

hotline

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“The lack of an international standard medical infrastructure—coupled with extreme travel security risks—mean that any company must be as operationally self-sufficient as possible.”

Iraq's improving security situation and rich natural resources are spurring the start of an economic revival

Rebuilding Iraq

As the fragile reconstruction and recovery of Iraq slowly continues, multinational businesses are now re-entering the country. Commercial activity and foreign investment are expanding. And, with Iraq holding around 10% of the world's oil reserves (according to the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries), oil and gas is a major growth sector.

Operationally self-sufficient

Olivier Ryder is International SOS' Regional Managing Director for East Europe, Africa and the Middle East. "There's been a significant influx of resources and expertise into Iraq in the last year, particularly in the south", he explains. But while international companies can see great potential, the risks to their employees must be comprehensively managed. "The lack of an international standard medical infrastructure, coupled with extreme travel security risks, means that any company must be as operationally self-sufficient as possible."

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After the Gulf War in 1991, Iraq's healthcare system deteriorated significantly. While its hospital infrastructure was badly affected, perhaps the biggest impact has been the lack of experienced medical staff after so many left the country. "Inevitably, the quality and capacity of health care available is well below international standards", says Dr Christiaan Barnard, International SOS' Regional Medical Director for the Middle East. "The security risks of accessing health facilities add another layer of complexity especially for foreign nationals."

Complex challenges

While multinational companies have strict security procedures to protect employees, foreign personnel face ongoing threats from insurgency, suicide attacks, roadside bombings and kidnapping. "Moving people around the country continues to require significant logistical planning and resources", says Olivier. Communications and IT infrastructures can be

intermittent. Sub-standard roads, frequent road traffic accidents and limited law enforcement all present extra risks. The only way to reach the most remote areas is by air, but options are very limited. Strict controls on flight plans limit the ability to reach much of the country after dark, and can have major implications in an emergency.

And there are other challenges. Language barriers exist, with English not widely spoken, and most local medical staff speak only Arabic or Kurdish. Dust storms, sandstorms and floods are also common, threatening people's health and safety and impacting effective emergency response.

Specialist experience

"Together these factors create a highly unpredictable environment in which a minor incident can turn into a major emergency", says Olivier. "And as government agencies reduce their presence and support in Iraq, it's more important than ever to have medical, safety and

security plans in place.” As he points out, even with extensive preparation, contingency plans can rapidly become unworkable. Specialist experience, with high operational flexibility, is essential.

RMSI, International SOS’ strategic partner, brings exactly that experience and is the only full-service medical company of its type in existence. Headquartered in the United Arab Emirates, RMSI delivers a unique set of clinical, medical staffing and medical evacuation services designed for austere and hostile environments, specifically Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia. “RMSI’s experience in these environments is second to none, enhancing International SOS’ resources and integrating seamlessly into our regional and global network”, says Dr Barnard. “By utilizing RMSI’s existing on-the-ground resources, we’re assuring companies in Iraq of the fastest advanced medical response and a high-quality remote and industrial medical service.”

Robust plans

Rob Lamb is CEO of RMSI. “In Iraq, as elsewhere, pre-planning is crucial”, he explains. “While a major focus will be on the response to hostile incidents, those events account for only a small proportion of medical risks. So rather than relying on a ‘security first-aid’ role, companies need to address their employees’ broad primary healthcare needs.”

Robust contingency plans are needed to deal with emergency medical incidents. “Of course time is critical”, Rob continues. “In an emergency, our teams have the capabilities and necessary relationships already established to respond, deploy and evacuate quickly to a secure stabilization point.

RMSI’s dedicated air ambulance (which operates from Dubai) and International SOS’ Abu Dhabi-based air ambulance are critical factors. “They overcome complications with organizing aviation in and out of Iraq not just with the plane, but all the visa requirements. And it means we can reach medical resources in the UAE very quickly”, Robb adds.

When clients in Iraq need help, it’s a joint response among International SOS and RMSI’s team of expatriate and local Iraqi medical professionals and logistical experts. “Ensuring our workforce is diverse means that clients received western standards of emergency care with knowledge of local resources. This is crucial to navigating the often daunting medical and logistical landscape of Iraq”, says Rob.

Expanding presence

With over a dozen remote medical services sites across Afghanistan, RMSI has a growing presence in Iraq, most recently opening a regional medical center at Iraq Energy City, near Basra. An oil and gas services company, Petronor, has been developing the Iraq Energy City base with an emphasis on enhancing

living conditions. The project is officially promoted and supported by the Iraq Ministry of Oil and South Oil Company.

With a future capacity for more than 1,000 residents, and its vision as a premier working and living environment, Iraq Energy City is expanding the traditional role of an oilfield supply base. Peter Day is CEO of Petronor. “Our selection of medical provider at Iraq Energy City was an important one”, he says. “RMSI brings a strong track record in Iraq.”

Proactive step

The RMSI center at the base is the only international-standard medical and emergency stabilization center in the South of Iraq. Clients will be treated for everything from the simplest cuts and scrapes, through full emergency stabilization and possible evacuation. “Opening the center is a proactive step to meeting the needs of the oil and gas community after the pull-out of the military”, says Rob Lamb. “It provides a much-needed security blanket for thousands of expatriate and Iraqi workers.”

Having chosen the base as a secure, strategically important location, RMSI plans to use it as its central medical hub and to support its network of remote clinics at client sites throughout Iraq. Control Risks is also establishing a strategic presence at the base to complement its existing operations and help companies manage the security risks to personnel as operations expand.

“The situation in Iraq is improving all the time”, says Olivier Ryder. “Our role is to work in partnership with our clients, continually responding to challenges and helping them work with companies in the region to create a more secure and prosperous future there.” ■

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