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Iraq turns to U.S. drones to protect oil platforms

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By Patrick Markey and Ahmed Rasheed

BAGHDAD (Reuters) - Iraq is buying unmanned drones from the United States to help protect its southern oil platforms as the OPEC nation ramps up production after the withdrawal of the last American troops, U.S. and Iraqi officials said on Monday.

Protecting the vital infrastructure around its oil reserves, the world's fourth largest, is crucial as Iraq rebuilds an industry battered by years of war and sanctions against former dictator Saddam Hussein.

"Iraq's navy has purchased U.S. drones to protect the country's oil platforms in the south, from where most of Iraq's oil is shipped," said an official from the Office of Security Cooperation in Iraq, which is part of the U.S. embassy.

The OSCI did not give further details of the number or type of unmanned aircraft. But Iraqi security officials confirmed plans to use drones to protect oil infrastructure.

Iraqi forces took over responsibility for protecting the oil infrastructure in 2005, but until the withdrawal of the last American troops in December, the U.S. military had provided aerial surveillance and other logistical support.

Violence in Iraq has ebbed since the height of the war in 2006 and 2007 when thousands were killed in daily suicide bombings and sectarian slaughter, but insurgents still often target oil infrastructure.

"According to the energy police plans, we intend to use the drones by the end of this year," head of the energy protection force, Major General Hamid Ibrahim told Reuters. "We are in the process of training engineers."

Iraq opened a new offshore export terminal in the south earlier this year which helped push exports to their highest level since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion at 2.317 million barrels per day in March. A second Single Point Mooring floating platform was scheduled to further increase exports in April.

Crude exports are forecast to reach 2.75 million bpd by the end of 2012, the world's biggest source of new oil supplies over the next few years.

The southern oilfields around Basra are the heart of Iraq's production, where majors like BP, Exxon Mobil and Italy's are working.

Security is generally better in the south of the country, where one Shi'ite militia ended its fight after the last U.S. troops left in December. But the oil industry has not been immune from attacks from other insurgents.

Three bombs hit a pipeline in December, disrupting output at the huge Rumaila oilfield.

Iraq's 40,000-strong energy police stepped up protection to deter attacks it expected from Sunni Islamist armed groups linked to al-Qaeda. But officials long complained they were poorly equipped for the task of protecting the vital sector.

(Writing by Patrick Markey; Editing by [Janet Lawrence](#))



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