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A Benchmark of Progress, Electrical Grid Fails Iraqis

By **STEVEN LEE MYERS**

BAGHDAD — Ikbal Ali, a bureaucrat in a beaded head scarf, accompanied by a phalanx of police officers, quickly found what she was out looking for in the summer swelter: electricity thieves. Six black cables stretched from a power pole to a row of auto-repair shops, siphoning what few hours of power Iraq's straining system provides.

"Take them all down," Ms. Ali ordered, sending a worker up in a crane's bucket to disentangle the connections. A shop owner, Haitham Farhan, responded mockingly, using the words now uttered across Iraq as a curse, "Maku kahraba" — "There is no electricity."

From the beginning of the war more than seven years ago, the state of electricity has been one of the most closely watched benchmarks of Iraq's progress, and of the American effort to transform a dictatorship into a democracy.

And yet, as the American combat mission — Operation Iraqi Freedom, in the Pentagon's argot — officially ends this month, Iraq's government still struggles to provide one of the most basic services.

Ms. Ali's campaign against electricity theft — a belated bandage on a broken body — makes starkly clear the mixed legacy that America leaves behind as Iraq begins to truly govern itself, for better and worse.

Iraq now has elections, a functioning, if imperfect, army and an oil industry on the cusp of a potential boom. Yet Baghdad, the capital, had five hours of electricity a day in July.

The chronic power shortages are the result of myriad factors, including war, drought and corruption, but ultimately they reflect a dysfunctional government that **remains deadlocked and unresponsive** to popular will. That has generated disillusionment and dissent, including protests this summer that, while violent in two cases, were a different measure of Iraq's new freedoms.

“Democracy didn’t bring us anything,” Mr. Farhan said in his newly darkened shop. Then he corrected himself. “Democracy brought us a can of Coke and a beer.”

The overall legacy of the American invasion today, like that of the war itself, remains a matter of dispute, colored by ideology, politics and faith in democracy’s ultimate ability to take root in the heart of the Arab world.

Even Iraqis suspicious of American motives hoped that the overthrow of [Saddam Hussein](#) would bring modern, competent governance. Still, the streets are littered with trash, drinking water is polluted, hospitals are bleak and often unsafe, and buildings bombed by the Americans in 2003 or by insurgents since remain ruined shells.

What is clear is that Iraqis’ expectations of a reliable supply of electricity and other services, like their expectations of democracy itself, have exceeded what either Americans or the country’s quarrelling politicians have so far been able to meet.

“Iraqi politicians are killing our optimism,” Hassan Shihab said, complaining about blackouts after Friday Prayer at a mosque in Baquba, northwest of Baghdad. Dictatorship, he added, “was more merciful.”

Iraq’s electricity problem is, of course, older than its still-uncertain embrace of a new form of government. Before Mr. Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait 20 years ago this month, Iraq had the capacity to produce 9,295 megawatts of power. By 2003, after American bombings and years of international sanctions, it was half that.

The shortages since have hobbled economic development and disrupted almost every aspect of daily life. They have transformed cities. Rumbling generators outside homes and other buildings — previously nonexistent — and thickets of wires as dense as a jungle canopy have become as much a part of Iraq’s cityscapes as blast walls and checkpoints.

Most of the generators are privately operated, and the cost — roughly \$7 per ampere — has for ordinary Iraqis become too exorbitant to power anything more than a light and a television.

“I’ve never seen good electricity from the day I was born,” said Abbas Riyadh, 22, a barber in Sadr City, the impoverished Shiite neighborhood in Baghdad. As he spoke, as if on cue, the lights went out.

Billions of Dollars Later

The United States has spent \$5 billion on electrical projects alone, nearly 10 percent of the \$53 billion it has devoted to rebuilding Iraq, second only to what it has spent on rebuilding Iraq’s

security forces. It has had some effect, but there have also been inefficiency and corruption, as there have been in projects to rebuild schools, water and sewerage systems, roads and ports.

The special inspector general for Iraqi reconstruction, Stuart W. Bowen Jr., said that one quarter of 54 reconstruction projects his office had investigated — including those providing electricity and other basic services — had not been completed or carried on by the Iraqis they were built for.

The United States is now winding such projects down, leaving some unfinished and others, already in disrepair, in the hands of national and provincial governments that so far seem unwilling or unable to maintain and operate them adequately.

“We brought the framework of electoral democracy,” Mr. Bowen said, “but its future efficacy is very much in doubt.”

Iraq does generate more electricity than it did in 2003, but nowhere near enough to match rising demand, driven higher by the proliferation of consumer goods, especially air-conditioners. Democracy, the easing of the country’s isolation and improving security have, paradoxically, created new conditions and demands that the government of Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki has been unable to address.

Iraq’s electrical grid remains a patchwork of old power plants and new, supplemented with makeshift and inadequate solutions. Iraq now imports 700 megawatts from Iran. When temperatures soared this summer, it paid for two electricity-generating ships from Turkey to dock near Basra, one of the most badly affected cities, at a cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The country’s transmission and distribution networks are aging and mismanaged by a bureaucracy as sclerotic as it was in Mr. Hussein’s era.

The entire system is hampered by poor planning and by interagency rivalries that, for example, delay fuel to power plants; by a lack of conservation; by continuing terrorist attacks on electrical towers, including four in the last half of July in Baghdad, Anbar and Diyala Provinces.

Corruption — which the special inspector general’s office called “Iraq’s ‘second insurgency’ ” in a report released on Friday — is pervasive. Mr. Farhan, the shop owner, said his landlord had bribed Ministry of Electricity workers to install the pirated cables three years ago. “He couldn’t just connect the cables himself,” he noted.

Fight Against Pilfering

The government campaign against pilfering — which officials said resulted in hundreds of miles of cables removed, with barely discernible effect — followed the public protests, including one in Basra in June that **ended with the police opening fire**, killing two.

At first Mr. Maliki denounced the protests as the work of foreign agents, an ominous echo of the conspiracy-minded remarks of Saddam Hussein, while the Interior Ministry announced strict limits on public protests.

Then Mr. Maliki, fighting for a second term as prime minister, moved to quell the populist outrage. **He fired his electricity minister** and ordered cuts in power to the privileged enclaves of ministers and politicians, a practice that began under Mr. Hussein and continues. Few Iraqis believe those cuts have been meaningful or will be lasting.

In Mosul, the troubled northern city, the consequence of the campaign against piracy turned violent in June. When government workers cut an illegal connection from the Nineveh Textile Factory to a restive neighborhood called Mahmoun, insurgents retaliated by shelling the plant.

“I knew it was not safe for me, but I did it anyway,” said a ministry engineer, referring to ordering the cutting of the cables.

“After that, the electricity went back to normal, as it was before, but the reply came quickly when the factory was targeted with mortars. There were many victims of the success,” said the engineer, who would give his name only as Abdullah, Father of Mohammed. Twelve people at the factory were wounded.

Mr. Maliki and his ministers have pleaded for patience, which is clearly running out, especially as the newly elected Parliament remains deadlocked over choosing a new prime minister and government nearly five months after the election.

The new acting electricity minister, Hussain al-Shahristani, said at an investment conference in July that Iraq would add 5,000 megawatts by 2012 but acknowledged that that would not keep up with demand.

“The problem will persist because there is no magic wand or miracle that can solve it,” he said.

He then urged Iraqis to turn off all but one air-conditioner in their homes — and presumably to huddle with their families in that room.

Bureaucratic Hurdles

The government’s inaction compounds the problem. In 2008, Mr. Maliki announced a deal to

buy 56 gas turbine generators from General Electric and 16 from Siemens for a total cost of \$5 billion. More than two years later the purchase remains stalled because of political quarrels over financing and delays in negotiating contracts to install them.

These types of generators have their own problems. At Baghdad South, a complex of three power plants, two General Electric generators installed in 2005 by the United States operate at about half their 125-megawatt capacity.

The plant director, Abdul Karim Mohammed, said the generators were designed to operate at an optimal efficiency using natural gas, not the fuel oil that the Iraqis use, and when the temperature is 60 degrees. It was 120 the day he spoke.

Already he has been ordered to defer recommended maintenance to keep the machines running at full tilt, with the consequence of wearing them out faster. Needed parts are prohibited by Iraq's customs rules. Mr. Mohammed has spent a year trying to break through the bureaucracy. "It's not a technical issue," he said. "It's a political issue."

American diplomats and military commanders respond defensively when pressed on why, after all the American investments and expertise, Iraq still struggles to provide electricity.

They cite challenges that would overwhelm any government trying to fix a country emerging from dictatorship and war: violence, climate, aging infrastructure and soaring demand, which they call a sign of a burgeoning consumer society.

"Are people frustrated by this?" the American ambassador, [Christopher R. Hill](#), asked. "Yes, I think they are."

He added: "I think that the frustrations were evident on the street, but the solutions are ones that involve timely decision-making. I'm not going to criticize the government on whether it moved fast enough to build more power stations, but I think Iraqi voters are going to look at that."

The question today is whether voters can force their leaders to act — and whether only moderately functional services will get worse as America continues to disengage. Not all Iraqis are persuaded. Even some senior officials express doubts about the country's governance, about Iraq's readiness to function: either on practical matters like electricity or more abstract ones like democracy.

"This is the fault of the Americans," the deputy minister of electricity, Ra'ad al-Haras, said. "They put in place a big, wide-open democracy after the regime. They went from zero democracy to 100 percent. Democracy has to be step by step. You see the result."

Reporting was contributed by Stephen Farrell, Khalid D. Ali and Zaid Thaker from Baghdad, and Iraqi employees of The New York Times from Mosul, Baquba and Basra.