

Matt Sanchez

February 26, 2008

Bright Idea--Iraqi Electricity

By Matt Sanchez

Most of us expect something to happen when we plug in an appliance or flip a switch, but in Iraq flipping a switch to get power is a key part of fighting terrorism.

The strategy to combat a counter-insurgency consists mainly of improving the living conditions; that means bringing a national infrastructure neglected by dictatorial socialism and asphyxiated by a decade of sanctions to a functional level for a growing population with an increasing appetite for energy.

In the past, the media reported how little electricity the average resident of Baghdad had. During a low point, only two or three hours of power was available daily to the residents of the Iraqi capital. How hard could it be to repair a couple of fallen lines, even if terrorists targeted infrastructure, the American public back home thought while shaking a collective head.

The answer could be found over 100 miles north in places like Haditha, site of a major hydroelectric dam that provides power to parts of Baghdad and every major city in between.

Haditha Dam is a mish-mash of several projects combining mostly East German equipment installed by mostly Yugoslavian engineers. The dam is a concrete fortress and the current home to the 3rd battalion 23rd Marines, a reserve unit pulling in Marines from states throughout the South. Thick concrete bulwarks make Haditha Dam one of the safest places in Iraq, but the importance of electricity guarantees that Iraq's second supplier of hydropower always will be a target.



Marines in Fallujah patrol the streets. Besides sniper fire and improvised explosives, troops also have to watch out for dangling live wires

Soldiers from the eastern European country of Azerbaijan are stationed on one side of the river; they're job is to protect the dam from any attack. Al-Qaida has the goal of wrecking anything that could make life bearable in Iraq.

Iraqi engineers are in charge of the six whirling turbines that emit a constant hum as they turn water and motion into light and heat. The engineers live in a village not far away. Of course, the nearly 400 employees have to be protected, the employee village itself is just outside of Haditha.

VIDEO: Haditha Dam is built on the Euphrates River and requires special security measures. The Marines revived the type of river patrols that were common in Vietnam. New equipment such as the MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles) are used to protect this crucial structure.



Iraqi unemployment is high, and Haditha offers much coveted, good jobs. The bad news for the multitude of applicants is that 18 Haditha power plant employees have been targeted and killed since 2004; the good news is that most of the residents of Haditha have electricity 24 hours a day.

The dam was designed to supply power to the immediate area, before sending energy to the other major metropolitan areas. It was a great political system for turning the lights off and on for those who cooperated and those who did not.

"The distribution network is overpowered and way overtaxed," said civilian electrical engineer Scott Gates.

Gates has spent the past year working on maintaining the flow of electricity to the Anbar province. As the situation has improved, the demand for electricity has increased. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, the demand for energy has skyrocketed as satellite televisions and air conditioners have become standard expectations in the Iraqi households.

Unfortunately, the Iraqi power grid is not getting any younger. Outside of the former British military bases, the average Iraqi began to get electricity in the 1950s, but as the years progressed, the equipment stayed the same. Haditha Dam was completed in the 1980s but it seems much older than that. The halls have little or no natural lighting, and the linoleum on the floors looks especially dingy despite the constant swabbing of the deck by lower ranking Marines.

"It's fair to say there is not a strong culture of maintenance in Iraq," said Gates, who was training his replacement before returning to the United States. Pirkle has been at Haditha Dam since early 2006 and sees progress. He led me to the main control room where a dozen or so engineers watched a soccer game while overseeing all the equipment that monitored the dam. Some of the engineers spoke good English, others did not.



Tapping into the grid is something done throughout Iraq. Here, several dozen households attempt to sap a bit of power, which only blows a transformer and sends residents to another tower. This wire situation is not uncommon, but military vehicles also can complicate matters by unintentionally ripping down low-hanging cables with their high reaching antennas.



The demand for electricity has grown steadily since the fall of Saddam Hussein and the influx of electric appliances like air conditioners

"The only thing I know in Arabic are the names of the fish," Gates remarked.

Like most of Iraq, no one remembered or wished to remember much of what the energy challenges were under Iraq's former government, but they all had an opinion about the future.

"They need to modernize this dam," said several of the engineers.

On the 10th story, near the helicopter pad, the view of the Euphrates was bright, but down river in the Anbar capital of Ramadi power problems were just one of several issues.

Throughout Iraq, terrorists had targeted sub-stations and transformers, it was the job of the Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team (EPRT) Navy Commander Kevin Anderson to bring power levels back to something livable. In this, Commander Anderson had largely succeeded. Anbaris had anywhere from 20 to 24 hours of electricity coming from the power grid.

As the residents of Ramadi get used to the return of electricity, they are also growing accustomed to the new ways. Electricity was largely subsidized in Saddam's Iraq, for many it was free. Today's power reliability comes at a price, there's a certain convenience to having energy on demand. The security situation in Iraq has improved enough to where the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) and local governments are feeling safe enough to go out and read meters. Some Iraqis are getting their first utility bills in years.



Throughout Iraq, the sound of these mini-generators means that most Iraqis do not rely exclusively on the official power grid. The problem then is not one of electricity but of finding fuel to power the generators. For a country with enormous oil reserves, gasoline is scarce and difficult to buy

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