



THE UPS AND DOWNS OF EVERYDAY WORK IN THE TOWER DURING COVID-19

In this brief report, **Shaul Guthrie** reports on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on operations at Haifa Airport in Isreal.

During the first days of March, a pandemic was something that was happening somewhere else. It had no effect on traffic volume at Haifa International Airport. By mid-March, there was only a 20% decrease in traffic. On March 27th, a notice to airmen (NOTAM) was issued prohibiting non-

commercial flights. The effect was that traffic fell from 100-170 aircraft a day to 8-16 a day.

During this time, 30% of ATCOs in the unit were sent on unpaid leave. Some of the shifts were reduced from three or four ATCOs to two ATCOs per shift. The

work needed no more than one active ATCO. There was a protocol for how to operate in this 'slim shift', and capacity was declared so that the slim shift could safely operate.

On April 19th, the NOTAM was cancelled, and traffic returned. In the



first 2 days, it was in small bursts of traffic, but on April 21st, we were up to 90% of normal traffic. By April 25th we were at 100% normal summer traffic. To put it into numbers: in the month prior we were working with zero to one plane per hour in the control tower, and within three days we went back to working with 10-23 planes per hour for most of the day.

In response to the rise in traffic, the slim shifts protocol was immediately cancelled. Then, the ATCOs who were on unpaid leave from April 1st were brought back. We had to ascertain their ratings and only then fill the shifts. Luckily, it was 'only' one month that they had not worked at the tower, so four hours with a training officer on the first shift was all that was needed.

One of the things that we had to think about was that the ATCOs who had been on unpaid leave were relatively new, with two to five years of experience, including one ATCO who got their rating just a month prior to the COVID-19 crisis.

The way we coped with the sudden return of traffic was to avoid reaching our full capacity in the tower. We controlled that by calling for a coordinator as soon as it was thought that traffic could build up. In LLHA, most traffic is local flights and circuit training (pop-ups) and traffic tends to spike from two to seven in a matter of minutes. As far as workload is concerned, traffic is not the major issue, but rather the phone calls and coordination of incoming and outgoing traffic. So, to keep the workload in the tower manageable, we split the coordination to another ATCO. This is considered normal operation in Haifa, but due to the short period that we had minimum traffic, we tried to keep the workload well away from the ATCOs' full capacity for the first two months.

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From March until June, LLHA was open only during daylight, before that we were open for training during the night, three days a week. At the beginning of June, we reopened for two hours once a week for night training. This created a surge of traffic; in the first four weeks, we were operating at maximum capacity of the control tower and the runway for two hours straight. In these two hours, we had 70 counted aircraft movements. This is not something we practise in training, keeping maximum capacity for two hours. This required four ATCOs, which means having all the ATCOs in shift active. After the fourth week, traffic went back to normal operation.

In August 2020, traffic was at 110% of what it was before COVID-19 started in Israel.

So, what have we learned in the past five months? We learned how to operate as a team at maximum capacity traffic for long periods of time, understanding

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the role of each team member. We gathered our data, including talking after the shifts, self-reflection and positive feedback from the team. We wrote down what we should preserve as standard operating procedures so that we can use the collected experience in future training and operations. **S**



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