



International Civil Aviation Organization

MIDANPIRG/23 & RASG-MID/13 Meetings

(Cairo, Egypt, 14 – 18 June 2026)

Agenda Item 5.6: ATM-SAR

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES TO BRIDGE THE ATCO SHORTAGE
WITHIN THE MIDDLE EAST REGION

Presented by

**The International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Associations (IFATCA),
Africa and Middle East (AFM) Region**

SUMMARY

This working paper presents strategic initiatives for consideration by the MID Region to address the persistent shortage of Air Traffic Controllers (ATCOs). It focuses on recruitment, innovative training, and effective retention strategies aimed at strengthening the sustainability and resilience of the Air Traffic Management (ATM) workforce. The paper highlights key factors contributing to workforce shortages, including demographic shifts, limited training capacity and professional migration (“brain drain”), and proposes data-driven, future-oriented solutions aligned with IFATCA’s policies on professional development, just culture, and sustainable ATM capacity.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE

This working paper relates to Strategic Objectives: **Aviation Safety and Air Navigation Capacity and Efficiency**

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The global aviation sector continues to experience significant post-pandemic recovery and growth in air traffic volumes. Forecasts indicate sustained increases in passenger and cargo traffic over the coming decades, placing unprecedented demands on Air Traffic Management systems and personnel.

1.2 For the MID Region, this growth underscores the urgent need to address critical human capital deficits, particularly in the availability of qualified ATCOs who form the backbone of safe and efficient air navigation services. Adequate controller staffing is indispensable for maximising regional airspace capacity, maintaining safety standards, and ensuring the operational integrity of air transport systems.

1.3 The African Airlines Association (AFRAA) forecasts a significant growth trajectory for passenger traffic for African airlines to reach 113 million in 2025, representing a substantial 15.3% increase from 2024 figures.

1.4 Globally, the shortage of qualified air traffic controllers (ATCOs), exacerbated by retirements, limited recruitment and training disruptions during the pandemic, has intensified competition for skilled professionals. This has, in some cases, resulted in workforce migration towards more favourable employment conditions, further deepening the shortage elsewhere.

1.5 In view of forecasts projecting the need for thousands of additional controllers across the region over the next decade, there is a compelling need for a coordinated, strategic, and sustainable approach to workforce development, recruitment, and retention.

1.6 With forecast indicating a requirement for approximately 2,000 additional ATCOs in the region over the next decade, there is a pressing need for strategic workforce planning, recruitment, training and retention initiatives to ensure the long-term sustainability of ATM services.

2.0 DISCUSSION

2.1 The ATM industry faces a dual challenge: managing traffic growth while simultaneously contending with an escalating shortage of qualified personnel. For the region, this situation poses a significant risk to safety, efficiency and long-term sustainability.

2.2 IFATCA has consistently underscored, through its global policies and regional initiatives, the importance of strategic human resource planning as a cornerstone of air navigation service delivery. The Federation advocates for workforce strategies that are evidence-based, inclusive and responsive to emerging operational realities.

2.3 The persistent shortage of controllers has its roots in several interrelated factors, including retirements, insufficient training capacity and a lack of coordinated human resource planning. These challenges have been documented in multiple ICAO and IFATCA studies, which collectively stress the need for proactive measures to strengthen ATM resilience through people-centred strategies.

Current Challenges in Recruitment, Training and Retention

2.4 Recruitment Challenges

2.4.1 Recruiting Air Traffic Controllers in many parts of the region presents complex and multifaceted challenges, including:

- Limited public awareness and visibility of the profession.
- A perception of the role as excessively demanding or stressful.
- Restrictive age limits imposed by some ANSPs that may exclude capable candidates.
- Limited training opportunities due to infrastructural constraints.
- A shortage of qualified instructors and assessors.
- High attrition rates during the selection and initial training phase.

2.4.2 These factors necessitate a paradigm shift from conventional recruitment approaches towards inclusive, diversified and evidence-based recruitment frameworks.

2.5 Training Capacity and Quality

2.5.1 Training remains a critical bottleneck in addressing ATCO shortages. Persistent issues include:

- Limited simulator and technological capacity.
- Ageing infrastructure and equipment requiring modernisation.
- Shortage of qualified instructors and assessors.
- High failure and attrition rates during training.
- Financial barriers and limited access to modern training technologies.

2.5.2 To mitigate the above shortcomings, ANSPs are encouraged to consider:

- Curriculum enhancement and harmonisation aligned with ICAO's Competency-Based Training and Assessment (CBTA) frameworks.
- Integration of advanced simulation technologies (VR, MR, XR) to enhance immersion and learning outcomes.
- Collaborative training partnerships under ICAO and IFATCA frameworks.
- Accreditation and mutual recognition of training programmes to foster regional mobility and support.

2.6 Retention and Workforce Sustainability

2.6.1 Retention remains one of the most pressing challenges, shaped by professional, economic, and organisational factors such as:

- Workforce migration and global competition for skills.
- Extended duty periods and high workload, leading to fatigue.
- Inadequate remuneration and erosion of purchasing power.
- Limited career development and progression opportunities.
- Low morale associated with outdated equipment and systems.

2.6.2 Retention strategies should therefore extend beyond financial incentives to include:

- Competitive and equitable compensation packages.
- Transparent career progression frameworks.
- Fatigue management and rostering reforms.
- Mental health, peer support, and well-being programmes in line with Just Culture principles.
- Continuous professional development.
- Modern and ergonomically designed work environments.

2.7 ATCO Mobility

2.7.1 The increasing global demand for qualified ATCOs has intensified competition among ANSPs for experienced personnel. ATCO mobility is influenced by several factors, including:

- More competitive remuneration and benefits packages.
- Enhanced career development and progression opportunities.
- Improved working conditions and quality of life.
- Access to modern technologies, equipment, and operational environments.
- Greater employment stability and long-term career prospects.

2.7.2 The migration of skilled ATCOs can create staffing gaps, increase recruitment and training costs, and undermine workforce sustainability. Addressing this challenge requires coordinated retention strategies, competitive and attractive employment conditions, and sustained investment in professional development.

3. ACTION BY THE MEETING

3.1 The meeting is invited to note the information contained in this paper