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## ***Iraqi-American Chamber of Commerce CEO says new convention center key to promoting business***

By Norris Jones  
Gulf Region Central District

Construction will soon be completed on facilities that will promote and showcase business development opportunities in Iraq.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) is overseeing work to convert the two old domestic terminals at Baghdad International Airport into a modern convention center. In addition, an eight-story structure is being totally remodeled to offer 250 office spaces for lease.

Raad Ommar, Chief Executive Officer of the Iraqi American Chamber of Commerce and Industry (IACCI), says those facilities will focus attention on Baghdad as the business capital of Iraq. "This is where the action is, where the Ministries are located, where over 6 million Iraqis live. The new Convention Center will offer an incredible boost."

Ommar pointed out that the Baghdad International Airport complex is an ideal location. "There's plenty of room. It's safe, secure, and easily accessible with international flights. Everything is here."

The new convention center will have the capacity to handle gatherings up to 25,000 people, says USACE project engineer Matthew David. "It will include exhibition halls, offices, conference rooms, and a restaurant. We're putting in new plumbing, plastering, electrical, lighting, and air conditioning." The two former ter-



Progress continues on the construction of a new convention center at Baghdad International Airport that will have the capacity to handle gatherings up to 25,000 people. (U.S. Army photo by Kendal Smith)

minals are both two-story structures, one measuring 53 by 138 meters, the other 31 by 150 meters. The \$6.3 million renovation project is about 50 percent finished with a projected completion of late spring.

Next door to the convention center is the eight-story 3,076-sq. meter office structure. Businesses will be able to rent space as needed, from one office to several floors of offices. Work there includes new restrooms, electrical, fire protection with sprinklers, lighting, new ceilings, plastering, a new mechanical system including two 200-ton air conditioning chillers, office furniture, a lighted parking lot and a cafeteria. That \$4 million project is also about 50 percent finished with a projected completion of April.

Ommar grew up in Baghdad and immigrated to the United States in 1969. Nearly four decades later when Iraq was liberated in 2003, he returned to his homeland and established IACCI. "Our group's mission is to help our 9,000 members (who are 95 percent Iraqi companies) connect with the rest of the world. I learned early on it's not going to be easy. You take it one day at a time."

Ommar has experienced first-hand the kind of commitment and courage required to succeed. His office has been located in the red zone since his arrival and in July 2006 he and 15 of his fellow office workers were kidnapped. "During that ordeal, I never thought for one moment that it was time to return to the United States. My roots are here and I'm staying in Iraq."

Once the new convention center opens, he wants to host trade shows every other month focusing on specific sectors of the economy such as oil, agriculture, water resources, banking and finance, and consumer products.

He knows something about trade shows as IACCI has hosted four successful ones in Sulaymaniyah in northern Iraq



Raad Ommar, Chief Executive Officer of the Iraqi American Chamber of Commerce and Industry, is looking forward to the opening of the new convention center at Baghdad International Airport. He plans to schedule trade shows there on a bi-monthly basis focusing on specific sectors of the Iraqi economy such as oil, agriculture, water resources, banking and finance, and consumer products. (U.S. Army photo by Kendal Smith)

drawing tens of thousands of visitors. "It's Iraqi companies who are going to attract foreign companies, foreign investment," he noted. "That's what happened in the Kurdistan area — all kinds of projects worth hundreds of millions of dollars and it's all private sector development." On his business card are the words, "Impossible is nothing." He is optimistic about Baghdad's future and the pivotal role the new convention center and office building will play in helping Iraq move forward.

*(Writer's note: Ommar earned an MBA from Northrop University and a PhD from California Graduate Institute and has more than 30 year's work experience with such firms as Olivetti Corp., Sun Microsystems, Texas Instruments, and operating his own Teledirect business.)*

Note: Norris Jones is a Public Affairs Officer with the Gulf Region Central district, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Iraq. For more information, contact him at 540-665-2644 or email requests to CEGRD.PAO@tac01.usace.army.mil. For more information on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Iraq, visit [www.grd.usace.army.mil](http://www.grd.usace.army.mil) <<http://www.grd.usace.army.mil>> .