it needs to refurbish Iraq’s airpower.

² John Pike, “Iraqi Air Force [IQAF],” Global Security, last modified September 7, 2011, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/airforce.htm>.

³ Samantha L. Quigley, “Iraqi Air Force Growing in Size, Capability,” U.S. Department of Defense, last modified August 5, 2007, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=46950>.

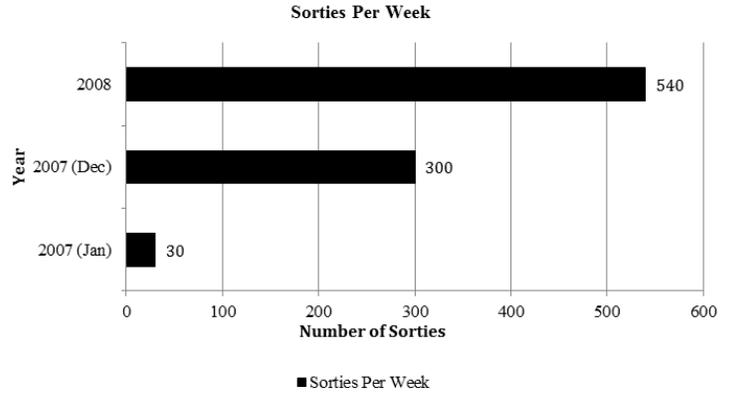
The New IQAF: Strides and Achievements

On August 18, 2003, the Coalition Provisional Authority issued Order 22, authorizing the recreation of the Iraqi military, including the IQAF. Rebuilding began with a gift from the US of three antiquated C-130s (built in the 1960s). In December 2005, a US Central Command Air Force assessment team released a study that detailed how to train, equip, and organize the IQAF to meet the country’s needs.⁴ This study served as the foundation of the USAF’s advisory role to the IQAF and outlined the mission of the Coalition Air Force Transition Team (CAFTT). CAFTT, a subsidiary unit of the former Multi-National Security Transition Command—Iraq (MNSTCI), aimed to improve the quality of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), and increase the ISF’s responsibility over time.

Functional Output

According to Lt. Gen. Robert Allardice, CAFTT commander from March 2007 through March 2008, CAFTT’s efforts resulted in a quick increase in IQAF capacities.⁵ In early 2007 the IQAF was only flying approximately 30 sorties a week (the exact number is unknown because there was no air operations center to command and control them), there was no academy to train personnel, and the IQAF fleet consisted of only 28 airplanes. By the end of 2007, the IQAF was flying 300 sorties a week and its fleet had increased to 59 aircraft, most of which had been donated by other nations. These aircraft included 24 helicopters, 12 Cessna 172s (a small single engine plane used for ISR missions), five slightly larger Cessna 202s, five King Airs that were specially equipped for ISR sorties (operational flights), and three C-130 transport planes.

IQAF Productivity 2007-2008



Source: Allardice 2008

As CAFTT soon discovered, the Iraqis were very adept at recruiting. In January 2007 there were about 700 Iraqis in the IQAF, all of which were pre-2003 IQAF soldiers. By March 2008, that number had increased to 1,350, with 450 more attending training school. By April 2010, the IQAF consisted of 5,000 airmen, and was operating 102 aircraft: 44 training aircraft, 36 transport planes, 19 ISR planes, and three ground attack planes.⁶ In addition to boosting personnel and aircraft numbers, CAFTT also helped the IQAF reopen and improve many abandoned airfields around the country. As a result, US assistance has helped the IQAF quickly develop its capacities. “We are now seeing concrete evidence that (the IQAF) have returned to the (sky) and are proving themselves a credible force for safety, security and sovereignty,” Colonel David Penny, the 370th Air Expeditionary Air Advisory Group commander said.⁷

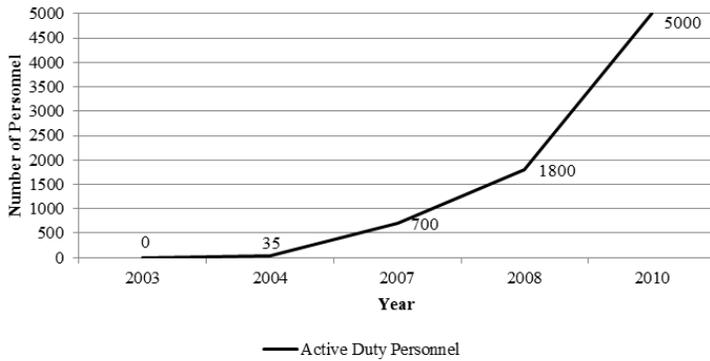
⁴ Lt. Gen. Robert R. Allardice and Maj. Kyle Head, “The Coalition Air Force Transition Team: Rebuilding Iraq’s Air Force,” *Air & Space Power Journal* XXI, no. 4 (2007), accessed November 20, 2010, <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj07/win07/allardice.html>.

⁵ Lt. General Robert R. Allardice, “Iraqi Air Force Training,” C-SPAN Video Library, last modified March 17, 2008, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/204454-1>.

⁶ Katarina Kratovac, “Iraqi Air Force Still Taking Baby Steps,” *The Associated Press*, last modified April 22, 2010, http://www.airforcetimes.com/news/2010/04/ap_iraq_air_force_struggles_042210/.

⁷ Tech. Sgt. Amanda Callahan, “Iraqi Air Force Postured to Break Records,” *US Air Force*, last modified May 21, 2008, http://www.af.mil/news/story_print.asp?id=123099617.

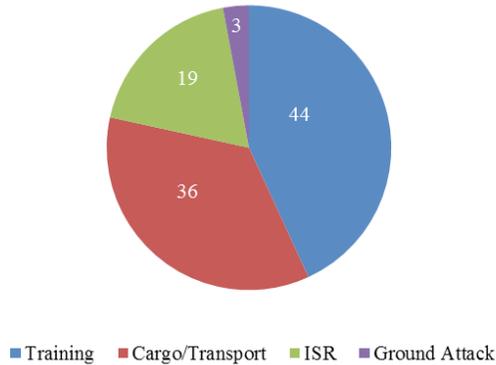
IQAF Active Duty Personnel



Source: Allardice 2008

Aircraft Inventory Composition

April 2010, 102 Total



Source: Kratovac 2010

Assisting the COIN Effort

More importantly, by late 2007 the IQAF was contributing to the COIN effort even though it had almost no offensive capabilities. Despite the absence of weapons, in 2008 IQAF planes were in the air facilitating battlefield mobility, moving troops, and performing light ISR and transport missions. Specifically, the IQAF had assumed the responsibilities of transporting distinguished visitors, providing the ISF with supplies around the battlefield, transporting patients and prisoners, and replacing convoys on the ground, since these were often the targets of deadly Improvised Explosive Devices. The Ministry of Oil had previously estimated that the GOI was losing \$10 billion per year from oil theft.⁸ The new IQAF has addressed this problem using Seekers, CH-2000s, and Cessna Grand Car-

avans to provide surveillance over essential oil pipelines for the Ministry of Oil and the Ministry of Electricity, guiding them to the site of thefts. Cessnas were also used to map out power lines and electrical grids and to patrol Iraq’s borders, which resulted in a reduction of weapons smuggling from Iran and Syria. The IQAF’s impact on the oil industry showed the GOI how successful an independent IQAF could be. This realization would lead to even more drastic improvements.

Yet, perhaps the IQAF’s greatest impact on the COIN effort was its influence on the morale and unity of the Iraqi people. As Lt. Gen. Allardice and Maj. Kyle Head, CAFTT’s senior Coalition airpower advisor, write in their report on CAFTT, “According to an accepted rule of thumb, the hearts and minds of the host-nation population represent the center of gravity in COIN operations.”⁹ The new IQAF garnered the support of the Iraqi people when it performed simple tasks like transporting distinguished visitors. The IQAF’s mere presence inspired feelings of pride, dignity, and confidence among the population. When an Iraqi saw a C-130 or a “Huey” helicopter thundering overhead with an Iraqi flag emblazoned on its wings, he or she would feel a deep sense of patriotism and pride. This brought hope to a population that had witnessed unimaginable violence and oppression:

Whether playing soccer in an empty field, shopping in a crowded market, or gathering on their roof-top patios, Iraqis will typically stop whatever they are doing, smile proudly, and wave vigorously at the sight of one of “their” aircraft. More than a largely regionalized army or police force, a credible air force serves as a source of national pride in people looking for something to unite them.¹⁰

With this in mind, commanders instructed new Iraqi pilots to fly low over crowded areas so the Iraqi people would take notice. According to Lt. Gen. Allardice, CAFTT’s unofficial motto during 2007 was “just get ‘em in the air” to show the people that Iraq was rebuilding its air force.¹¹ This goal was accomplished. As a result, it seemed that the new IQAF’s presence proved crucial to the GOI in curbing the Iraqi people’s faith in the insurgency. Throughout the war, the GOI vied against insurgents for the population’s support. To win this support, both sides sought to demonstrate their superior military capabilities. According to American perspectives, when Iraqis saw an IQAF helicopter thunder-

⁸ Lt. Gen. Robert R. Allardice and Maj. Kyle Head, “The Coalition Air Force Transition Team: Rebuilding Iraq’s Air Force,” *Air & Space Power Journal* XXI, no. 4 (2007), accessed November 20, 2010, <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj07/win07/allardice.html>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

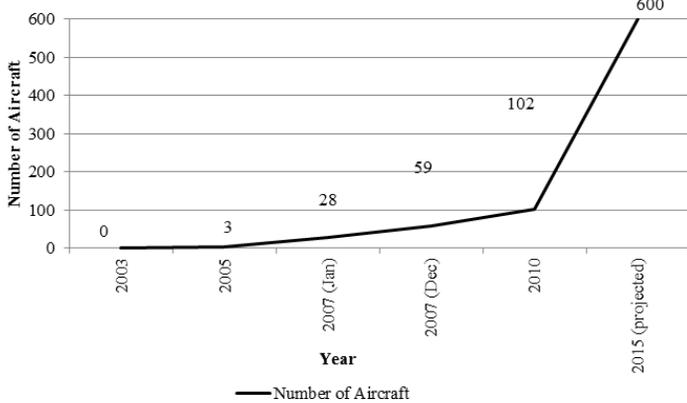
¹¹ Lt. Gen. Robert R. Allardice, telephone interview, March 11, 2011.

ing low overhead, they began to believe that if the GOI could maintain the IQAF, it could restore peace in Iraq.

Growth Plans

Finally, according to the Pentagon, the GOI has been working with a CAFTT foreign military sales team on plans to purchase 500 aircraft from the US and France by 2015. Once in possession of these aircraft, the IQAF will theoretically achieve air strike capacity.¹² Specifically, the aircraft under consideration include Eurocopter EC635s, Bell ARH-70s, C-130s, and T-6 Texan II training planes.

IQAF Operational Aircraft Inventory Selected Years



Sources: Allardice 2008, Kratovac 2010

With such an increase in fleet size and personnel, the IQAF is poised to build upon its successes and knowledge gained from its US mentor.

The Challenges of Rebuilding the IQAF

However, despite CAFTT’s and the new IQAF’s achievements, the question remains of whether or not the new IQAF will be able to function now that the majority of US troops have withdrawn from Iraq. Given the numerous challenges that it has faced and will continue to face, the possibility of failure for the IQAF is all too real. Specifically, both the American and Iraqi units have struggled with the difficulty of starting an air force given the circumstances in Iraq. Furthermore, CAFTT faced additional challenges because it had to overcome culture barriers while fighting a COIN war. Each of these obstacles, both within and beyond CAFTT’s control, served to hamper the IQAF’s development.

12 Bill Thomas, “The Iraqi Air Force Flies Again,” TIME Video, last modified April 7, 2010, http://www.time.com/time/video/player/0,32068,76238930001_1978290,00.html.

The Challenge of Iraq

From the outset, CAFTT and the new IQAF were fighting an uphill battle because of the circumstances in Iraq. Of course, the USAF and the GOI had to face all of the inherent challenges associated with rebuilding the IQAF from the ground up. For instance, Navy Captain Jamie Hopkins, Senior Military Advisor for MNSTI in 2008, describes that due to a lack of sufficient resources for maintenance and upkeep, the IQAF installed a policy of charging individual pilots or soldiers when something on an aircraft is broken.¹³ In turn, Iraqi soldiers tend to hide any mechanical problems that they may have caused. As a result, minor issues are not discovered until they lead to a catastrophic failure, which is almost always more expensive and more difficult to fix (not to mention more dangerous). Given that much of the IQAF’s fleet was donated by various other nations, this maintenance issue is exacerbated because the fleet consists of many different types of planes that are equipped with different mechanical systems. Moreover, the Iraqis are reluctant to go to a single source for aircraft in order to avoid reliance upon a single provider.¹⁴ This mixture of equipment makes it difficult for the IQAF to operate efficiently because different planes require unique parts and specialized training for technicians.

Additionally, the IQAF has had to deal with setbacks caused by Saddam Hussein and Iran. During the Gulf War, Hussein conducted several purges of the Iraqi military in an effort to ensure that it remained loyal to him. Many IQAF pilots, fearing for their lives, fled these purges by flying their planes to Iran. Eventually, Iran impounded the planes and claimed them as reparations from the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. The IQAF’s struggles with Iran continued into the twenty-first century. In 2005, Iran backed a Shi’a insurgency campaign to assassinate many former Sunni IQAF pilots who had bombed Tehran in the Iran-Iraq War.¹⁵ Knowing that it takes many years to train pilots, the Iranians helped assassinate former Iraqi pilots who were among the finest in the world. Consequently, Iraq would be able to purchase new planes, but would have to train an entirely new core of IQAF pilots. Similarly, throughout Operation Iraqi Freedom, the US military discovered hundreds of dilapidated former IQAF MiGs that were rusting in abandoned airfields or had been buried to hide them from the US during the Gulf War.

13 Captain Jamie Hopkins, personal interview, November 17, 2010.

14 Ibid.

15 Toby Harnden, Aqeel Hussein, and Colin Freeman, “Iran ‘Sponsors Assassination’ of Sunni Pilots who Bombed Tehran,” The Telegraph, last modified October 29, 2005, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/1501837/Iran-sponsors-assassination-of-Sunni-pilots-who-bombed-Teheran.html>.

Although it was skillful at recruiting, the IQAF faced a personnel problem from within Iraq. According to Lt. Gen. Allardice and Maj. Kyle Head:

The most difficult challenge in building a credible air force entails quality people. Getting the right people, in the right place, at the right time, with the right training and equipment is critical to the success of rebuilding the force. The effort to recruit, educate, train, and integrate technically competent people from this war-torn nation has proven extremely difficult.¹⁶

Many eligible Iraqi men were involved in the insurgency, or were afraid of joining the IQAF out of fear that the insurgents would harm their family. While it was difficult to enlist soldiers and pilots, it was even harder for the IQAF to find and train effective leaders to steer the IQAF in the future. To aid in this effort, CAFTT encouraged current IQAF leaders to contact those who were in charge of the former IQAF under Saddam Hussein. While this was a seemingly logical strategy, the average age of a pilot who returned was 43 years.¹⁷ These pilots had not flown a mission since they were in Soviet MiGs before the Gulf War (January of 1991). Furthermore, many of them were members of the former Baath Party. When the CPA decreed the de-Baathification of party members, it unintentionally alienated many senior Iraqi pilots.¹⁸ Hence, relying on former IQAF pilots was not a viable long-term solution. CAFTT’s only option was to slowly re-develop a recruiting and accession program to produce an entirely new generation of pilots.

Once found, many of the new commanders and pilots did not anticipate the lethargic pace of rebuilding the IQAF from scratch. According to Lt. Gen. Allardice, CAFTT had to explain time and time again that it was not practical to start off with a powerful air force and high-tech jet fighters.¹⁹ Rather, constrained by a limited budget, the IQAF had to initially focus on contributing to the COIN effort by performing basic logistics, ISR, and humanitarian missions. Despite the Iraqis’ eagerness, CAFTT worked with them to align these modest goals with their limited budget. In addition to the cost of equipment itself, US advisors had to consider the inflated infrastructure costs of maintaining the IQAF’s equipment. For example, because

the new IQAF did not have the ability to maintain its fleet of basic Cessna Caravans, it had to contract out repair work, thus adding to its costs and hampering its ability to invest in better equipment.

More notably, the young Iraqi state struggled to provide the new IQAF with three prerequisites needed to sustain any air force: an economy capable of supporting it, a government willing to devote the resources necessary to support it, and, as mentioned, the necessary military capacity to train and recruit personnel.²⁰ After Saddam Hussein’s defeat, the state of Iraq had none of these capabilities: its economy was hampered by Hussein’s dictatorial restrictions; the new GOI was busy struggling to legitimize itself; and insurgents and Iran were targeting the soldiers that the IQAF was trying to recruit.

Culture Barriers

From an American perspective, the second set of challenges stemmed from the differences in language and cultural values between CAFTT advisors and IQAF soldiers. In terms of the language barrier, CAFTT trainers had to learn how to teach through interpreters in the classroom and in the air. Similarly, advisors had to translate PowerPoint slides into Arabic while remaining sensitive to observed variations in the Iraqis’ learning preferences.²¹ Furthermore, all Iraqi pilots had to learn to speak English on at least a 12th grade level as mandated by the International Civil Aviation Organization for all pilots around the world.²²

Aside from the obvious language barrier, Americans noticed more subtle cultural discrepancies. For example, the Iraqis’ apparent sectarian fears played a role in hampering the IQAF’s effectiveness. To illustrate, the commander of the IQAF, General Anwar Hamad Amen Ahmed is a Kurd. According to US Navy Captain Jamie Hopkins, non-Kurds in the GOI fear that if the political climate in Iraq ever became tumultuous, General Ahmed could potentially turn the IQAF against the GOI.²³ As a result, the GOI is afraid to give him too much money or power. Through an American lens, such deep-seeded cultural stigmas amongst the Iraqis make developing the IQAF much more difficult

¹⁶ Lt. Gen. Robert R. Allardice and Maj. Kyle Head, “The Coalition Air Force Transition Team: Rebuilding Iraq’s Air Force,” *Air & Space Power Journal* XXI, no. 4 (2007), accessed November 20, 2010, <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj07/win07/allardice.html>.

¹⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸ Captain Jamie Hopkins, personal interview, November 17, 2010.

¹⁹ Lt. Gen. Robert R. Allardice, telephone interview, March 11, 2011.

²⁰ Ibid.
²¹ Lt. Gen. Robert R. Allardice and Maj. Kyle Head, “The Coalition Air Force Transition Team: Rebuilding Iraq’s Air Force,” *Air & Space Power Journal* XXI, no. 4 (2007), accessed November 20, 2010, <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj07/win07/allardice.html>.

²² Sgt. Ry Norris, “Iraqi Air Force Academy Reopens Doors,” United States Forces – Iraq, last modified September 7, 2010, <http://www.usf-iraq.com/news/headlines/iraqi-air-force-academy-reopens-doors>.

²³ Captain Jamie Hopkins, personal interview, November 17, 2010.

and are nearly impossible to reverse.

In addition to the sectarian rift within Iraqi society, traditional Arabic culture seemed to emphasize that the degree of a person's power and influence is determined by the strength of the relationships that he or she forms with others. Thus, for CAFTT advisors to wholly gain the Iraqis' trust, they would need to spend a long time on tour in Iraq because these relationships take a long time to form.²⁴ Many CAFTT advisors sent to Iraq were unaware of this nuance in Arab culture. While the first CAFTT advisors were required to attend a five-week educational course, later advisors only attended a one-week Middle East Orientation Course. Others spent two weeks in training designed for combat-convoy commanders that provided them with very little cultural awareness, knowledge of the Arab and Islamic history of the Middle East, or information about the complex tribal societies that make up Iraqi spheres of influence.

Another challenge that CAFTT advisors faced was learning the Iraqis' seemingly unique decision-making and command hierarchy structure.²⁵ CAFTT officers could only advise the Iraqis effectively after they understood that Iraqi hierarchies seemed to involve a relatively strong sense of authority and large separation of power between seniors and subordinates. Therefore, in Iraq's case, both the student and the teacher had to account for large cultural disparities between one another.

The Ongoing COIN Effort

Finally, all of these challenges were exacerbated by sectarian violence in Iraq. While the US military was trying to rebuild the IQAF, it was also fighting a COIN war against insurgents attempting to undermine the new GOI. Not only was it CAFTT's responsibility to train the new IQAF, but USAF personnel also had to help the struggling GOI ensure victory in the current conflict. Meanwhile, as the IQAF gained operational mission capabilities, it became increasingly challenging to strike a balance between continued training and conducting real COIN missions on the battlefield. These functional missions did assist the COIN effort and relieved pressure on the US military, but did so at the expense of crucial time needed for training –

the ultimate key to success in the long run.²⁶ As a result, CAFTT advisors were forced to fly operational missions while also training new Iraqi soldiers. CAFTT's inability to devote its full attention to either task jeopardized the efficiency and safety of American and IQAF soldiers. As the IQAF continued to expand its combat mission capabilities, the demand for such missions surpassed the IQAF's ability to supply them and CAFTT's ability to supply advisors to oversee them.

In addition to a lack of cultural education, CAFTT's supply of advisors suffered from a lack of adequate COIN training. Traditionally, internal defense advisors were members of the Air Force's Special Operations Command and were required to pass extensive screening and rigorous training before they were sent into the field. However, the demands of the COIN wars in Iraq and Afghanistan required that CAFTT officers be deployed to Iraq sooner, thereby devoting less time to training. This reduced training had to include both combat skills for the battlefield and practical skills for the classroom. Additionally, CAFTT advisors were not educated enough about the application of airpower in COIN environments because the USAF lacked a "doctrinal framework to guide the building of a COIN air force."²⁷ CAFTT advisors sent to Iraq were never part of the Special Operations Command, and several did not even have experience with basic combat tactics. Consequently, many of them arrived in Iraq not knowing how to conduct combat operations on the battlefield, not to mention during a COIN war. Many CAFTT advisors were therefore simply unprepared to give the Iraqi pilots the training they needed. Instead, IQAF pilots-in-training were forced to expend their limited flying hours learning the basics of military aviation like strafing patterns, how to fly with night vision goggles, and how to analyze low-level threats on the ground.²⁸

The lesson learned from the conflict in Iraq is that the Coalition should have focused more on rebuilding the IQAF in 2004 rather than waiting until 2007. From a national perspective, building an air force is key to a COIN effort, and the Coalition should have devoted more resources to rebuilding the IQAF from the beginning. To illustrate, it takes the USAF five to seven years to fully train a helicopter mechanic. As Lt. Gen. Allardice described, the Iraqis wanted equipment and trained personnel to aid the COIN effort immediately, but had to realize that if they

²⁴ Lt. Gen. Robert R. Allardice and Maj. Kyle Head, "The Coalition Air Force Transition Team: Rebuilding Iraq's Air Force," *Air & Space Power Journal* XXI, no. 4 (2007), accessed November 20, 2010, <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj07/win07/allardice.html>.

²⁵ Lt. Gen. Robert R. Allardice, telephone interview, March 11, 2011.

²⁶ Lt. Gen. Robert R. Allardice and Maj. Kyle Head, "The Coalition Air Force Transition Team: Rebuilding Iraq's Air Force," *Air & Space Power Journal* XXI, no. 4 (2007), accessed November 20, 2010, <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj07/win07/allardice.html>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Captain Jamie Hopkins, personal interview, November 17, 2010.

wanted a new helicopter or a trained mechanic, then the process to develop them needed to start five to seven years in advance.²⁹ Overall, the Coalition treated the role of advising the IQAF as a less-than-crucial endeavor, and did not place enough emphasis on the fact that the IQAF’s presence would greatly contribute to the COIN effort.

What these Challenges Mean for the Future of the IQAF

These challenges mean that the ultimate fate of the new IQAF is frighteningly uncertain. When asked about the timeframe for IQAF independence, Lt. Gen. Allardice responded that he was unable to place a certain number of years on this goal: “we learned from this counterinsurgency that we don’t know what’s going to happen in six months... putting a timeline on something during a counterinsurgency is difficult and problematic.”³⁰ Though estimates can be made, it is impossible for anyone to foresee exactly how much American money and time the IQAF will require.

This is not to say that CAFTT and the IQAF have not made impressive strides. The IQAF has suffered from many minor setbacks, but no major failures. To illustrate, people usually measure the effectiveness of an airpower on whether or not it is shooting and killing people on the ground. Yet, the IQAF’s achievements must be measured relatively. For the Iraqis, a mission as simple as a C-130 delivering medicine to a province suffering from a cholera outbreak, or an Iraqi chopper flying over a crowd after an IED explosion to show the Iraqi people that the GOI is able to respond, provides critical support to the visibility and legitimacy of the GOI. Most importantly, Lt. Gen. Allardice is confident in the IQAF’s new leaders, whom he describes as “fiercely patriotic Iraqis [determined to achieve] a unified, independent Iraq.”³¹ In addition, these men represent one of the highest, most educated segments of Iraqi society. However, as an unnamed Iraqi pilot stated, “We’ve [Iraqi airmen] learned a lot, but we need more.”³² The process is working, but it is, predictably, extremely slow.

The IQAF’s true worth can only be measured by its ability to defend Iraq. Unfortunately, the answer to this question can only be found in time. In April 2010, while the US military was developing its plans for the removal of

US troops from Iraq, General Anwer Hamad Amen Ahmed said in an interview, “Iraq is a sovereign country, but... we don’t have [equipment]... We are still far away from [our] full potential. We will need the US long after 2011... The Iraqi Air Force cannot be completed... before 2020, and until then we would not be able to say that the Air Force is ready to defend the skies.”³³ These truths are worrisome in a region where violence has become the norm.

At this point, the IQAF simply lacks the heavy weaponry and training to defend Iraq’s sovereignty from enemy aggressors. Several recent events show this, including Iranian and Turkish attacks on Kurdish separatists in northern Iraq, the Iranian military’s occupation of an oil field in southern Iraq in December 2009, and accusations against Syria and Iran for smuggling soldiers and weapons into Iraq to supply insurgent militias. Thus, “[Because] Key elements of homeland defense include airspace control, air defense, and air interdiction, ... No nation can remain truly sovereign if it cannot protect its own airspace.”³⁴ While the IQAF remains without sufficient training and equipment, it would be the USAF’s responsibility to repel an aerial attack by Iraq’s neighbors. Despite the December 31, 2011 drawback of Coalition troops from Iraq, it is clear that the IQAF will continue to rely on USAF assistance, training, and guidance for years to come.

As a result, both Iraqi and American officers are planning for a long-term partnership in air operations. These plans include the sale and delivery to Iraq of 36 F-16 fighter jets built by Lockheed Martin Corporation.³⁵ Through shared training operations, the US sees this deal as an opportunity for a long-term relationship and presence in Iraq. However, the first squadron of 18 F-16s will not be operational until 2015 or 2016 as it takes time to build the planes and to train Iraqi pilots to fly them. Nonetheless, the US is willing to invest in this partnership because of the strategic benefits of an ally in the Middle East, especially as the Iranian nuclear question continues to fuel global unease.

The most important determinant of the new IQAF’s effectiveness will be the GOI. Though CAFTT and the US have laid the foundation for a capable IQAF, the difficult

29 Lt. Gen. Robert R. Allardice, telephone interview, March 11, 2011.

30 Lt. General Robert R. Allardice, “Iraqi Air Force Training,” C-SPAN Video Library, last modified March 17, 2008, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/204454-1>.

31 Lt. Gen. Robert R. Allardice, telephone interview, March 11, 2011.

32 Katarina Kratovac, “Iraqi Air Force Still Taking Baby Steps,” The Associated Press, last modified April 22, 2010, http://www.airforcetimes.com/news/2010/04/ap_iraq_air_force_struggles_042210/.

33 Ibid., Khalid al-Ansary, “Iraqi Air Force Not Ready till 2020 – Commander,” Reuters, last modified October 6, 2010, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2010/10/06/idINIndia-51991820101006>.

34 Lt. Gen. Robert R. Allardice and Maj. Kyle Head, “The Coalition Air Force Transition Team: Rebuilding Iraq’s Air Force,” Air & Space Power Journal XXI, no. 4 (2007), accessed November 20, 2010, <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj07/win07/allardice.html>.

35 Nathan Hodge, “U.S. Help to Upgrade Iraqi Air Force Will Take Time,” The Wall Street Journal, last modified December 14, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204336104577096670191102742.html>.

circumstances and challenges that the GOI and the IQAF continue to face mean that its ultimate success or failure depends on the government's ability to allocate necessary resources. As Lt. Gen. Allardice and Maj. Head explain:

Building an air force capable of homeland defense requires national will, as well as the proper resources to field and support the people and equipment that are core to Air Force operations and sustainment. Only the GOI and its leadership can determine when, and to what level, they want to invest in this range of capabilities.³⁶

The GOI's ability to support the IQAF depends largely on the amount of oil revenue that world markets generate. Iraq's economy relies on this revenue, so if global demand were to decline, decreased oil profits would have to go towards basic government needs like paying for police, hospitals, and food stamps. To demonstrate, the GOI would have liked to have placed its F-16 order in 2009, but was forced to delay negotiations because of a decrease in oil revenues caused by the global economic downturn.

Nonetheless, the Iraq's air force is in the air. Owing to CAFTT's instrumental guidance, the IQAF now has the ability to perform ISR missions, to recruit and train pilots and technicians, and to help unite the Iraqi population. In spite of these accomplishments, the new IQAF's long-term viability remains uncertain, and will not be evident until at least 2020 when the IQAF will hopefully be able to operate independently. At that point, the IQAF's impact will be measured by Iraq's national sovereignty in years to come. Specifically, the IQAF will likely be tested Iran, whose grand strategy dictates that it holds superior power in the Middle East. In a hostile environment, the IQAF is well on its way to independence and sustainability; perhaps no air force has ever come so far so quickly. Nonetheless, no bird learns to fly overnight, and this bird is "barely off the ground."³⁷

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³⁷ Heath Druzin and Teri Weaver, "Barely Off the Ground: Iraqi Air Force Not Ready to Defend Nation," *Stars and Stripes*, last modified October 12, 2010, <http://www.stripes.com/news/barely-off-the-ground-iraqi-air-force-not-ready-to-defend-nation-1.121498>.

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