

Issue

1

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9 November 2022

FLIGHT DAILY NEWS



Night fighter

The sun sets behind a Royal Bahraini Air Force Lockheed Martin F-16D on the eve of the show's opening. The two-seat trainer is one of an array of assets from the host service on display.

BillyPix

Bahrain is back

Show returns with cargo and space high on agenda and first appearance from Israelis

Murdo Morrison

The Bahrain International Airshow roars back today for the sixth time after a pandemic-enforced break in 2020, with an eye-catching aerial display debut by the Red Arrows and an impressive line-up of military and commercial aircraft.

The growing reputation of Bahrain as an air cargo hub and the

ambitions of Gulf nations in space are two overarching themes of the biennial show.

DHL, FedEx and local operators Texel and MENA Aerospace are among the freight specialists with a presence at the three-day event. It comes as Bahrain rolls out plans for an airport cargo village, and promotes intermodal links with the nearby sea container port.

Bahrain's young space agency has a large stand. Yesterday, on

the sidelines of the show, Bahrain hosted the first meeting of the Arab Space Cooperation Group held outside the United Arab Emirates, the region's most advanced country in the sector.

Meanwhile, the highly symbolic first appearance of Israeli companies is a sign of that nation's growing interest in the Gulf market, following 2020's signing of the Abraham Accords diplomatic agreement - although the move

has stirred opposition from some of Bahrain's neighbours.

This year's show also features a forum programme with panel discussions on airports and airlines; cargo and logistics; women in aerospace; and spaceflight.

The Royal Air Force's Aerobatic Team - known as the Red Arrows - appear as part of a five-week tour of the region, designed to cement military, diplomatic and trade ties with the UK.



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Red dawn

The world's most famous air display team, the Red Arrows, will today make its Bahrain International Airshow debut as part of a visit to the Gulf to promote longstanding diplomatic, military and trade links between the UK and the kingdom.

The five-week tour will take in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace says the Red Arrows, whose official name is the Royal Air Force Aerobatic Team, "represent the RAF's commitment to excellence" and their appearance here is part of

the UK's "long and prosperous partnership" with Bahrain.

The country is home to the Royal Navy's largest naval base outside the UK.

The Red Arrows announced the decision to perform at the Bahrain show at the Royal International Air Tattoo in the UK in July.

For this year's season, just seven BAE Systems Hawk T1s make up the Red Arrows formation, instead of the usual nine, after two members of the team returned to other RAF roles.

Pictured is the team's practice session yesterday.



Kallman: Welcoming the latest Bahraini students to Mission 9

Worden's legacy sends students to space camp

The late Apollo astronaut Al Worden was passionate about inspiring young people to pursue careers in space, science and engineering.

His legacy lives on with the Al Worden Endeavour Scholarship, which funds students to attend a week-long training experience at the US Space and Rocket Center's Space Camp in Huntsville, Alabama.

Kallman Worldwide - organiser of the show's USA Pavilion - coordinates the scheme, and will tomorrow announce four Bahraini recipients of the award. They will attend the camp in 2023, with their teacher.

Worden, who died in 2020, was Apollo 15 command module pilot in 1971. He attended many shows with Kallman Worldwide as an ambassador for the programme, including Bahrain in 2018. During his time here, he visited schools, securing the agreement of His Majesty King Hamad to extend the programme to Bahrain.

"The Endeavour programme is a platform from which we can recognise the achievements of tomorrow's leaders and today's teachers," says Tom Kallman, chief executive of Kallman Worldwide. "I am excited to be returning to the show to welcome 'Mission 9: Bahrain' to the Endeavour family."

Thunder rolls in

Craig Hoyle

Pakistan's air force has brought a trio of JF-17 fighters to make the type's Bahrain show debut, with the "Thunder" taking part in the flying display.

Operated by the air force's 2 Squadron "Minhasians" unit, the Chengdu/Pakistan Aeronautical Complex-produced Block II jets arrived after a non-stop flight from Masroor air base. They were supported by an Ilyushin Il-78

tanker, but did not need to undergo inflight refuelling to complete the deployment.

Cirium fleets data shows that the Pakistan air force operates 109 JF-17 fighters and 25 B-model trainers, with another 50 on order.

While development partner China has not acquired the single-engined model, both nations are promoting it on the international stage. So far Beijing has brokered a 16-aircraft sale to Myanmar, and Islamabad secured a three-aircraft deal with Nigeria.

"This is our market," says Air Commodore Arsalan from the Pakistan air force delegation promoting the fighter, noting that the service has also previously displayed the type at the Dubai air show.

Referring to the team's presence here, he adds: "We are expecting a lot of visits and interest in the aircraft."

"We have the aircraft, we have the technology, and our marketing team is promoting its 4.5th-generation performance and affordable cost."



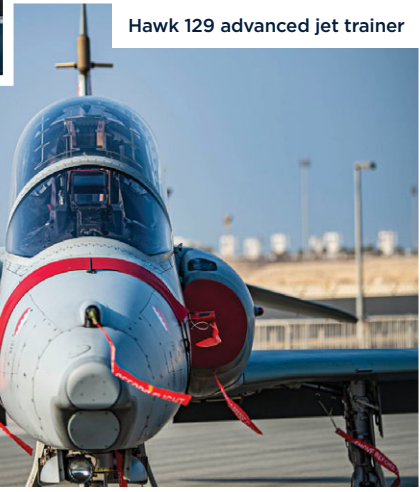
Pakistan's air force is targeting fresh export sales of the JF-17



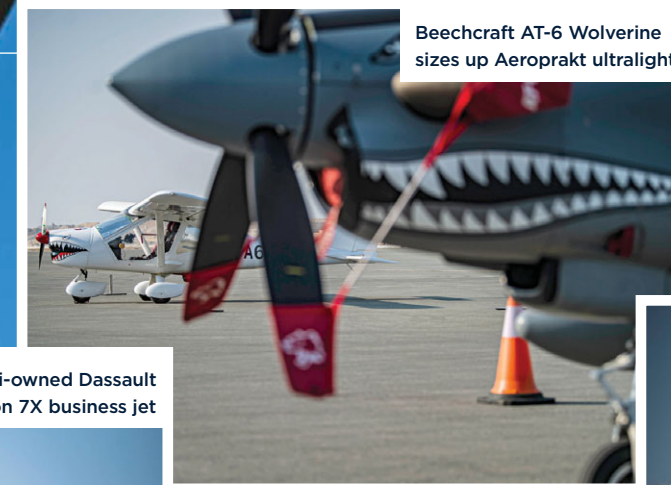
Firepower kept under wraps: one of Bahrain's AH-1 Cobras



Light aircraft on display include BRM Aero's Bristell



Hawk 129 advanced jet trainer



Beechcraft AT-6 Wolverine sizes up Aeroprakt ultralight



Saudi-owned Dassault Falcon 7X business jet



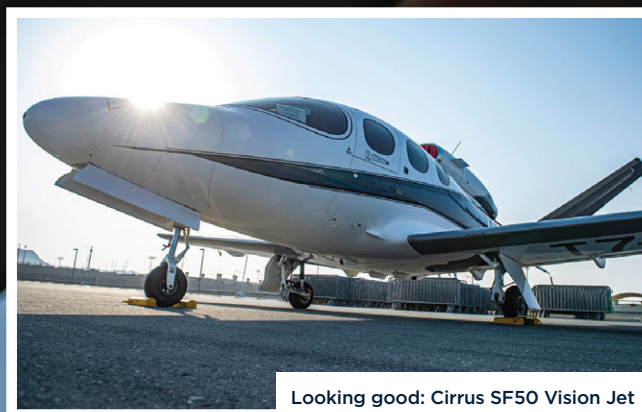
Royal Bahraini Air Force UH-60 Black Hawk



Gulf Air static attractions include 787 Dreamliner



Home nation's military fleet exhibit features this two-seat F-16D



Looking good: Cirrus SF50 Vision Jet

An AirTractor AT-802 of Saudi Arabia's Aramco brings a splash of colour

Dream parade

Making a welcome return after a four-year gap due to the pandemic, the Bahrain International Airshow has a wealth of attractions on static display, sized from tiny tandems to widebody twins and an array of military types

Photography: Billy Fox

Rolls on rebound

Rolls-Royce is at the show this week to “celebrate recovery and our enduring partnerships in the region” as the widebody market continues its rebound from Covid-19.

The UK engine maker says that the “large-engine” fleet in the Gulf is back to around 80% of pre-pandemic levels of activity, and continuing to head in the right direction.

“We are seeing a strong bounceback in passenger demand in terms of flying hours, and our customers are enjoying the strong pricing that comes from that demand,” says John Kelly, senior vice-president Rolls-Royce Civil Aerospace.

Rolls-Royce numbers among its customers the big three regional carriers – Emirates, Etihad and Qatar Airways – as well as Gulf Air, whose Boeing 787-9s are powered by Trent 1000s.

“We’ve had a long history with Gulf Air, and we are privileged to be their partner,” says Kelly.

He says the company’s message at the show will also focus on sustainability, working with fuel companies on making sustainable aviation fuel more available, and discussing “innovative technologies”, including its work on electric propulsion for smaller aircraft.

“These technologies offer real opportunities to change the game with carbon emissions,” he says.

FLIGHT DAILY NEWS

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Cargo-getters

MENA and ACN link to launch air freight venture to service Gulf

Murdo Morrison

Singapore’s Asia Cargo Network (ACN) is to launch an operation in Bahrain in partnership with local group MENA Aerospace, which will see ACN base six of its aircraft in the kingdom and the wider Gulf region, the companies are announcing at the show today.

The first two ACN aircraft, a Boeing 737-800F and a 767-300F, will arrive in the next two months, joining MENA’s 737-300 converted freighter, and beginning operations “immediately”.

The rest of the fleet will deploy over 18 months, says ACN.

The move comes as the Bahrain authorities bolster the country’s credentials as an air freight hub. The island is one of four global hubs for German parcels and logistics giant DHL, which is expanding its Bahrain-reg-



Isaak: Partnership a historic milestone



Juman: Looking at where the growth is

istered fleet. Meanwhile, DHL’s rival FedEx Express will become the anchor tenant of a new Cargo Village being built at the airport. Texel is another significant air cargo operator.

The “strategic alliance” will position the companies “among the key players in freight in the Middle East,

South Asia and Africa”, says MENA.

MENA founder and managing director Dr Mohammed Juman says the company looked at “where the growth is” in the global freight market and identified the Gulf, Africa and South-east Asia.

“Our thought process was

to try to link and serve these markets,” he says. “We identified ACN as the leading freight operator in Southeast Asia to be the perfect partner to expand our services in these markets.”

ACN group chief executive Marco Isaak describes the partnership as a “historic milestone as we expand our operations into the [Middle East and North Africa] region”.

The venture will operate under the MENA Cargo brand and be managed by ACN under its Bahrain air operator’s certificate. MENA Cargo was set up in 2020 and has its own Bahrain AOC, awarded in 2021.

ACN was established in 2015 and has companies in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. It owns World Cargo Airlines, Asia Cargo Airlines and Aero Speed Aviation.

Tomorrow’s *Flight Daily News* will have a feature article on Bahrain’s thriving air cargo sector.

Healthy returns from region for medevac specialist FAI

German charter and air ambulance specialist FAI is back at the show as it anticipates record revenues of around €120 million (\$117 million) in 2022, with its Middle East business that makes up a fifth of its flying activity contributing strongly to that success.

FAI, in which Bahrain state investment fund Mumtalakat owns a “significant” minority stake, has had an operation in the region for 20 of the company’s 35 years.

Although it does not have a local air operator’s certificate or aircraft stationed in the Gulf, it uses Al Bateen airport in Abu Dhabi as a hub and has a call centre with 13 medically trained staff at Dubai International’s free zone, explains Barbara Baumgartner, its Dubai-based managing director.

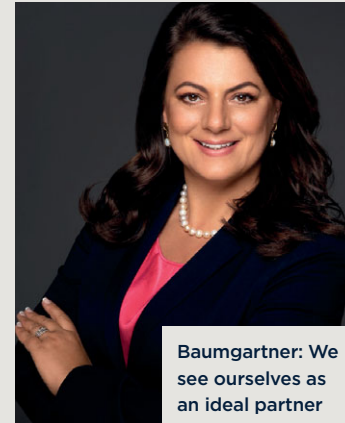
The Nuremberg-headquartered firm operates an almost-all Bombardier fleet, with five Global Express jets, six Challenger 604s, one Challenger 850, seven Learjet 60s and



FAI has seven medically equipped aircraft on constant readiness

one Beechcraft Premier IA. Seven of the aircraft – a mix of Challengers and Learjets – are always available in medical configuration, says Baumgartner.

The Learjet 60 tends to be the preferred type for many customers because it offers value for money, has room for two family members as well as the patient, and can reach Europe from the Middle East with one fuel stop. However, a Challenger is sometimes requested because of its larger cabin and ability to travel to most destinations without stopping, often a vital requirement if



Baumgartner: We see ourselves as an ideal partner

the patient has a head injury or pulmonary issues, says Baumgartner.

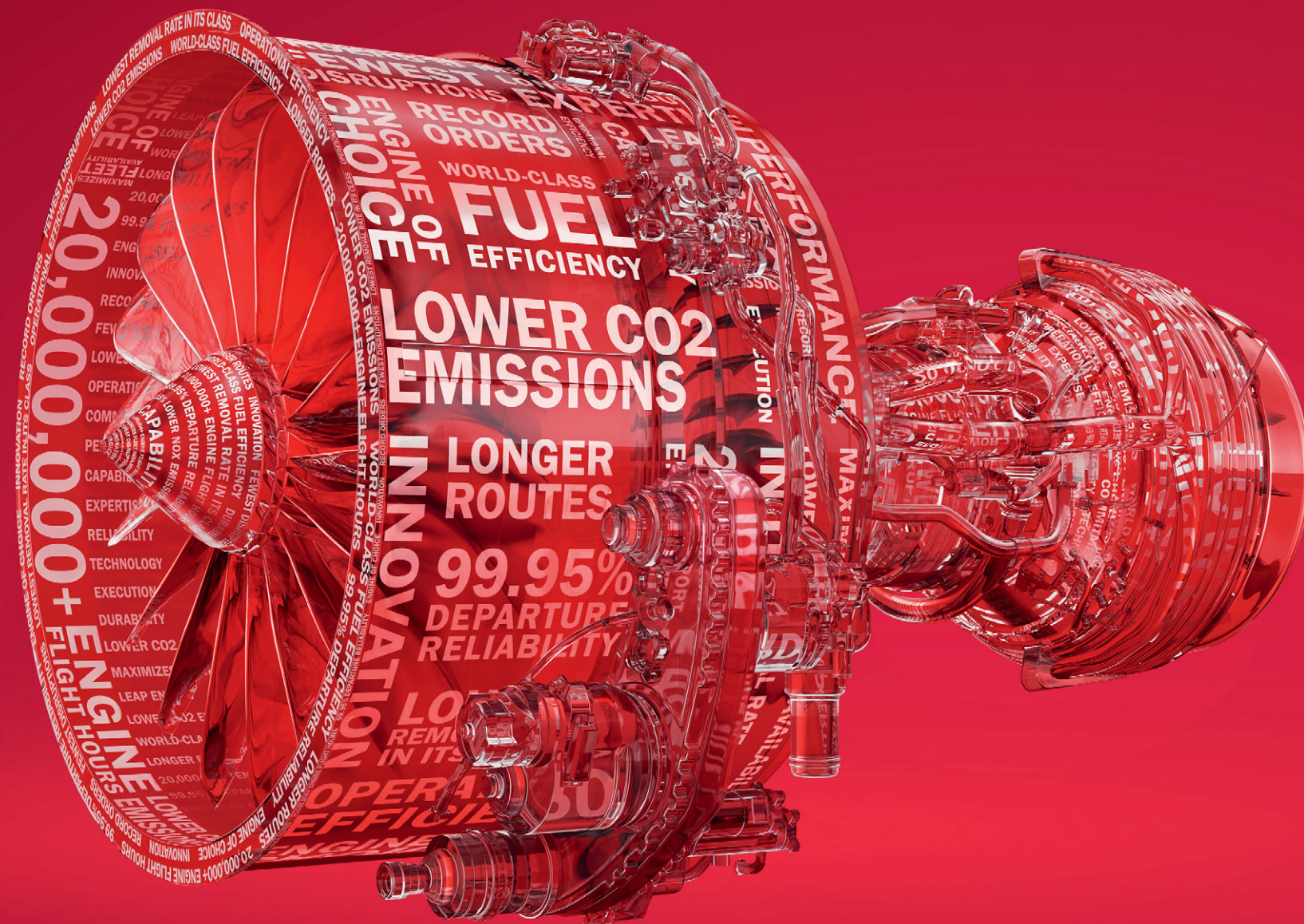
While the company offers VIP charter, aircraft management and maintenance services, the bulk of the Middle East business is medical, she says.

Many high net worth families choose to travel to North America or Europe for treatment, and the company also works for insurance and medical assistance organisations representing tourists and corporates, as well as for government agencies.

“We are one of the most recognised air ambulance providers in the world, so we see ourselves as an ideal partner,” she says.

FAI is the official partner to the McLaren Formula 1 race team, in which Mumtalakat holds a majority stake, and will be flying personnel to the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, which takes place next week.

While FAI has a stand at the show this week, it will not have an aircraft on the static. “We had hoped to but we just could not spare one during what is one of our busiest periods,” says Baumgartner.



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Alongside the exhibits, this year's show features an extensive conference programme over two mornings, covering topics from sustainability to space, diversity to digitization, and air freight to future-proofing

Talking points

How will the drive to sustainability and changing passenger demands change the way airlines and airports operate? What is the potential of the space sector in the Middle East? How does the aerospace industry attract more women? What will drive the air cargo market in the future? A host of expert speakers will address these questions and more during a packed forum programme taking place tomorrow and Friday at the show.

The morning sessions will run in parallel in two theatres, with Airlines and Airports and Space taking place tomorrow, followed by Women in Aviation and Cargo and Logistics on the final day of the show. The organisers decided to bring back the programme this year after it proved a "real success" at the previous event in 2018. Adding a thought leadership element to the show ensures Bahrain Airshow attendees "truly get the most from their visit", they say.

The Airlines and Airports stream begins at 10:05 with a keynote address on "Charting a path to the next normal" by Matteo Manchini, senior partner with global consultancy McKinsey.

At 10:35 the spotlight turns to sustainability, with a panel discussion on "The path to net zero" that includes Gulf Air acting chief executive Capt Waleed Al Alawi and his counterpart at Air Arabia, Adel Ali, as well as His Excellency Kamil Alawadhi, regional vice president for Africa and the Middle East with the International Air Transport Association. Corrin Higgs from Airbus and Omar Arekat from Boeing complete the panel.

Following that, the chief executives of Bahrain Airport Company and Ras Al Khaimah International Airport, together with Stefano Baronci from Airports Council International will debate how airports can "innovate for success", including becoming more digital and creating "warm, friendly human experiences" for their passengers.

You might wish instead to take a journey into space. In Theatre 2, Olivier Brusle from KPMG sets the scene with an address entitled "Space for all", ahead of a discussion on how to engage younger generations in the sector. It features the heads of the Bahrain, Egyptian and UAE space agencies, as well as the chairman of NewSpace India.

For decades, space was the preserve of governments, but in recent years, the rapid growth of



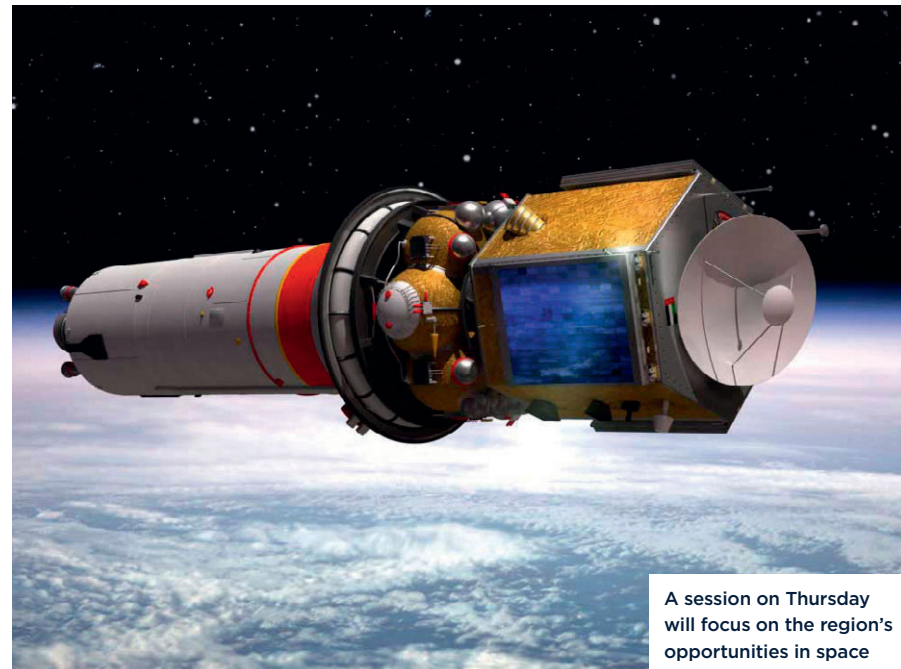
Friday includes a discussion on how to recruit more women into the industry



CNN anchor Eleni Giokos moderates a panel looking at the potential of e-commerce



Air Arabia's Adel Ali will give his views on the journey to net zero



A session on Thursday will focus on the region's opportunities in space

mobile telecommunications and the internet has created huge opportunities for private players. The final space session looks at entrepreneurial opportunities in the MENA region, with representatives from three Gulf start-ups, Farmin, Orbital Space, and SARsat X.

Friday's programme begins at 10:05 in Theatre 1 with the Women in Aviation forum. Oliver Wyman partner Rana Nawas will outline the business case for gender and generational equality.

Women have made remarkable strides in recent years in fields traditionally dominated by men: more than half of STEM students and more than three-quarters that study computer science in the UAE are female, for instance. However, in the wider region those sort of numbers do not necessarily translate to employment trends.

At 11:00, a panel including women executives from Bahrain Airport Company, Boeing and Lockheed Martin, joined by Yasmeen Fraidon Mohammed, Gulf Air's first Bahraini pilot, will provide their answers to the question of how barriers for women

in aerospace can be broken down. If air freight is more your thing, the Cargo and Logistics forum begins at 10:00 with a session exploring the potential of e-commerce against the challenges of a potential global slow down, high energy prices and new localization pressures. CNN anchor Eleni Giokos hosts.

At 10:45, the emphasis shifts to the Gulf, with a discussion on the particular market forces affecting the region featuring representatives of DHL Global Forwarding, Bahrain's Economic Development Board and the country's General Authority of Civil Aviation.

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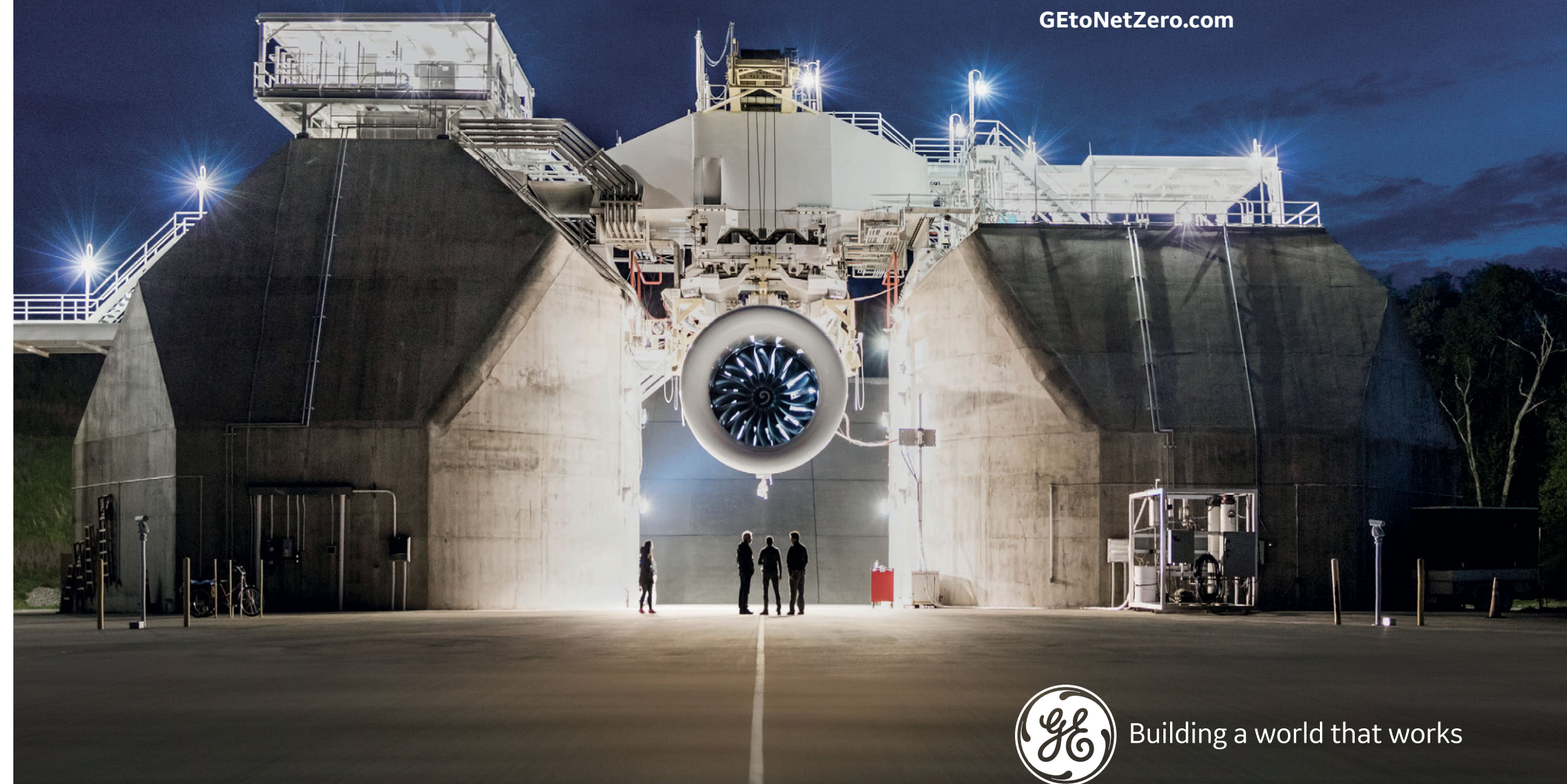
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 Building a world that works

Bahrain is putting its air power on display at the show, as the nation's air force eagerly awaits the arrival of new fleets of Lockheed Martin F-16 fighters and Bell AH-1Z attack helicopters from next year

Home advantage

Craig Hoyle

The Royal Bahraini Air Force (RBAF) is using the show as an opportunity to display its aerial prowess, with a range of its assets in attendance.

Although the service may be modest in size when compared to those of its near neighbours, notably it is awaiting the addition of two significant new capabilities: Lockheed Martin F-16 Block 70 fighters and Bell AH-1Z attack helicopters.

Both acquisitions will bolster Bahrain's existing fleets of the US-built types. Sixteen new F-16s – due to be delivered from early next year – will join the RBAF's current 21 C/D-standard jets. And a dozen "Zulu" rotorcraft will add the latest version of the AH-1 to an inventory already totalling 30 E/F/P-model examples of the veteran "Cobra".

FlightGlobal's soon-to-be-published 2023 World Air Forces directory – compiled using Cirium fleets data – records Bahrain as having 110 military aircraft in current use, excluding those flown for VIP transport duties.

Its youngest assets are nine Sikorsky UH-60 utility helicopters, averaging 12 years, followed by a



Current assets include F-5F and F-16D trainers

14-year-old Cessna 208 transport and its six BAE Systems Hawk 129 advanced jet trainers (16 years). At the other end of the age spectrum are the RBAF's four MBB-built BO105s (44 years), Bell 212/412 transport helicopters (39), and its remaining 12 Northrop F-5 trainers (36).

The pending F-16 and AH-1Z deliveries will be the RBAF's most

significant additions in a decade.

Over recent years, Manama added an airlifter capability in the guise of two Lockheed Martin C-130Js. The turboprop-powered assets were acquired from the UK, after it retired its Royal Air Force's (RAF's) short-fuselage examples of the Super Hercules.

Prepared for RBAF service by Marshall Aerospace, the now 23-year-old C-130Js were handed over to the service from 2018. Were Manama keen to acquire more, the UK is currently offering the RAF's remaining 14 stretched-fuselage examples for sale.

One of Bahrain's C-130Js made a historic appearance at the Royal International Air Tattoo in July 2022: it was the nation's first military asset to take part in the UK show.

The RBAF also flies three BAE Avro RJ85/100 quadjets, with these employed for VIP transport tasks.

Analysis of our forthcoming World Air Forces directory shows that Bahrain has the smallest of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) military air arms – albeit only slightly behind Oman's 128 aircraft.

Manama accounts for just over 5% of the 2,102 GCC military aircraft: a combined fleet dominated by the scale of Saudi Arabia (45%) and the United Arab Emirates (28%). Both have sent aircraft to participate in the show, namely Eurofighter Typhoons, and F-16s and Dassault Mirage 2000s, plus their respective Saudi Hawks and Al Fursan aerobatic display teams.

With the show taking place for the first time since the Covid-19 pandemic, visiting companies will be interested to discover whether the host nation may have additional procurement needs on the near horizon.

Potential requirements could include replacing its BO105 helicopters, two of which are also used by the Royal Bahraini Navy, along with the Bell 212/412s, and aged F-5s.

But with the RBAF approaching the introduction of the most advanced F-16 model built and its new-generation AH-1Zs, the service is already poised to boost its regional credentials in time for the next show here in 2024. ▶



Manama acquired two C-130Js from UK surplus stock

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Gulf Air's business model is to be a boutique airline. That means a modern fleet, frequent services on key routes, and impeccable customer service, says its new chief executive



Gulf Air has been replacing its A330s with 787-9s

Flying the flag

Murdo Morrison

Gulf Air may be one of the Middle East's oldest airlines – it celebrated its 70th birthday in 2020 – but its days of being the region's largest and best-known operator are far behind it. Until early this century, it was a flag-carrier for four countries. However, when Abu Dhabi, Qatar and Oman decided to bet all chips on their own audacious start-ups and quit the partnership, it left Gulf Air as the national airline of its sole remaining shareholder, Bahrain.

Since then, Gulf Air has struggled at times to find its niche. While Bahrain is an important centre for financial services and commerce, and it has a growing tourism sector, its population of just 1.5 million gives it a modest home market. For a long time after the split with its former partners, it appeared unsure whether to try to retain its status as a hub airline, competing against three well-funded global connectors on its doorstep, or to settle for being a domestic player.

However, new chief executive Capt Waleed Al Alawi is convinced that after a strategic rethink and fleet refresh, begun under his predecessor Kresimir Kucko, Gulf Air is emerging from the disruption of the pandemic with a robust, hybrid

business model. The former pilot describes Gulf Air as a "boutique" airline, and believes the airline's at least twice-daily connections within the region as well as to London and Istanbul, a modern fleet,

and a strong offer to customers, particularly in premium, set it apart. "We see ourselves as small, personal, and effective," he says.

Although Emirates, Etihad and Qatar Airways have long eclipsed

it in terms of size, the 72-year-old brand remains a force, with a growing fleet of 36 aircraft, operating to Europe and Asia-Pacific, as well as within the Middle East. The airline's route strategy, is "about making the right choices", says Al Alawi – who won promotion to the top job in October after two years of filling the role on an acting basis, and was previously Kucko's deputy.

Because Gulf Air cannot compete with the network of the big three, it has had to be highly measured with its choice of destinations. As well as the largest cities of the UK and Turkey, the carrier serves Bangkok, Manila and the Maldives daily, and Rome and Milan five times weekly. It recently added Malaga, Manchester, Singapore and Tel Aviv. The latter was made possible on the back of 2020's Abraham Accords, which established diplomatic relations between Israel and a number of Arab countries.

A key selling point of Gulf Air's offer, says Al Alawi, is its schedule to regional capitals, with up to nine daily flights to Dubai, as well as Abu Dhabi, where it has recently expanded a codeshare with Etihad. Under the "strategic commercial cooperation agreement", signed in 2021, and built on a 2018 memorandum of understanding, the airlines added another 30 combined



"We see ourselves as small, personal, and effective,"

Capt Waleed Al Alawi Chief executive, Gulf Air

destinations beyond their hubs, in the Middle East, Africa, Europe and Asia.

In addition, Gulf Air – which is a subsidiary of state investment house Mumtalakat, under whose ownership Bahrain Airport Company and Gulf Aviation Academy also sit – flies two or three times a day to Jordanian and Egyptian capitals Amman and Cairo. Business travellers on short trips are a crucial demographic for the airline. However, three in five of its passengers connect through Bahrain, indicating that the hub connector part of the model is still intact.

A major gap in Gulf Air's network map is the USA. Before the pandemic Kucko had stated he hoped to start direct services in two or three years. Post-Covid, that ambition is still on the cards, with Al Alawi saying Gulf Air intends to launch transatlantic flights next summer depending on regulatory approval. Al Alawi will not disclose potential destinations but says the airline would look to codeshare with a US major. No US airlines fly to Bahrain, but the leading European members of the three major alliances – British Airways, KLM and Lufthansa – do.

Al Alawi says the business model is proving successful, based on traffic figures since the Covid-19 crisis ended. After performing strongly in cargo during the pandemic, Gulf Air's passenger traffic rebounded strongly from February this year, reaching a load factor of more than 85% during the summer. "We saw that people just wanted to travel again," says Al Alawi, who rejoined Gulf Air in 2017 after 18 years with the Bahrain Royal Flight.

A major factor behind Al Alawi's confidence in Gulf Air's future is Bahrain's impressive new airport terminal, which opened in January 2021 after almost five years of construction. It replaced a now demolished rather tired and congested 1970s predecessor, which was operating pre-pandemic at more than twice its original design capacity of four million passengers.



Al Alawi: We are an airline that looks after our nation

The new building is more than four times its size.

With Gulf Air representing about 60% of traffic at the airport, it has allowed the airline to improve its service to passengers, especially frequent flyers. Its Falcon lounge is three times bigger than the facility in the old terminal, and includes an outdoor terrace. There is room for 400 passengers at any time. With four times as many air bridge gates, Gulf Air is unlikely to have to bus passengers to stands – a regular occurrence at the former terminal. There is also much more room at check-in, security and baggage reclaim.

On 28 January last year, Gulf Air operated the first flight from the new terminal, an Airbus A320neo to New Delhi, and – a few hours earlier – the final flight from its

predecessor, to Dubai and using the same type. A Gulf Air Boeing 787-9 from Lahore was also the first to land at the new facility.

Gulf Air is in the final stages of a massive fleet revamp, having replaced its ageing A330s with 787-9s – it has seven in service with three on order – and its A320ceo family aircraft with CFM Leap-powered A320neos and A321LRs. It currently has four A321LRs and six A320neos. A further eight and 11 respectively are due to be delivered by 2027. It is phasing out its remaining 16 older generation A320 family aircraft.

Al Alawi describes the A321LRs in particular as "an amazing product" with 16 full lie-flat seats in business, as well as 150 in economy, that allow the airline to operate the narrowbody on mid-haul routes to the likes of

Frankfurt, the Maldives, Milan, Nice, Paris and Rome. Its A320neos are configured with 136 or 150 seats, with a higher density 196-seat version to join the fleet. Although Gulf Air unveiled a new brand identity at the Bahrain Grand Prix in 2018, one of the A321s and a 787 will retain a legacy livery to "connect us to our heritage", says Al Alawi.

He is proud of the fact the airline did not stop during the pandemic, repatriating foreign citizens stranded when their original carrier stopped flying, and operating all-cargo and humanitarian services, including collecting personal protective equipment (PPE) from China. "The repatriation flights put us on the map as an airline that looked after people. Countries thanked us," says Al Alawi.

The fact that Bahrain is dependent on imports for almost all of its food was another reason Gulf Air had to continue flying, converting some of its aircraft to "freighters" by removing seats from the main cabin. Even the causeway linking the island nation to Saudi Arabia was shut for a while, preventing trucks crossing. "We helped Bahrain import six months of food supplies," says Al Alawi.

One time, near the start of the pandemic, Al Alawi – who began his career with Gulf Air as a cadet pilot in 1980 before becoming a training captain – joined three other volunteer pilots and a team of cabin attendants to fly to China to collect PPE. With no local handlers to help, Al Alawi and his makeshift crew spent four and a half hours loading the 787 themselves, before returning to Bahrain.

He says the episode epitomised the team spirit of his staff, and the status of Gulf Air in Bahrain's social fabric. "The whole mission took almost 24 hours," he recalls. "But, for me, it was a case of leading by example. It showed that, as well as being a boutique airline, we are an airline that looks after our nation." ▶

Gulf Air's A320neos will operate in three seating configurations



Ahmed Sultan, executive director, investment development for manufacturing, transport and logistics at the Bahrain Economic Development, Board explains how the country is focusing on infrastructure to attract business investors and international tourists

Building up Bahrain

Q Why is Bahrain a good place for international investors to put their businesses?

A For investors and businesses planning to acquire a footprint or expand their businesses in the region, Bahrain offers tremendous opportunities and presents the ideal location to access the growing \$1.67 trillion GCC market and beyond. Strategically located at the heart of the Gulf region, Bahrain enjoys excellent connectivity network by sea, land and air with only a 40min drive to the region's biggest market, Saudi Arabia, and connected to the rest of the GCC via multiple daily flights on the national carrier, Gulf Air. The Kingdom offers zero corporate tax, the region's best-value operating costs - up to 45% more cost effective than the rest of the region, highly skilled bilingual workforces and 100% foreign ownership in most business sectors. Bahrain is also one of the best countries to live and work in. The expat communities are well-integrated with locals socially and professionally, which is unusual in the region.



Q Specifically, what does Bahrain offer to air cargo companies?

A We have several plans in the pipeline. Bahrain Airport Company (BAC) recently laid the foundation stone for the Express Cargo Village, an advanced logistics hub, stretching over an area of 25,000sq m. The Village will increase the airport's cargo capacity and will deploy advanced technologies to improve efficiency

and meet growth targets for air freight and e-commerce. It will enable the airport to handle larger quantities of cargo, better meet the requirements of cargo customers, and create new job opportunities.

BAC also signed a 10-year agreement with FedEx Express, allocating 9,000sq m to it for the operation of a 5,000sq m warehouse and a 4,000sq m open area, which will be handed over in the third quarter of 2023.

We also have the global sea-to-air logistics hub, which was launched in September 2021. It is the region's fastest multi-modal logistics hub with only a two-hour turnaround time for all containers - meaning products can be with customers in half the time and at 40% of the cost. This will translate to a 50% reduction in average lead-time compared to pure sea freight and a 40% reduction in cost compared to air freight.

The launch of this hub capitalises on Bahrain's strategic position between European and Asian markets, as well as on the country's proximity to regional markets. It serves as a valuable alternative for manufacturers and freight forwarders, especially in the context of the ongoing shipping crisis.

Bahrain will also grant partner status to all markets that allow for granting their nationally based companies the opportunity to become an authorised Trusted Shipper at the logistics hub.

Other initiatives include the digital transformation of the port through multiple programmes. We also look forward to seeing the application of blockchain technology, which will enhance the accuracy of digital customs transactions and maintain their confidentiality.

Q With the extensive tourist infrastructure being developed as part of the Bahrain Economic Recovery Plan, how does this create opportunities for airlines?

A Last year, Bahrain opened a new \$1.1 billion passenger terminal at Bahrain International Airport. The airport terminal is one of the Kingdom's largest national developments in the sector in the last 20 years. The Airport was recently named as the World's Best New Airport at the Skytrax 2022 World Airport Awards has an annual capacity for 14 million passengers - four times the amount of the previous terminal.

Bahrain also launched a new four-year tourism strategy from 2022-26 under the Economic Recovery Plan, with the aim to diversify the Kingdom's economic portfolio and attract 14.1 million visitors by 2026.

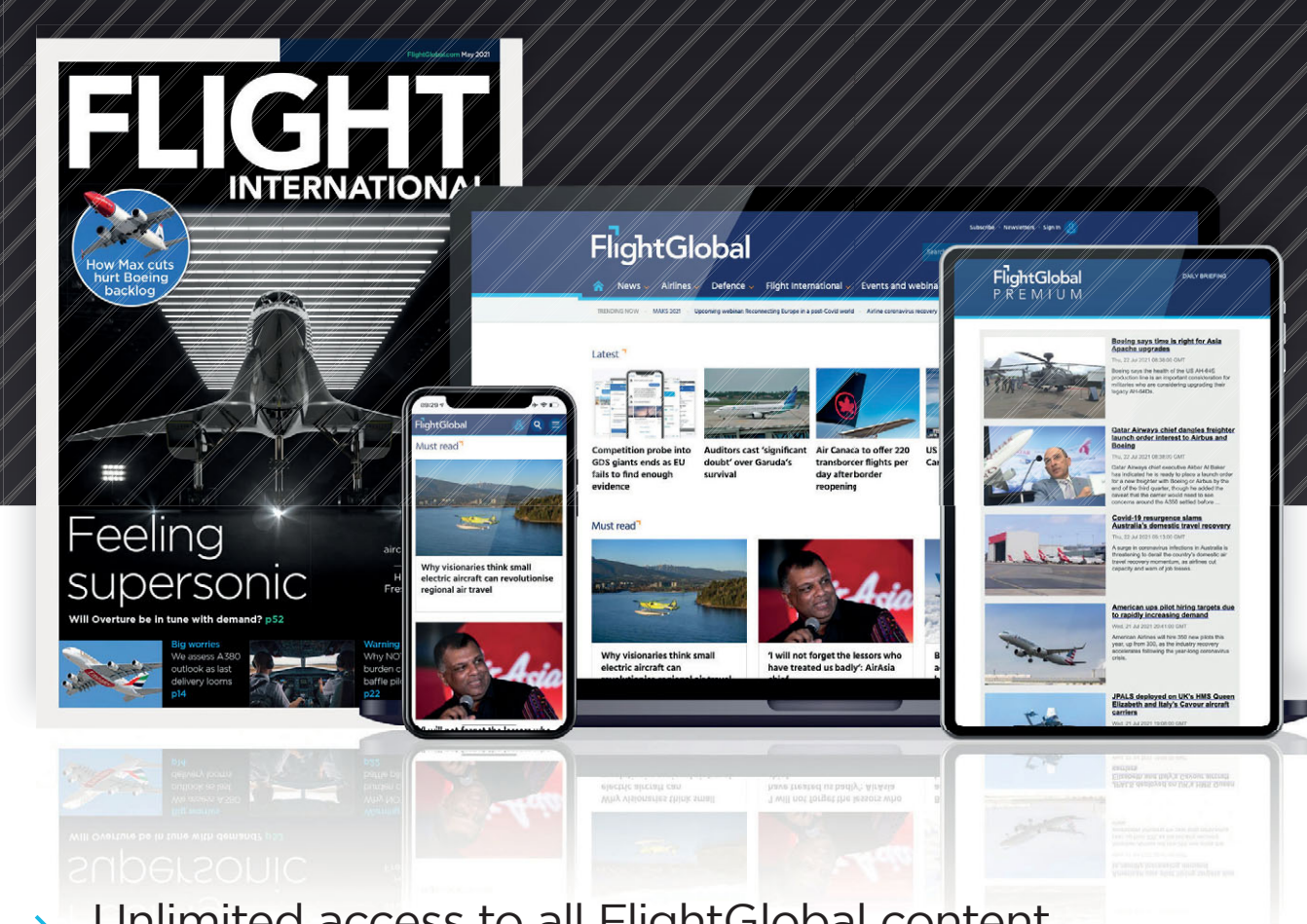
The new tourism strategy is an extension of the 2016-2019 strategy, which has achieved its goals despite various challenges. The strategy is based on seven pillars, which include developing marine attractions, business, sports, recreational, medical, cultural, and media and cinematography tourism. It targets markets across the globe including the USA, UK, GCC, China, Egypt, Germany, and France among others, with a framework that includes four main objectives. These are to increase the contribution of the tourism sector to GDP to reach 11.4% by 2026, highlight Bahrain's position as a global tourist hub, increase the number of targeted countries to attract more tourists, and diversify tourism products.

Recent statistics from the Information and e-Government Authority (iGA) showed an increase in the number of visitors to Bahrain as the Kingdom registered around four million visitors in the first half of 2022, while the hospitality and hotel sector recorded around 5.9 million nights of tourism and the total tourism revenues amounted to \$1.7 billion during the same period. All these signs show post pandemic recovery and brace Bahrain to reach its target of 14 million visitors. ▶



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Bahrain opened its impressive new terminal last year. However, providing a better experience for passengers and attracting more airlines is only part of the airport's ambitious transformation strategy

Gateway to success

Murdo Morrison

While Bahrain's now demolished former airport terminal had a certain compact, retro charm, few would have described it as a national gateway fit for the 21st century. Not so the building that replaced it in January last year. An airy, light-filled structure four times the size of its 1970s predecessor, it is one of several striking new terminals that have sprung up in the Gulf in recent years, including in Abu Dhabi, Doha and Muscat.

The building - construction on which began in 2016 - has massively increased the airport's capacity to 14 million, with 12 direct-access gates each able to accommodate a widebody or two narrowbodies. This compares with just seven in the original terminal, where passengers were often bussed to remote stands during busy periods. That alone "makes for a much better customer experience", insists Bahrain Airports Company (BAC) chief executive Mohamed Yousif Albinfalah.

If the terminal seems particularly spacious it is partly because traffic



Albinfalah: Cargo and logistics an important part of airport's strategy

numbers at Bahrain are still around two-thirds of pre-pandemic levels. The building it replaced had a design capacity of just four million passengers, but saw 9.7 million pass through its doors in 2019. Bahrain Airport Company (BAC) expects to handle about 6.5 million

people through the new terminal in 2022, with Albinfalah confident of matching the pre-Covid-19 total next year. New terminal buildings are never guaranteed a smooth introduction to service - witness the teething problems faced by the likes of

London Heathrow's Terminal 5 and the years of delays at Berlin's Brandenburg. However, Albinfalah says Bahrain's performance so far has been "excellent for a new building with highly sophisticated systems and technologies". He adds: "Everything has been running smoothly, with is remarkable when you think of other experiences around the world."

Airport review organisation Skytrax has audited the terminal and awarded it its top five star rating in areas such as cleanliness, shopping, and security/immigration. "It is good to be recognised by the industry in this way," says Albinfalah, who admits that the process of commissioning, constructing and bedding in the new facility over the past six years has been "a very challenging journey". He continues: "The success is testament to all the effort and teamwork that went into the project."

Before the pandemic, Albinfalah and his team had been debating whether to move from the old to the new terminal in a "big bang" or in a gradual process over a few months. Both had their advantages and drawbacks, given that part



New terminal replaced a 1970s building that was operating at twice its capacity

of the former building had to be demolished to complete the building on its replacement. The almost complete collapse of passenger traffic in March 2020, just months before the building was due to open, made the decision easier.

"We thought this is an opportunity that is not going to repeat itself, so we might as well capitalise on

it," says Albinfalah. It meant his team was able to launch operations in week one without facing the headache of processing tens thousands of passengers new to the layout of the building. However, there were hurdles. The airport had to conduct trials in late 2020 using small groups of off-duty staff rather than the public volunteers it would

have normally recruited to test its systems. On 28 January 2021, five years of planning, building and fine-tuning ended. The first flight from the new terminal - which was partially funded to the tune of AED 3.7 billion (\$1 billion) by the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development - was operated by Gulf Air, an Airbus A320neo service

to New Delhi. The national carrier had also made the final flight from the old terminal a few hours earlier, to Dubai, and notched the first arrival at its successor, a Boeing 787-9 service from Lahore. The new terminal has a number of features that Albinfalah believes add to its distinctiveness. The departure area includes a display of marble



BAS is exclusive line maintenance provider at the airport

At your service

BAS is exclusive ground handler at the kingdom's international airport. Its chief executive outlines how the company keeps aviation on the move behind the scenes and its opportunities for expansion

If your trip to the show involved arriving by aircraft, chances are Bahrain Airport Services played a crucial part in your journey. As exclusive ground handler and line maintenance provider at the nation's international gateway, BAS is "at the forefront of Bahrain's aviation sector", declares chief executive Mohamed Khalil Ahmed: "We are the first to welcome passengers and the last to say goodbye."

The company - which is majority privately owned - has been part of the set-up at Bahrain International Airport for 45 years, and was the first ground handler in the region. Back then, the country was very much its aviation hub, home to its major airline, the centre for air traffic control, and the destination of British Airways' first scheduled Concorde flight in 1976 (the airline operated the route for four years).

The rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) may have caught up a bit since, but BAS remains a key player in the region.

Over five years, it has expanded its reach beyond Bahrain, securing contracts to train ground-handling agents at new airports in Saudi Arabia and Oman. BAS's record of accomplishment in Bahrain over many years helped secure the business, says Ahmed. "It was testament to the work we have done here."

Another factor that enhanced BAC's reputation internationally was the overnight transfer of operations to Bahrain's new airport terminal in 2020, he says. "Along with BAC and the airlines, we prepared for months. There was no room for error. In the end it was a beautifully orchestrated transfer." Getting it right was a "pre-requisite for targeting more international business", he adds. "I am confident that we can win another GCC contract soon, and then hopefully we can go further."

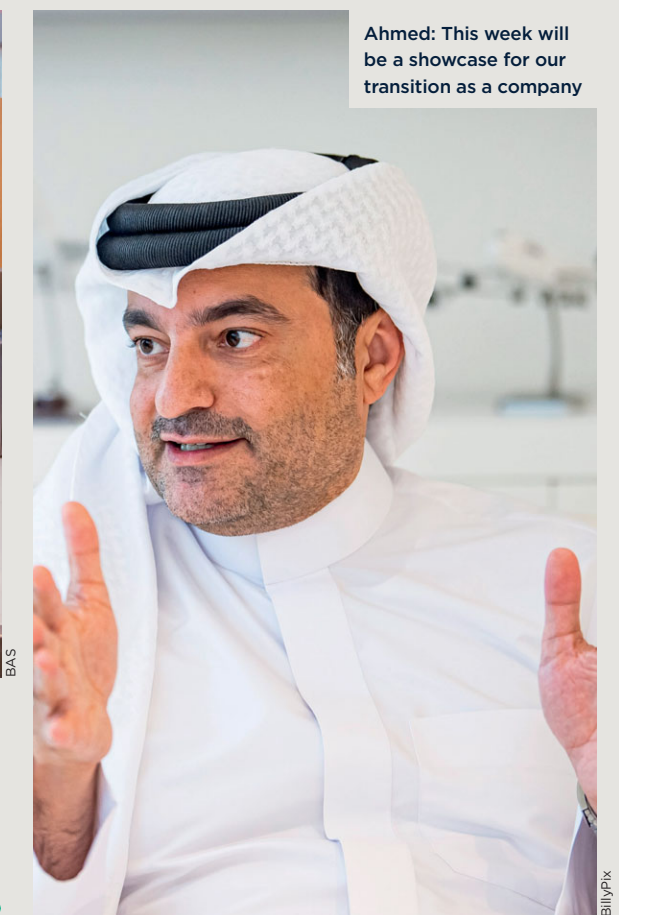
As well as ground handling and line maintenance, BAS provides a range of catering services. It operates a fleet of 30 refrigerated

BAS provides ground agents for airlines using the airport



high-loader trucks, and supplies most of the airlines serving the airport. Additionally, it is the catering provider for the two business class lounges and has a growing external customer base, including corporate events, factory canteens and one of Bahrain's biggest hospitals. Its airside kitchens serve 6.5 million meals a year, with a capacity for more. "We do

everything from cold sandwiches to the royal flight - the most VVIP customer we could have - plus everything in between," says Ahmed, who took over as chief executive after a career that included senior executive positions at Gulf Air and airport operator BAC. The expansion into non-aviation markets is part of its strategy to become less reliant on traditional customers.



Ahmed: This week will be a showcase for our transition as a company



Freight is a key component of BAC's expansion blueprint

sculptures by Bahraini artists that depict the kingdom's heritage. A 60-room airside transit hotel also provides 24 sleeping pods for transiting passengers and provides a spa. A souk-style shopping area offers local produce and jewellery. Alongside the expanded Gulf Air business-class lounge there is a premium lounge for passengers of other airlines.

Gulf Air represents around 60% of traffic at Bahrain, but BAC is working hard to attract more airlines, says Albinfalah. Those who have recently added or resumed services include Ethiopian Airlines, IndiGo and Wizz Air Abu Dhabi. While the airport is not a global hub on the scale of Dubai or Doha, 60% of Gulf Air's traffic is connecting. Meanwhile, a burgeoning tourism sector, business, and guest worker connections to the subcontinent remain major drivers for other airlines serving the airport.

Cargo is key to the airport's business model, given Bahrain's ambition to become an east-to-west logistics and e-commerce



Bahrain's now-demolished former terminal

crossroads for air, land and sea freight. The airport is home to one of German parcels and logistics giant DHL's four global hubs.

The Khalifa bin Salman container port is just 10min by truck from the airport, allowing forwarders to transfer the content of containers from Asia to aircraft. Cargo can also travel by road via the causeway to Saudi Arabia.

BAC began work on a 25,000sq m Express Cargo Village on the north side of the runway in June, signing a 10-year agreement with DHL's rival FedEx Express, which will move into a 9,000sq m area of the facility in the third quarter of next year. Albinfalah says negotiations are underway with further potential tenants. "Cargo and logistics is a major element of the government's

economic recovery plan," says Albinfalah. "We are a component of that strategy."

BAC is also catering for business aviation with plans to convert into a private terminal the original airport building that dates from the 1960s and recently housed the offices of the aviation regulator. The 4,000sq m (43,000sq ft) Awal Private Terminal, as it will be known, will offer meeting rooms, private parking and a duty free shop. A royal pavilion is likely to be built in the space occupied by the demolished terminal.

For many visitors to the show this week, this will be the first time that they have experienced the new terminal - and the contrast with its predecessor will be evident. Albinfalah hopes that the facility will not only provide a better experience for passengers of current airline users, but help attract new ones too. Meanwhile, developments elsewhere on the airport are enhancing Bahrain's credentials as one of the Middle East's most important intersections for the global flow of cargo.

Training is another offshoot. It offers courses in aircraft maintenance engineering with its centre the first in the Middle East and only the second outside Europe to secure European Union Aviation Safety Agency approval. BAS is also making efforts to become more sustainable - replacing its diesel fleet with electric vehicles - and to digitize its operations, a project begun during the pandemic shutdowns. "This will vastly improve our efficiency as business comes back," says Ahmed.

BAS is sufficiently big and with the experience to be a reliable partner, but compact enough to "deliver a differentiated product in areas that are easier as a smaller company", maintains Ahmed.

He is proud of the fact that BAS continued operations during the pandemic, providing a vital service to cargo airlines and humanitarian and essential passenger flights. "We had amazing support from our Bahraini workforce," he says.

After a difficult two years, BAS is dealing with almost as much traffic as it did in 2019, Bahrain's peak year for air travel. He admits that dealing with the rapid rebound in demand has been "tremendously exciting" but challenging, as "it is difficult to know what our external resourcing will need to be". However, he is confident about the opportunities ahead. This week, says Ahmed, will be a "showcase for what we have to offer and our transition as a company".



BAS's services include baggage and passenger handling, line maintenance, and catering



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Simulator centre Gulf Aviation Academy has forged an independent path over 12 years, but its chief executive believes diversification is key to its future



Al Abbasi: Airlines really just want to fly planes

Murdo Morrison

At a time of sweeping consolidation in the sector, Bahrain's Gulf Aviation Academy (GAA) remains one of the few truly independent simulator centres - unaffiliated to an airline or one of the giant training providers. The 12-year-old business - which operates five Airbus simulators and offers courses to air traffic controllers, aircraft engineers, and cabin crew - has battled through the Covid-19 crisis and is again winning airline customers. It has also begun an ambitious diversification drive into areas such as maritime and management training.

While being small may limit GAA's ability to invest, one advantage of independence is that "everyone is ready to hear you", says chief executive Capt Dhaffer Al Abbasi, a former Gulf Air and Philippine Airlines pilot. This has allowed the organisation to secure contracts over the years from a number of airlines in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as Europe, India and the former Soviet Union. In

fact, in 2010 GAA became the first European Union Aviation Safety Agency-approved training provider outside Europe.

Like most training providers, GAA was prospering in the period immediately before the pandemic, providing instruction, for example, to 120 pilots from Portuguese airline TAP as well as a number of regional carriers. As borders closed and airlines furloughed or laid off crew in the second quarter of 2020, simulator halls fell largely silent, and GAA's business dried up. However, Al Abbasi reports that customers are returning in force as traffic grows again.

"We have had two difficult years with Covid, but utilization is increasing in a healthy way in recent months," he says. While local operator Gulf Air provides a solid 30% of custom for GAA, the company has been focusing on attracting young carriers that do not have their own training facilities. "We have just signed up a new airline in Cyprus and a start-up in Turkey, plus a UK airline," he notes without naming the customers.

One of GAA's selling points, says

Al Abbasi, is that it offers "complete, hassle-free" packages. "We provide accommodation, transport and laundry services. We even sort the pilots' visas and arrange excursions on their time off. From the second they land in Bahrain they are taken care of." Such is the attention to detail that many do not want to leave the kingdom at the end of their course, he jokes. "This bundle of benefits makes us very competitive."

Another "differentiator", argues Al Abbasi, is GAA's recently upgraded equipment. It operates four A320 family simulators - two by CAE and two by Tru - as well as a CAE-built A330. By next year, all four A320s will function as Neos, with three able to switch back to previous-generation engine versions. Al Abbasi says that, despite the addition of the Boeing 787 to Gulf Air's fleet, GAA will not be investing in a Dreamliner simulator. "The numbers just don't work," he admits.

GAA's 12,500sq m (135,000sq ft) campus next to Bahrain's international airport also includes a control tower simulator, which opened in 2014, and a large cabin crew training hall, with a swimming

pool for evacuation-in-water instruction, a 787 door-trainer and a metal cabin mock-up to train crew to tackle on-board fires. There are also classrooms focused on airport security, first aid, and engineering.

GAA is also branching into new sectors. It was a move prompted by the pandemic, with the company spending eight months developing an e-learning system, complete with exams. In 2020, it announced the launch of a sub-brand called Masaraat - Arabic for "paths" - that provides learning programmes in areas such as business leadership, first aid for the public, and maritime. One of the first is a course for yacht skippers.

Beyond that, Al Abbasi's long-term vision is to establish overseas satellite training facilities with airline partners. "We would like to go out of Bahrain, although everything has been slowed by Covid, so it would be maybe next year if we can complete a lot of groundwork." Ultimately, he believes, most carriers are keen to outsource non-core activities such as training, so will be amenable to discussions. "Airlines really just want to fly planes," he says. ▀

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The Royal Bahraini Air Force will next year take the first example of the most advanced variant of the evergreen Lockheed Martin F-16 – with 15 more to follow



Leader of the pack

Manama ordered its 16 new-generation fighters in June 2018

Craig Hoyle

Instead of dying out as Lockheed Martin's fifth-generation F-35 Lightning II scoops up an increasing number of international orders, the manufacturer's older F-16 is enjoying a late-life revival. Having established a new final assembly line for the F-16 in Greenville, South Carolina, the US airframer is now within months of delivering its first customer example of the type since it in 2017 transferred the last to be completed

at its Fort Worth site in Texas. The Royal Bahraini Air Force (RBAF) will have the distinction of taking the milestone jet – also the first built to Lockheed's latest Block 70/72, or V-model standard. "The first F-16 Block 70 jet, for Bahrain, is now in the final assembly and checkout process. Flight tests will begin in early 2023," Lockheed says. The company expects to complete the so-called DD250 delivery process to the US government – which is providing the aircraft to Manama via a Foreign Military Sales (FMS) programme

deal – in the first quarter of the year, it adds. Already an operator of 21 F-16C/Ds, Bahrain in June 2018 ordered 16 new-build examples to strengthen its air force fleet, under a deal worth \$1.2 billion. The aircraft will use GE Aviation's F110 engine, in common with its legacy assets. Images released by Lockheed show the nation's lead new aircraft – one of an eventual four two-seat examples – undergoing structural assembly in Greenville around the middle of this year, including undergoing landing gear installation

and the wing to fuselage mate. Five countries have so far signed firm contracts to acquire the Block 70 and Pratt & Whitney F100-powered Block 72 aircraft, with their combined commitments totalling 128 jets. Along with Bahrain, these buyers are repeat F-16 customers Morocco (24) and Taiwan (66), plus two future new operators: NATO members Bulgaria (8) and Slovakia (14). "Block 70/72 production continues to make significant progress, with multiple aircraft in work for Bahrain, Slovakia and Bulgaria," the company says. "The Block 70 production rate

will increase significantly throughout 2023, with DD250 deliveries for additional customers continuing into the mid-to late-2020s." Beyond its current backlog, Lockheed notes that "Jordan has signed a letter of offer and acceptance for eight new aircraft, and Congressional notification for a second fleet of [8] jets for Bulgaria was released earlier this year." Jordan – which already operates 59 A/B-model F-16s – in June 2022 signalled its intention to obtain the eight Block 70 examples. Lockheed highlights that a broad range of enhancements have been incorporated with its new-standard jet. These include the Northrop Grumman APG-83 active electronically scanned array radar, an "improved performance engine", the installation of conformal fuel tanks, plus a datalink and advanced weapons.

The US Defense Security Cooperation Agency in May 2019 outlined a potentially \$750 million armament package for the RBAF's Block 70 jets, with air-to-air munitions to include Raytheon AIM-120 AMRAAM and AIM-9X Sidewinder II missiles. Air-to-surface stores mentioned included the Boeing AGM-84 Harpoon Block II anti-ship missile and GBU-39 Small Diameter Bomb; Raytheon AGM-154C Joint Standoff Weapon and AGM-88B High-Speed Anti-Radiation Missile; plus precision-guidance kits for use with a variety of bomb sizes.

The fighter's modernised cockpit features updated avionics and a Joint Helmet Mounted Cueing System II, along with safety enhancements including an automatic ground collision avoidance system. Airframe life also has been extended to 12,000 flight hours. Lockheed declines to outline its planned delivery schedule beyond the first RBAF aircraft, referring questions about such FMS transactions to the US government. Likewise, it directs queries regarding Manama's plan to also modernise its in-service F-16s to the customer. However, it notes: "Regarding upgrades for the current fleet, we know this remains a priority for Bahrain."

The US Department of State in September 2017 gave its approval for a potentially \$1 billion project to update the RBAF's Block 40-standard aircraft – which are aged between 20 and 32 years – to the V-model standard.

Lockheed says its upgrade and sustainment programmes "help ensure the F-16 can operate for decades to come and support our customers' national defence, regional security and interoperability with the United States".

Meanwhile, asked about the task of establishing its new assembly facility in Greenville against the backdrop of a global pandemic, Lockheed confirms: "We have experienced some supplier challenges, many of which were Covid-19 related, as well as challenges with starting a new production line in a new location, and staffing challenges related to a competitive labour market. "However, we continue to take proactive measures in partnership with the US government, our suppliers and our international



Lockheed Martin has assembled the RBAF's lead Block 70 jet at its Greenville site

partners to maximise production efficiency," it says. This has included "hiring more than 300 employees at our Greenville site to support F-16 operations".

In addition, "New digital engineering technologies are also being implemented into the production line to maximise efficiency and decrease span time," the company notes.

As Lockheed prepares to begin the new chapter in the F-16's already almost 50-year operational story – the type was first flown in 1974, and entered service with the US Air Force four years later – it remains the most widely-operated fighter in use today. Cirium fleets data used in FlightGlobal's soon-to-be-published 2023 World Air Forces directory shows that 2,184 examples are currently operated as combat aircraft, with another 626 employed as dedicated trainers.

Those 2,810 jets are in use with 25 nations, located in Africa, the Asia-Pacific region, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and North

America. In the Middle East, a combined 437 are flown by the air forces of Bahrain, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Oman and the United Arab Emirates.

Once deliveries resume next year, Lockheed has an assured production path running out for several years, but sees clear potential to sell yet more examples to export customers.

"We see significant potential for additional new production F-16s based on international interest," says Danya Trent, the company's vice-president of F-16 programmes. In addition to the pending eight-aircraft deal with Jordan and follow-on batch for Bulgaria, she refers to the prospect of sealing further business with "customers in Europe, Asia and Africa".

"Based on that level of demand, we see production opportunities in Greenville well into the late 2020s and beyond as additional customers seek the F-16," Trent says.

One major opportunity lies with the Indian air force (IAF), which has a long-standing need to acquire 110

new fighters. Indeed, the scale of the potential deal is strong enough to have encouraged Lockheed to offer a unique F-16 variant renamed as the F-21.

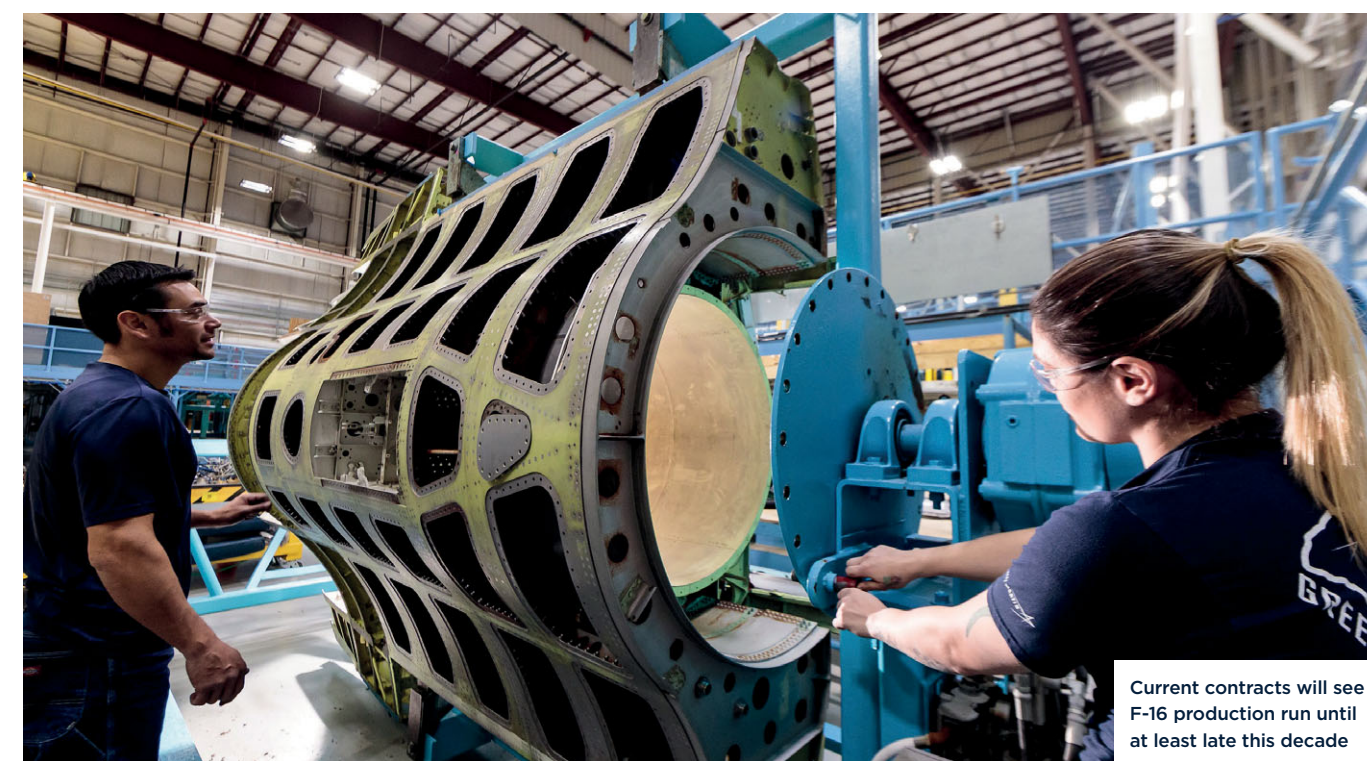
"Our F-21 is uniquely configured to meet or exceed all of the IAF's Multi-Role Fighter Aircraft requirements as we understand them to date," Lockheed says. Noting that the nation's government has yet to release a formal request for such a fleet, it notes: "If requirements deviate from our current understanding, then this may yield changes to our configuration and ultimate offering."

Lockheed will, however, face strong competition for an Indian order, with regular sales adversaries Boeing, Dassault Aviation, the Eurofighter consortium, and Saab also all interested in pursuing such a lucrative, large-scale order.

Lockheed stresses that its F-21 proposal concerns "an indigenously-produced, Indian aircraft for India... which addresses the goals of self-reliance while providing India with an improved security cooperation relationship with the United States".

"Production of the F-21 in India will create thousands of new highly-skilled jobs within the Indian industrial base," it says. The airframer points to its more than three-decade presence in the Indian market, including the success of its Tata Lockheed Martin Aerostructures and Tata Sikorsky Aerospace joint ventures in Hyderabad. These "have been instrumental in helping India achieve its goal of developing an aerospace and defence supplier ecosystem", it notes, while Lockheed has established "significant teaming agreements, and close to 500 suppliers" in the country.

"We have had tremendous success working with the Indian industry; the products are very high quality and the delivery is on time and at a good cost," Lockheed says. With assembly work gathering pace in South Carolina, and customers including Bahrain eagerly awaiting the receipt of the most advanced F-16 variant yet built, Lockheed appears set to have many more years of success with the ubiquitous light fighter. ▶



Current contracts will see F-16 production run until at least late this decade



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