

Introduction

Author: [Tiare Rath](#)

Despite vast investment, Iraq's sclerotic electricity network shows little sign of improvement, to the despair of residents and businesses alike.

Iraq's electricity system has been in shambles for nearly two decades, and power continues to be the country's largest reconstruction challenge.

It is also the common complaint that links all of Iraq. Despite the widespread violence, bombs and shootings do not affect every province - but the lack of electricity is a burden every Iraqi must bear. In the hour or so it took to write this report, for example, the power blacked out and returned five times in the Sulaimaniyah neighbourhood where IWPR is based.

For outsiders, electricity may seem a trivial concern compared with the rest of Iraq's problems. But the reality is that there is a lot of talk about megawatts, kilovolts and amperes among ordinary people, most of whom have no professional background in electricity but have become experts nonetheless.

Power is a primary issue for Iraqis, one that the United States and Iraq's national and local governments recognise is integral to the development of the country. Electricity has, in many ways, become Iraq's most valued resource.

A limited electricity supply forces businesses and homes to buy their own generators. They must supply fuel for those generators, which is usually purchased at an inflated price on the black market. The generators may or may not provide enough power to run a refrigerator, for example, and only wealthier Iraqis can afford a generator that can power an air conditioner or a heater.

The US has poured about 4.7 billion dollars into repairing Iraq's electricity networks, but Baghdad receives fewer hours of power than it did four years ago. Most of the rest of the country enjoys more hours of electricity but is nowhere near receiving 24-hour power.

The US Embassy in Baghdad reports that electricity production should be around 8,440 megawatts, but the supply is just under 5,000 megawatts for a variety of reasons including attacks on electricity infrastructure, corruption, poor maintenance and fuel shortages.

An IWPR report from Baghdad explains why the capital has the worst power in the country. US reconstruction money is drying up, and the Iraqi ministry of electricity estimates it will cost 27 billion dollars to repair the system.

Corruption is one of the major issues frustrating Iraq's development. In Karbala, so-called emergency lines which provide 24-hour power to hospitals, police stations and other places crucial to the community are also being used illegally by officials, political parties and militias, according to an IWPR report.

Iraqi Kurdistan's economic growth and relative stability have not saved it from blackouts. The north is plagued by an irregular power supply that has brought Kurdish residents into the streets to protest against the government.

The Kurdistan Regional Government says it has hundreds of millions of dollars in electricity projects underway, but few locals have seen the benefits.

Tiare Rath is IWPR's Middle East editor.

Location: Middle East

Palestine

Israel

Syria

Topic: Special Report: Iraqi Electricity

Crisis

Focus: Iraq

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