

Rebuilding the Iraqi Amateur Radio Society

By Teemu S. Korhonen, SM0WKA

Ham radio in Iraq under the rule of Saddam Hussein was never fun. The few who were active during the regime were always afraid to say the wrong things. They were monitored at all times, and were only authorized to operate from a handful of club stations. To use any equipment from home was strictly forbidden. Many still hoped for better times.

Just one week before the Swedish mid-summer festivities in June 2003, I received a phone call from the Swedish Rescue Services Agency asking if I could travel to Baghdad to help the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) with their radio communications. Without hesitating, despite the obvious risk, I decided to go. One week later, I stepped out of the aircraft onto Iraqi soil. The first weeks were tough, with average daily temperatures around 130°F and dry air.

A ham's true calling is to operate during as adverse conditions as possible, so one of the first things I thought about when touching down in Baghdad was, Could I operate from here? The next day I started my research and actually found what I was looking for on the ARRL Web site. A short article about Iraq mentioned that Fred Matos, W3ICM, was in charge of spectrum affairs for the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). I e-mailed him saying that I was in town and needed to obtain a proper ham license. In just a few hours, Fred responded to my e-mail and we exchanged



SM0WKA



The Canal Hotel in downtown Baghdad served as the UN Headquarters in Iraq.

information. Shortly thereafter, I received my license and was now authorized by the CPA to do any ham activities I wanted.

No VFO

Unfortunately, I did not have time to take any ham equipment along. I had barely had time to pack my clothes before leaving Sweden. What was available in Baghdad were lots of Codan and Barret vehicle shortwave radios. These are the non-VFO type transceivers; you have to pre-pro-

gram all frequencies on channels with a computer, and the receiver is also fixed with no RIT and a bandwidth of 3.5 kHz! I set up one Barret 40 W radio in my tent and operated with a homebrew two-element wire beam outside the tent. Boy, was it tough to operate CW with that wide filter.

Leaving in August, I made only about 2000 QSOs, not having much "quality operating time" left over during the days. A few days after my departure Ghis, ON5NT, also came down to Baghdad and used my



SM0WKA

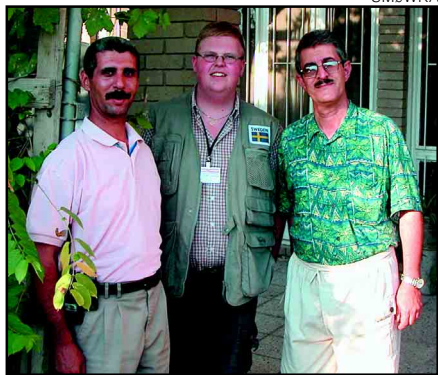
Here are some of the founding members of the Iraqi Amateur Radio Society (IARS) standing in front of an ancient Babylonian wall sculpture. From the left: Raid; Mohammed, Y11MD; Riad, Y11RNU; Emad, Y11EYT; Omar, Y11OM; Diya, Y11DZ; Ali, Y11AL; Mazin, Y11MAR, and Azhar, Y11AZ.



Y11DZ

Qusay, Y11QEA, helps Diya, Y11DZ, put up a tribander on a new tower on top of his apartment complex in Baghdad. Note the many satellite dishes on the rooftops. These showed up right after the Iraqi liberation as satellite antennas were forbidden during the Saddam regime.

SM0WKA



Mohammed, YI1MQ (right), one of the Iraqi microwave experts, use to work as a chief designer for the Iraqi space program. He was really proud to explain that they had once put a satellite in orbit, with Amateur Radio included. From the left: Diya, YI1DZ, and Teemu, SM0WKA.



YI1DZ

Here are just a few of the IARS members (standing l-r) Najah, YI1NHR; Laith, YI3SRA; Esam, YI1EM; Qusay, YI1QEA; Ahmed, YI1AHM; Riyad, YI1RNU; Azhr, YI1FLY; Kareem, YI1AK; Sarmad, YI1SN; Mazin, YI1MAR and Omar, YI1OM.

YI1MAR



Mazin, YI1MAR, shown here at his home QTH, was truly happy to finally be able to use his equipment from his home.

YI1DZ



Mazin, YI1MAR, finalizing the antenna setup on Diya's, YI1DZ, brand new tower.

plained the situation to the Iraqi hams. Many of those attending still thought it was forbidden to operate from home, and when the news broke that they were indeed authorized to use their amateur equipment from home, many big smiles filled the room. On July 25, 2003, the Iraqi Amateur Radio Society (IARS) was established, and we elected Diya, YI1DZ, as its first president.

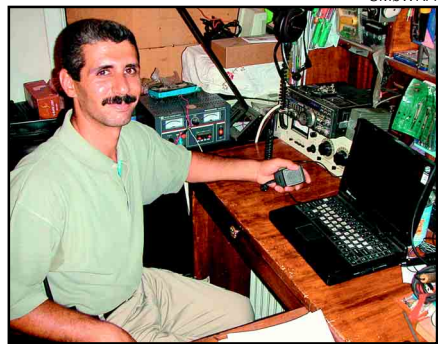
The next step was for me to meet with Fred, W3ICM/YI3DX, of the CPA. I made a phone call to Fred and broke the news that we had finally started IARS; he was delighted and shortly after we met at the CPA HQ to discuss what would be proper at this stage. Fred said we should now create new amateur regulatory rules. Wow—what an opportunity to make ham radio in Iraq as open and easy as possible!

I sat down again for a few evenings and composed brand new regulatory rules, which would go straight to Fred's office after approval by the IARS. This would guarantee Amateur Radio privileges, including that hams would be the primary users of all frequencies according to the International Amateur Radio Union (IARU) Region 1 band plans. I spoke to Diya and he passed the document on to the other board members who were elected at our initial meeting. All agreed to the draft rules, and having received the official blessing of the Society, the document would now be turned over to the CPA. The CPA accepted the brand new rules, and they are now the valid ones in Iraq.

What Next?

An important task stands in front of the Iraqi hams. The old regime-controlled Iraqi amateur society is still registered at the IARU as the official one for Iraq. This has to be changed, and the wheels of the process that involves a vote at an IARU meeting have already been put in motion. I continue to support the IARS in practical matters from home, and shortly the IARS will be accepted by the IARU as a full national member-society. Fred Matos,

SM0WKA



Diya, YI1DZ, president of the newly founded IARS, at his home QTH. Diya is fascinated with PSK31 and can also be found on SSB. WA4JTK is his QSL manager.

homebuilt antenna during his short stay. All UN activities were aborted in the middle of August, due to the truck bombing of the UN Headquarters at the Canal Hotel.

Amateur Radio is True Friendship

After a few weeks of aiming all energy at my work, I started to discuss Amateur Radio matters with a local UN colleague, Diya, YI1DZ. After gaining an understanding of the full situation about the earlier

Amateur Radio activities and the old Iraqi Amateur Radio society, I suggested to Diya that I could help the Iraqi hams to get started on a new one.

Diya accepted this offer without even blinking once. He was very eager to get under way, and this was a very good omen for the project. I spent a couple of evenings figuring out the best way to proceed, remembering that we were still in the midst of a severe turmoil and that Iraq was still under military law.

The first step was to gather as many ham operators as we could find in order to establish a new amateur society. Diya agreed on this and spent his day off driving all over Baghdad asking everybody he could find to attend a meeting to be held at the Canal Hotel. We decided to have the meeting within one week to get going quickly. Diya proposed that we should meet beforehand with Mohammed, YI1MQ, to discuss society matters; he might have some good ideas, he said. Therefore, we met Mohammed one evening at his lovely house in downtown Baghdad to discuss both the past and the future. Mohammed was as excited as Diya and we shared many good ideas.

Finally, one Friday afternoon, all the hams Diya had managed to gather came to the UN HQ. I chaired the meeting and ex-

W3ICM, has done a tremendous amount of good for Amateur Radio in Iraq.

The IARS has had a very good start to their organization, and the Iraqi hams have developed the society with a true democratic foundation pillars. Democracy has been restored to the ham community in this vast desert country, once the place where our saga began, thousands of years ago. By the riverbanks of the Tigris and Euphrates, the first early communities sprang up, using other means of communication. When looking back at last summer's events, I feel proud. Amateur Radio *is* true friendship!