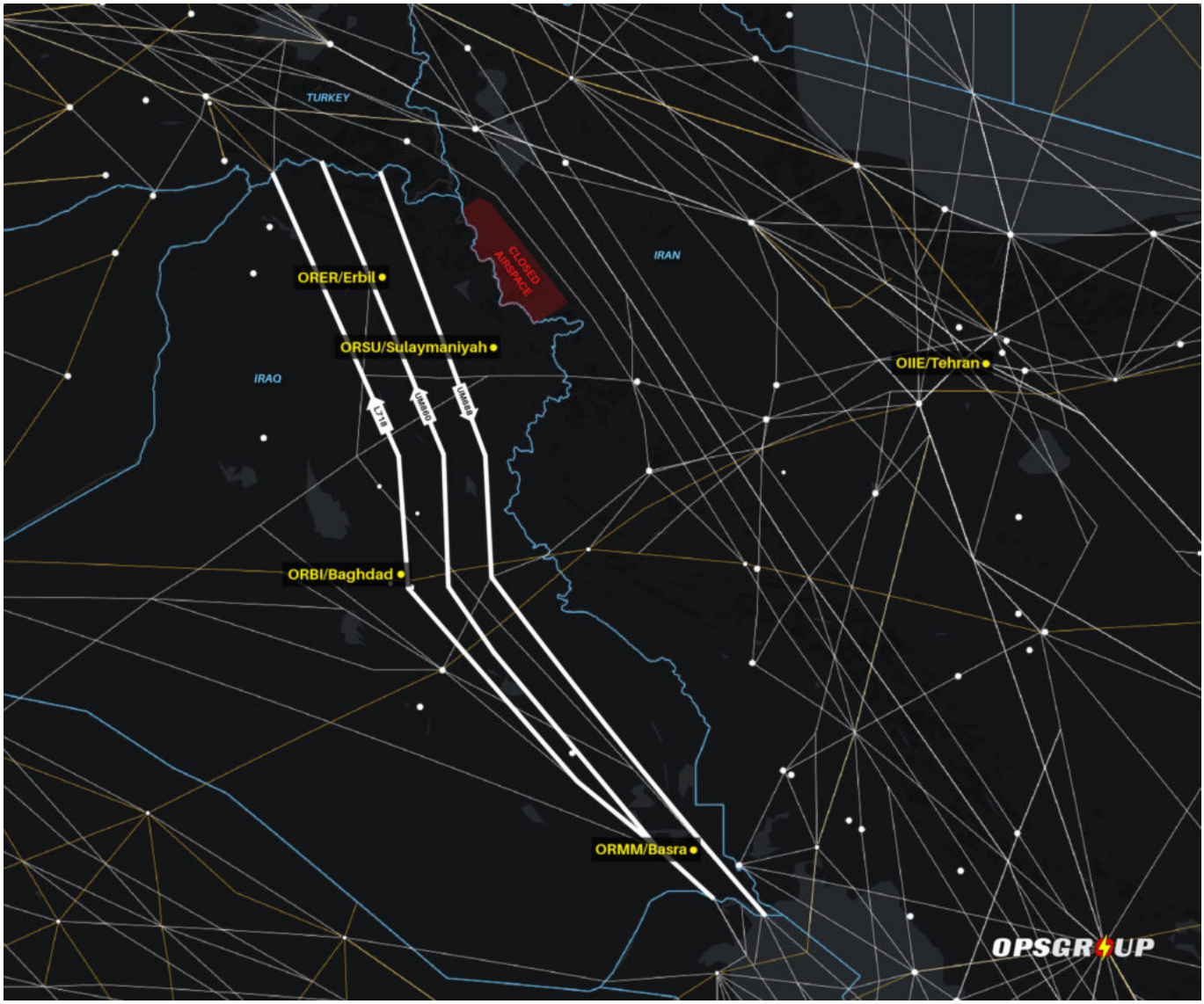
Iraq Airspace Risk For Overflights

David Mumford
30 September, 2022

International operators overflying Iraq should take note of recent events impacting airspace risk in the region.

Iran have closed a section of airspace in the north of the country along the border with Iraq, and are potentially using the area to launch **missile and drone attacks at targets near ORER/Erbil airport, in close proximity to heavily flown international air routes.**



Click for hi-res version.

Iranian attacks

Iran are warning their own operators against flying in Iraqi airspace, and especially at Erbil airport, which came under direct fire from Iranian surface-to-surface ballistic missiles in Feb 2021 and again in March 2022. Iran launched further attacks this week on an area 35 miles east of Erbil, reportedly targeting a Kurdish opposition group in the region – an armed opposition force that is banned in Iran.

Here is the warning issued by Iran:

OIIX A2959/22 - AIRSPACE SAFETY AND SECURITY WARNING ISSUED BY IRAN CAA IN RESPONSE TO THE HAZARDOUS SITUATION WITHIN THE TERRITORY AND AIRSPACE OF BAGHDAD FIR (ORBB),
IRANIAN REGISTERED AIR OPERATORS ARE ADVISED TO TAKE ALL POTENTIAL RISKS INTO ACCOUNT IN RISK ASSESSMENT AND FLT PLANNING DECISIONS WHEN OPERATING AT AIRPORTS WHICH ARE LOCATED WITHIN BAGHDAD FIR (ORBB) ESPECIALLY ERBIL INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT (ORER), DUE TO THE RISK POSED BY
MILITANT ACTIVITY AND LIMITED RISK MITIGATION CAPABILITIES IN IRAQ. 28 SEP 17:35

2022 UNTIL 05 OCT 18:30 2022 ESTIMATED. CREATED: 28 SEP 17:43 2022

Iraq airspace risk

Several countries warn against overflights of both Iran and Iraq. The US FAA bans N-reg aircraft from the OIIX/Tehran FIR, and says that overflights of the ORBB/Baghdad FIR must be at FL320 or above – and just last week they extended these rules to 2024.

But the Iranian attacks in northern Iraq raise questions and concerns about overflights of Iraq. Airways UM688 (southbound) and UM860 (northbound) through Iraq are popular routes for international flights between Europe and the Middle East. **Is it really safe to fly these routes now, even above FL320?**

It's worth digging into the US FAA guidance on Iraq a bit deeper to get a clearer picture of exactly what the risk is here. SFAR 77 has the info, and this is (some of) what it says:

- *Iranian-aligned militia groups (IAMGs) have access to UAS and anti-aircraft capable weapons systems which present inadvertent risks to the safety of U.S. civil aviation operations in the ORBB/Baghdad FIR at altitudes below FL320 and at potentially targeted airports.*
- *IAMGs likely lack the ability to conduct effective target identification and airspace de-confliction, increasing the risk of an accidental shoot down of a civil aircraft due to misidentification or misperception.*
- *In addition, the FAA remains concerned about cross-border military activity. Both Iran and Turkey have previously conducted various no-notice, cross-border operations striking targets in northern Iraq using a variety of weapons, including short-range ballistic missiles, rockets, and weaponized UAS. In a recent example, on March 12, 2022, up to twelve Fateh-110 surface-to-surface ballistic missiles launched from western Iran and impacted near the construction site of the new U.S. consulate in Erbil, Iraq, and Erbil International airport (ORER). While this attack did not pose a direct threat to the airport, the missile trajectories possibly presented an inadvertent risk to aircraft in flight that might have been operating at low altitude in the vicinity of Erbil International airport (ORER) during the time of the attack.*
- *In general, unannounced third-party cross-border operations in the Baghdad FIR (ORBB) present a low altitude safety-of-flight risk for aircraft flying in the vicinity of the targeted location(s) and for aircraft on the ground at airports co-located with, or in close proximity to, the intended targets. These activities also pose an airspace de-confliction challenge.*

Should I avoid overflying Iraq?

For most Europe-Middle East flights, **the route through Saudi-Egypt is a safer option than Iraq.**

Even routing through Iran is probably a safer bet at the moment (although we don't advise that either!). We received a report from an OPSGROUP member this week who routed through Iran:

"I would estimate our flights through Iran vs Iraq are taking (approximately) 10-15 mins longer, but at significantly less risk. We only consider airports that are served by either Emirates or FlyDubai as suitable for diversion, but only as a last resort, such as OIIE, OISS and OIFM. The company we use for support and handling if such diversions are required is Hadid. They are excellent for sorting any problems/permits in the Middle East."

Here's the Iraq risk, as we see it:

- Potential of **intentional targeting** by terrorist organisations who possess portable anti-aircraft weaponry.
- Civil aircraft may be **misidentified** by the air defence systems of both local and foreign military who are active in the country.
- Iraq is politically unstable, and **security and safety on the ground** is unpredictable and likely to be high risk.
- The US have pulled their troops out and so there is **little protection at the major airports.**
- ORBI/Baghdad and ORER/Erbil airports are **common target for rocket attacks.** Militia and terrorist groups are active in these areas.

Want a full briefing?

Just click here. Safeairspace.net is our conflict zone and risk database run by OPSGROUP. We continually assess the risk to operators the world over. It presents that information in a way that will always be simple, clear, and free. You can also add your email to our new fortnightly airspace risk briefing that contains only what you need to know, delivered every second Monday.

Iraq Overflights: A Recent Report

OPSGROUP Team
30 September, 2022

The US FAA recently amended their long standing Notam prohibiting US Operators from entering the ORBB/Baghdad FIR. The KICZ Notam A0036/21 used to bar flights at all levels, but now US operators are allowed to overfly Iraq provided they **remain at or above FL320**, as per the SFAR.

So, what can you expect if you elect to use this newly available routing, and what risks remain?

You can still expect risk

Iraq remains a political volatile country and the **security there is unpredictable.** Terrorist groups remains active, and have access to **anti-aircraft weaponry.**

What should you do?

- Continue to monitor alerts and sites such as Safeairspace to confirm what the current situation is.
- Flights should **remain above FL320** to avoid risk from MANPADS.
- Do not use Iraqi airports as **diversion options** unless it is an absolutely critical emergency situation.

All going well, here's what expect

Plan to use the **UL602, UM860 and UM688 airways.** These are major airways utilised by traffic routing between Europe and the Middle East. Iraq offers the slightly shorter route compared to Iran (and Iran remains out of bounds for US operators).

The routings to plan are as follows:

Northbound:
– TASMI DCT SEPTU DCT ROXOP UM860 NINVA
– TASMI UL602 ALPET L718 DEBNI DCT EMIDO L718 KABAN (all flights need to be at or above FL280 before DEBNI to stay clear of restricted area OR/R 401).

Southbound:
– TASMI RATVO UM699 SIDAD (via airway)
– RATVO DCT SISIN UM688 SIDAD (DCT – subject to availability)

Kuwait are good at handing you over, and Bahrain and the UAE airspace is all well managed.

ATC standards are good, and standard VHF throughout, with radar. It is worth keeping your headsets on though because a good listening watch is required at all times in this region.

Routing south you might find yourself **slowed down or shifted levels**, or given early descents, as they manage the flow into some of the major hubs in the Middle East. If you fly into the Bahrain FIR (via RABAP or LONOS) be aware there are high levels of congestion here, particularly military traffic.

Any other considerations?

Iraq borders **Syria** which is an absolute no go area. There is a **large prohibited area** in the northwest quadrant of Iraqi airspace along the Syrian border. If you are looking to use LCLK/Larnaca as a diversion airport, consider how you will manage routing around Syria.

The main southerly airway lies extremely **close to the Iranian border.** The border is not a straight line so consider whether you might accidentally cross it if detouring for weather, or if offered a direct routing which cuts the corner.

You do occasionally get some **major storms** in this region. When they are there, they aim to be impressive!

GPS jamming is a problem, usually in the northern region from around 40nm north of the border and

through about one third of the airspace. Of course, if you have INS and/or VOR/DME RNAV etc then you'll be ok, but if you're using something like Garmin avionics which rely solely on GPS then not so much. UAE airspace requires at least one GPS too, so update ATC if you need support!

What if I have to land there?

Security and safety on the ground is unknown and likely to be high risk.

The US have pulled their troops out and so there is little protection at the major airports. Leaving the airports will result in possible security issues and is unadvisable. While the airports are generally well maintained and serve some major international airlines, **conditions are challenging** particularly in the summer when temperatures regularly exceed 40°C. **Terrain is also a consideration.**

Cultural and religious regulations must be taken into account, and **political conflict with certain nationalities** should be considered. Alcohol and drugs are banned with severe penalties.

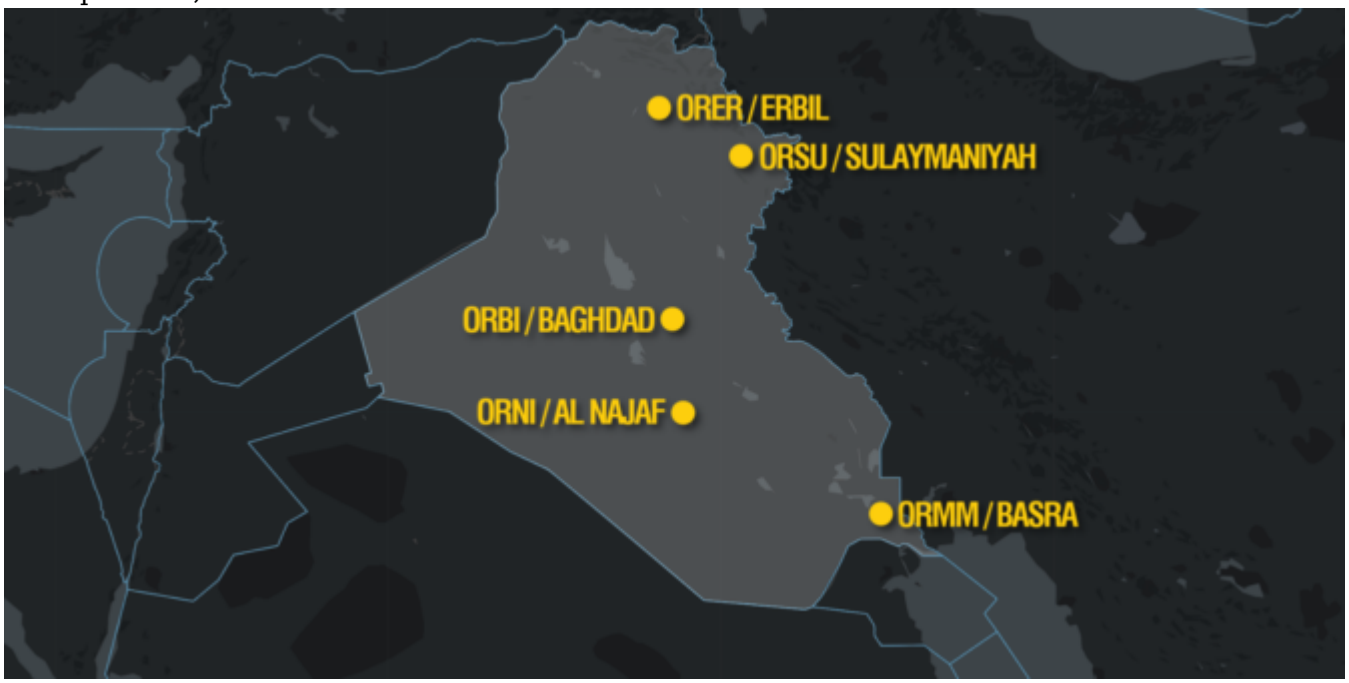
ORBI/Baghdad is a common target for rocket attacks, particularly because of its proximity to an air base. Rebels and terrorists are active in this area. The facilities and runways are decent with two ILS approaches and two runways of 4000m and 3301m. **This should only be used in absolute emergencies.**

ORMM/Basra is the second largest airport in Iraq and has a good length runway and an ILS. **This should only be used in absolute emergencies.**

ORER/Erbil offers a very decent length runway and facilities. The main area of issue is over the hills to the north of the airport. **This is the only airport which may be recommended for use as a possible en-route diversion.**

Oct 2021: Iraq Airport Closures

OPSGROUP Team
30 September, 2022



Please note the date on this story – Oct 2021. We're keeping the info here for reference purposes only.

Iraq is closing for a few days while their elections take place.

Here is a quick look at what this will mean for traffic who are planning to operate over or into Iraq over the closure dates.

Why and what are they closing?

They are closing all airports and border crossings for **security reasons.**

The election will take place Oct 10th. **The closures will run from 2300LT on Saturday Oct 9th to the morning of Oct 11th.** You will not be able to operate in or out of Iraq during this time.

Any further information on this has not yet been provided, but when elections took place in 2018, there were a number of strikes which reduced public services to nearly zero, as well as violent protests and riots across the country. This resulted in a 24 hour closure in May 2018.

In September 2018, several Katyusha rockets were fired directly at Basra airport during further protests against the government and elections.

It is volatile at the best of times.

ORBI/Baghdad airport is situated around 100nm southeast of a **major airbase** which is **often targeted by rockets and weaponised drones.** Baghdad itself is a target for rebel groups, and while attacks are generally low level, they do pose a risk to civil aviation and also heighten the **risk of misidentification** by air defense systems.

But can you still overfly?

The Notam published by ORBI/Baghdad Airport suggests you can:

A0239/21 - AD CLSD DUE TO IRAQ ELECTION DAY. WITH EXEMPTION TO EMERGENCY SITUATIONS DECLARED BY FLIGHTS OVERLYING IRAQ. 09 OCT 18:00 2021 UNTIL 11 OCT 03:00 2021. CREATED: 30 SEP 19:11 2021

ATC through Baghdad is provided by a large, international air traffic services provider, Serco, and you often hear US accents on frequency. Kuwait also provide some control of the southern sector when they hand over. So ATC control is not thought to be impacted.

The days leading up to and following the elections may well see some **increased traffic across Iraq** as dignitaries, government officials etc fly in, out and about.

Iraq and the ORBB/Baghdad FIR are a main connection between the Middle East and Far East to Europe. There are really only 4 options –

- Via Iraq
- Via Iran
- Via Saudi Arabia
- Via Pakistan into Eastern Europe

ORBB/Baghdad FIR Notams A0235/21 and A0236/21 advise on the routes available for civilian aircraft overflying the region. This is also covered in their AIP ENR 1.10-2 section 4.5.3.

Heading Northbound you can file TASMI SEPTU ROXOP UM860 NINVA

Heading Southbound you can file RATVO SISIN UM688 SIDAD

Airports

The airports will be closed. All international airports (ORER, ORSU, ORNI, ORMM) have published identical Notams to the one for ORBI/Baghdad, saying that they will remain available for emergency diverts, but they will not be available for "general" en-route alternates.

Iraq borders **Iran** (another region with airspace warnings in place) and **Syria** to the other side (which is a No Fly Zone) so you may be limited on where you can go – turning around and heading back to Kuwait and Saudi, or routing to Turkey (depending on which direction you are heading from).

Eastern Turkish airports are generally smaller and less capable than the larger ones to the West. There are also often skirmishes along the border between Iraq and Turkey, with military on both sides sometimes **closing portions of airspace during military activities.**

What should you do?

Continue to plan overflights, but be aware that diversions will likely not be supported during this time.

Be aware that government offices and services will likely be closed and unavailable during the election period, so don't submit overflight and permit requests last minute because they won't be handled until afterwards.

What is available (when they aren't closed for elections?)

Check out SafeAirspace – US Operators are banned from operating over or into Iraq, and other authorities **advise against flights below FL260.**

ORBI/Baghdad airport, in the capital, has a decent runway, however they do currently have **works on 15L/33R** and it is closed (when the weather permits) and between 0300-0500z.

Runway 15R/33L is only available during daylight hours and in VMC because the instrument approaches are suspended. 33L also currently has a **displaced threshold (400m)** and the declared distances are now 2901m.

So keep an eye on the weather and be aware of what might or might not be available. **Notams A0222/21 and A0193/21** are the ones to read.

Iran and Iraq airspace restrictions

David Mumford
30 September, 2022

Please note: This article refers to the airspace warnings for Iran and Iraq following the shootdown of UIA flight 752 in Tehran in Jan 2020. We are keeping the article here for reference purposes only. For updated airspace warnings, check safeairspace.net

---

Following the events of Jan 8, when an Iranian missile strike on US military bases in Iraq was quickly followed by the shooting down of Ukraine Int Airlines flight 752 in Tehran by the Iranian Armed Forces, multiple western countries issued warnings to **avoid the airspace of Iraq and Iran completely**.

But in the weeks that followed, some of these countries issued updated advice, **allowing overflights to resume at the higher flight levels**.

Here's a summary of what the main countries/agencies who regularly publish airspace warnings have said with regards to Iraq and Iran:

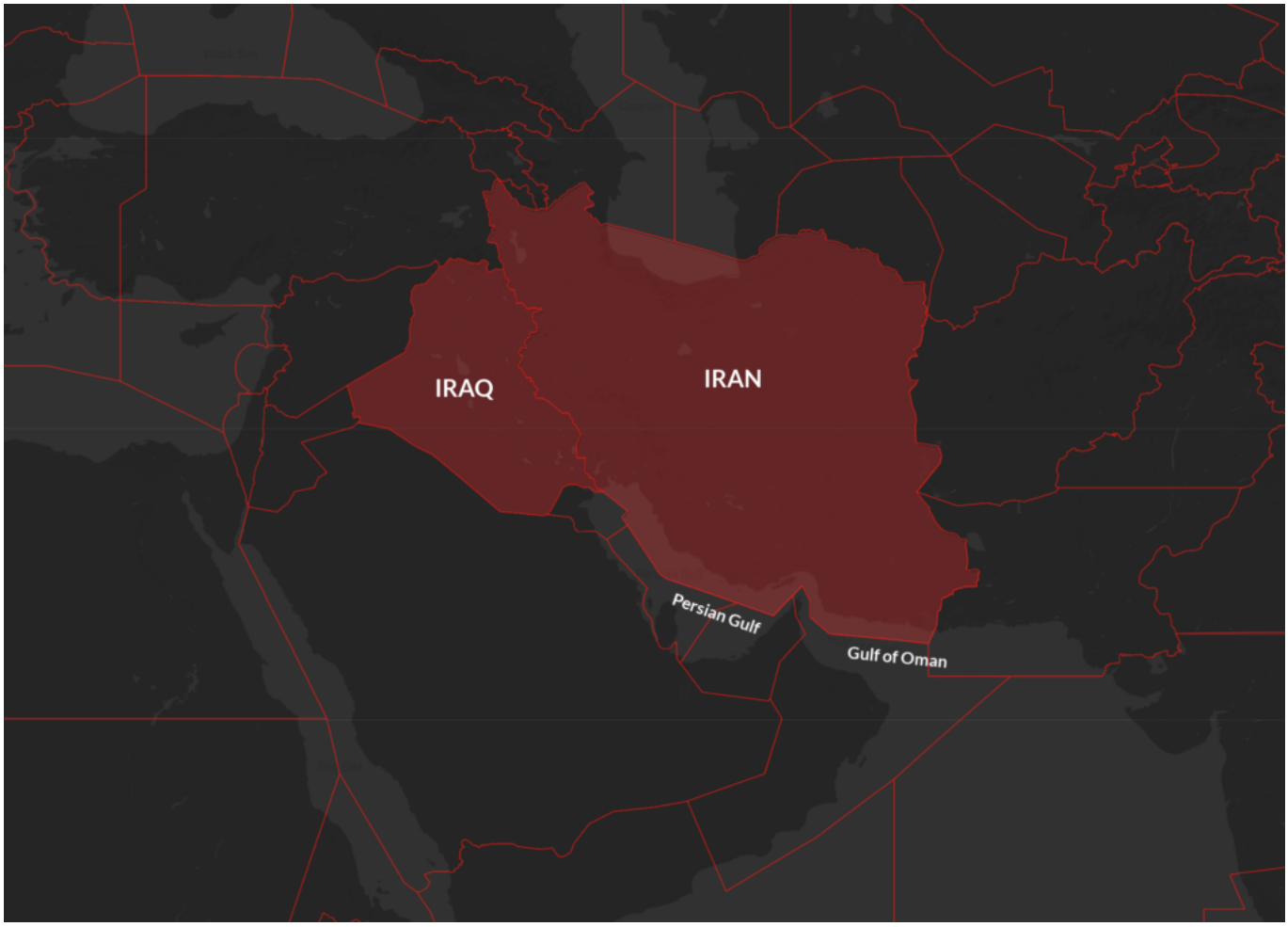
The US
As of Mar 12, the US prohibit all flights in the airspace of Iraq and Iran, but allow flights in the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman. Here are the details for each:

On Feb 27, the US loosened its restrictions on Iraq, issuing an updated Notam and Background Notice document which advised that US operators were now permitted to overfly Iraq at FL320 or above. They said there has been a de-escalation in military activity and diminishing political tensions in the region, but there was still a risk at the lower flight levels from armed militias who are likely responsible for multiple recent attacks on US armed forces in Iraq, as well as rocket attacks targeting the US Embassy and ORBI/Baghdad International Airport.

Then on Mar 12, the US issued an emergency order that once again banned US operators from overflying Iraq with immediate effect. This came after US warplanes hit militia weapons storage facilities in southern Iraq in a strike designed to destroy rockets like those fired at US troops earlier this week.

The US downgraded its airspace warning for the overwater airspace in the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman on Feb 17 – the new guidance now just advises caution in this region, and recommends to avoid the airways nearest to the OIIX/Tehran FIR whenever possible, to reduce the risk of miscalculation or misidentification by air defence systems. The crucial change with this new warning is that **overflights in this region are now permitted**. So for US operators wanting to transit the OKAC/Kuwait, OBBB/Bahrain, OMAE/Emirates and OOMM/Muscat FIRs – you can now do so.

The US ban on the airspace of Iran is still in place – US operators are prohibited from entering the OIIX/Tehran FIR.



Germany
Germany just advises caution for both Iraq and Iran overflights – at no point since the events of Jan 8 have they issued outright bans on the airspace of these two countries.

France
France initially issued a Notam on Jan 9 advising operators to avoid the airspace of Iraq and Iran. Then on Feb 14, they changed their advice for Iran, saying that the only chunk of airspace which should be avoided is the western half of the country (everywhere west of 54 Degrees East longitude); they recommended that overflights of the eastern half should be at or above FL320. This guidance was then incorporated into AIC 14/20. The French Notam for Iraq lapsed on Feb 12, and was not renewed – therefore the French advice for Iraq has reverted back to that contained in AIC 14/20 which says that overflights should be at or above FL320, and only on certain airways.

The UK
The UK published Notams on Jan 9 prohibiting operators from entering the airspace of both Iraq and Iran. Then on Jan 17, they issued a new Notam for Iran, and cancelled the one for Iraq, advising operators to revert back to the guidance contained in the AIP ENR 1.1 (1.4.5). Bottom line, the UK advice for both countries is now this: do not overfly below 25,000ft AGL.

EASA
EASA published a notice on Jan 11 specifically warning operators against overflying Iraq and Iran. They said this should be taken as a precautionary measure, following the events of Jan 8. EASA don't normally issue blanket warnings/recommendations like this. Then on Jan 29, they withdrew that advice, and reaffirmed the position previously stated in their Conflict Zone Information Bulletins (CZIB) – Iraq overflights should be avoided except on two specific airways (UM688 and UM860), and Iran overflights should be avoided below FL250.

Further discussion

- The **#FlightOps** channel on Slack is open for Iran/Iraq discussion
- Email team@ops.group with any intel or analysis you can share

---

Risk assessing Iran ops – the UIA 737 may have been shot down

Mark Zee
30 September, 2022

Special Update Thursday 09JAN: Members, please see either your email or this post in the Members forum, for a special briefing and update.

08JAN: Iran/Iraq Information page activated with latest information.

The cause of the crash of Ukraine International Airlines (UIA) AUI/PS752 on departure from Tehran is not yet determined, and given political circumstances, may not be clarified beyond reasonable doubt anytime soon.

Purely from the perspective of making a risk assessment for operations to Tehran, and Iran in general, however, **we would recommend the starting assumption to be that this was a shootdown event**, similar to MH17 – until there is clear evidence to the contrary.

Images seen by OPSGROUP, shown below, show obvious projectile holes in the fuselage and a wing section. Whether that projectile was an engine part, or a missile fragment is still conjecture, but in making a decision as to whether to operate to Iran, erring on the side of caution would dictate that you do not, until there is clear information as to the cause.

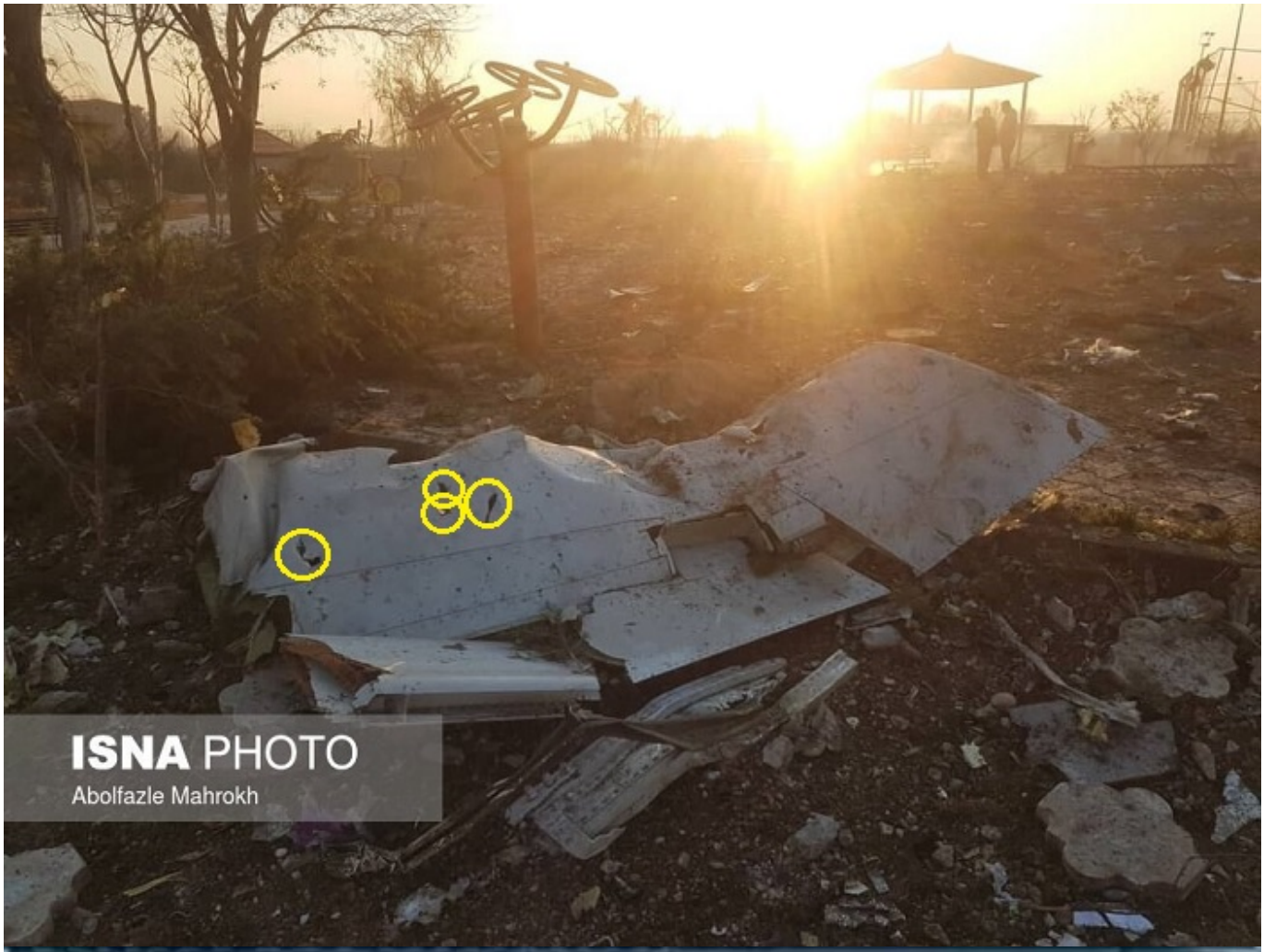
Obviously, there is also the wider regional risk as indicated through the US FAA Notams issued late Tuesday night. US operators are covered by these clear and specific Notams – do not operate to Iran, or Iraq, or operate in the Persian/Oman Gulf area.

Other operators are free to make their own judgement, but should note that a majority of non-US international carriers have elected to avoid both countries for the time being.

See also:

- OPSGROUP Article: FAA Bans Flights Over Iraq And Iran Following Missile Strike On US Base
- OPSGROUP Article: Germany publishes new concerns for Iraq overflights

Images from ISNA, Reuters; marking of projectile areas from JACDEC.


ISNA PHOTO
Abolfazle Mahrokh

REUTERS

Germany publishes new concerns for Iraq overflights

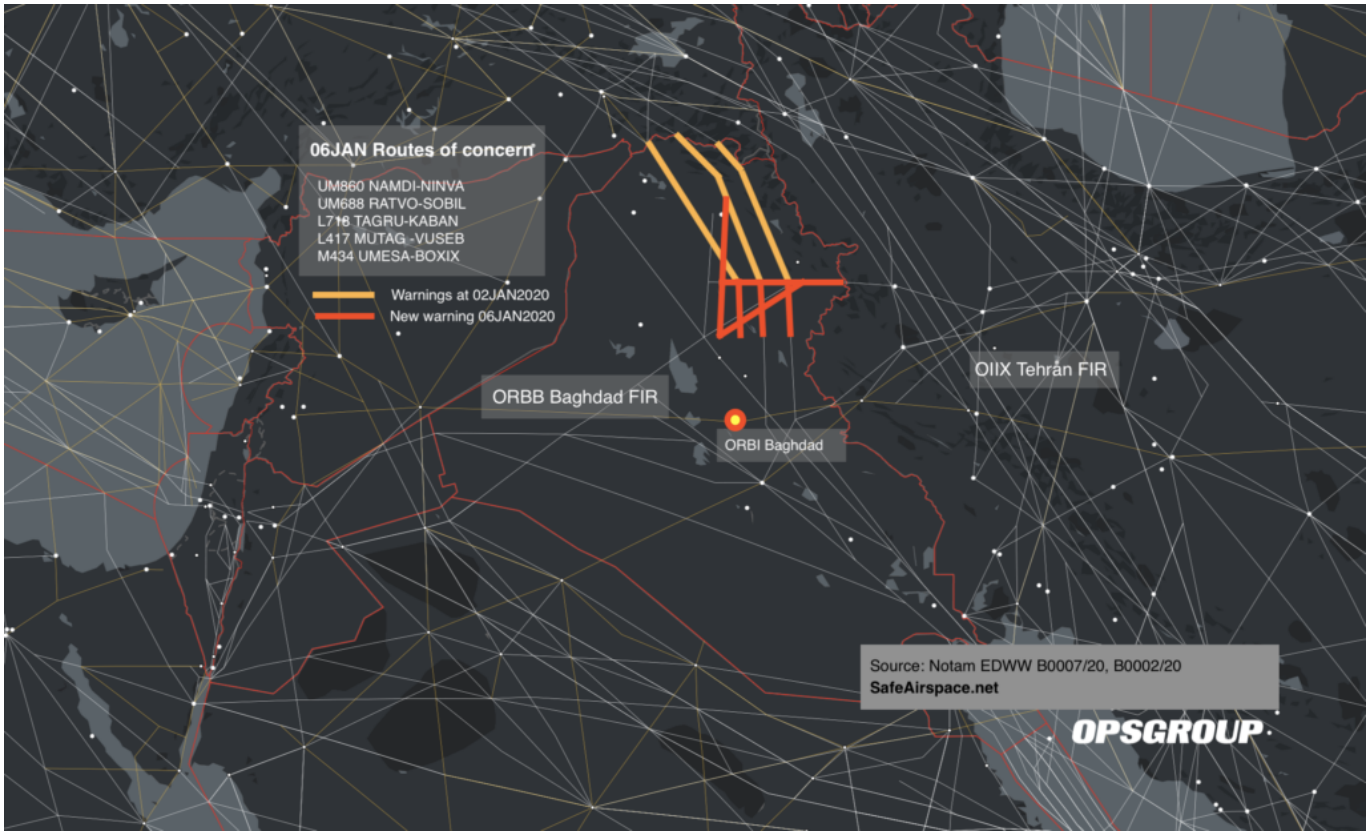
Mark Zee
30 September, 2022

Late Monday evening, the German LBA published a **new warning for Iraq**, indicating areas of concern for overflying traffic, together with a new warning on ORBI/Baghdad Airport.

Notam B0007 of 2020 (issued Jan 6) replaces Notam 0002 (issued on Jan 2nd), and these are the routes that Germany now considers a potential risk for aircraft below FL260:

Airway UM860 NAMDI – NINVA
Airway UM688 RATVO – SOBIL
Airway L718 TAGRU – KABAN
Airway L417 MUTAG – VUSEB
Airway M434 UMESA – BOXIX
Airway R652 MUTAG – DAVAS

Seen on the map below, all these airways are in the north east of Iraq: the yellow lines are the warnings that existed on and prior to Jan 2nd, and the orange lines show the additional areas flagged in Mondays Notam.



Of the other primary states that issue airspace warnings – the UK, France, and the US – none have issued updated guidance yet this year.

There is no doubt that the events of Jan 3, 2019 at ORBI/Baghdad Airport have created an extremely tense situation between the US and Iran. The aviation security picture in the Middle East, already fragile and unstable, is now unpredictable. A response by Iran to the US airstrike of Jan 3rd seems possible.

Specific to the Baghdad Airport incident, it seems early reports of Katyusha rockets can be discounted, that it was an attack carried out on vehicles near the airport by US Apache Helicopters. Civil traffic resumed operations shortly after the attack with several departures operating 'as normal'. Overflights continued during the attack.

As to the Iranian response, anything that looks like a US asset or ally could be a target – military or civil. US operators, at a minimum, should be avoiding the Tehran FIR, and considering security carefully when operating in other countries in the region, most notably Israel, Lebanon, and Kuwait – as a response may target airports in those countries or foreign aircraft. That said, it's a guessing game right now, and predicting the specifics of a response is extremely difficult.

For full analysis, and a listing of all current warnings, see **Safe Airspace**.

Iraq ATC strike – update

Declan Selleck
30 September, 2022

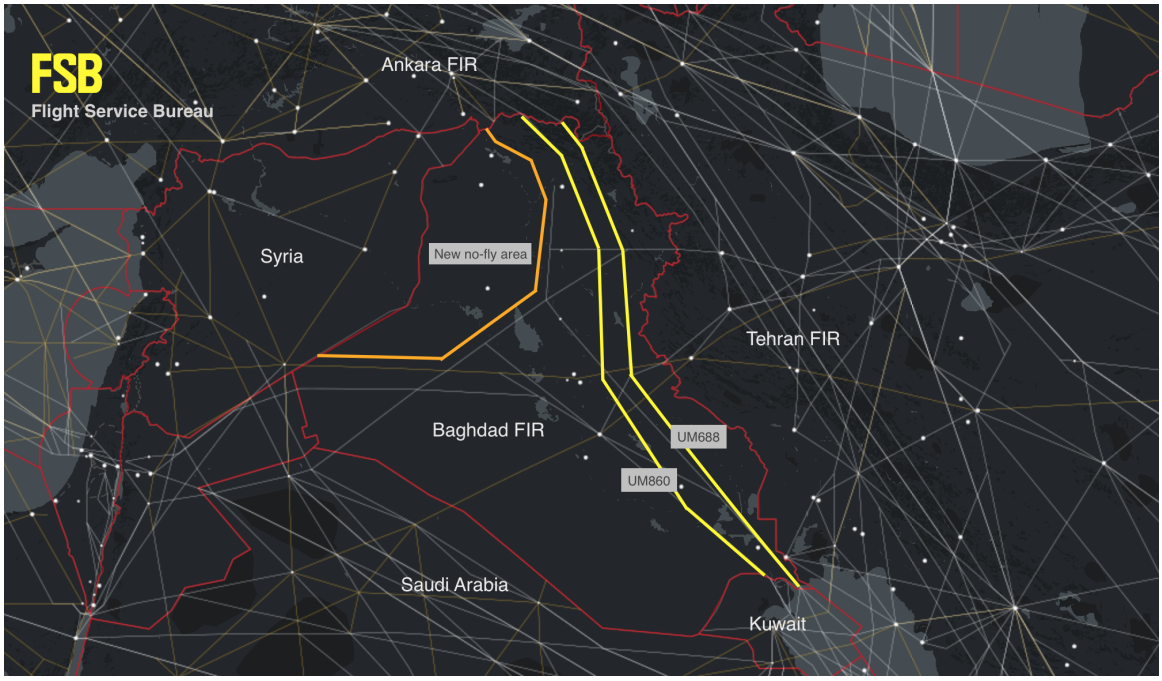
At 0800 local this morning, Iraqi controllers returned to work. For the last few days, Iraqi ATC had been on strike for better pay, effectively closing the Baghdad FIR and intermittently Baghdad and Basra airports. An 80nm in trail requirement has been removed. Military controllers, pictured above, who had been running ORBI/Baghdad Airport have completed their duties.

Local ATC controllers tell us that the strike is over – they are running what they call ‘ops normal’ for two weeks, before they will/may strike again as negotiations continue. Inside word is that a number of local controllers have been fired, and Serco were providing most of the staff to cover the centre. Baghdad FIR Control Centre and Iraqi Airports are running normally – for now.

We are still expecting the FAA to remove the restriction for US operators using the Baghdad FIR, this is a separate issue. No further news on that just yet.

Iraq Airspace to re-open for overflights

Declan Selleck
30 September, 2022

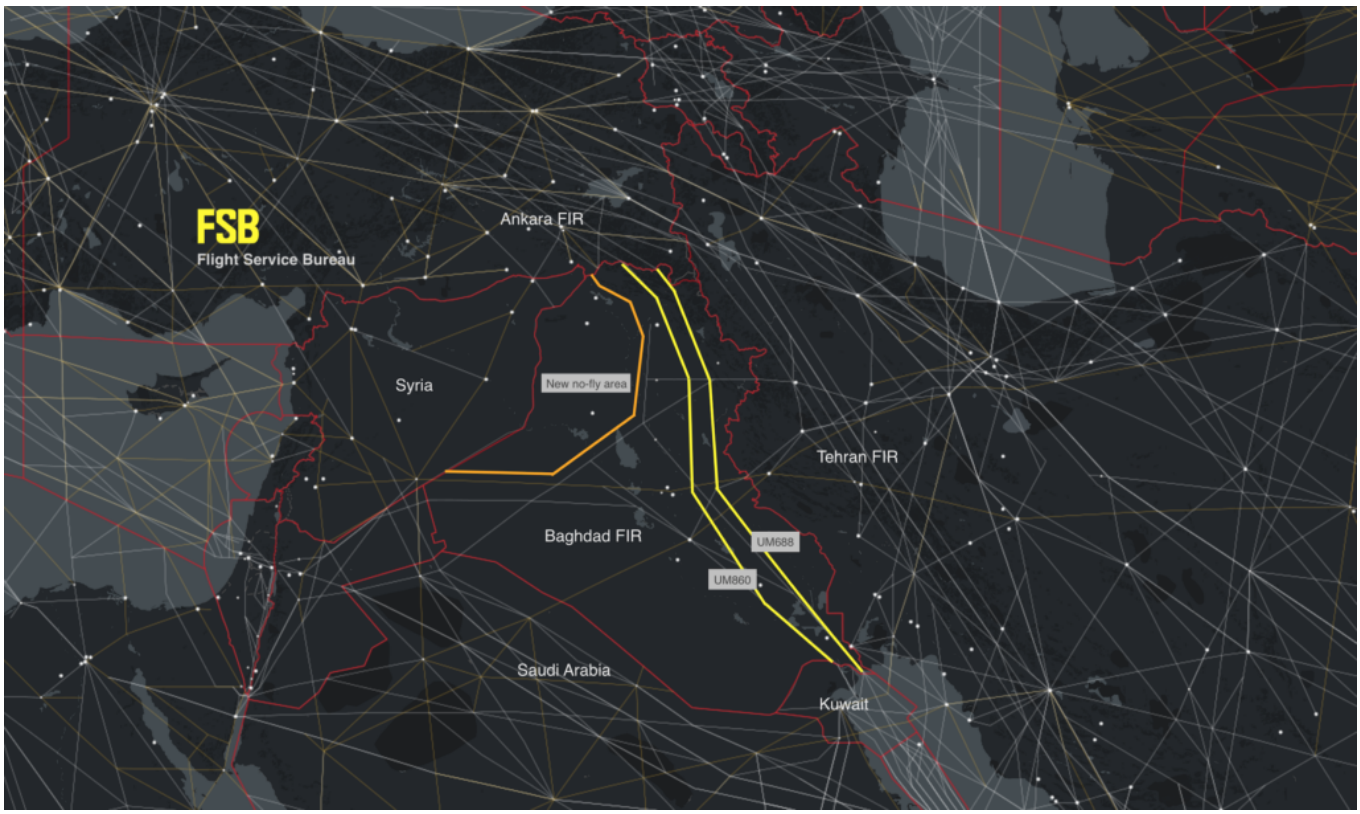


ORBB/Baghdad FIR Overflights of Iraq may be permitted to resume as early as next week, allowing international carriers access again to several previously heavily used routes through the eastern side of the Baghdad FIR.

In May of this year, SFAR 77 – banning US operators from operating within Iraqi airspace – lapsed, and was replaced by Notam KICZ 10/2017 – which had much the same wording.

However, on October 3rd, Iraq issued a new Notam (A0477/17) – with a **new restricted area** in the northwest of the FIR, from Surface to FL460. The previous restricted areas 601 and 701 were withdrawn.

This re-shuffling of restricted airspace paves the way for two major international air routes to be reopened, UM860 and UM688 – which were realigned in April for this purpose, allowing operators additional route options through the Middle East to Europe and vv.



FSB expects an official announcement shortly, and will update operators further. OpsGroup members will be notified directly.