

# Iraq: A Country in Shambles

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*Despite promises made for improvements, Iraq's economy and infrastructure are still a disaster.*

As a daily drumbeat of violence continues to reverberate across Iraq, people here continue to struggle to find some sense of normality, a task made increasingly difficult due to ongoing violence and the lack of both water and electricity.

During the build-up to the US-led invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration promised the war would bring Iraqis a better life, and vast improvements in their infrastructure, which had been severely debilitated by nearly 13 years of strangling economic sanctions.

More jobs, improved water availability, more reliable electricity supplies, and major rehabilitation of the medical infrastructure were promised.

But now that the US military has ended its formal military occupation of Iraq, nearly eight years of war has left the promises as little more than a mirage.

## Ongoing water shortages

Hashim Hassan is the Deputy Director of the Baghdad Water Authority (BWA), and he admits to an ongoing shortage of clean drinking water for Baghdad's seven million residents.

"We produce 2.5 million cubic litres daily, so there is a shortage of 1m cubic litres every day," Hassan explained to Al Jazeera. "We've added projects to increase water availability, and we are hoping to stop the ongoing shortage by the end of 2012."

According to Hassan, 80 per cent of the Baghdad's piping network needs rehabilitation – work currently underway – in addition to positioning 100 compact units around the city, which would increase clean water availability until larger plants can come fully online.

Several water treatment plants are already being extended, including one that would increase the capacity of a wastewater treatment facility in Sadr City, a sprawling slum of roughly three million people.

Hassan said that health committees and the Ministry of Environment carry out tests, and along with BWA testing, 1,000 water samples are checked daily, "less than one per cent of the samples fail" he said. The "acceptable threshold" is five per cent.

Bechtel, a multi-billion dollar US-based global engineering and construction company – whose board members have close ties to the former Bush administration – received \$2.3bn

of Iraqi reconstruction funds and US taxpayer money, but left the country without completing many of the tasks it set out to.

Bechtel's contract for Iraq had included reconstruction of water treatment systems, electricity plants, sewage systems, airports and roads.

Managers at water departments around Iraq say that the only repairs they managed during the US occupation were through UN offices and humanitarian aid organisations. The ministry provided them with very little chlorine for water treatment. "New projects" were no more than simple maintenance operations that did little to halt collapsing infrastructure.

Bechtel was among the first companies, along with Halliburton (where former US Vice-President Dick Cheney once worked), to have received fixed-fee contracts drawn to guarantee profit.

Ahmed al-Ani who works with a major Iraqi construction contracting company told Al Jazeera the model Bechtel adopted was certain to fail.

"They charged huge sums of money for the contracts they signed, then they sold them to smaller companies who resold them again to small inexperienced Iraqi contractors," Ani said. "These inexperienced contractors then had to execute the works badly because of the very low prices they get, and the lack of experience."

According to a March 2011 report by the UN's Inter-Agency Information and Analysis Unit, one in five Iraqi households use an unsafe source of drinking water, and another 16 per cent report daily supply problems.

The situation is even worse in rural areas, where only 43 per cent have access to safe drinking water, and water available for agriculture is usually scarce and of very poor quality. These facts have led more Iraqis than ever to leave rural communities in search of water and work in the cities, further compounding already existing problems there.

The UN report states: "Quality of water used for drinking and agriculture is poor, violating Iraq National Standards and WHO guidelines. Leaking sewage pipes and septic tanks contaminate the drinking water network with wastewater. Eighty per cent of households do not treat water before drinking. Furthermore, just 18 per cent of wastewater is treated, with the rest released directly into waterways."

And this is exactly what many Iraqis experience first-hand.

"Sometimes we turn on the tap and nothing comes," explained Baghdad resident Ali Abdullah. "Other times the colour is brown, or yellow, or sometimes even smells of benzene."

## Electricity and sewage

Street side electricity generators are now a common sight around Iraq's capital city, where the average home receives between four and eight hours of electricity each day. Some areas, such as Sadr City, receive an average of less than five hours a day, with some portions of the area receiving a mere hour to two a day – and sometimes none at all.

Many people opt to simply pay private vendors for electricity from the generators, whose owners run lines to their respective clients.

Nabil Toufiq is a generator operator who serves 220 homes for 12 hours each day.

“We buy our diesel on the black market, not from the government,” he told Al Jazeera. “We expect this business to continue forever because government corruption prevents them from fixing our problems.”

Abu Zahra, a media liaison worker with the office of Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr in Sadr City, Baghdad, explained that, in addition to the ongoing lack of electricity, every aspect of the infrastructure in the area needs improvement.

“We are depending on the street generators,” Zahra said, before going on to say that roads have been resurfaced, but due to corruption causing corners to be cut, the pavement begins to fracture and break apart within six months, causing the cycle to begin again.

This is readily apparent, as the garbage-strewn roads are bumpy, cracking, with potholes abundant.

Turn off one of the main thoroughfares through the area and one quickly finds dirt roads with sewage streaming down the gutters.

Zahra said that one of the hopes of Sadr joining the political fray was that this area of Baghdad would obtain better services – but this has clearly not come to pass.

“Sadr asked the government to give better services and jobs here, but nothing has happened,” he said, while children played near raw sewage. “There have been demonstrations here where people carried shovels asking for work, and empty kerosene cans asking for fuel. Meanwhile, we have a totally failed sewage system that needs complete reconstruction.”

While water-borne diseases and diarrhoea are common across Baghdad, but they are rampant in Sadr City, where the lack of potable water, coupled with raw sewage flowing through many of the streets, make the spread of disease inevitable.

Toufiq pointed out an issue that does not bode well for the future – and likely aptly describes the root of Iraq’s myriad problems.

“Many people make a living from the system being broken,” he said. “From the government, to me, to the gas sellers.”

### Broken economy

According to the UNDP, Iraq has a poverty rate of 23 per cent, which means roughly six million Iraqis are plagued by poverty and hunger, despite the recent increase in Iraq’s oil exports. Iraq’s Ministry of Planning has also announced that the country needed some \$6.8bn to reduce the level of poverty in the country.

Zahra concurs.

“No-one in my family has a job,” he said. “And in my sister’s house, they are seven adults,

and only two of them work.”

Inside a busy market, Hassan Jaibur, a medical assistant who cannot find work in his field, is instead selling fruit.

“The situation is bad and getting worse,” he said. “Prices continue to rise, and there are no real jobs. All we can do is live today.”

Jaibur said he and his family are living on the fruit he sells, but he has a sick child and any profits he earns all go to medication.

“All of my relatives and friends are in a similar situation,” he added. “Most of them try to find work as day labourers.”

Gheda Karam sells dates and fruits. Her husband was paralysed during the Iraq-Iran war, and the benefits they get from the government for his disability are not enough.

“My family is suffering too much,” she told Al Jazeera. “Even yesterday we did not eat dinner. We are 20 of us in an old house, and I’m the only one with work.”

She paused to cry, then wiped away the tears.

“My children see things in the market they want to eat or drink, but we can afford none of it, and I am in debt to the fruit sellers. God help us.”

The state of the economy in Iraq is a disaster. Yet this irony is highlighted by the fact that Iraq has proven oil reserves third only behind Saudi Arabia and Iran – hence one would expect it to be one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

But nowhere is the lack of economic growth more evident than in Baghdad. According to the Central Bank of Iraq, unemployment and “under-employment” are both at 46 per cent, although many in Iraq feel this is a generously low estimate.

Iraq continues to have a cash economy; meaning there are no credit cards, almost no checking accounts, no transfer of electronic funds, and only a few ATMs.

Iraq lacks a functioning postal service, has no public transportation, nor a national airline – and most goods sold in Iraq are imported.

Only in the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq is there rapid development and an effectively functioning government.

Iraq is ranked the eighth most corrupt country in the world, according to Transparency International. That means Iraq is tied with Haiti, and just barely less corrupt than Afghanistan.

One of Iraq’s ministers recently took a forced resignation because he signed a billion-dollar contract with a bankrupt German company, along with a shell company in Canada, which had no assets or operations, only an address.

Lack of security

Recent spates of coordinated bombings that have killed more than 100 Iraqis and wounded

more than 200 in the past few weeks are evidence of Iraq's current security situation.

Despite Iraq's own forces numbering 280,000 soldiers with 645,000 police and border guards, for a total of nearly one million men, and a capital city clogged with checkpoints, security remains elusive.

As Prime Minister Nour al-Maliki said recently, there can be no security without political stability. Given that his critics accuse al-Maliki of upsetting the delicate political balance within the Iraqi government by ordering the arrest of Vice President Tareq al-Hashimi, his words ring truer than ever.

Despite most of the daily violence in Iraq having long since fallen from the headlines, reports are constant and blood continues to flow.

Reported attacks around the country on January 3 included a roadside bomb killing an Iraqi soldier near Mosul, a sticky bomb seriously wounding a Pershmerga guard in Kirkuk, gunmen killing a Sahwa militia member and his wife in Muqdadiya, and a roadside bomb which wounded three civilians in Baghdad - to name but a few.

When most Iraqis are asked what their main concern is, "security" tends to be the first answer, then followed by electricity, water, jobs, and healthcare. Yet security is the foundation upon which the rest of the infrastructure can be built, so ongoing attacks across Iraq, and the chaos they bring, do not bode well for the future.

In December 2011, Iraq signed a deal worth roughly \$3bn to buy 18 more F-16 fighter jet planes from the United States - a controversial move given that it occurred while Maliki was making moves his critics say were nothing more than consolidating power.

During a December press conference with al-Maliki, President Obama said, "We've got to train [Iraq's] pilots and make sure that they're up and running and that we have an effective Iraqi air force."

Most Iraqis would prefer to have their streets safe, before worrying about their airspace.

And for people like Gheda Karam, whose family is having to skip meals on a regular basis, a government that would spend \$3bn on improving infrastructure and the economy would be preferred over one that buys highly advanced warplanes.

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