

Flying to the Emirates: The end of British Overseas Airways Corporation's service to Dubai and Sharjah in 1947

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Abstract

During the 1930s Dubai and Sharjah in the Trucial States (now the United Arab Emirates) were regular stops on Imperial Airways' England – India route. But in early 1947 the successor British airline British Overseas Airways Corporation discontinued service to them. The local market for air travel connecting the Gulf shaikhdoms, which were *de facto* British protectorates, was undermined just as the expanding oil industry most needed reliable scheduled flights. For fear of competition following its ratification of the Chicago Convention, Britain still restricted access to the airfields at Kuwait, Bahrain and Sharjah. For four years the Trucial States had no regular air service. Its wireless facilities led to the survival of the Sharjah airfield, shared by the Royal Air Force and International Aeradio Limited, a new British telecommunications company. Britain's control over air services and their post-war disruption arguably contributed to delaying the socio-economic development of the Emirates that oil production would make possible.

Keywords

British Overseas Airways Corporation, Dubai, Sharjah, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates

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Introduction

During the 1930s the British airline Imperial Airways developed its intercontinental routes so as to connect London with British colonial territories in Africa, Asia and Australasia. In Africa it established a network that extended from Egypt to South Africa; on its eastern route its initial concern was to provide a regular service to India. Within a few years, it had extended this route to Singapore and Australia.¹ Its main competitors were the Dutch airline KLM and the French Air France (formed in 1933 through the merger of five existing airlines), both of them also keen to create direct air links to colonial territories in Asia, respectively, in the Dutch East Indies and in Indochina.

Civil aviation history is usually written as a story of steady progress, with gradually improving aerospace technology, better infrastructure at airports, shorter flight times (London–Sydney can now be flown non-stop) and, above all, the greater international communication, trade and tourism that air travel has facilitated.

In this article I present a case contrary to the idea of steady progress. It centres on one of the intermediate stops on Imperial Airways' air route to India in the 1930s. Today Dubai International Airport is one of the world's principal hubs for civil aviation, the busiest of all if measured by international passenger traffic. Its origins lie ultimately in the selection by Imperial Airways of a site in the region for an overnight stopover on its London–Karachi route. But any assumption of a steady progression from simple facilities in the 1930s to today's massive airport complexes would in fact be false. In the immediate post-Second World War period, the United Arab Emirates (known then as the Trucial States) learned that the scheduled air services that had served them as a stop on the route between London and Sydney were being withdrawn. Here I consider how this came about and what local effects it had in a region which, thanks to exploration for oil production, was on the brink of social and economic change. In fact, that the striking economic development of the Emirates did not take off until many years later could be attributed in part to the disruption of air services in the immediate post-war period. A number of oil concessions had already been agreed in the Trucial States in 1937–39 but the world war prevented any prospection work.² The events that are the subject of this paper contributed to the slow pace of resumption of oil exploration after the war.

The specific cause of the post-war disruption was the decision in January 1947 by the British airline, British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) to discontinue its service to Dubai and Sharjah. Indications that the service would end caused immediate alarm in the Gulf region. Local expatriate reaction is revealed in the regular correspondence exchanged among British diplomats posted to the territory and between them and their London superiors.³ Since the nineteenth century, the Trucial States had been *de facto* under British protection. A Political Resident, based at Bushire on the Persian coast (Figure 1), promoted British interests, reporting to the India Office in London. It was through a series of treaties or truces (hence,

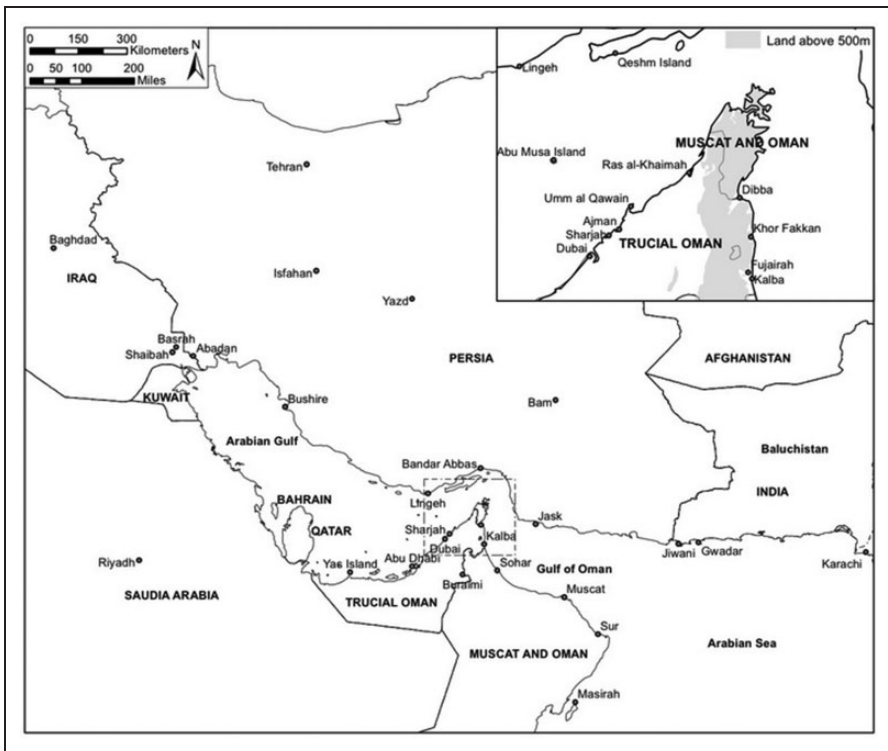


Figure 1. The Gulf states and their neighbours.

the ‘Trucial’ States) dating back to 1820 that Britain had ensured a controlling role in the external affairs of these shaikhdoms.⁴ The Gulf communities enjoyed cultural and commercial interaction with their larger neighbours, notably Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Iran and India, but external affairs, including agreements for resource exploitation (particularly oil) and air communications, were under British control. This situation led to one airfield in the Trucial States assuming a strategic importance during the 1930s that became even greater in the Second World War, only to be drastically reduced in the immediate post-war period.

The strategic importance of Sharjah airfield

The origins of the airfield at Sharjah, one of the seven United Arab Emirates, lie in Britain’s development of the London–Karachi air route in the early 1930s. In order to transfer successfully its air route from the Persian side of the Gulf to the western, Arabian one, Imperial Airways needed to establish an airfield in the region of the Trucial States for an overnight refuelling stop. In agreement with the Ruler of Sharjah, Shaikh Sultan bin Saqr al-Qasimi, it built an airfield a few kilometres



Figure 2. The Sharjah airfield rest house, c. 1934 (Mrs Ellison/Historic Croydon Airport Trust).

inland from Sharjah town in 1932. It also constructed an adjacent rest house, designed as a defensible fort, where the passengers spent the night in comfortable quarters (Figure 2). The once-a-week London–Karachi service soon became twice-weekly with the extension of the route to Australia. Imperial Airways promoted its operations through advertising, commissioning films and reprinting enthusiastic accounts published by passengers who had travelled on their routes. The name of Sharjah therefore became known to the western world.⁵ In 1937 the airline started using flying boats in preference to landplanes and Sharjah airfield lost some of its importance. There were still scheduled landplane services landing there, but the more frequent flying boats used the creek at Dubai some 20 km away (causing Dubai also to come to the attention of the West). Some of the flying boat services made an overnight stop; when they did – or in the event, not uncommon, of emergencies – the passengers were conveyed the short distance to the rest house at Sharjah.

The only other permitted user of the Sharjah airfield was the British Royal Air Force (RAF). Based in Iraq with its headquarters at Habbaniya outside Baghdad, the RAF used Sharjah as one of a series of landing grounds along the coasts of the Arabian Peninsula that eventually extended as far as Aden. Its aerial surveys had reconnoitred possible airfields for Imperial Airways and its regular patrols guaranteed the security of the route that was selected. It had its own facilities at Sharjah, such as a fuel dump and armaments store, and its senior officers took advantage of the bar and meals at the rest house, but it had no permanent presence there.

The relationship between the two users of Sharjah airfield changed dramatically with the outbreak of the Second World War. The obsolescent fleet and poor public image of Imperial Airways led to the Cadman enquiry of 1938 and the decision to create a new nationalised airline by merging Imperial Airways with British Airways (then a small airline operating in the United Kingdom and Europe).⁶ The formal launch date of 1 April 1940 for the new BOAC was pre-empted by the outbreak of war and by the definition of the new public corporation's role: BOAC was to be fully at the disposal of the RAF, providing transport for the latter's operations and conveying important passengers, freight and mail as directed by the Air Ministry.⁷

In this new context Sharjah became a staging post for aircraft transporting troops and materiel to India and to theatres further east. It served primarily as a stopover for refuelling but its rest house (the 'BOAC fort') provided overnight facilities for senior armed service personnel, politicians and others passing through on duty travel. Adjoining the rest house there developed a low-budget RAF camp that expanded substantially in 1942 when, for the first time, a RAF squadron (No. 244) was stationed there permanently to conduct anti-submarine patrols. In 1944 Shaikh Sultan of Sharjah permitted a detachment of the Air Transport Command (ATC) of the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) to be based at the airfield in support of its Persian Corridor supply route.⁸ The Americans' camp, built adjacent to the RAF one but with markedly superior facilities, was designed to accommodate three hundred men. The BOAC station superintendent (Raymond O'Shea) during the closing months of the war (November 1944–June 1945) estimated that there were on average seventy landings a day in good weather, a figure that included all RAF, BOAC and American ATC flights. Following the Japanese surrender the airfield experienced even higher levels of activity as thousands of troops were repatriated from Asia for demobilisation back home.

The airfield's strategic importance and rate of use declined steeply with the end of the war. Within the space of sixteen months from VJ day (15 August 1945) to January 1947, it changed from serving as a crucial stage between England and India (and thence Australia) to facing a real prospect of closure. Neither the RAF nor BOAC saw much further use for it. RAF personnel strength in the Middle East was to be reduced from 820,000 at the start of January 1946 to 305,000 by the end of the year. More than eight hundred surplus aircraft were to be prepared for sale to foreign buyers. So efficient were the British Air Ministry's repatriation plans that its Air HQ in Iraq found itself severely undermanned. By April 1946 it had not a single operational squadron or even a detachment under its command.⁹ For example, manpower shortages led to the closure of an Aircraft Safety Centre in Bahrain: in future, search and rescue would be co-ordinated from the Air HQ at Habbaniya, several hours' flight away in Iraq. But individual stations would still be responsible for their own rescue operations. RAF Sharjah had by then reverted from being a busy 'staging post' to its pre-war status of a 'station', one of only four retained in the region (the others were at Habbaniya and Shaibah in Iraq, and at Bahrain). Inspectors visiting Sharjah on 1 February 1947 confirmed that it was dependent on the distant Habbaniya for search and rescue – it had no

aircraft or launches of its own although it did have vehicles and personnel for desert rescue. The station was on a care-and-maintenance basis, the personnel numbering about thirty. Its main role was air traffic control, with one Flying Control Officer and two Airfield Controllers, to be increased shortly to three. Movements (mainly of RAF planes) averaged four or five a day. 'Personnel do not, therefore, consider themselves overworked.'¹⁰

If the RAF presence was minimal by early 1947, BOAC's interest when resuming its commercial services after the war had also evaporated. Both for landplanes and flying boats, Sharjah and Dubai ceased to be important. Landplanes with greater range required fewer stops for refuelling. In May 1945 BOAC inaugurated scheduled flights from London to India that flew non-stop between Lydda (in Palestine) and Karachi, and then continued with QANTAS to Australia. But the discomfort and limited capacity – only nine passengers – of the Avro Lancastrian aircraft (modified Lancaster bombers) provoked many complaints. BOAC therefore reintroduced flying boats on this route even though they took longer and cost more than the landplanes. The aviation world had long recognised that flying boats were obsolescent, the future lying in the much faster landplanes (e.g. the Douglas DC-4) that the US airlines were using and selling in other countries. For lack of adequate British-built aircraft, BOAC had been allowed to purchase American Lockheed Constellation aircraft for its transatlantic route despite government pressure to 'buy British'. But for its India route in 1946, it reverted to flying boats (the Short S.25 Sandringham, flying as the Plymouth class) while awaiting new models of landplanes to be designed and built.¹¹ A landplane of a type that had seen service since before the war, the Armstrong Whitworth Ensign, made its last landing at Sharjah on 3 January 1946. So popular had been its flights that BOAC's manager invited the local shaikhs and diplomats for light refreshments to mark its passing.¹² A year later, on 10 January 1947, the last scheduled 'C' Class flying boat took off from the creek at Dubai, the end of an era also marked by a ceremony held at the BOAC Marine Base to which the Ruler of Dubai and other notables were invited.¹³ Thereafter BOAC used the Dubai creek and Sharjah airfield only in emergencies.

Local impacts of BOAC's discontinuation of service

BOAC's withdrawal left the Trucial States without any scheduled commercial air service. Its decision no longer to call there made economic sense. But for those living there or wanting to visit, it was disastrous. In the 1930s Imperial Airways aircraft had made a series of refuelling stops between Basra and Karachi. These were Kuwait (optional, depending on customer demand), Bahrain, Sharjah and across the Indian Ocean at Jiwani (initially optional) and Gwadar in India. Long-haul passengers flying between Britain and India or Australia were the airline's target customers, but the refuelling stops led quickly to an internal market developing within the Gulf states.

A variety of clients had taken advantage of these new air connections: shaikhs of the region who used them to visit their Arab neighbours, to travel to India or

Europe for education, pleasure or medical treatment, or to shorten the journey when going on pilgrimage to Mecca; local businessmen who were trading within the Gulf or with India; British diplomats based in Bahrain who could even finesse the timetables of the infrequent flights so as to make an overnight visit to the Trucial Coast, a hitherto unimaginable scenario; the foreign entrepreneurs and technicians involved in oil exploration who needed to reach remote drilling sites; and pearl merchants who could dispatch their valuable cargoes by airfreight or convey them themselves to market in Karachi and Bombay. Travel by air was much quicker and more expensive but Imperial Airways fares and cargo tariffs appealed to its wealthier clients when compared with those of its only competitor, the steamship service. The British India Steam Navigation company had for many years been connecting the ports of the Gulf with Karachi. But its fortnightly service, slow speed and no air-conditioned cabins made air travel more appealing.¹⁴

BOAC's termination of services via Sharjah and Dubai put a sudden end to this local market. Previously, executives of the oil company Petroleum Development Trucial Coast could reach Dubai on the flying boat service from Alexandria to Karachi. Alternatively, if starting from Baghdad or Bahrain, they caught the land-plane to Sharjah and then took a taxi for 20 km across the sands to the creek. After BOAC's services ended, they could, subject to space availability, travel on the occasional RAF flights between Bahrain and Dubai. The landing ground that the RAF had built and used heavily at Dubai during the war was now surplus to RAF needs and was not developed for civil aviation use – not until 1960 did the emirate of Dubai build its own airfield on the site of what is today Dubai International Airport. British diplomats in Bahrain could also fly with the RAF to Dubai and to Sharjah although, for many of their inspection tours, a Royal Naval vessel provided greater independence of travel. Occasionally oil companies such as Petroleum Concessions Limited (PCL) would provide an aircraft for someone as distinguished as the Political Resident.¹⁵ But for others, not least the people of the Trucial Coast, the loss of scheduled air services was extremely inconvenient. Travel within the Gulf became more difficult, as did reaching and returning from India or England. Bahrain was a stopover on BOAC's long-distance flights but most seats were booked by long-haul passengers, leaving few places available from Bahrain. BOAC's regular airmail service also stopped. Postal dispatch and deliveries were limited to a weekly RAF flight between Bahrain and Dubai (later, between Bahrain and Sharjah).

Not until 1950 and the founding by Freddie Bosworth of Gulf Aviation (now Gulf Air), based in Bahrain, did a limited, weekly service reconnect Sharjah.¹⁶ In the intervening years, other airlines used the airfield without, however, exploiting the market vacated by BOAC. New aviation options in the Gulf region opened up as a result of the Chicago Convention (i.e. the Convention on International Civil Aviation, 1944; in force from 1947). In signing and ratifying the convention, the British government had, as the *de facto* protecting power, made it applicable also to the Trucial States. The shaikhs duly complained: under one of the Truces (in 1892), their ancestors had agreed not to enter into any agreement with a foreign power

except through the British government, but this, they argued, did not justify its signing away their airspace rights without their knowledge. The Foreign Office in London ruefully acknowledged a lack of consultation.¹⁷

Ratification of the Chicago Convention promised to open up an airspace that the British had jealously kept to themselves since the First World War. Other than for emergency landings, the air route along the western Gulf coast had been a British monopoly (during the war they allowed the USAAF and other Allied military flights to use it). With the ratification of Chicago, Britain had to allow overflights of the territory and to permit foreign aircraft to land for fuel or repairs though without taking or leaving passengers or cargo. Requests were not slow in coming – already in January 1946 the American airline Trans World Airlines (TWA) requested permission to overfly the Trucial States.¹⁸

Under the Convention the British had also to allow access by the private aviators whom hitherto they had strongly discouraged. They would refuse requests to transit the area, usually made by those en route to or from India. The British peer Lord Sempill, a keen pilot, landed at Bahrain in 1935, unaware of the regulations. He had promptly to leave, as did Charles Lindbergh and his wife when they arrived on their way to England two years later. Amelia Earhart was denied permission to cross Oman on a planned flight from Karachi to Aden. The British authorities expressed concern about rescuing inexperienced aviators when lost in the desert. In reality they were reluctant, in these early competitive days of oil exploration, to allow independent pilots into Gulf airspace.¹⁹ As the Convention allowed, private pilots did land at Bahrain and Sharjah in the post-war years, many of them British couples or families en route to Australia. More significant was the oil companies' response to the loss of scheduled civil aviation services. ARAMCO, based at Dhahran in eastern Saudi Arabia, had been employing its own pilots since the mid-1930s for aerial exploration in that country. Now other oil exploration companies recruited their own pilots or paid for charters. The companies (e.g. PCL, referred to earlier) could carry non-company passengers, a practice that had to stop once Gulf Aviation commenced scheduled flights in 1950.

Oil exploration brought a new strategic importance to airfields that were no longer essential to long-distance carriers. American airlines especially had been eyeing opportunities for route development once the British monopoly was broken. During the war USAAF planes used British airfields in Iraq, Bahrain and Sharjah, and the airline Pan Am had, like BOAC, operated in support of the American supply corridor to Persia. British attempts desperately to limit United States penetration of 'their' airspace and air facilities were only partly successful. In fact they proved counterproductive in that after the war the Americans invested heavily in the Dhahran airfield, used by the ARAMCO oil company but also by Pan Am and TWA as a commercial transportation hub.²⁰

The entering into force of the Chicago Convention coincided with BOAC's ceasing to serve the Trucial States. To what extent was the vacuum left by BOAC filled by other airlines taking advantage of Sharjah's airfield? In reality, foreign airlines made little use of it, other than Air France making occasional

stopovers en route to or from Indochina and KLM on its Amsterdam–Batavia route. In February 1948, an Iraqi Airways flight landed at Sharjah on its way to Karachi, reportedly the first of what would be regular weekly calls.²¹ The airline's proposals to run a regular service to India had encountered various obstacles: a reluctance by the British government to accept them, a cholera outbreak in the region and a moratorium in mid-1947 on any decision-making during negotiations over Partition (under which the destination, Karachi, was due to be capital of the new Pakistan).²² But now, finally, it extended its weekly Baghdad–Kuwait–Bahrain service to Sharjah. Once again oil company personnel and British diplomats could reach their posts in the Trucial States on commercial flights. But after three months Iraqi Airways cancelled the service for lack of adequate freight demand and Sharjah lost this vital connection to its Arab neighbours.

If lukewarm about the Iraqi Airways proposal, the British had actively encouraged a similar scheme involving Air India (Tata Airlines). Aware of the impending loss of regional air services, the Political Resident in Bahrain, Sir Geoffrey Prior, urged that Air India be encouraged to develop a route to Baghdad. He saw many commercial opportunities in a service following the old Imperial Airways route, from Karachi to Basra via Jiwani, Sharjah, Bahrain and Kuwait, especially since the alternative steamer service was poor. It would attract airmail and passengers who could not wait for the ship. The large Indian communities in Sharjah and Dubai would be well served as would those in Bahrain who had difficulty booking on international flights.²³ Air India's proposal to fly this route had still not matured by the end of the year when the discontinuation of BOAC's local services was imminent. The new Political Resident in Bahrain, Sir Rupert Hay, was familiar with the logistics of local travel, having served in the same post (based then at Bushire) during the war. In a strongly worded memo to London, he viewed the withdrawal of BOAC's service as 'very inconvenient', called attention to the difficulty of booking seats on international flights, and emphasised how oil company and commercial travellers were being 'severely handicapped' in reaching their destinations in the Gulf, in view also of the 'execrable steamer services'. He advocated retaining the 'C' Class flying boats service until Air India or another airline started operations.²⁴

A few months later the Air Staff Liaison Officer in Bahrain also warned of the serious implications of the cutback in BOAC and RAF staffing. As from 1 May 1947 no servicing or accommodation would be available at Bahrain or Sharjah. Personnel at each station were to be reduced to some twenty-five men. Aircraft would be able to land at their own risk, but there would be no night flying. Refuelling would be carried out by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, which supplied aviation fuel to the airfields. All signals services except point-to-point would cease. On 1 May he repeated his message: Indian Airlines should be aware that neither Bahrain nor Sharjah could handle their aircraft so they would have to provide their own ground crew. The lack of a standby ambulance or fire tender would normally exclude regular use by passenger aircraft.²⁵

Table 1. Timetable of inaugural Gulf Aviation flights, July 1950.

Wednesdays			
Dep. Bahrain	08.30	Arr. Doha	09.10
Dep. Doha	09.45	Arr. Sharjah	11.45
Thursdays			
Dep. Sharjah	09.00	Arr. Doha	11.00
Dep. Doha	11.30	Arr. Bahrain	12.15
Sundays			
Bahrain–Doha			
Dep. Bahrain	09.00	Arr. Doha	09.40
Dep. Doha	11.00	Arr. Bahrain	11.40

Air India's proposed service never materialised. BOAC's regional staff recognised that there was potential for local services in the Gulf, perhaps a company based in Bahrain offering 'Dhow traffic services', a third-class operation with the lowest possible fares to tempt passengers away from the steamer service.²⁶ But, other than the short-lived Iraqi Airways connection to Sharjah, none emerged until Gulf Aviation's service via Doha (Qatar) was launched in mid-1950 and even that was extremely limited (Table 1).

A new manager at Sharjah: International Aeradio Limited (IAL)

On economic grounds Britain should have declared the airfield at Sharjah redundant in 1947. Reluctant to lose a strategically located landing ground, however, the RAF retained its station there on a care-and-maintenance basis, i.e. kept in adequate condition in case of future need. The most important asset of Sharjah proved to be its wireless station. BOAC's wireless facilities occupied rooms inside the courtyard of the 'Fort'. The RAF had its own nearby but hoped, should the airline evacuate the rest house, to take over BOAC's medium frequency capacity.²⁷ The value of these installations was to ensure that the airfield survived as an integral part of the air traffic control network in the lower Gulf region.

In the very month that BOAC ended its flights via the Trucial States, the newly created Ministry of Civil Aviation (MCA) in London belatedly sent a technical survey mission to the region. Its broad terms of reference, in summary, were: 'to examine existing aerodromes and ground facilities and to recommend most suitable aerodrome sites for future land plane trunk routes with short term and long term [sic]'. The party of six men and a female secretary visited airfields and then held meetings in Karachi (in which Pan Am also participated) about point-to-point communications along the air routes.²⁸ While at Shaibah in Iraq, the mission warned against basing civil aviation wireless services on RAF standards,

a reservation that must have applied also to Sharjah which was not on the planned itinerary (and does not appear in the title of the report). The mission members decided to visit it only after learning in Bahrain that Sharjah's wireless facilities that were crucial for the Bahrain–Karachi route were at that very moment at risk of being closed down. They signalled London immediately asking for interim authority to keep them in operation.

During the same talks in Bahrain the Political Resident (Sir Rupert Hay) pointed out that BOAC, by changing (i.e. reducing) its services, was potentially breaching the Air Agreement made between the Bahraini and British governments.²⁹ The same was true for Sharjah. Britain's use of the Sharjah airfield was governed by agreements made with Shaikh Sultan. An initial agreement with Imperial Airways in 1932, valid for ten years, had been renewed with BOAC for five years in 1943, and was due to lapse on 22 July 1948. The airline was withdrawing from an agreement that was still in force. Hay asked London that BOAC, or Cable and Wireless as their agents, continue at least to man the wireless station which was essential for private and commercial telegram traffic. He had an ulterior motive of ensuring that the Sharjah rest house, with its civilised accommodation, bar and eating facilities, remained in British hands, for the terms of the Sharjah Air Agreement required that any buildings evacuated by BOAC revert to the Shaikh's ownership.³⁰

Rumours had circulated about what would happen to Sharjah's facilities once BOAC flights stopped calling there. The wireless used for air traffic control had commercial value too in transmitting telegrams. Current traffic was some one thousand telegrams a month, producing an income of about Rs. 4000 (£300) monthly (equivalent to 16,200 in today's US\$).³¹ Shaikh Sultan received an annual free allowance for sending telegrams but British diplomats paid full rates and, accordingly, used this option sparingly. Since the RAF could not handle a moneymaking business, the commercial company Cable and Wireless, operating already at Karachi and Bahrain, expressed an interest in taking over BOAC's wireless facilities, as did Indian Posts and Telegraphs.³² Accepting the recommendations of its own survey party, the MCA instead asked BOAC to continue to occupy the rest house at Sharjah and to provide communications for the Persian Gulf air route. This was seen as an interim measure; the long-term solution was to bring in a new tenant: IAL.

Very little has been written about the history of IAL despite its seventy years of worldwide operations, predominantly in air traffic control. It produced a staff newsletter for many years but no company archives are known to exist. Today the company is owned by the public service provider, Serco Group plc, which, among many other functions, operates most of the airports and air traffic control in the lower Gulf area.³³ IAL was created after the war to provide civilian air traffic control in underserved regions, especially where the RAF was evacuating its facilities. Its goal was to install and operate telecommunication and radio aids to navigation to the standards established by the International Civil Aviation Organization (which started functioning at the same time that the Chicago

convention came into force). IAL was formed by three British corporations, BOAC, British European Airways and British South American Airways (merged in 1949 with BOAC) which among them held 75 per cent of its shares. The balance of the share capital was taken up by foreign airlines which wished to participate: TWA, Air France, Sabena, KLM, SAS and Alitalia were among the early investors.³⁴ Within a year of its founding, IAL was advising civil aviation authorities in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Persia and was operating signals stations at a wide range of locations in Europe, Africa, and the Middle and Far East. It recruited many BOAC staff who were already employed in Air Traffic Control at its overseas stations. Bahrain and Sharjah were among them (Figure 3).

The handover at Sharjah from BOAC to IAL should have been straightforward as essentially an internal operation. The airline's in-house newsletter announced that IAL already had full operational control of ground signalling functions there on 13 October 1947.³⁵ But the superintendent could not yet hand over formally to an IAL manager. A year later E.J. Palmer arrived from the United Kingdom to assume responsibility for IAL, replacing William Coultard, the last of a long line of BOAC station superintendents. But Palmer was to have no official status on his arrival, London ruled, and was not to take over 'administration of Sharjah airport' until the new Air Agreement was signed.³⁶

In March 1948 the MCA planning committee recommended renewing the Sharjah Air Agreement. It noted that the RAF needed Sharjah as a staging post and emergency landing ground, while BOAC also required signals facilities for its main route to the East and an emergency landing ground. Facilities for charter and private flyers also had to be provided – during the last three months, nineteen applications to land at Sharjah had been received. The total cost to the MCA for maintaining Sharjah was c. £45,500 p.a. (equivalent to 2,443,000 in today's US\$), of which £3000 was paid to the Shaikh in rent, £22,000 for signals facilities, £3000 for meteorological services and £17,500 for general maintenance and miscellaneous costs. At Dubai the RAF wanted to maintain a buoy on the creek in the event of emergency landings. Reductions in signals facilities and personnel should be made, if possible. IAL should then submit cost estimates. The committee proposed renewing the Sharjah Agreement for seven years and the Dubai one for three years.³⁷

Hay drily informed London that he understood that IAL had now entirely replaced BOAC at Sharjah but his Residency had not been formally notified of the changes.³⁸ Evidently relieved that his appeal for a continuing British civilian presence at Sharjah had succeeded, he set about negotiating a renewal of the Air Agreement for a further ten years. In the event, it took three long years of discussions to achieve. Financial issues such as the rent payable to Shaikh Sultan, the landing fees to be charged to airlines, taxes due on aviation fuel and wage increases for the armed guards at the airfield, all led to innumerable exchanges between the Political Officer in Sharjah and his superiors in Bahrain and London. When agreement was almost in sight, the Air Staff Liaison Office in Iraq informed Bahrain of its urgent request to extend the runway at Sharjah by 450 yards to accommodate

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THE AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER FROM MALTA

THE FIREMAN FROM BAHRAIN

THE WIRELESS OPERATOR FROM BURMA

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Principal Representatives: Manager, I.A. (Far East), Ltd., 1st Floor, Macdonald House, Orchard Road, SINGAPORE 9; Managing Director, I.A. (Pakistan), Ltd., David Sassoon Building, McLeod Road, KARACHI; I.A.L. Area Representative, Idris Airport, TRIPOLI; Manager I.A. (East Africa), Ltd., P.O. Box 3133, NAIROBI; Manager, I.A. (Caribbean), Ltd., 21 Edward Street, Port of Spain, TRINIDAD.

Note: International Aeradio Limited offers the following services to aviation: installation, operation and maintenance of telecommunications, radio and radar aids to navigation; airport management; air traffic control and aeradio training schools; briefing services and navigation consultants; systems planning, aeradio engineering layouts; flight guides, trunk route manuals, maps, charts and other navigational needs.

Figure 3. Advertisement for International Aeradio Limited (from *Flight* 29 August 1952).

Table 2. Aircraft passing through Sharjah in the year 1948.

<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Eastbound</i>	<i>Westbound</i>
British	52	21
Norwegian	29	33
Belgian	4	4
French	40	18
Australian	4	5
American	8	4
Iraqi	5	21
Indian	13	3
Scandinavian	1	1
Burmese	7	–
Dutch	4	2
Malayan	1	–
Saudi Arabian	3	1
BOAC	5	9
Totals	176	122

the new jet planes. An extension required substantial land modification and the Shaikh's permission, further complicating the negotiations. Earlier the British had exerted pressure on Shaikh Sultan by subjecting him to a temporary travel ban.³⁹ With the travel ban lifted early in 1949, Shaikh Sultan, his health by then failing, had to fly to India for medical treatment and eventually to London where he died in hospital in 1951. In his absence, his brother, Shaikh Muhammad bin Saqr, deputised as Ruler and took over the protracted negotiations. The long delay in reaching agreement owed much more to prevarication in London over a period of eighteen months than to Shaikh Sultan's obstinacy, as local diplomats acknowledged.⁴⁰ The negotiations reached a successful conclusion in November 1951, more than three years after the Air Agreement had lapsed.

Sharjah airfield under IAL and its renaissance in the 1950s

Under the new agreement, Sharjah (like Bahrain) operated as a 'joint-user airfield', with certain facilities shared by the RAF and BOAC/IAL. Other than the short-lived service of Iraqi Airways mentioned earlier, there were no scheduled flights connecting Sharjah with the outside world. Nevertheless, many aircraft – among them, charter and private flights – made use of its facilities either for refuelling or for emergency landings⁴¹ (Table 2).

A similar census for 1949, though without a breakdown by nationality, showed that Sharjah handled 815 aircraft compared with 298 in 1948. The statistics for 1948 reflect continuing British use (BOAC is separately listed). Air France had been

calling at Sharjah en route between Paris and Saigon since 1946, when it had been overflying the Trucial States and landing at Sharjah without permission.⁴² For a few months in late 1947 KLM had stopped regularly at Sharjah en route to the Far East before switching to using the 'American' airfield at Dhahran instead. In 1949 the airline reverted to using Sharjah to refuel after the governments of India and Pakistan refused it permission to land during the Dutch–Indonesian war, thus accounting in part for the higher total of 815 landings in that year. The large number of Norwegian flights in 1948 may reflect preparations for Norway's participation in the UN Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan, active from the following year.

Obligated under the Chicago Convention to allow overflights and landing rights, the British government feared competition from foreign airlines even though its own BOAC had no modern aircraft and was heavily criticised for the irregularity of its flights. KLM, Pan Am and TWA were all entering the market in the Gulf, and the local diplomats' view was that BOAC was unlikely to survive open competition.⁴³ Learning that 815 aircraft had passed through Sharjah in 1949, the MCA advocated reducing this number: Sharjah was not for aircraft in transit, it asserted, nor for those merely using it as a convenience.⁴⁴ Moreover, all landings except those of British or Dominion (e.g. Australian) carriers should be notified, for two reasons: the Air Agreement required that Shaikh Sultan be informed of all foreign aircraft flying through his territory; and there was apprehension about hosting aircraft from countries behind the 'Iron Curtain'.⁴⁵

IAL became responsible for implementing government policy at Sharjah (and in part at Bahrain too). By September 1948, in addition to air traffic control duties, IAL was collecting landing fees for the government.⁴⁶ Unaware of official proposals to restrict it, IAL wanted to see more traffic so as to increase landing fee income. Some of the foreign aircraft requests to land were being addressed to Hay in Bahrain or even directly to IAL, rather than through the MCA in London.⁴⁷ There was no clear policy. Were foreign airlines to be encouraged or discouraged if BOAC were unable to compete? London fought against potential competition but its diplomats on the ground were more concerned to see local air services facilitating travel and mail delivery.

In addition to postal charges and landing fees, accommodation at the airfield rest house provided a small income. The 'BOAC rest house' was the only accommodation to western standards on the Trucial Coast and was used by short-stay visitors and by businessmen needing a residential base for longer periods.⁴⁸ Since the late 1930s it had served as a small hotel run by the Imperial Airways and BOAC station managers, many of whom had been trained in hospitality and customer relations. Although specialists in telecommunications, the IAL managers also found themselves running a guest house.

Imperial and BOAC had imported from India many of the provisions for the rest house's catering but now, with no scheduled air services, IAL had to depend on the RAF for supplies. By January 1949 IAL staff at Sharjah numbered thirty-six, fourteen of them W/T operators and five radio mechanics.⁴⁹ Three months later the



Figure 4. International Aeradio Limited staff at Sharjah, May 1948, Harold Dunn at front centre (photo: H. Dunn).

IAL communications specialists went on strike. About twenty-four Indian and Pakistani wireless operators struck because of ‘the poor quality of the food served to them and the picturesque oaths employed by the present Station Manager in his instructions to them’.⁵⁰ Harold Dunn was dispatched from the new IAL office in Karachi and succeeded in calling off the strike after two days. Dunn was already familiar with the IAL personnel at Sharjah, having been posted there in September 1947 when the BOAC superintendent was still in charge. He made subsequent visits in 1948 and 1949 while based in Karachi. The photo (Figure 4) documenting his visit in May 1948 shows sixteen staff, all of whom are identified in a caption to the photo. Dunn eventually returned to Sharjah as full-time IAL manager for eighteen months in 1951–53, accompanied – unusually for Sharjah – by his wife.⁵¹ The Political Agency at Bahrain gave him permission to substitute IAL’s own name and address in London for BOAC’s name on the Fort’s entrance doors (Figures 5 and 6).⁵²

It continued nevertheless to be known as the ‘BOAC rest house’ or ‘BOAC Fort’, long after any corporation representative had left (the airline was a major shareholder in Gulf Aviation, however). RAF Sharjah, with its minimal staff implementing a care-and-maintenance policy, epitomised what have been called ‘the quiet years’.⁵³ But by 1951 deteriorating security situations in Kenya and Aden led to substantial build-ups of British forces in those territories. In the Trucial States the



Figure 5. Rest house entrance under BOAC, 1948 (photo: H. Dunn).

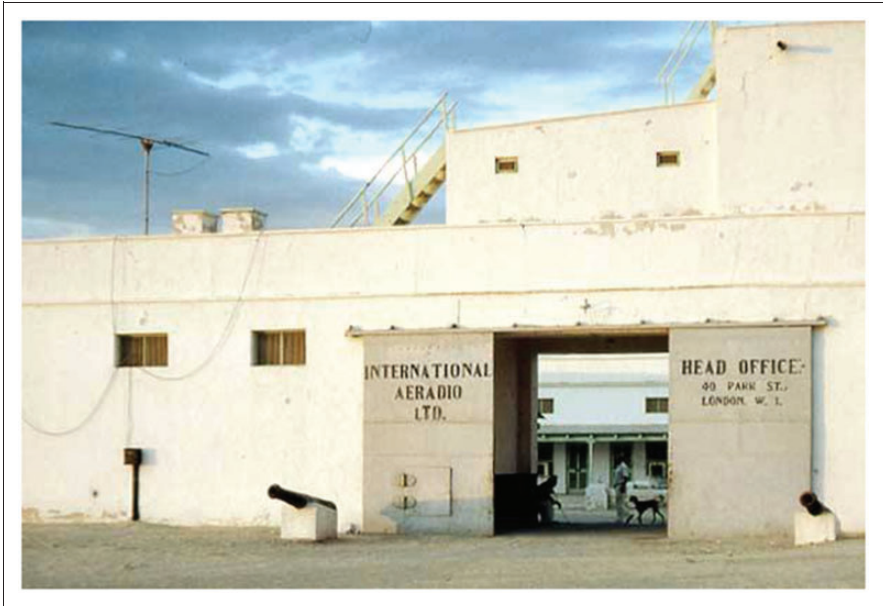


Figure 6. Rest house entrance under International Aeradio Limited, c. 1962.

confrontation between Saudi Arabia and the British over the Buraimi oasis led to a rapid expansion of the British presence, with Sharjah airfield at its centre. Between September 1952 and January 1953, the number of personnel at RAF Sharjah increased from fifty to one thousand.⁵⁴ The airfield once again became a strategic asset for operations conducted at Buraimi and then in the Jebel Akhdar campaigns in Oman.⁵⁵ It enjoyed this rejuvenated status and greatly expanded facilities until the sudden decision by the British government in January 1968 to withdraw its forces from the Arabian Gulf, thus marking the end of Britain's overt presence there.⁵⁶ The decision was fully implemented at Sharjah by 1971 when the emirate joined five others, including Dubai and Abu Dhabi, to form an independent union (the United Arab Emirates). IAL, still operating from the rest house, assumed control of military air traffic, previously shared with the RAF, as well as civilian.⁵⁷ The government of the emirate of Sharjah had by then taken over the airfield facilities and opened its own international airport there, to be superseded in 1979 by a new one located outside the growing city. At both airports, old and new, IAL continued in the role that it had been created to perform in 1947.

Conclusion

The case considered here challenges the common assumption of steady progress in civil aviation development from simple beginnings to today's mega-airports. As a well-documented episode of local character but with considerable international ramifications, it should stimulate further enquiries into deliberate disruptions of scheduled air services to specific destinations and the social and economic repercussions that they have. Moreover, it should generate analyses of pre- and post-war civil aviation development in other nations of the Middle East.

The decision by BOAC in 1947 to discontinue services via the Trucial States was disastrous for those who lived there or who needed to visit for business purposes. The internal Gulf market for air services created by Imperial Airlines was undercut at a time when the rapidly expanding oil industry, along with the associated engineering, banking and retail businesses, would have contributed substantially to its growth. It is arguable that BOAC's withdrawal was a factor in delaying the Emirates' future socioeconomic development that would be made possible by oil production.

BOAC's own fleet of obsolescent aircraft types could not compete on international routes with its European and American rivals. But Britain only grudgingly conceded access by foreign airlines to the airfields that it controlled in the Gulf region (Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Muscat in addition to Sharjah), while waiting for BOAC to modernise its fleet. It showed no interest in running 'a Dhow traffic service' of low-cost flights up and down the Gulf, but made it difficult for others to do so. Iraqi Airways tested the market but withdrew; Air India lost enthusiasm as its own plans encountered obstacles. It was only after four years without scheduled services to Sharjah that a colourful entrepreneur launched Gulf Aviation and reconnected the Trucial States with their neighbours by air.

The airfield at Sharjah, an important node in air travel since 1932, seemed in 1947 to have become redundant to British aviation needs and could have been handed back to Shaikh Sultan. But Britain resolved to retain the RAF station on a care-and-maintenance basis and to continue operating BOAC's wireless facilities to serve the region. Both these assets realised their value when, within a few years, regional political events made Sharjah again a vital base for British military interventions. The expanded and improved facilities that followed led in turn to its becoming eventually Sharjah's own international airport, although destined to be overshadowed by its neighbour 20 km away in Dubai.

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34. For references to the early history of IAL, see *Flight magazine*, e.g. 17 April 1947, 332; 29 February 1948, 171; 28 April 1949, 501, <https://www.flightglobal.com/pdfarchive> (accessed 1 February 2018); also, Hansard *HC Deb 06 August 1947 vol 441 cc1455–6*; and R. Higham, *Speedbird. The Complete History of BOAC* (London, I.B. Tauris, 2013), pp. 83–4, 182. Serco's own website has less than thirty words about IAL's long record in the Middle East. <https://www.serco.com/middleeast/aboutus> (accessed 5 January 2017).
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