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# A NEW HOPE

The only female CEO of an airline in the Middle East is attempting to bring prestige back to Kuwait Airways



January 2017  
Volume 16 Issue 01

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DECIPHERING DIGITAL

Digital engagement needs focus if airlines want seats to not become commodities



INTERVIEW

PITCHING IT RIGHT

It isn't viable for airlines to have offices in each market they want to reach out to



# A NEW HOPE

A large airplane is parked on a tarmac at night. The scene is illuminated by several bright spotlights, creating a dramatic atmosphere. A group of people is standing in a line on the tarmac in the background. The overall color palette is dark with highlights from the spotlights.

Kuwait Airways' first addition to its fleet in 20 years is bringing renewed but cautious optimism toward a revival in the carrier's fortunes

By **Shayan Shakeel**





▲ Kuwait Airways has spent nearly \$8 billion on 35 new aircraft and expects to receive the rest of its ten Boeing 777-300ER by the first half of next year

In October last year, at an event in Everett, Seattle, Kuwait Airways accepted the first of 10 Boeing 777-300ERs it had placed an order for in 2014. It was the first new aircraft that carrier had received in over 20 years.

Kuwait Airways isn't the region's oldest airline, not even in the GCC. The latter distinction belongs to Gulf Air, against which it once used to compete for supremacy of the skies. But Kuwait Airways, which was formed in 1963, has suffered tremendously since the Iraq War in 1990. The airline hasn't turned a profit in nearly 25 years. Competition hasn't helped either, a fact not lost on Rasha al Roumi, chairwoman and CEO of Kuwait Airways Corporation. "It's no secret that Kuwait Airways lost its march on regional competitors," she told *Aviation Business*. "That's why we needed a fresh approach."

Rasha al Roumi's plan to transform the fortunes of Kuwait's national carrier's is beginning to take shape. Since being appointed in 2013 it has taken her nearly three years to get her company to this point. And after unveiling her five-year strategic plan in September she is now



▲ Kuwait Airways' Blue Bird adorns its cabin in a look designed to invoke its new premium direction

DID YOU KNOW?

**53 years**  
Kuwait Airways began service in 1963

embarking on the next step of a plan she calls, "Bold, but achievable."

The fresh new approach, to bring life back to what used to be a premier flying experience, involves 35 new aircraft by 2021, massive staff cuts, investments in technology and infrastructure, the renegotiation of slots at airports in an at-

KUWAIT AIRWAYS



▲The airlines' Boeing 777s will feature 9 abreast seating in a 3-3-3 format as well including a 54 seat premium economy section

tempt to boost frequencies on in-demand routes by 22 percent and a return to a premium service offering—not to mention profitability by 2019. It's certainly a bold plan. But is it achievable? That's the million (or rather billion) dollar question.

Kuwait Airways' turnaround plan comes at a pivotal juncture for both the airline and Kuwait itself. Parliament after parliament has been dissolved in the Gulf's most democratic country since 2013—but a new round of elections is creating cause for cautious optimism. A ground-swell of support from the people now exists, "to see their national carrier reassert its proud legacy in the region's aviation industry," says al Roumi.

This renewed vigour comes after the airline won a \$500 million settlement against Iraq for damages caused during the war. But it also comes as the government waived all of its debts until 2014 and promised no more. That means that the



▲ Vice president 777 Program, Elizabeth Lund & Rasha Al Roumi at the new livery unveiling

airline's nearly \$8 billion bankroll for a new fleet from Boeing and Airbus could be among the last of its official lifelines.

Conversation around the carrier's privatisation has long been on the cards. Despite a move to privatise passing of-

KUWAIT AIRWAYS



▲ The airline plans to have the youngest fleet by 2021

“The new aircraft will clearly offer an enhanced onboard experience with a nine-abreast configuration and offer all three classes onboard.”

official approval earlier in the decade, the airline remains government owned, confirms al Roumi. But plans to eventually privatise the company are afoot, she says. And they all rely on the airline becoming profitable, which she hopes will happen by 2019.

Investment in new aircraft was necessary considering the airline’s ageing fleet predicament. A scare in 2013, where the cabin started leaking air only to have the hole covered with sheets and blankets, reportedly, led to it having to invite media to a tour of its planes the next year to convince passengers its fleet was still airworthy. Kuwait’s fleet is over 20 years old, having not added any new airlines to its roster in over two decades, and C and D checks, conducted on airliners over ten, are expensive. It’s part of the reason why Emirates has a carrier life of just over five years. “Maintenance checks are expensive to conduct, and new aircraft will help reduce operating expenses,” says al Roumi.

Having the youngest fleet by 2021 will help the airline reclaim its lost prestige in the premium segment, says the CEO.



▲ Economy class will have the most spacious seating available, says Rasha al Roumi



▲ The Boeing 777-300ERs will have a first class cabin with eight private suites

The airline has invested in a whole new identity, complete with uniforms and a set up that includes all three classes on-

board its 777s. At the event in Seattle, the airline also unveiled its new brand identity: a more prominent take on its



trademark Blue Bird, dressed in tonal blues to represent skies and seas, “signifying new horizons soon to be crossed,” juxtaposed with pearls, a nod to Kuwait’s trading roots and ambition to reclaim prestige. “The new aircraft will clearly offer an enhanced onboard experience. This is especially true of our decision to go with a nine-abreast configuration and offer all three classes onboard.”

That’s not to say the airline has abandoned the low-cost segment. Recent reports suggest that the airline is still considering a low-cost unit, and Jazeera Airways, Kuwait’s successful budget carrier, has attempted to bid for 35 percent of the carrier’s business. Kuwait Air’s older fleet and possibly even some of the smaller Boeings it’s placed an order for could be used for that unit, if the airline decides to go that route. “It’s something we are considering, but it isn’t the main plan yet,” says al Roumi. **AVB**



▲ Rasha al Roumi was appointed CEO and chairwoman in 2013

#### POINT OF VIEW

## On being the only female CEO of an airline in the Middle East

**You stand out in the crowd, not just as Kuwait Airways reinvents itself, but also as the only lady leading a national flag carrier. What does that feel like? Do you feel an added responsibility or are you just doing your job?**

It is not just in this region that we see the corporate world dominated by male leaders, but I do feel that we live in a time where that tide is turning. In the near future we will hopefully see more women in top positions and it will no longer be seen as unusual.

In fact, within Kuwait Airways, we do not consider this issue too much as—in addition to myself—we also have a strong representation of female leadership in the senior management team. Our head of legal and the acting-chief commercial officer are also women. So, we have a fairly gender-balanced set up when it comes to senior decision-makers.

If I am a motivation to others, I am flattered. On the matter of women in leadership roles, I would say only this: the talent and capabilities are out there and, if they are currently being ignored, then it can only be a great loss to many companies who could benefit from their skill sets.

**Is it different leading as a lady in a predominantly male industry?**

The roles and responsibilities of running of an airline are the same whether you are a man or woman. Of course, being the first woman to head an airline in the region, it naturally attracts interest and I am, of course, proud to have achieved this position in my career.

In Kuwait, we have a number of prominent women in leadership roles and in politics and I can only see this trend going in a positive direction. I hope to see more women having the opportunity to reach their potential and to contribute to business and society in a positive way.