

## *SkyLink Arabia keeps its head down while flying in Iraq*

by Julian Moxon

For many, the story of Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein is not a happy one. So it is perhaps surprising that there is a daily operation on the ground and in the air which sees life in the strife-torn country in a very different light.

"We have a very positive approach to Iraq," SkyLink Arabia director and CEO Mike Douglas told **Aviation International News**.



*Providing air transportation in Iraq is risky business and sometimes the price is high. In April, SkyLink Arabia lost five employees when their helicopter was shot down.*

"We believe this country has a future and we're building relationships to help with the rebuilding of the Iraqi aviation industry."

SkyLink's mission statement—"Doing Difficult Jobs in Difficult Places"—appears to be something of an understatement as Douglas, who describes himself as "ex-military with special forces experience," talks of day-to-day life in Iraq. In April, five

of SkyLink's key workers were killed, along with six others, when their Mi-8 helicopter was shot down on a mission to Tikrit. "They were very good people and we miss them greatly," said Douglas. "But life goes on. I firmly believe the amazing resilience of Iraqis will win the day. We're here to stay because we believe we can really help with the reconstruction effort."

Part of the huge challenge facing SkyLink is the covert transfer of the aviation fuel needed to keep all commercial aircraft in the country flying, from the oil refinery in the Red Zone north of Baghdad, to Basra, Baghdad and Erbil [in the Kurdish region of Iraq]. "We've achieved the impossible," said Douglas. Unsurprisingly, he declines to explain how so much fuel is covertly shifted without attracting attention from insurgents. "Every day a huge team of people, many Iraqi, risk their lives. There is no other source of fuel, and we get no assistance from the military,

because that would attract attention." He added, "We haven't lost a single consignment since we started doing this 18 months ago."

Since arriving in Iraq three years ago, SkyLink Arabia has become "one of the only companies to achieve real integration and cooperation with the Iraqi authorities," said Douglas. To support its airborne operations, the company has forged a strong relationship with the Iraqi civil aviation authority as well as the U.S.-controlled Regional Air Movement Control Center, based in Qatar.

Douglas admitted the air traffic control system in Iraq "leaves a lot to be desired, but is slowly improving." The dangers are horribly evident—two months ago three ATC staff were captured and beheaded. "The staff knows they live with constant risk, but they're determined to carry on. You have to respect that."

SkyLink operates Russian aircraft exclusively in Iraq. "They're reliable and easy to maintain," said Douglas. Four Antonov An-24s, two An-26s, one An-12 and several helicopters form the basis of a fleet that can be expanded instantly by leasing if the situation demands. Its charter service for contractors working in Iraq flies more than 14,000 passengers a month into and out of the country,

mainly to Dubai, using a Boeing 727 and 737. A Boeing MD-83 is about to join the lineup.

Maintaining Russian aircraft is far less a challenge than would be the case with their Western equivalents, said Douglas. "Basically, we have a team of Russians and a couple of container loads of spares. We can change an An-24 engine on the ramp in a day and we've never lost a mission for lack of maintenance." Moldavian, Ukrainian and Bulgarian crews fly the aircraft. "They are extremely professional and have a 100-percent safety record, which says a lot for both the aircraft and the crews," he said.

Missions vary enormously. Recently SkyLink helped transport the remains of 300 Kurds executed during the Saddam regime and buried in mass graves in the western desert. The company provided an An-26 to transport the excavation team and its An-12 to bring the remains from Basra to Erbil. It also coordinated all logistics and made certain the operation was carried out with great sensitivity, said Douglas.

"We succeed because we're there on the ground, every single day of the year—not hiding in a fortified camp playing with computers. Our uniqueness is that Baghdad couldn't function without us." □