

Public Land Transport Development in Saudi Arabia

GEORGE GRAY

Saudi Public Transportation Company intracity Neoplan bus.



The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has significantly upgraded its land transportation services over the past several years. The Ministry of Communications has played a major role in bringing about these momentous changes in the development and modernization of land transportation. Following is a status report of the public land transportation services in which the Transportation Affairs Deputyship is directly involved.

SAUDI ARABIAN PUBLIC TRANSPORT COMPANY

Until 1977 the only public transportation modes available in Saudi Arabia were jitney services, which were generally limited to high-density routes in major urban areas at rush hours; unorganized taxi services; and one rail line from the Arabian Gulf to Riyadh, the capital city. Beyond these limited and uncoordinated services, there were only private automobiles utilizing the rapidly developing highway system.

In 1977 the Ministry of Communications began the process of establishing public bus transit and improving other services in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The prime authority for this action was given to the Ministry of Communications by Royal Decree, which also gave the Ministry authority to establish fares for all means of transport, exclusive of air, and to supervise companies under obligation or license to the Ministry.

The Ministry of Communications conducted detailed studies of organizational alternatives for transit implementation and contract selection of an operator for such service. On the basis of these deliberations, the Saudi Public Transport Company (SAPTCO) was formed in 1978 as a Saudi joint stock company charged with operation of intracity and intercity bus service in the Kingdom under a concession contract with the Ministry of Communications. SAPTCO subsequently contracted with



Saudi Public Transportation Company intercity Mercedes bus near the Riyadh water tower.

a consultant (ATE/DMJM-USA) for management and operations assistance in the implementation of services.

SAPTCO worked quickly to begin the intracity services in the major cities of the Kingdom. By June 1981 service had been started in seven areas:

Riyadh	July 31, 1979
Mecca	October 1, 1979
Dammam/Khobar	February 5, 1980
Jeddah	February 21, 1981
Taif	May 18, 1980
Medina	June 14, 1980
Buraydah	June 1, 1981

The crash nature of starting these services in diverse locations and the comparative remoteness of some of the sites resulted in higher initial costs than normally associated with such transit services in Western nations. Costs of service are now favorably comparable with similar services in other nations, and the largest divisions, in Riyadh and Jeddah, are approaching a revenue-to-operating-cost ratio of unity.

In addition to the considerable accomplishment in providing intracity ser-

vices, intercity services were started concurrently in both the Eastern and Western parts of the country. These services were soon expanded by adding other intercity express service lines. Currently services operate between the capital city, Riyadh, and a number of the Kingdom's major cities.

The success achieved by the company in the first year of bus operation greatly exceeded expectations. The total number of passenger trips accommodated by company buses amounted to approximately 31 million, rising to 64 million the following year. The most recent data reveal the annual ridership to be 146 million passengers. As ridership continues to build, the government has increased its controls on jitney service operations and intends eventually to limit their operations to noncompetitive corridors.

All intracity passengers presently ride for a charge of 2 SR (approximately \$0.70), with the government subsidizing the difference between the substantially higher actual cost per passenger and the fare collected.

When intracity transit was first implemented, the buses operated with two-man crews—a driver plus a conduc-

Gray is Senior Advisor, U.S. Department of Transportation, and Transportation Advisor at the Transportation Affairs Deputyship, Ministry of Communications, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

tor who collected the fares. This arrangement was believed necessary because there were separate compartments on each bus for men and for women and children. The women boarded at the front of the bus and paid their fare to the driver, while men boarded at the middle of the bus and paid their fare to the conductor. Because of the great strain on operating costs, it was soon decided to convert to a driver-only operation. This involved a change to an exact-fare system and a modification to the compartments in the buses. Today the women's compartment is at the back of the bus, with fare collection on the honor system. Given the local tradition of honesty, and the relatively small number of female passengers, any potentially lost revenue was considered to be offset by the labor cost reduction by the elimination of the conductors. The change in seating compartments was introduced gradually, route by route. The changes were introduced first in the test city of Riyadh and then in other cities.

SAPTCO also provides charter service to schools and universities, and buses are rented by public agencies and others on an availability basis. Charter services generate significant profits, which offset some losses of the intracity services.

Along with the fundamental issues of daily public transport, SAPTCO also deals with the annual influx of over 2 million pilgrims from around the world during the Hajj period. During the month of Hajj, SAPTCO adjusts its entire operation to focus manpower and equipment on the transportation demands of Mecca and Medina. The annual pilgrimage of Muslims to Mecca puts a great strain on the public transportation systems of the area. In 1983 approximately 1 million foreigners and 1 million Saudis participated in the Hajj. Foreign pilgrims start arriving about 1 month before the Hajj period, and many stay until 1 month or more after, utilizing every available mode of transportation. The "High Hajj" period is 5 days in duration. Because it is a basic pillar of Islam for Muslims to carry out this duty at least once in their lifetime, if at all possible, transportation must be available for every class of people. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has committed itself to providing the necessary services for pilgrims. SAPTCO now plays an important role by providing a large portion of the services for the transportation of pilgrims.

The company continues to expand by increasing the number of lines and the scope of services rendered, with the

concomitant need to increase the number of buses and the operation and maintenance facilities.

The establishment of the public transportation service has had a favorable impact on modern Saudi society. Enhancement of personal mobility and reduction in vehicular accidents and injuries are two major benefits of the program.

AIRPORT LIMOUSINE

Because many of Saudi Arabia's new airports are located well outside the cities, there is a need for public transportation services to and from airports in most of the major cities of the Kingdom. The Ministry of Communications governs the licensing of these services, and establishes operating parameters including tariff, size of fleet, type of unit, and allowed age.

The license does not grant a monopoly on transport to the airport, as additional licenses may be granted to any company that requests one, provided that the required standards and conditions are met. To acquire a license, a company must meet specifications regarding car model and age; provide service 24 hours a day; make specified provisions for passenger safety and comfort; and comply with the tariff established by the Ministry.

As of March 1984, 27 licenses have been issued to national companies to provide airport services, using over 200 cars in accordance with the specifications put forward by the Ministry. Limousine services are currently provided to the airports of Riyadh, Jeddah, Medina, Abha, Gassim, Yanbu, Tabouk, Hail, Jizan, Dhahran, and Taif.

TAXI

The regulations for taxi services were put into effect in October 1982, and are incorporated into the Kingdom's traffic code.

Specifications include a restriction on vehicle age and color, as well as require air conditioning and safety belts for front-seat passengers. Taxi meters are mandatory, with rates set and reviewed on a regular basis by the Minis-

Saudi Public Transportation Company intercity Mercedes bus stopping near a small mosque.



try of Communications. An in-service lighted panel on top of the cab is required to indicate that the vehicle is a taxi, and to indicate whether or not it is available. There are also restrictions on who can own and operate a taxi in the Kingdom, with a minimum age restriction of 35 years. This last requirement is intended to encourage employment of older Saudis who have limited opportunities for higher education.

CAR RENTAL

The Ministry of Communications also administers rules for the establishment and the operation of car rental facilities, including setting rental rates. Licensed firms are not permitted to operate cars that are more than 3 years old. The number of licenses granted for the practice of this activity totaled 22 in November 1983. Services are available in the major cities of Saudi Arabia.

JITNEY SERVICES

Licenses are granted for the establishment and operation of jitney services in areas that are not served by SAPTCO, or in some cases, as a supplement to existing SAPTCO services.

Seasonal bus licenses are also granted to transport pilgrims to the Holy Areas. The Ministry of Communications sets allowable rates and conducts continuous followup studies to identify this important public transportation need.

GOODS AND EQUIPMENT TRANSPORTATION ON HIGHWAYS

The goals of the Ministry of Communications regarding truck transportation on Saudi Arabia's highways are

1. To protect the government's investment in highways and bridges by controlling damaging loads;
2. To minimize truck shipping costs to consumers while providing a fair return to operators on investment; and
3. To provide adequate truck transport services throughout the Kingdom.

The Ministry licenses truck transport companies and establishments and offices for the dispatch of goods and equipment. It sets truck transport rates by ton/kilometer. The transport license issued is good for three Hijra years, and can be extended provided that the licensee operates his trucks within the conditions established by the Ministry. The Ministry has the right to make financial and technical inspections of the licensee at any time and monitors activity records submitted by licensees. The license also establishes that the licensee is responsible for any damage that occurs to public and private property during transport operations.

The number of transport licenses granted by the Ministry to commercial truck transport companies is currently over 860, covering more than 9,400 trucks. A total of 1,500 licenses have also been granted for the operation of small trucks. A total of 130 offices are licensed for dispatching trucks for transport.

RAIL TRANSPORTATION

Rail services are provided by the Saudi Government Railroad Organization (SGRRO), an independent government agency. The Ministry of Communications is responsible for national, regional, and corridor transportation planning, which guides railroad development. The Minister is Chairman of the Board of SGRRO.

Currently there is only one railway line, from Dammam to Riyadh. It has played an active role for about 30 years in the transportation of goods. Port congestion at Dammam brought about the creation of a dry dock at Riyadh in 1978, which has given the railway line new life and an expanding market. Despite extremely low freight rates, revenues from containerized cargo traffic exceeded SR 80 million last year. The Railway Customs Terminal at Riyadh Dry Port handled a monthly average of 3,700 containers for the first 7 months of 1983.

SGRRO's top development priority is a new, direct railway line now under construction that will decrease the rail distance between Dammam and Riyadh

by 120 km and allow diesel electric locomotives to attain an average speed of 150 km per hour. The new track has been designed specifically for desert conditions. Fifty percent of the line has now been finished, but it will take another couple of years to complete the entire project. The new lines will reduce travel time from 7 to 3½ hours, as well as provide a luxury form of travel, with coaches to be equipped with such items as telephone and telex. Railway terminals are being upgraded as well. New terminals now underway in Riyadh, Dammam, and Hofuf will have such facilities as banks, post offices, car hire and hotel booking agencies, and shops.

The current 5-year plan for rolling stock is 1,500 wagons. Forty passenger coaches are being manufactured by French and German firms, with cargo carriages on order from Korea and Brazil. The lot will include 200 wagons for containers, 50 flat bed cars, and 13 car carriers. Also, 12 locomotives are on order from General Motors Diesel Division and Franco Rail of France. A central maintenance workshop with a capacity to overhaul 100 diesel locomotives is under contract.

A future planned project is the 100-km line between Dammam and Jubail, where it is hoped that the railway will serve several industries, such as fertilizer and steel, which are presently using trucks. In addition, the expansion of rail service to Jeddah and other points in the Western Province is being considered, and the Ministry expects to begin a feasibility study of this project in the near future.

CONCLUSION

The Transportation Affairs Deputyship, Ministry of Communications, has made significant strides in providing for public land transportation in the rapidly developing country of Saudi Arabia. Additional improvements are currently in progress. A conscientious effort is being made to involve private enterprise in the provision of services to as great an extent as is practical, and to develop a healthy industry with a minimum of government regulation.