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# Turbulent Takeoff—Hard Landing: State-Airline Relations and the Challenges of Early Commercial Aviation in Iran, 1923–1932

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This article studies the rise and fall of commercial aviation in Iran, then known as Persia, between 1923 and 1932. Two airlines, the German Junkers Luftverkehr AG and Britain's Imperial Airways, invested significant time and effort in developing air routes but eventually failed due to financial hardship and political intransigence. Exploring this erratic development, the article has two aims: first, to investigate the entangled history of two of the world's oldest airlines and the challenges they navigated; and second, to assess the fraught relationship between state and business interests. The German and British airlines were rivals in Iran, but they became partly dependent on each other. Both airlines suffered from the global political dynamics of the interwar period while Junkers, in particular, also struggled financially. Meanwhile, the Iranian state had yet to decide whether to view the new technology with enthusiasm or concern. Its ambivalent and reluctant reaction had profound effects on the trajectories of Junkers and Imperial Airways. Assessing the capability of a nascent airline industry to develop viable business models outside of Europe, the article also serves as a case study revealing the headwinds airlines encountered in the earliest phase of commercial aviation.

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**Keywords:** imperialism; aviation; Middle East; interwar period

The early interwar years saw the simultaneous dawn of aviation and a political reconfiguration of the globe: air technology and commercial aviation came of age precisely at a time when empires were both expanding worldwide and facing independence movements in their colonial realms. Young nation-states likewise claimed their place in the international order. These political, commercial, and technological developments converged in Iran where two airline enterprises, the German Junkers Luftverkehr AG and Imperial Airways, from Britain, invested significant time and effort in filling the sky with air routes. This article studies the rise and fall of commercial aviation in Iran, known in the West as Persia until 1935, during the period from

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1923 to 1932. Focusing on these two companies, its aim is threefold: first, to investigate the entangled history of two of the world's oldest airlines and the challenges they navigated; second, to revisit the history of Iran's engagement with actors from Germany and Britain in the interwar period; and third, connected with that, to provide a case study of how the fraught relationship between state and business shaped the development of international commercial aviation in its infancy.

At that time, Iran was experiencing a phase of extreme political upheaval. In February 1921 Reza Khan staged a coup and took control in Tehran. First assuming the role of war minister, he soon became prime minister (October 1923) and later Shah (December 1925), replacing the Qajar dynasty and establishing his own, called Pahlavi. Within Iran, the Pahlavi period was marked by a centralization of both power and statehood. Embarking on an Iranian path to modernity, the autocratic regime suppressed tribal mobility and identity and reorganized the military. State-building efforts intensified in 1927 and 1928 with judicial reforms, a civil code, conscription, and a uniform dress law mandating that all men wear Western-style clothing. At the same time, work began on a transversal railroad from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf.<sup>1</sup>

To the outside, Reza Khan sought to take a strong stand against the great powers Britain and Russia, which had both repeatedly intervened in the country in the past. As part of his comprehensive examination of the country's foreign policy prior to the Second World War, Rouhollah K. Ramazani analyzed Iran's relations with Russia, Britain, and Germany. His book *The Foreign Policy of Iran, 1500–1941* (1966) highlights the strategies Reza Khan employed to emancipate Iran from foreign dominance, suggesting that the Iranian government tried “to utilize the presence of a third power in Iran as a counterweight against retention or expansion of influence and control by the British and the Russians.”<sup>2</sup> In this “third-power diplomacy,” Germany became Iran's favorite partner. Not only did economic ties between the two countries strengthen in the 1920s, but Iran also purchased German military equipment and technology, had parts of its railway constructed by a German company, sent students abroad, and received German advisors.<sup>3</sup> Between 1935 and 1941, the year Britain and the Soviet Union invaded Iran, Germany was the country's primary trade partner.<sup>4</sup>

At first glance, Iran's engagement with foreign aviation, which Ramazani's study mentions only briefly, appears not just as another facet of Reza Khan's modernization efforts but also as part of his third-power doctrine.<sup>5</sup> In 1927, the German Junkers company received a concession to establish a truly state-of-the-art network of air routes between several Iranian cities.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Britain's state-sponsored airline, Imperial Airways, requested overflight rights to establish an air route connecting India to England but faced hostile and arduous negotiations with the Iranian government. This adverse stance towards British aviation appears to be an

1. For the Pahlavi period, see Cronin, “Writing the History;” Cronin, *Tribal Politics*; Koyagi, *Iran in Motion*; Cronin, *The Army*; and the essays in *The Making of Modern Iran*, ed. Cronin.

2. Ramazani, *The Foreign Policy*, 203.

3. *Ibid.*, 277–288.

4. Hirschfeld, *Deutschland*; Khatib-Shahidi, *German Foreign Policy*.

5. Ramazani, *The Foreign Policy*, 245; Butt, *History in the Arab Skies*, 95.

6. For brief mentions of the company's activities, see Andersson, “Histoire de l'aéronautique persane;” Andersson, “Iranian Eagles;” Fuhrer, *Hugo Junkers*, esp. 322, 413.

indicator of the state's new self-confidence and anti-British attitude, fueled, as Teresa Crompton argued, "by growing nationalism and aspiration for self-determination, which challenged and indeed undermined Britain's leverage on Persian policy, and hence the air route negotiations."<sup>7</sup>

This interpretation is plausible and yet incomplete. Previous research on air infrastructure in interwar Iran convincingly highlights the deep connection between aviation and broader geopolitics and Iran's manner of dealing with the British Empire.<sup>8</sup> However, revolving almost exclusively around state interest, this research mirrors the tendency of earlier general history writing on Iran to focus solely on the state level when studying the Pahlavi period.<sup>9</sup> Hence, existing studies oversimplify not only the gradual developments since 1923 that eventually resulted in the commencement of scheduled air service but also their abrupt termination: in 1932, less than a decade after the initial planning began, both Imperial Airways and Junkers abandoned their domestic and international air links in Iran and hastily departed the country. Previous state-centered approaches have failed to fully grasp this erratic development because they did not take the interests and ambitions of other actors much into account, particularly the airlines and their management.

This article puts company activity front and center. Building on Ramazani's framework, it situates the expansion of commercial aviation within the context of Reza Khan's "third-power diplomacy," illuminating the dynamics of late imperialism during the interwar period and the efforts of independent states to resist informal empire bonds. The present analysis provides evidence that the German and British origins of Junkers Luftverkehr and Imperial Airways were indeed central to the Iranian government's initial transactions with them. However, as the first study to bring British and German source material into conversation, the article goes further. Examining the operations of both airlines, it adds to Ramazani's analysis by investigating the entanglements between Junkers Luftverkehr and Imperial Airways, thereby revisiting their collaboration with state institutions.

In doing so, the article not only provides a more complete picture of interwar aviation in Iran but also contributes to the broader history of the global airline industry. Existing research on early commercial aviation in different countries has already highlighted the sector's reliance on government assistance, either through direct subsidies or mail contracts. Ticket sales and postal rates were never sufficient to cover the expenditures for machines, ground infrastructure, and personnel. However, previous studies overwhelmingly focused on the economic centers of interwar aviation in North America and Europe (including their colonies).<sup>10</sup> Providing a unique case study from an understudied region in aviation history, the analysis reveals the multifarious, sometimes contradictory ways in which developing states dealt with commercial aviation, and foreign airlines in particular, in the early days of the new technology. Moreover, the analysis adds an important element previous studies

7. Crompton, *British Imperial Policy*, 132–133.

8. In addition to Crompton and Butt, see Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes*, 122–133; and Al-Sayegh, *Imperial Air Communications*, 77–81.

9. For a critical review of earlier research, see Cronin, "Modernity;" Schayegh, "Seeing Like a State."

10. See, for instance, Kranakis, "European Civil Aviation," in *Materializing*, eds. Badenoch and Fickers; van der Linden, *Airlines and Air Mail*.

missed: how airline companies dealt with each other in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>11</sup> The case of Anglo-German interaction in Iran provides novel insights into how different types of airline companies, international trunk carriers and regional feeder services, aligned their business models to one another. The full complexity of their transactions can only be understood if state *and* company interests are studied in a power field consisting of the two enterprises, the diplomatic missions of their home countries, and the Iranian government.

The following sections pay close attention to the dynamics between these entities and their representatives and explore their interaction, ruptures, and entangled interests. The first section provides historical background on the region with a particular focus on Anglo-Iranian relations leading up to Junkers's engagement in the country. Section Two delves into the German company's early challenges in securing both an agreement with the Iranian government and adequate funds to inaugurate its domestic air routes. The third section then addresses the simultaneous British efforts to obtain access to Iranian airspace. It provides evidence that the Iranian government was very unwilling to grant this request because it feared further imperial intrusion into the country. The fourth section focuses on the planned international hub of Junkers's domestic network, Baghdad. The section discusses the extent to which Junkers pursued its own agenda in the Anglo-Iranian negotiations, but it also highlights entangled company interests amidst competition. Even after both companies had successfully launched their networks, operations remained temporary, as the fifth section reveals. Iran prevented Imperial Airways' route from gaining permanence. But it did not support Junkers either. The section discusses the state's strained partnership with the German company before outlining both airlines' departure from the country in 1932. All these sections taken together not only offer fresh insights into the history of air networks in the Gulf region and their operating airlines but also explore the intricate relationship between government and corporate interests in early commercial aviation and assess the capability of a nascent airline industry to develop viable business models outside of Europe.

## The Geopolitical Context

Transportation entered the third dimension in the early interwar period, a time marked by an "imperial paradox":<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, imperial rule was expanding globally with the French and British empires reaching their zenith by absorbing former German and Ottoman territories. In the Middle East, for instance, the League of Nations mandated France control over Syria and Lebanon while Britain came to control Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq. The League of Nations mandate system was designed to prepare Arab populations for self-rule. Under the oversight of a permanent commission based in Geneva, imperial governments were obligated to guide these regions toward independence while retaining control over them for the time

11. An exception is the work of Marc Dierikx who studied the interrelations of KLM and Imperial Airways. See Dierikx, "Struggle for Prominence."

12. Gerwarth, "1918 and the End," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, eds. Thomas and Thompson.

being.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, this expansion of imperial spheres of influence went hand in hand with global disintegration as imperial rule from Ireland to India faced unprecedented opposition, unrest, and growing calls for “self-determination.”<sup>14</sup> In this moment of imperial crisis, aircraft innovation held the promise of averting the imminent end of empire. This was particularly evident in Iraq, created by combining the three Ottoman provinces Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul, where the British takeover sparked a revolt in 1920. After suppressing the revolt, Britain reverted to a system of informal rule with an appointed monarch under the authority of a British high commissioner. The Royal Air Force became the enabler of British rule, having used aerial bombing in 1920 and holding military responsibility for the entire country before it was granted independence in 1932.<sup>15</sup>

But civil aviation, too, was to play an important part in imperial consolidation. After 1918, airlines of different empires took on the task of establishing air routes connecting their home countries with their various colonies and dominions—such as KLM, Pan American Airways, and Air Orient (which was later merged into Air France).<sup>16</sup> In Great Britain, the idea of intercontinental aerial links was detailed as early as 1919. Then, a specially appointed committee recommended two major air routes, one to South Africa and one to India. In 1924, Imperial Airways was formed as a private, subsidized airline to establish and operate these two routes.<sup>17</sup> Receiving state subsidies was the typical mode of operation for airlines at that time. Because neither air mail nor the few paying passengers could make up for the cost of establishing and running air infrastructure, the British government—as much as any other imperial government—stepped in to finance intercontinental aviation. In 1927, for instance, Imperial Airways received £226,400 from the government.<sup>18</sup>

Imperial air routes supplemented the existing global networks of shipping lines and telegraph cables. Along the Persian Gulf, the British held key positions in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar, as well as several sheikdoms, commonly called Trucial States. They had entered treaties with the British Empire in the late nineteenth century to maintain their independence against Iranian and Ottoman interference. These arrangements guaranteed the British a naval presence in the Gulf region as well as control over the Trucial States’ foreign affairs.<sup>19</sup> Historically, British activities in the region had aimed at protecting shipping lanes by establishing a “cordon sanitaire” around India, as James Onley has argued.<sup>20</sup> In the interwar period, Imperial Airways’s planned air route to Karachi in Western India was meant to reinforce this position

13. Pedersen, *The Guardians*.

14. For the imperial endgame in the interwar period, see Stanard, “Interwar Crises,” in *The Oxford Handbook of European History*, ed. Nicholas Doumanis; Goebel, “Anticolonialism,” in *The Interwar World*, eds. Denning and Tworek; Gerwarth/Kitchen, “Transnational Approaches;” Thomas et al., *Crises of Empire*; Motadel, “Global Authoritarian Moment;” Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*.

15. Omissi, *Air Power*; Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, 239–262.

16. For the history of imperial aviation, see Van Vleck, *Empire of the Air*; Bhimull, *Empire in the Air*; Dierikx, “Struggle for Prominence;” Dierikx, “Routes Versus Revenue;” Markovic, “Le rôle de l’Etat.”

17. For the company and its role in British imperialism, see Pirie, *Air Empire*; Millward, “Grounded,” in *Empire and Mobility*, eds. Lambert and Merriman; Higham, *Britain’s Imperial Air Routes*; McCormack, “Airlines and Empires;” Jackson, *Imperial Airways*; Lyth, “The Empire’s Airway.”

18. Higham, *Britain’s Imperial Air Routes*, 346.

19. Balfour-Paul, “Britain’s Informal Empire in the Middle East,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, eds. Judith Brown and Wm. Roger Louis; Onley, “Britain’s Informal Empire.”

20. Onley, “Raj;” Onley, *The Arabian Frontier*.

and tie India, the empire's most important colony, closer to London. Through the dispatch of airmail, and, to a lesser extent, officers and administrators, airplanes were expected to accelerate communication across the imperial sphere and engender economic development. In 1926, the Under-Secretary of State for India, Lord Winterton, thus called India "one of the most vital points in the Empire [air] chain" because "India has a far larger population than all the rest of the Empire combined; she is the largest individual customer of Great Britain."<sup>21</sup>

By then, the airline's preparations for the new air route were well underway. When establishing the intercontinental route to Karachi, planners faced challenges stemming from both immature technology and the laws governing airspace. Because airplanes in the 1920s could fly only short distances (in today's terms) and during daylight hours, they could not directly connect two distant places but, like railroads, made many scheduled intermediary stops. Imperial Airways would thus have to fly along a chain of airports to India. However, the airline's pilots could not unilaterally fly over or land at airfields in foreign countries or colonies: in 1919, the states convening at the Paris Peace Conference had crafted the Convention Relating to the Regulation of Aerial Navigation, the first international convention governing transborder aviation. The signatories established that states maintained absolute sovereignty over their airspace, granting or denying foreign aircraft access as they deemed appropriate. Diplomatic missions were thus forced to approach foreign governments on behalf of their airlines to secure overflight and landing rights.<sup>22</sup> Outside of Europe, Britain's projected Empire route would run through Egypt, Palestine, Iraq, Iran, and India and thus almost completely through British-dominated territory. Only with independent Iran were British diplomats required to negotiate access rights so that Imperial Airways could cross its airspace on the way to India.

As an independent state, Iran found itself surrounded by imperial powers: The British to the west, south, and east, and the Russians to the north. Since the nineteenth century, both imperial governments had repeatedly attempted to expand their influence in the country as part of their "Great Game," the Anglo-Russian rivalry in West and Central Asia. In 1907, they settled their rivalry over Iran by signing a convention that divided the country into two zones of interest, a British zone in the south and a Russian zone in the north, separated by a buffer zone. Not only was Iran's ruling Qajar dynasty not involved in drafting this agreement, but the country saw severe challenges to its integrity and independence in the aftermath. In 1911, Russian forces violently occupied Tabriz and other cities in the north. In southern Iran, where oil had been discovered, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company held the exclusive right to drill the vast oil fields. During the First World War, Russian and Ottoman forces invaded Iran, while a British-led military group, composed of local recruits, operated in the southern parts of the country.<sup>23</sup>

After the World War, the Soviet Union, which had succeeded Tsarist Russia in 1917, first reoccupied northern Iran in May 1920. However, the following year, it gave up concessions

21. N.N., *Imperial Conference*, 144.

22. Jönsson, "Sphere of Flying;" Kranakis, "European Civil Aviation," in *Materializing*, eds. Badenoch and Fickers.

23. Ramazani, *The Foreign Policy*, 81–167; Keddie and Amanat, "Iran under the Later Qājārs," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, eds. Avery, Hambly, and Melville; Nezam-Mafi, "Qajar Iran," in *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History*, ed. Daryaeae.

and renegotiated privileges in a friendship treaty with Iran.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, Britain's interest in the Gulf region grew further because of its oil deposits. In 1919, the British government sought to strengthen its dominant position through a secretly negotiated Anglo-Iranian Agreement, which foresaw Britain as the sole supplier of advisors, military equipment, and infrastructure. Even though the agreement was never enacted, violations of sovereignty, combined with the extraction of oil reserves and a British naval presence in the Persian Gulf, appeared to be what Mohammad Gholi Majd has called a “strangulation of Persia.”<sup>25</sup>

In 1921, Colonel Reza Khan seized Tehran in a coup d'état that ended the Qajar dynasty and installed a new regime under his own leadership. In 1925, Khan assumed the Iranian throne and, as the new Shah, became the sole autocratic leader of Iran. His rise to power was initially backed by the British diplomats on the scene, but relations between Iran and the British government quickly grew tense.<sup>26</sup> Pahlavi's foreign policy, as Chelsi Mueller has observed, “was strongly influenced by a particularly virulent strain of anti-colonial, nationalist impulses that emerged in Iran in the aftermath of the First World War.”<sup>27</sup> One way to further disassociate his country from British or Soviet influence was by seeking the support of third-power actors. In the realm of aviation—in line with the broader political and economic German-Iranian rapprochement emerging after the early 1920s—Reza Khan thus turned to the Junkers Flugzeug- und Motorenwerke company from Dessau, Germany.

### Third-Power Engagement and Financial Hardship

The Junkers company introduced the world's first civilian airliner, the F-13, in 1919.<sup>28</sup> While airplanes were then commonly built of wood and fabric, Junkers was one of the first manufacturers to employ a novel aluminum-copper alloy, Duralumin, in aircraft design. The F-13 type (Figure 1) was a futuristic all-metal, low-wing design with an aerodynamic shape and a four-seat cabin. The company marketed its aircraft worldwide. In 1920, the first F-13s were delivered to the United States and Colombia, where the SCADTA airline employed them in regular service.<sup>29</sup> To help the market grow, company founder Hugo Junkers and his headquarters conceived their own airline holding company (Junkers Luftverkehr AG) and cofounded a European airline alliance, the Trans-Europa-Union. By the mid-1920s, almost 180 Junkers airplanes were in operation worldwide.<sup>30</sup> Still, through the years under consideration, the company would repeatedly experience financial hardship, not only because the market demand was small, but also because its airline operations did not receive any subsidies from

24. Bast, “Iran's Foreign Policy,” in *Iranian-Russian Encounters*, ed Cronin.

25. Majd, *Great Britain and Reza Shah*, 21.

26. For the Anglo-Iranian relations, see Zirinsky, “Imperial Power and Dictatorship;” Mueller, *The Origins*; and Mueller, “Anglo-Iranian Treaty;” Ramazani, *The Foreign Policy*, 242–257.

27. Mueller, *The Origins*, 4.

28. For this airplane, see Andersson et al., *Junkers F 13*; and Hofmann, *Als das Auto fliegen lernte*. For the company, see Budraß, *Flugzeugindustrie und Luftrüstung*, esp. 1–335; Byers, *The Flying Man*; Fuhrer, *Hugo Junkers*; and Siegfried, *Der Fliegerblick*.

29. Rinke, “Die Firma Junkers,” in *Grenzenlose Märkte*, eds. Barth and Meissner.

30. Hofmann, *Als das Auto fliegen lernte*, 307–308, 421.



Figure 1. A Junkers F-13 over Tehran, 1925.

Source: ETH Zurich Library, Image Archive, LBS\_MH02-02-0088-AL-FL.

the German state. Without state funding, however, aviation within Europe was not economically viable given the high costs compared to well-developed railway networks.

Given the absence of subsidies and the competition from railways on the European continent, the company saw its opportunity for profitable operation in regions with weak rail and car infrastructure, particularly outside of Europe. In addition to Asia and Africa, Junkers regarded the Middle East as “particularly suitable for the establishment of air traffic, as the only existing means of transportation is the caravan.”<sup>31</sup> While this assertion was not fully justified with regard to Iran, where motorized trucks were operating between some regions, the managers still believed that the country’s infrastructure was so underdeveloped that a novel means of transportation could attract enough customers. Moreover, they were convinced that in the country’s difficult climatic and topographical conditions, Junkers’s all-metal airplane would showcase its superiority over the wooden structures commonly used in aviation. The latter tended to warp in dry climates while moisture caused their glued surfaces to disintegrate.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, the F-13 aircraft was particularly suited for flying in these environments because, as Lutz Budraß has underlined, “the low maintenance requirements inherent to the design, resilience to weather conditions, and flight safety, were characteristics that allowed operations in areas with an adverse climate and little developed road networks.”<sup>33</sup>

Iran was thus a perfect field of operation for the Junkers company, and the first contact was made in 1923. In January of that year, the Soviet government authorized the German company

31. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0301 T05 M14, 0301/15/17, Aktenvermerk betreffend Finanz-Ausschuss-Sitzung, Dessau, 18.9.1926.

32. Hassinger, *Zwischen Evolution und Revolution*, 222.

33. Budraß, *Flugzeugindustrie und Luftrüstung*, 68.



to secretly establish an airplane factory in Fili, near Moscow, to evade restrictions imposed upon Germany by the 1919 Treaty of Versailles.<sup>34</sup> Together with the factory, the Soviets also granted Junkers a concession to develop and operate a Moscow–Tehran air route.<sup>35</sup> To study the Iranian airspace, an F-13 airplane was dispatched on a survey flight and arrived in Tehran on 12 April 1923. Upon disembarking, Junkers manager Friedrich Schmidt was for the first time confronted with circumstances that would repeatedly shape the trajectory of aviation in Iran over the next nine years: Despite proclaiming that it would conduct strictly neutral business in the country, Junkers found itself enmeshed in a web of geopolitics. The Russian chargé d'affaires in Tehran immediately realized the symbolic power of the airplane and cast the survey flight as an official Soviet mission. He forbade Schmidt to contact any Iranian official regarding the sale of Junkers aircraft or a future Moscow–Tehran air route.<sup>36</sup> The Germans were at least able to give a demonstration of their machine to Reza Khan who was then the war minister and de facto ruler of the country.<sup>37</sup> Impressed by Schmidt's F-13, Reza Khan considered buying six machines but eventually purchased six French Breguet airplanes instead. Yet, upon arrival, four of them were already in a state of disrepair.<sup>38</sup> After this disappointing experience, the war ministry purchased two Polikarpov R-1s from the Soviet Union as well as two Junkers F-13s in 1924, promptly deploying one of them as a bomber in a military campaign in western Iran.<sup>39</sup> That same year, a British Royal Air Force mission stopped for a month in Tehran to showcase its De Havilland aircraft.<sup>40</sup>

Despite this competition from Soviet and British air interests, it was the German company that was eventually tasked with bringing civil aviation to Iran. After Schmidt left Tehran, the Russian chargé d'affaires repeatedly approached Reza Khan, who had been serving as prime minister since October 1923, with his own proposals for an air service linking the two countries. However, the Iranian government refused to commission the development of its air infrastructure to Soviet or British actors as it was struggling to emancipate itself from the decade-long grip of both great powers. A German aviation company instead appeared to be an ideal neutral contractor. The prime minister explained this consideration to the new Junkers representative in Tehran, Edmund Jaroljmek. The latter was indeed ready to play the role of a tradesman devoid of ulterior motives and presented his company and its F-13 machines as ideal means for developing air traffic in the country.<sup>41</sup> Five F-13 machines were transferred to

34. Maier, *Die geheime Fliegerrüstung*, 87–182; Budraß, *Flugzeugindustrie und Luftrüstung*, 101–128; Fuhrer, *Hugo Junkers*, 394–415.

35. Hofmann, *Als das Auto fliegen lernte*, 287, 298; Fuhrer, *Hugo Junkers*, 322.

36. PAAA, RZ 207/78102, Schulenburg to German Foreign Office, Tehran, 2.5.1923; *Ibid.*, Schulenburg to German Foreign Office, Tehran, 18.5.1923; *Ibid.*, Schmidt, Bericht über den Flug Baku–Enseli–Teheran–Tebris–Djulfā–Tiflis, Moscow, 24.5.1923.

37. “Ein deutsches Flugzeug in Persien,” *Junkers-Luftverkehr Nachrichtenblatt*, 17.6.1923.

38. N.N. “A Glance;” Cronin, *The Army*, 134–136.

39. Andersson, “Histoire de l'aéronautique persane,” 4; DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T01, Jaroljmek, Bericht über die Tätigkeit in Persien, 1924; PAAA, RZ 207/78102, Schulenburg to German Foreign Office, Tehran, 29.5.1924.

40. Andersson, “Iranian Eagles,” 26.

41. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T01, Jaroljmek, Bericht über die Tätigkeit in Persien, 1924; PAAA, RZ 207/78102, Schulenburg to German Foreign Office, Tehran, 30.4.1924; “Baku–Enseli–Teheran–Buschir: Junkers-Luftverkehr in Persien,” *Junkers-Luftverkehr Nachrichtenblatt*, 11.10.1924; Jaroljmek, “Brief aus Teheran,” *Die Luftreise*, 31.8.1925, 241–245.

Tehran in late 1924, and an air route to Baku was tentatively launched in 1925. However, it was closed after a few months in the absence of official Iranian permission and subsidies.<sup>42</sup> Instead of the projected long-distance Moscow–Tehran route, the focus shifted to first establishing a network within Iran. On 9 February 1926, the parliament—being fully subservient to Reza Khan, who had climbed the throne in December 1925 and called himself Reza Shah thereafter—granted the German company the exclusive right to operate three domestic air routes for five years.<sup>43</sup>

The way was clear for Junkers Luftverkehr to negotiate a proper contract with Iran and start operations. Yet, the company headquarters in Germany were now facing grave financial challenges owing to a decrease in sales and the loss-making Fili plant, which closed in 1925. To rescue Germany's prime aircraft manufacturer, the German Reich became involved with Junkers and acquired two-thirds of its shares.<sup>44</sup> Even then, its financial situation remained strained. By mid-1926 the new board, now dominated by government controllers, seriously considered shutting down the embryonic business venture in Iran.<sup>45</sup> The German envoy in Tehran, Count von der Schulenburg, strongly advised against this step, cautioning Berlin about Reza Shah's personal involvement. Von der Schulenburg believed that if the company favored by the Shah failed, it might reflect badly on the Shah's own political capabilities, and he would be enraged at Germany.<sup>46</sup> In January 1927, the German government waived most of the company's debts and put founder and patriarch Hugo Junkers back in control.<sup>47</sup>

Contract negotiations with Iran continued throughout Junkers's period of financial hardship and concluded on 29 January 1927, thus setting the expiration date for 1932. Tehran was to become the hub of the domestic network, from where routes would run to Bandar Anzali, Bushehr, and a location on the Iraq–Iran border near Khanaqin. The company pledged to carry free mail on every flight. In exchange, it would receive a subsidy of 3 Kran (c. 1.30 Marks) per kilometer flown in the first eighteen months of operation.<sup>48</sup> It is unclear whether the Iranian government was unwilling to pay more subsidies, but it was certainly unable to do so due to its high foreign debts. In any way, it soon transpired that this subsidy was far from sufficient to cover the costs. The airline could not expect adequate backing from its home country because Germany did not have any imperial possessions in Asia, which would have made a passage through Iran necessary, and because the national flag carrier, Luft Hansa, received almost all of the German subsidies. Junkers thus relied on Iranian subsidies, which were, however, significantly lower than those provided by European governments. Luft Hansa, for instance, was paid c. 2.30 Marks per kilometer for its European services. Given that, as was reported from

42. Andersson, "Iranian Eagles," 30.

43. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T01, Gesetz über die Zuerteilung des Monopols für Luftschiffahrt an die Luftverkehrs-Unternehmung Junkers, 9.2.1926.

44. Budraß, *Flugzeugindustrie und Luftrüstung*, 170–197; Maier, *Die geheime Fliegerrüstung*, 183–193.

45. PAAA, RZ 207/30616, Richthofen to Schulenburg, Berlin, 8.7.1926.

46. PAAA, RZ 207/78102, Schulenburg to German Foreign Office, Tehran, 5.5.1926.

47. Maier, *Die geheime Fliegerrüstung*, 227–229.

48. BL, IOR/L/P&S/12/1953, Contrat du service aérien, 29.1.1927. For earlier drafts and negotiations, see *Ibid.*, Lorraine to Foreign Office, Gholhak, 19.6.1925; DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T01, Aktennotiz betreffend Luftverkehrsvertrag Persien, Dessau, 15.9.1926; *Ibid.*, Aktennotiz zu den Verhandlungen betreffend Änderungen und Verbesserungen im bisherigen Vertrags-Text, Tehran, 20.11.1926.

Tehran, Junkers Luftverkehr had to pay its European pilots and mechanics four times more than in Germany, the difference in subsidies between Luft Hansa's European and Junkers's Iranian network was tremendous.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, while Junkers was entitled to receive postal revenues of up to 2,000 Toman (c. 8,800 Marks) per month, any revenue exceeding this amount was reserved for the Iranian treasury.

The Iranian government's reluctance to invest severely affected Junkers' operations. As per the contract, the company was responsible for constructing the necessary airport facilities on its own. Town administrations made plots available, but without financial support, airfields at most of the scheduled stopping places along the routes remained mere meadows.<sup>50</sup> To reduce costs, the company focused on developing the airport in Tehran. With all air routes terminating there, hangar and maintenance facilities were to be centralized in the capital. The most pressing need was for a proper workshop so that ground crews could conduct their work sheltered from adverse weather conditions, particularly the summer heat. However, such construction was cost-prohibitive during the first year of operation, so proper workshop facilities were not established until 1928 (Figure 2). Given the exposed workplace and the fact that their work was declared as unpaid training, Iranian workers and apprentices often left within weeks of their recruitment.<sup>51</sup>

Notwithstanding the skeleton crew and improvised facilities, weekly services on the Tehran–Qazvin–Bandar Anzali route (c. 300 kilometers) and the Tehran–Hamedan–Kermanshah–Qasr-e Shirin route to the Iraqi border (c. 600 kilometers) began in February and March 1927, respectively, while the third route to Bushehr (c. 1000 kilometers) remained closed. Flying conditions on the route to Bandar Anzali were very difficult due to the strong winds in the Alborz mountains, particularly near Manjil. The route to the Iraqi border was just as difficult because the aircraft crossed the Zagros mountain range at an average cruising altitude of 3,200 to 3,500 meters, with the pilot sitting in an open cockpit. Between the airfield in Hamadan and the next landing site crews and machines had to endure temperature changes of up to 50°C.<sup>52</sup> The five F-13s flew a total of 193,039 kilometers in 1927, carrying 2,812 passengers and 757 kilograms of mail.<sup>53</sup>

While from an operational point of view, Junkers's first year in Iran was very successful, the financial situation nearly brought the company to its knees. The service to Bandar Anzali was especially unprofitable as, along the route, people continued to send their mail and packages by trucks. As these took two days instead of three hours, they were slower but also 90 percent cheaper and available every day instead of once per week. In addition, the subsidy of 3 Kran granted by the government for every kilometer in the air was not sufficient to cover the operational cost of 5 Kran (c. 2.20 Marks) per kilometer.<sup>54</sup> In the initial phase, the Dessau

49. Orlovius, "Die europäische Handelsluftfahrt," *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 16.5.1928; "Der Flugverkehr in Persien," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 16.11.1929.

50. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T02, Junkers headquarters to Weil, Dessau, 29.11.1927.

51. DMM, NL 021, Hugo Junkers, diary entry of 13.7.1927 [transcription]; DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T02, Weil to H. Junkers, Tehran, 6.2.1928; Jaroljmek, *Das andere Iran*, 112.

52. Jaroljmek, "Plaudereien aus Persien," *Die Luftreise*, 31.8.1925, 249–252; DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T02, Weil to Steudel, Tehran, 30.5.1927.

53. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T04, Weil, Junkers Luftverkehr Persien, Dessau, 11.9.1928.

54. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T02, Überblick über Entwicklung und augenblickliche Lage des persischen Luftverkehrs, Dessau 28.12.1927; DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T05, Jahresbericht 1929.



Figure 2. Junkers workshop in Tehran, 1930.

Source: Deutsches Museum, Munich, Photo Collection, 31271.

headquarters thus had to subsidize the Iran branch with 50,000 Marks per month. Although they managed to halve these subsidies for the remainder of 1927, it still posed a significant burden for the struggling headquarters, which had budgeted its worldwide foreign expenditures at only 20,000 Marks per month.<sup>55</sup>

To enhance profitability and eventually put the Iran branch on its own feet, the company needed better contract terms. But more than that, Junkers needed access to Europe's air networks with their comparatively large trade volumes.<sup>56</sup> An air link with Europe was vital not only because of its commercial prospects but also because the Iranian government had made it a central component of the 1927 contract. The company was required to start a service from Tehran to the Iraqi border within its first month of operations and to effect Iran's inclusion into international networks within the first three months. Because Junkers was not able to fulfill this request in time, the government kept the third route to Bushehr closed until an international service had been established.<sup>57</sup>

An international connection was only possible via Baku, in Soviet Azerbaijan, or Baghdad. Junkers first surveyed the Baku route. In November 1927, after having concluded a neutrality pact, the Iranian and Soviet governments signed an air agreement. Junkers simultaneously

55. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T02, Junkers headquarters to Weil, Dessau, 29.11.1927.

56. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T02, Überblick über Entwicklung und augenblickliche Lage des persischen Luftverkehrs, Dessau 28.12.1927.

57. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T02 Ettel to Sachsenberg, Tehran, 14.6.1927; *Ibid.*, Juluft 0707 T02, Jarolj-mek, Bericht über die derzeitige Gesamtlage beim Junkers Luftverkehr Persien, Tehran, August 1927.

negotiated a working agreement with the airline Ukrvosduchput, the Ukrainian air traffic company, according to which Junkers airplanes could fly to Baku and Ukrvosduchput to Bandar Anzali.<sup>58</sup> Scheduled weekly services from Tehran to Baku began in February 1928, with each flight taking eight hours. From Baku, mail and passengers could proceed to Moscow on express trains and then be handed over to the airline Deruluft on its service to Berlin, reducing transit times from Tehran to Central Europe from two weeks to as little as three to four days.<sup>59</sup>

And yet, the company could hardly be pleased with its new air link. The Russian side insisted that all airplanes crossing the border should be manned with exclusively Russian crews.<sup>60</sup> The local management, however, soon considered the one pilot seconded to Junkers by Ukrvosduchput unfit for the job; after crashing his airplane, he resigned. The Soviet airline could not provide a substitute, but the authorities in Azerbaijan would not accept German pilots flying regularly over their territory. In consequence, in August 1928, only half a year after the route's inauguration, Junkers had to temporarily suspend the service. Even though the route was revived after a new pilot was hired, company officials considered shutting down the troublesome Soviet link altogether and instead reach Europe via Iraq.<sup>61</sup>

There, Imperial Airways could provide such an intercontinental connection. The British airline had inaugurated a mail service to Baghdad in January 1927, reducing the delivery time of letters from London to 7.5 days. If Junkers managers were able to obtain permission to land in the Iraqi capital, they believed, regular service would promise "an increased frequency and also an aggregation of mail on this line. This connection would create a link to international tourist transportation."<sup>62</sup> If the staff in Tehran were able to extend their reach beyond the embryonic domestic route network and tap into international traffic, the German company might survive. But if nothing changed, they would soon need to pull out of Iran altogether.

## Airspace Politics amid Diplomatic Tensions

British diplomats in Tehran viewed the German company's development of air routes in Iran as suspicious and soon came to consider the German activities a threat to Britain's future air communications.<sup>63</sup> Imperial Airways' airplanes on the imminent route to India would have to cross Iranian territory, for which they would need overflight rights. While Junkers's plans for a domestic route network did not per se interfere with this Empire route, the prospect of an Iranian sky open exclusively to German aircraft certainly did: Junkers's contract with the

58. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T04, Weil, Junkers Luftverkehr Persien, Dessau, 11.9.1928.

59. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T02, Überblick über Entwicklung und augenblickliche Lage des persischen Luftverkehrs, Dessau 28.12.1927.

60. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T02, Bericht über die derzeitige Gesamtlage beim Junkers Luftverkehr Persien, August 1927.

61. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T03, Durchführung der Postflüge nach Baku, Tehran 28.7.1928; PAAA, RAV 180-1/368, Schulenburg, Stand des Junkersunternehmens in Persien, Tehran, 3.8.1928; *Ibid.*, Junkers headquarters to Reich Ministry of Posts, Dessau, 18.8.1930.

62. PAAA, RZ 207/30616, Akten-Notiz, Dessau, 15.9.1926.

63. BL, IOR/L/P&S/12/1953, Loraine to Chamberlain, Tehran, 1.1.1925; BL, IOR/L/P&S/12/1953, Loraine to Chamberlain, Tehran, 20.3.1925.

Iranian government granted the German company a five-year monopoly on its three domestic air routes, stipulating that foreign airplanes could use these routes only “if they do not engage in commercial transportation of passengers, luggage, or merchandise upon arrival, in the interior of the country, or when leaving it.”<sup>64</sup>

The British Foreign Office reasoned that it would still be able to run the London–Karachi route once Iran granted access to its airspace. But the planned route—coming from Iraq, running along Iran’s Persian Gulf coastline, and stopping at the airport in Bushehr—would inevitably overlap with the domestic routes. The Junkers contract could be interpreted as prohibiting foreign airlines from effecting any through traffic. It was not wholly unlikely that British aircraft would be forced to surrender their freight and passengers to Junkers airplanes at the border and pick them up again at the last airport before leaving Iran.<sup>65</sup> The Imperial Airways management suspected that their competitors had pressed for such a deal, and Junkers had, indeed, previously shown ambitions to “sell the concession for this route at a high price to the British.”<sup>66</sup> If the British were ever to fly over Iranian territory, they would need to come to terms with both the Iranian government and its German aviators.

The British Director of Civil Aviation, Sefton Brancker, visited Tehran in September 1925 and negotiated provisional permission for Imperial Airways to fly along the proposed Gulf route, pending approval by the Iranian parliament. However, by 1927, when the airline was ready to inaugurate this service, the parliament still had not ratified the agreement.<sup>67</sup> In mid-March 1927, Iran invoked its sovereignty over its airspace and informed the British legation that the requested route along the Persian Gulf could not be granted.<sup>68</sup> This created a missing link in Britain’s intercontinental air route to India. Suddenly, the tenacity of the one independent state along the Empire route put the entire project at risk; the planned service had to be postponed indefinitely.<sup>69</sup>

The nationalist government under Reza Shah was eager to emancipate the country from British influence. But the tense political relations also provided ample opportunity to revisit the air question in a timely fashion: Iran’s Minister of Court Abdolhossein Teymurtash and British diplomats were simultaneously engaged in a number of negotiations regarding open questions between the countries, such as Iran’s claims to various Persian Gulf islands.<sup>70</sup> Another diplomatic question concerned the capitulatory regime that had granted extraterritorial jurisdiction as well as low taxes and customs rates to nationals of Russia, Britain, France, and the United States among other countries, since the nineteenth century. After Russia had already signed a new agreement in 1921, Reza Shah was eager to also overturn the unequal

64. BL, IOR/L/P&S/12/1953, Contrat du service aérien, 29.1.1927.

65. BL, IOR/L/P&S/12/1953, Loraine to Davoud Khan Meftah, Tehran, 7.5.1926; Clive to Chamberlain, Tehran, 14.3.1927.

66. BA, Imperial Airways Board Meeting Papers, Woods Humphrey, Report on Visit to Persia, 28.6.1928; DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T01, Jaroljmek to Sachsenberg, Tehran, 5.5.1925.

67. “Persia and Air Route to India,” *The Times*, 19.10.1925; Crompton, *British Imperial Policy*, 125–127; Higham, *Imperial Air Routes*, 122–124.

68. TNA, AVIA 2/1837, Clive to Foreign Office, Tehran, 15.3.1927; *Ibid.* Clive to Foreign Office, Tehran, 16.3.1927.

69. Crompton, *British Imperial Policy*, 127–130.

70. Mueller, “Anglo-Iranian Treaty;” Mueller, *The Origins*, 110–139.

relationship with Britain and declared he would revoke the capitulations as of May 1928, inviting the British government to negotiate a new agreement.<sup>71</sup> The abundance of British commercial interests, including those of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, put Iran into a strong negotiating position. If we follow Ramazani, the Iranian government also used the air question as leverage to pressure Britain to accept a suspension of the capitulations.<sup>72</sup> Accordingly, when Britain and Iran concluded a new commercial agreement in May 1928, Iran also announced that it would reassess overflight rights.<sup>73</sup>

One month later, Imperial Airways' general director George Woods Humphrey met Teymurtash, the Minister of Court, in Tehran.<sup>74</sup> The Iranian minister unilaterally offered an arrangement for a maximum of three years, beginning in 1929: The airline would be allowed to make scheduled stops at the airports of Bushehr, Bandar Lengeh, and Jask on its way to India. However, he emphasized that it was to be understood as only an experimental agreement that also obliged the airline to study a possible replacement route across the mountain ranges of central Iran. The agreement was not renewable, and after three years the company would either shift from the Gulf route to the overland route or else cease operations. Nevertheless, since this arrangement would enable the British to eventually commence their work and retain hope of getting back to the negotiating table in the future, they ultimately accepted it.<sup>75</sup> In December, the Iranian parliament passed an air navigation bill.<sup>76</sup>

Iran thus allowed the British to launch an air service. However, its specific implementation was determined by security concerns and fitted into Reza Shah's broader struggle to protect his country against foreign interference. The Iranian government was afraid that, once the country had been opened to commercial air traffic, it would be impossible to prevent aircraft incursion or control foreign ground crews, exposing Iran to a possible British military strike. This was especially true for the southern regions through which Imperial Airways planned its route as they were far from the administrative center and hard to monitor. These concerns were justified not only because of the difficult shared history outlined in the first section of this article and because of Iran's bitter experience with being invaded during the First World War, but also because the British Empire intended its civil air routes to serve as military infrastructure for the Royal Air Force, if necessary. Moreover, airspace intrusions had already occurred in December 1920, when the Royal Air Force carried out its first flights between Iraq and India along the Iranian coast and had even constructed landing fields on Iranian soil, all without seeking authorization.<sup>77</sup> To prevent this from happening again, Reza Shah's government sought to keep British air traffic as far away as possible from the littoral of the Persian Gulf once the initial concession expired after three years.<sup>78</sup>

71. Mueller, "Anglo-Iranian Treaty," 581–582; Zirinsky, "Riza Shah's Abrogation of Capitulations," in *The Making of Modern Iran*, ed. Cronin.

72. Ramazani, *The Foreign Policy*, 245.

73. Hansard, House of Commons, Anglo-Persian Agreement, 14.5.1928, vol. 217, col. 649.

74. Crompton, *British Imperial Policy*, 135.

75. BA, Imperial Airways Board Meeting Papers, Woods Humphrey, Report on Visit to Persia, 28.6.1928.

76. AN, 19760064/15, Iran (Perse) 1928–1939, Règlement pour l'aviation, Tehran, 28.12.1928.

77. Al-Sayegh, *Imperial Air Communications*, 55–56.

78. BA, Imperial Airways Board Meeting Papers, Woods Humphrey, Report on Visit to Persia, 28.6.1928; DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T02, Jaroljmek, Bericht über die derzeitige Gesamtlage beim Junkers Luftverkehr Persien, Tehran, August 1927.

But even the overland route offered as an alternative was a mere bluff. The Iranian prime minister confidentially informed Junkers representative Jaroljmek that he hoped Imperial Airways would reject the offer, as he did not wish for British aircraft to fly on this route, either.<sup>79</sup> It was clear that the British de Havilland DH 66 aircraft were designed for international long-distance transport and could not fly at the necessary altitude with any profitable payload. The requested overland route was thus not a result of Iran's desire to enhance its air infrastructure or get the capital connected to a growing global network. Rather, it was a mere smokescreen. Facilitated air connections were simply not worth the risk of further intrusion into the national territory. Therefore, despite having agreed to provide Imperial Airways with the necessary ground facilities along the prospective overland route, the government did nothing to develop landing strips or hangars after 1928, making it impossible for the British airline to seriously consider flying there.<sup>80</sup> Iran expected Imperial Airways to withdraw from the country once the three-year term had expired.

### From Airline Rivalry to Mutual Reliance

During the negotiations between Teymurtash and Imperial Airways in June 1928, the Junkers company had an ambivalent stance towards Iran's persistence against British demands. On the one hand, forcing international traffic onto an overland route was not in the company's interest, even though the route proposed to Imperial Airways did not overlap with Junkers's routes.<sup>81</sup> Not only was it important to retain the monopoly serving the small domestic demand for swift air transportation, but Junkers could, in fact, increase its revenues if foreign aviation were allowed to fly regularly on the Persian Gulf route. The German company had been operating without financial aid from Dessau since January 1928, and Iran's subsidies were to end in August. Meanwhile, the airplanes continued to grapple with low demand, only achieving 30 percent occupancy. These gaps could be filled with Imperial Airways' future traffic: Junkers aircraft could pick up mail and passengers arriving from Europe or India at airports in Iran and distribute them along the domestic network.<sup>82</sup>

On the other hand, there was a lot to be gained from tough negotiations between Iran and Imperial Airways: through its contract, Junkers held the key to vast parts of the country's airspace and could—as Imperial Airways' general director Woods Humphrey suspected—demand that the British airline hand over all freight while transiting the country. Accordingly, the British arrangement with Teymurtash had to contain at least one advantage that would satisfy the Germans enough to prevent them from insisting on their monopoly right—the “high

79. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T01, Jaroljmek, Bericht über Besuch beim Ministerpräsidenten, Tehran, 26.4.1927.

80. BL, IOR/L/P&S/12/1953, Clive to Foreign Office, Tehran, 27.4.1931.

81. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T04, Fiala Ritter von Fernbrugg, Englische Bemühung um die Durchflugsbewilligung in Persien, June 1928; DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T07, Weil to Junkers headquarters, Tehran, 9.8.1931.

82. PAAA, RZ 207/78102, Litten to German Foreign Office, Baghdad, 18.4.1927; DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T02, Weil to H. Junkers, Tehran, 6.2.1928.



price” referred to earlier: access to the airspace of neighboring Iraq and thus an airlink with Europe’s growing network of air routes.

Junkers in Iraq was in the same position as Imperial Airways in Iran: It needed to apply for permission to enter the airspace. The British had granted Iraq limited self-governance but retained control in foreign and military matters. Accordingly, landing rights for Baghdad were administered in London. As early as 1925, driven by Britain’s air interest in the Middle East, Junkers manager Edmund Jaroljmek had made presentations at the Air Ministry to discuss the issue with civil aviation director Sefton Brancker. The British authorities, however, were strongly disinclined to allow foreign airplanes to fly regularly to Baghdad, and Brancker exhorted Jaroljmek “to avoid raising delicate questions of this kind.”<sup>83</sup> What stood against Junkers’s appeal for landing rights in Baghdad was the strained diplomatic relations between Iran, Iraq, and Great Britain. Iran argued over the correct demarcation of the border between the two countries, a conflict that was only resolved later, in 1929. The British High Commissioner in Baghdad made it quite clear that this unresolved issue was a significant obstacle to granting the concession.<sup>84</sup> In March 1927, Jaroljmek traveled to Baghdad to debate the matter with the High Commissioner, emphasizing what he regarded as a neutral stance in the Anglo-Iranian conflict: “The Junkers company is a German commercial enterprise that has no interest in politics and cannot be held liable for the attitude of the Persian government.” The British official responded that Imperial Airways was the exact same type of apolitical enterprise and yet had been refused overflight rights in Iran.<sup>85</sup>

This shows that the fates of both companies had become interwoven. Junkers was in dire need of Imperial Airways’ European traffic and the British Air Ministry soon realized that access rights might work as a quid pro quo. The ministry considered offering Junkers permission to at least fly to the Iraqi town of Khanaqin close to the border and assured the Junkers headquarters that it was prepared to grant them landing rights if they convinced the Iranians to sanction the Gulf route. Still, the Air Ministry remained clear that access to the airport in Baghdad would not be granted.<sup>86</sup> One year later, the 1928 deliberations between Imperial Airways and the Iranian government afforded Junkers a perfect opportunity to reopen the case. Minister Teymurtash made it an explicit condition that Junkers receive access to Baghdad in return for overflight rights, and the British conceded. Following the agreement, the postal authorities of Iraq and Iran signed a treaty that allowed airplanes to carry mail across the border.<sup>87</sup>

Once these questions were settled, the long-anticipated air services could finally start. The first Imperial Airways airplane on the Empire route arrived in Karachi, India on 6 April 1929. Ironically, the journey from London was still not fully airborne because Italy had closed its airspace to Imperial Airways. Accordingly, its passengers had to cross Italy by rail.<sup>88</sup> That

83. TNA, AVIA 2/1839, Brancker, Note on meeting with M. Jarolimek and M. Trost, 21.10.1925; BL, IOR/L/P&S/12/1953, Loraine to Chamberlain, Tehran, 29.12.1925.

84. PAAA, RZ 207/78102, Litten to German Foreign Office, Baghdad, 9.3.1927.

85. PAAA, RZ 207/78102, Litten to German Foreign Office, Baghdad, 15.3.1927.

86. TNA, AVIA 2/1837, Air Ministry to Foreign Office, London, 20.3.1927; TNA, CO 730/118/2, note, 5.4.1927; PAAA, RZ 207/78102, Ziemke, note, 28.4.1927.

87. BA, Imperial Airways Board Meeting Papers, Woods Humphrey, Report on Visit to Persia, 28.6.1928; DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T04, Fiala Ritter von Fernbrugg, Bericht, 17.7.1928.

88. Burchall, “The Politics,” 93–94.

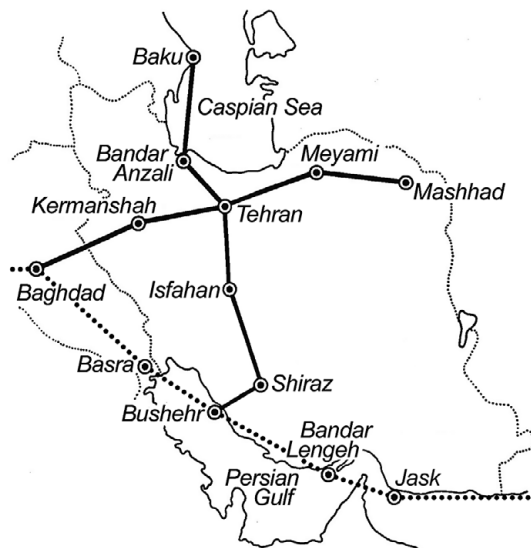


Figure 3. Air routes of Junkers Luftverkehr (solid) and Imperial Airways (dotted), 1929.

Source: Adapted from "Der persische Luftverkehr im Jahre 1929," *Junkers-Nachrichten*, 2 (1930), 37.

same month, Junkers took up its service to Baghdad. There, its arrival and departure times were synchronized with the schedules of Imperial Airways so that Junkers passengers could transfer to airplanes to Europe without too much layover time.<sup>89</sup> Junkers's business developed well after the opening of the Tehran–Baghdad route. Restrictions on postal revenues were lifted in early 1929, leading to a more than twofold increase in Junkers's earnings.<sup>90</sup> The Tehran–Bushehr service, opened in 1928, particularly picked up pace as Junkers flights carried mail to and from the new stopping place of Imperial Airways' India route. Frequency on this line, as well as on the Tehran–Baghdad line, was increased to two services per week. In May, an additional route from Tehran to Mashhad near the Afghan border was inaugurated (Figure 3). The new services doubled the monthly kilometers flown.<sup>91</sup> To handle this increase, the fleet—consisting of four F-13s (one of them leased to the Anglo-Persian Oil Company) and one W-33 type airplane—was expanded by three W-33s in 1929. The Dessau factory had introduced this aircraft type in 1926 and in 1927 the first W-33 had arrived in Iran laden with vaccines from Germany to combat a Cholera outbreak.<sup>92</sup> The amount of mail carried by company aircraft quadrupled from 1928 to 1929.<sup>93</sup> Even the British legation praised Junkers's service for its safety and reliability.<sup>94</sup>

89. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T05, Junkers-Luftverkehr Persien, Flugplan, 15.10.1929.

90. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T06, Bentheim to Ulderum, Dessau, 9.1.1929.

91. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T05, Jahresbericht 1929.

92. "Junkers-Flugzeuge im Dienste der Cholera-Bekämpfung in Persien," *Junkers-Nachrichten*, 4 (1927), 141–142.

93. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T05, Jahresbericht 1929; DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T07, Statistik des Junkers-Luftverkehr Persien, Tehran, 12.2.1931.

94. BL, IOR/L/P&S/12/1953, Dodd, Report by the Military Attaché, Gholhak, 2.7.1930.

## Political Intransigence and Contract Expiration

By the start of the 1930s, despite financial hardship and adverse political conditions, Junkers had managed to establish a domestic network spanning about 2,800 kilometers across four routes, two of which offered access to international hubs. Imperial Airways meanwhile carried more than 2,000 passengers between Egypt and India within its first year of operation. After many years of scheming, both companies could finally focus on flying. And yet, both were keenly aware that their lines were already on the verge of termination because both their concessions were set to expire by 1932.

Although Junkers was optimistic about renewing its contract, company officials knew it required revised terms to ensure the financial sustainability of its operations. The Dessau headquarters were again in severe difficulties. In the fiscal year 1929/30, the company lost 4.5 million Marks because less than half of the 118 airplanes manufactured were sold worldwide.<sup>95</sup> There was no demand for its increasingly outdated yet expensive aircraft designs. Junkers, for instance, made an offer to Reza Shah to equip his entire air force with almost sixty airplanes, but the army eventually purchased only two W-33s.<sup>96</sup> The civil aviation branch in Iran was facing similar hardship, the worldwide economic crisis following the stock market crash of 1929 having hit the country hard. With the decline in national trade volumes, the utilization of Junkers aircraft dropped by 50 percent. According to managing director Kurt Weil, even when revenues in Iran reached one million Marks in 1930, the company still lost approximately 125,000 Marks.<sup>97</sup> Any new concession would have to offset these losses. The management expected the Iranian government to pay a subsidy of 5 Kran (c. 2.20 Marks) per kilometer as well as a minimum guarantee of 40 kilograms of mail per flight, meaning that the government would pay for this amount whether or not the airplanes actually carried that much mail.<sup>98</sup>

The Iranian government, although financially extremely constrained, was prepared to enter negotiations but identified one major prerequisite: the German company must establish an aviation school for Iranian pilots and mechanics. The Iranians saw aviation as a crucial contribution to their own modernization project, particularly that of the armed forces. Reza Shah had founded a military academy in 1923, and in 1924 the first Iranian military pilots were sent to France for training.<sup>99</sup> Junkers was contracted not only to establish air routes but also to bring expertise and skills that were previously unavailable. From his initial discussions with Junkers's management, Reza Shah identified knowledge transfer as one of the most important aspects of the company's engagement in his country.<sup>100</sup> Accordingly, Article 36 of the 1927 contract had stipulated that Junkers was to set up an aviation school and provide all aircraft and teaching materials at its own expense, "within the limits of the sums that the government

95. Budraß, *Flugzeugindustrie und Luftrüstung*, 261–262.

96. Andersson, "Histoire de l'aéronautique persane," 6.

97. DMM, NL 021, Hugo Junkers, diary entry of 17.3.1931 [transcription].

98. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0701 T01, Übersicht über den Stand der Junkers-Interessen in Türkei, Iraq, Persien, Afghanistan, Turkestan, Dessau, 5.8.1931.

99. N.N. "A Glance," 184–185; Cronin, *The Army*, 129–131; Andersson, "Iranian Eagles," 28.

100. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T01, Jaroljmek, Bericht über die Tätigkeit in Persien, 1924; DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T01, Promemoria, 18.11.1926.

would contribute from its general budget to the expenses and maintenance of this school.”<sup>101</sup> Junkers Luftverkehr was to establish the aviation school, Iran to pay for its upkeep—or so the Germans thought.

By 1930, three years into the contract, neither side had done anything to establish the school. The Junkers management interpreted the future school as a purely civilian institution, while the Iranian military intended to use it to train air force pilots. Further discussions between both parties bore no fruit.<sup>102</sup> On 13 July 1930, Minister of Court Teymurtash summoned Weil to his office. During the three-hour examination, a second rupture became apparent: who was to pay for what? Teymurtash explained that, according to his interpretation of the contract, the government would indeed cover the operating expenses, but these did not include replacement aircraft or even repair or insurance costs.<sup>103</sup>

Without funds, progress on the aviation school stalled, and thus the negotiations regarding a new concession for Junkers stalled as well. As the existing contract’s expiration date in late January 1932 loomed closer, it remained unclear whether the company would still be allowed to operate air routes in the future, and whether it was to receive any Iranian subsidies. Weil was convinced that the Iranian government was gambling in the hope of striking a better deal at the last minute. To exert pressure, he took bold actions in October 1931: He ordered his staff to partially shut down operations, terminated all employees’ contracts with three months’ notice, and began to remove equipment. Seeing this step as a way to discourage Iran from playing with fire, he expected in response increased efforts to rescue domestic aviation. However, the company and the government failed to reach a new agreement. The suspension of the service to Mashhad, an important pilgrimage city, further alienated the two parties, and, in general, the German-Iranian relations were at a low due to anti-Shah agitations in the German press.<sup>104</sup> Through February 1932, the remaining skeleton crew kept operating, but after that they were summoned back to Germany.<sup>105</sup> By March, the parent company was on the brink of collapse and suspended all payments. On 26 March 1932, Junkers Luftverkehr ceased operations in Iran.<sup>106</sup> Kurt Weil estimated its total losses within the country at 2.5 million Marks.<sup>107</sup>

Imperial Airways’ situation in the country was not any better. The arrangement of 1928 had given the British some breathing space. By 1931, however, they could see the writing on the wall. Anticipating the three-year agreement’s impending expiration, Imperial Airways finally conducted the requested survey along the overland route. The Iranian government set its course from Dezful in the west to Bampur in the southeast, where airplanes could exit the

101. BL, IOR/L/P&S/12/1953, Contrat du service aérien, 29.1.1927.

102. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0708 T06, Weil to Junkers headquarters, 26.7.1930; *Ibid.*, Weil, Aktennotiz über die Besprechung mit S.H. dem Hofminister Timur Tasch, Tehran, 28.7.1930; BL, IOR/L/P&S/10/1206, Clive to Foreign Office, Tehran, 13.5.1931; BL, IOR/L/P&S/12/1953, Dodd to Foreign Office, Gholhak, 25.8.1931.

103. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0708 T06, Weil to Junkers headquarters, 26.7.1930; *Ibid.*, Weil, Aktennotiz über die Besprechung mit S.H. dem Hofminister Timur Tasch, Tehran, 28.7.1930.

104. Hirschfeld, *Deutschland*, 108–119.

105. BL, IOR/L/P&S/12/1953, Dodd to Foreign Office, Tehran, 13.10.1931; PAAA, RZ 207/78102, Blücher to German Foreign Office, Tehran, 5.2.1932; *Ibid.*, Junkers headquarters to Weil, Dessau, 21.3.1932.

106. Andersson et al., *Junkers F 13*, 171.

107. AN, 19760064/15, Iran (Perse) 1928–1939, French legation to Air Ministry, Tehran, 24.8.1932.

country in the direction of India.<sup>108</sup> When the test pilot returned, he reported on harsh winter weather, high mountain ranges, and the absence of serviceable airport facilities. In short, the company board concluded: “it is thought that the Persians selected the worst route they could find and that their desire is to get us out of their country altogether.”<sup>109</sup>

Because it was impossible to comply with Tehran’s demands, the British prepared to shift the intercontinental route to India in a way that would bypass Iran if necessary. An alternative was a route along the southern shore of the Persian Gulf, through the Trucial States, a part of Britain’s informal empire.<sup>110</sup> If the section of the Empire air route was transferred to the Trucial States, the route would run all the way from Egypt to India through territory whose governments and administrations had friendly relations with the British, or polities over which the British held sway. However, both the British government and Imperial Airways were very skeptical of moving to the Arabian Peninsula due to various hurdles: Some of the ruling sheiks fiercely resisted the construction of airports in their territories, and the British were uncertain how armed groups in the desert would react in the event of an emergency landing.<sup>111</sup> Most importantly, establishing an air route meant departing from the earlier policy of noninterference in the sheiks’ internal affairs.<sup>112</sup>

Given these factors, British officials still hoped to be able to renew the agreement with Iran. To increase their chances, they openly threatened to leave the country, believing that “as soon as the Persians realised that we were independent of them, they would prove more accommodating.”<sup>113</sup> That is, they applied the same strategy as the Junkers company. Accordingly, the British met with the same Iranian indifference and were only granted a six-month grace period. They intensified their negotiations with the rulers of the Trucial States, eventually receiving flyover and landing rights through, as Chelsi Mueller has remarked, “an unprecedented degree of coercion on the part of the British government.”<sup>114</sup> In September 1932, Imperial Airways withdrew from Iran, and on 5 October opened its new segment of the Empire route to India, bypassing the country via Bahrein, Sharjah, and Gwadar.<sup>115</sup> After 1932, two foreign airlines continued to provide international services to Iran, Air Orient and KLM. By contrast, domestic service lapsed after Junkers’s withdrawal because no contractor could be found. In 1935, the Iranian air force decided to establish its own service linking Tehran with Baghdad and Bushehr. Negotiations between Iran and Iraq for overflight rights dragged on for years. It was not until April 1938 that the Ministry of Post and Telegraphy allocated sufficient funds to revive passenger and mail service.<sup>116</sup>

108. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T07, Weil to Junkers headquarters, Tehran, 9.8.1931.

109. BA, Imperial Airways Board Meeting Papers, Woods Humphrey, Memorandum to the Board: Persia, 21.7.1931. See also BL, IOR/L/P&S/12/1953, Burchall, Central Persian Route, London, 7.10.1931.

110. For detailed studies of this air route’s development and underlying political and diplomatic struggles, see Al-Sayegh, *Imperial Air Communications*; and Crompton, *British Imperial Policy*, 172–251.

111. BL, L/P&S/10, Biscoe to Foreign Office, aboard CS Patrik Stewart, 13.5.1930; TNA, BT 217/1024, Biscoe to Government of India, Bushehr, 20.11.1931.

112. Al-Sayegh, *Imperial Air Communications*, 104.

113. TNA, BT 217/1025, Committee of Imperial Defence, Minutes of Sub-Committee Meeting, 17.12.1931.

114. Mueller, *The Origins*, 54–55.

115. Crompton, *British Imperial Policy*, 216–218; Stanley-Price, *Imperial Outpost*, 24–28.

116. BL, IOR/L/P&S/12/1953, Knatchbull-Hugessen to Hoare, Tehran, 23.8.1935; *Ibid.*, Peterson to Wood, Baghdad, 30.3.1938.

## Concluding Remarks

By the time Junkers and Imperial Airways ceased their services in Iran, commercial aviation worldwide had entered a consolidation phase. Major intercontinental air routes had either been recently inaugurated—such as Imperial Airways' routes to India and South Africa or Pan American Airways' Miami–Buenos Aires route—or were under development. By the mid-1930s, airplanes connected places as distant as London and Brisbane or San Francisco and Manila. In 1932, a worldwide route network existed that spanned over 286,000 kilometers and served 871,000 people that year. Remarkably, only about 5,500 of these passengers traveled between continents, thus making transport within Europe and the United States the predominant transaction.<sup>117</sup>

But even in Europe and the United States, very few of the many small airlines founded after the First World War had survived the initial period. The world's first airline to operate scheduled services with a London–Paris run in 1919, Aircraft Transport and Travel, for instance, went into liquidation in 1921. Its successor was later merged with other unprofitable airlines into Imperial Airways. In 1939, this British flag carrier was itself merged into BOAC, today's British Airways. Air France (1933) was likewise formed from a government-mandated merger of loss-making companies. SCADTA, the first airline to employ Junkers F-13s outside of Europe, was swallowed by Pan American Airways in 1930. The Junkers Flugzeug- und Motorenwerke company itself fell victim to this development. In the wake of its financial crisis of 1925/26, the German Reich requested that the company divest itself of its airline holdings. Operations and equipment were merged with the airline Aero Lloyd to establish a new state-sponsored flag carrier, Deutsche Luft Hansa. The company was allowed to retain its Iran branch, arguably Asia's first airline, but, as the preceding analysis has shown, Junkers Luftverkehr was incapable of reaching maturity.

The Iranian case study reveals the headwinds pioneering airlines encountered in the earliest phase of the now dominant global passenger transportation industry: Around the world, the performance of airline businesses was crucially shaped by global political dynamics, especially the conflict between imperialism and anti-colonial nationalism as well as the drive for independence. It was also shaped by the novelty of a transportation mode for which international laws and business strategies had yet to be drafted and by the struggle to make civil aviation financially viable. This article set out to investigate how Imperial Airways and Junkers Luftverkehr tackled these challenges, how both airlines dealt with each other, and how the Iranian state dealt with them. The analysis has unveiled the extent to which the activities of both airlines were interwoven. Both were contenders for the small aviation market of the 1920s. Although Junkers arguably needed Imperial Airways more than vice versa, seeking to attach its feeder service to the British intercontinental trunk route, the fate of both companies came to depend on each other. Both failed to implement sustainable air networks, and both grappled with the demands and anxieties of the Iranian state.

Confronted with the new technology at the dawn of the air age, Iran had by no means decided whether to view its potential with enthusiasm or concern. On the one hand, the

117. Pirath, *Der Weltluftverkehr*, 60.

demand for both an aviation school and the international expansion of the domestic network demonstrates the Iranian government's drive to enhance global connectivity and close technological gaps. On the other hand, given the country's history and strong anti-imperial stance, there was also significant concern about foreign interference, informal imperialism, and the threat of an aerial attack. The government in Tehran thought of Imperial Airways as an imperial intruder not to be trusted. These suspicions were partially justified, as became evident when during the Second World War the Soviet Union and Britain jointly invaded the country, citing Iran's close ties with Germany as their justification.

As a counterweight to British intrusion and investment, Iran increasingly turned to Germany during the interwar decades. Overall, as Ramazani has demonstrated, this "third-power policy that was to assist Iran to free itself from Great Britain and Russia led to heavy dependence on Germany."<sup>118</sup> However, while this may be true for trade and investment, a closer look at the airline industry tells a very different story. Junkers was indeed contracted because it appeared to be a neutral partner. The company's being German and having a technological lead in aircraft design gave it an opening into Iran's fledgling civil aviation sector. Unlike other German businesses operating in the region, however, Junkers Luftverkehr did not bring enough capital to Iran. Like almost every other airline in the world, the company depended on state subsidies to make its operations economically viable. In contrast to the French, British, and Dutch airlines active in the Middle East, however, the Junkers airline did not receive funding from Germany. Junkers thus requested that the Iranian government mitigate its losses. The Iranians, however, expected foreign investment from third-party bidders, rather than taking on the obligation to invest in these ventures. In the words of a British diplomat, "the Persians wanted to have everything on a very grand scale, but were not prepared to put down the money for it."<sup>119</sup> As a result, the government kept subsidies extremely tight, skimmed most of the profits, and made Junkers' Iran branch financially dependent on the almost bankrupt German headquarters.

The analytical focus on company activities and their interactions with the state helps refine our understanding of Iran's relations with foreign companies. Studying companies as actors with independent agendas and considering their interests provides a fresh perspective on the third-power doctrine and sheds new light on the complexities of the political environment in Reza Shah's Iran. Junkers Luftverkehr was not simply Iran's favorite and Imperial Airways was not simply the Germans' antithetical competitor, as has been argued by previous studies. In fact, Junkers, too, had strong frictions with the state. The Iranian state's behavior had significant effects on network development, ultimately leading to the grounding of Junkers Luftverkehr and the withdrawal of Imperial Airways. The managers of each airline independently came to consider their own agreement with the Iranian government a "very bad contract" (Junkers) and a "very poor, temporary and unwilling arrangement" (Imperial Airways).<sup>120</sup> Both agreements made it impossible to fly in the political and economic climate of the 1920s.

118. Ramazani, *The Foreign Policy*, 299.

119. BL, IOR/L/P&S/12/1953, Loraine to Chamberlain, Tehran, 18.3.1925.

120. DMM, FA 043, Juluft 0707 T02, Weil to Junkers headquarters, Tehran, 20.4.1927; BA, Imperial Airways Board Meeting Papers, Woods Humphrey, Report on Visit to Persia, 28.6.1928.

The entangled history of Junkers and Imperial Airways thus provides evidence of the state's role as either an enabler or a disabler of civil aviation on two levels: the political and the financial.

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