

August 23, 2007

Militias Seizing Control of Iraqi Electricity Grid

By [JAMES GLANZ](#) and [STEPHEN FARRELL](#)

BAGHDAD, Aug. 22 — Armed groups increasingly control the antiquated switching stations that channel electricity around [Iraq](#), the electricity minister said Wednesday.

That is dividing the national grid into fiefs that, he said, often refuse to share electricity generated locally with Baghdad and other power-starved areas in the center of Iraq.

The development adds to existing electricity problems in Baghdad, which has been struggling to provide power for more than a few hours a day because insurgents regularly blow up the towers that carry power lines into the city.

The government lost the ability to control the grid centrally after the American-led invasion in 2003, when looters destroyed electrical dispatch centers, the minister, Karim Wahid, said in a news briefing attended also by United States military officials.

The briefing had been intended, in part, to highlight successes in the American-financed reconstruction program here.

But it took an unexpected turn when Mr. Wahid, a highly respected technocrat and longtime ministry official, began taking questions from Arab and Western journalists.

Because of the lack of functioning dispatch centers, Mr. Wahid said, ministry officials have been trying to control the flow of electricity from huge power plants in the south, north and west by calling local officials there and ordering them to physically flip switches.

But the officials refuse to follow those orders when the armed groups threaten their lives, he said, and the often isolated stations are abandoned at night and easily manipulated by whatever group controls the area.

This kind of manipulation can cause the entire system to collapse and bring nationwide blackouts, sometimes seriously damaging the generating plants that the United States has paid millions of dollars to repair.

Such a collapse took place just last week, the State Department reported in a recent assessment, which said the provinces' failure to share electricity resulted in a "massive loss of power" on Aug. 14 at 5 p.m.

It added that "all Baghdad generation and 60 percent of national generation was temporarily lost." By midnight, half the lost power had been restored, the report said.

With summer temperatures routinely exceeding 110 degrees, and demand soaring for air-conditioners and refrigerators, those blackouts deeply undermine an Iraqi government whose popular support is already weak.

In some cases, Mr. Wahid and other Iraqi officials say, insurgents cut power to the capital as part of their effort to topple the government.

But the officials said it was clear that in other cases, local militias, gangs and even some provincial military and civilian officials held on to the power simply to help their own areas.

With the manual switching system in place, there is little that the central government can do about it, Mr. Wahid said.

“We are working in this primitive way for controlling and distributing electricity,” he said.

Mr. Wahid said the country’s power plants were not designed to supply electricity to specific cities or provinces. “We have a national grid,” he said.

He cited Mosul and Baquba, in the north, and Basra, in the south, as being among the cities refusing to route electricity elsewhere. “This greatly influenced the distribution of power throughout Iraq,” Mr. Wahid complained.

At times the hoarding of power provides cities around power plants with 24 hours of uninterrupted electricity, a luxury that is unheard of in Baghdad, where residents say they generally get two to six hours of power a day.

Mr. Wahid said Baghdad was suffering mainly because the provinces were holding onto the electricity, but he said shortages of fuel and insurgents’ strikes on gas and oil pipelines also contributed to the anemic output in the capital.

Although a refusal by provincial governments to provide their full quotas to Baghdad could easily be seen as greedy when electricity is in such short supply, many citizens near the power plants regard the new reality as only fair; under [Saddam Hussein](#), the capital enjoyed nearly 24 hours a day of power at the expense of the provinces that are now flush with electricity.

Keeping electricity for the provinces, said Mohammed al-Abbasi, a journalist in Hilla, in the south, “is a reaction against the capital, Baghdad, as power was provided to it without any cuts during the dictator’s reign.”

Other Iraqis are just grateful for anything that brings more comfort to their families and neighborhoods.

“We support any step that provides us with power,” said Ahmed Abdul Hussein, an ironsmith in Najaf, in the south.

The precision with which militias control electricity in the provinces became apparent in Basra on May 25 when [Muktada al-Sadr](#)’s Mahdi Army carried out a sustained attack against a small British-Iraqi base in the city center, and turned that control to tactical military advantage.

“The lights in the city were going on and off all over,” said Cpl. Daniel Jennings, 26, one of the British defenders who fought off the attack.

“They were really controlling the whole area, turning the lights on and off at will. They would shut down one area of the city, turn it dark, attack us from there, and then switch off another one and come at us from that direction.

“What they did was very well planned.”

The electricity briefing began with Brig. Gen. Michael J. Walsh, commanding general of the Gulf Region Division of the [Army Corps of Engineers](#), saying the United States had finished more than 80 percent of the projects it planned for rehabilitating the Iraqi grid.

He said that even though Baghdad now got no power from either the south or north, about a third of its electricity was still supplied by the national grid.

But General Walsh said he knew people in Baghdad were far from satisfied.

“I understand people’s impatience,” he said. “Certainly when you flip the light switch and nothing happens, you can get angry.”

Damien Cave contributed reporting from Baghdad, and Iraqi employees of The New York Times from Baghdad, Basra, Najaf, Hilla and Karbala.

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