

## **Sulaymaniyans Flying High**

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Iraqi Kurds' isolation will be at an end with the reconstruction of long-derelect airport.

The abandoned and weed-choked Bakrajo airstrip near Sulaymaniya could soon provide the Kurds of northern Iraq with much dreamt of access to the outside world.

The city's dilapidated airport was once the butt of jokes. Local people planning on leaving Saddam's Iraq would say they were escaping via Bakrajo International, a coded reference to the long and dangerous walk across rugged mountains into hostile Turkey or Iran.

In post-war Iraq, the Kurds no longer face the isolation of the Saddam years, but their nearest international airport is Baghdad, a four-hour treacherous drive away.

The Kurdish regional government in Sulaymaniya is bankrolling the project with the 887th engineering company of the US army's 101st Airborne division - which oversees the north of the country - providing the labor, equipment and expertise. Work is expected to be completed by the end of December.

The small airstrip, originally built by Saddam Hussein's regime in the Eighties to shuttle in troops and weapons to subdue Kurdish resistance, is now being refurbished for use as a civilian airport.

Work began in August, and is now well advanced. Saman Barzinji, who heads the Al-Salam company providing materials for the project, told IWPR that nearly half a million US dollars had been spent to date.

The airport is a "hearts and minds" project for the US military. "It is part of our mission to rebuild Iraq after the war," said Captain Andrew Loeb, commander of the 887th engineering company.

For local Kurds, it's a crucial connection to a world from which they have long been isolated. "We will no longer live in a forgotten spot on the globe," said Sami Hama Muamin, a 29-year-old photographer, reflecting the views of many local people.

Sulaymaniya lay at the heart of the Kurdish struggle against the Ba'ath regime and was therefore purposefully underdeveloped and neglected by the government. In 1991, after the first Gulf war, the regime withdrew from the area but imposed an internal embargo.

Which effectively meant that they were trapped - confined to three northern governorates, in an area roughly the size of Switzerland.

In the run-up to the latest conflict, Bakrajo became a focal point for Sulaymaniyans and foreign journalists alike, as they waited for the first US airplanes to land at the airstrip, as part of the initial stage of the invasion, which most Kurds saw as a liberation.

Soon, military planes packed with American special forces were landing regularly, to the relief of Sulaymaniyans.

The US engineers are mainly responsible for rebuilding the runway, apron, and adjacent taxiways. The Kurds will build the control tower and service buildings.

With the lifting of UN sanctions, many businessmen are now eyeing the Kurdish region for possible future investment. As the safest part of the country, it is already attracting businesses.

"I could export products directly to Europe," said Mufid Al-Arradi, a Kuwaiti businessman, who is making plans to invest in the area around Sulaymaniyah to exploit the future international air-link.

One business that is expected to make a comeback is tourism, as before its isolation the north attracted southern Iraqis keen to escape the oppressive summer heat of the desert for the region's cool mountains.

During the years of separation, there was what became known as "political tourism", with Kurds from Iran and Turkey visiting "free Kurdistan" to both express their Kurdishness - without fear of repression - and meet exiled relatives.

Bakrajo will initially be used for domestic flights, said Sa'ady Dizay'ee, the Kurdish regional government's minister of works and reconstruction, based in Sulaymaniya. But he hopes it will eventually become the international airport locals have always joked about.

"We used to say that when we leave, we will never come back," said Mariwan Ahmed, who made five unsuccessful attempts to smuggle himself out of Iraqi Kurdistan. "But when my city has an airport, I am sure I will return."

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