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Iraq: 10 years later

By Roula Khalaf

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A decade on from the US invasion, the country is still struggling to find its future

The man had approached me in the decaying lobby of Baghdad's Palestine Hotel 10 years ago, with a little piece of paper in his hand, my name scribbled in Arabic. His name was Abbas al-Sarray, he was an Iraqi Shia, sometime driver, sometime construction worker. He had 10 children and he was looking for a job. A few days earlier, across the street in Firdos Square, a new Iraq had been born, as the towering statue of Saddam Hussein, the dictator who had turned the country to ruin during more than two decades of rule, came tumbling down, with help from American troops who had marched into the capital.

People such as Abbas, who came from the long-suppressed Shia majority, were optimistic, if a little apprehensive, about what lay ahead and how long the Americans would stay. This was the time when "stuff" was happening, as Donald Rumsfeld, then US defence secretary, had infamously dismissed the destructive wave of looting that convulsed a capital that was now in the hands of everyone, and no one. Iraqis, deprived of their freedom by Saddam and of a livelihood by a decade of the toughest sanctions in history, were taking every advantage liberation had to offer, good and bad. The city was there for the taking, with only a few sites, including the oil ministry, guarded by US forces.

It was also the time when Iraqis were searching for mass graves and raiding security offices for information about lost relatives; when new political parties were suddenly surfacing, squatting in old offices of Saddam's ruling Ba'ath party across the city, and pavements were brimming with stalls of looted or smuggled goods. These were the days when, for the first time, the Shia marched freely on the main roads leading to their holy sites in Karbala, a human tidal wave determined to experience a ritual that had been denied to them in the past.

In the most vivid memory I have of those days, I had watched them as I made my way from Kuwait to Baghdad, through a volatile Basra and the Shia heartland, past the checkpoints manned by edgy US soldiers (and their more relaxed British colleagues). I'd heard about how afraid they had been in the past, as they crawled through fields to the Karbala shrine to mark the martyrdom of their revered Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed – but also of their hopes now that Saddam had been removed. It mattered little to the worshippers why or how the Americans had landed in Iraq – whether under the pretence of weapons of mass destruction, or through a bombing campaign. The roads to Karbala were theirs for the first time.

Forty-eight-year-old Abbas became the FT's driver in the years that followed, and also a friend to correspondents. Now that I was back in the country 10 years after the US invasion, there he was, looking barely a day older, his sarcastic humour as piercing as ever. He'd had another child since then but was no longer in the mood for driving in Baghdad's clogged streets. One of his sons now has a government job so he helps finance the family. Abbas has been taking philosophy courses and is preparing to run for a seat on the Baghdad provincial council in the April elections. He is about to start his door-to-door campaigning. "I'll still be the same Abbas if I win," he reassures me. When I ask him about life in Baghdad, he bursts out laughing. Like most Iraqis I would meet on this trip, he was disillusioned, at times livid at the disparity between what Iraq is today and what it could be. "Nothing's changed," he tells me, time and time again. "In fact, it's all going backwards. I might as well go into politics since I have nothing else to do. Even people who have jobs don't do anything at their work. We Iraqis just consume now, we don't actually produce anything."

Ten years later – and more than a year after Barack Obama pulled out the last troops – Iraq is indeed sovereign, as the US president declared. But it is not, as he also said, stable. It has a government of national unity that brings together the majority Shia population and the minority Sunni and Kurds but it is not being governed. Thanks to US spending and training, it has a collection of military and security agencies with an estimated 1.2 million personnel, for a population of 32 million. The north of the country is inhabited by the Kurds, who were already semi-autonomous and have benefited the most, their lands spared much of the sectarian fighting that blighted the rest of the country and protected by their own militias. Their economy is also booming, and they are exploiting their own oil resources.

Southern Shia parts of the country too are re-emerging from conflict, and reconstruction is starting apace around religious shrines in Karbala and Najaf. However, the centre of the country and the capital Baghdad seems to belong to a different time. A veneer of modern trappings conceals an Arab capital stuck in the 1970s rather than the 21st century.

American and British officials had calculated that the quest for “normality” would, in the aftermath of the invasion, push Iraq’s various sects – including the once dominant Sunni – towards compromise and peaceful cohabitation. What I found was a society traumatised by decades of war and sanctions, in the midst of a constant political storm. The new Iraq has a prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, whose partners in government denounce him on a fairly regular basis as an aspiring Shia dictator; a Sunni vice-president who fled the country more than a year ago after being accused of terrorism; and a long-time central bank governor who was sacked after being targeted in a corruption investigation. Iraq also has a finance minister who has just resigned after his bodyguards were arrested on terrorism charges. (All the officials deny the accusations.) “A black, black comedy,” is how Sarmad al-Tahai, a columnist for al-Mada newspaper, describes the state of the country’s politics. A young colleague from the same media organisation, 24-year-old Hamad al-Sayyed, is equally disenchanted. “We went from one-party rule to constant confrontation, to a lack of consensus, to parties which say they represent God on earth but which corrupt civil life.” An engineer who can’t find work in his field and is instead employed by al-Mada’s radio station, he tells me that his dream is to rebuild Iraq but “our dreams have been postponed.”

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For a superpower that occupied Iraq for eight years, spent \$60bn on reconstruction and lost more than 4,400 US lives, America has left few traces behind, except perhaps for the GI-style gear and rifles of local soldiers, far too many of them all over the city. The Baghdad that US forces abandoned in December 2011 is no longer bloodied by the violent onslaught of the middle of the last decade, when civil war raged and hundreds were killed every day. Many people are confident that, however intense the political battles, there can be no return to full-blown civil war. But Iraqis still worry about security when moving around the country and the army is on constant alert.

Baghdad feels besieged by security forces guarding against cars laden with explosives whose drivers try to make their way into residential areas and food markets – far less deadly a threat than before but still a regular occurrence. The city is divided by concrete walls that surround politicians’ houses and official buildings, sometimes sealing off whole neighbourhoods. Side streets are blocked and permanent checkpoints erected all over, sometimes turning a 10-minute drive into an hour of traffic agony. Yet the bombs, presumed to be the work of a much weakened but not eradicated al-Qaeda, still sneak in. One day while I was in town, the roads emptied as news filtered in of at least nine consecutive explosions, many in poor Shia neighbourhoods.

Iraqis are now used to such incidents. “It’s normal,” quips a soldier at a checkpoint, as he jokes with Abbas and points to where a truck exploded the night before. The banality of violence is part of a strange combination of simultaneous progression and regression. Baghdad’s potholed streets are crumbling, with only rare signs of new infrastructure. Residents still receive only a few hours of electricity a day. Many young people are unemployed, while others take up three jobs to make ends meet. But the façades of old shops have been covered with shiny hoardings advertising the glut of consumer goods now available, from mobile telephones to flatscreen televisions.

Iraq's factories are still idle but there are several new malls under construction, as well as fancy car dealerships and private banks. In parts of the Kerrada shopping district, the streets are lively at night and the restaurants busy. In this rentier state, the government accumulates oil revenues (production is back to 1990 levels of three million barrels per day, and could double by the end of the decade) and doles part of them out in salaries, with some of it (the Iraqi perception is most) wasted in inefficiency and corruption. A teacher's salary of \$1 a month in the last years of Saddam has now risen to \$500. A policeman makes twice as much. In many cases, though, landing a government job requires political connections and money, as can a promotion and often the supply of a government service.

At a dealership for Chinese cars, which are popular with taxi drivers, Maisam Fawzi, a 26-year-old saleswoman whose made-up face is wrapped by a colourful headscarf, says she has a civil engineering degree but can't find employment in her field. She paid \$5,000 to someone close to someone important in the government to secure a job, but has been waiting for a year and is now asking for her money back. "That's how you get a job, that's our government," she told me. "They're keeping people busy with cars, electronics and mobiles and they give us no services, no security or jobs and no housing." Even so, surely life is better than under Saddam's dictatorship, I ask her? She shrugs. "We had one oppressive regime but now we have 100 political parties that are oppressive. We can express ourselves but so what? No one is listening."

Outside Baghdad University, I sit in a minibus and chat with students. Alia, a 24-year-old studying for a master's degree in biology, says young people are enjoying access to the internet, to the dozens of satellite channels that have been set up in Iraq, and adds that, despite the political struggle between the elite, there is no sense of division between Sunni and Shia at the university. Yet she too is dissatisfied, her family always worried about her whereabouts, particularly when they hear of bomb blasts. "Freedom is important but it doesn't give me enough," she says. "Freedom should be about being able to do what you want, not just talk."

Such expressions of disenchantment are part of the Iraqi nature, Hoshyar Zebari, Iraq's gregarious foreign minister, tells me. We are at his ministry on a main avenue in the city. The building was reconstructed at record speed after the 2009 bombing when 250kg of explosives hidden in a truck blew up the original structure, killing 43 people. "I followed this change from the beginning [as foreign minister since 2003] and my honest feeling is that the change has been worth [it] for those of us who can compare," he says. "A few years ago you wouldn't be able to talk to me without hearing gunfire outside." The new system has brought "unprecedented freedom, media, travel, access to the internet and satellite, all that was taboo ... Iraq was [previously] isolated, an outlaw state, and this is no longer". He acknowledges, however, that the country has failed to make an "overall" change, and goes on to list the many shortcomings. "The government has not done a good job on providing services or resetting the bad deeds of the occupation ... or on settling the issue of the disputed territories [between Arabs and Kurds] or on corruption in the system. It's the fault of the politicians." And then there is the confusion between the executive and other powers and the judiciary. "Parliament acts like the government and the executive interferes in the work of the judiciary, that's a key problem," he says.

Unlike many of his colleagues, Zebari works outside what is now called the international zone but is known in Iraq, and across the world, as the Green Zone. This swath of Baghdad real estate

near the Tigris river, around Saddam's old presidential palace, is where the Americans set up their headquarters when they arrived in the city. It continues to be the heart of political power, of plotting and intrigue, and is home to the prime minister's office and parliament. Still surrounded by blast walls, but its entry points now controlled by Iraqi forces, the Green Zone is a world apart from the chaos of the city.

The US embassy, the largest US mission in the world, is here of course. It is the first time that I have seen the massive new compound, with its apartment blocks for staff, sports facilities including tennis and basketball courts, and even a power station. In a fitting image of the US's declining influence, though, the 10,000 staff – mostly contractors – who work here and across the other missions in Iraq – are being slashed to 5,000-6,000 by the end of this year. The US puts a brave face on Iraq's predicament. An embassy official says the country's trajectory is "upward" and that there has been dramatic change since Saddam. "There's life in Baghdad," he tells me. "It's much better than it was five years ago."

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Abbas lives in Sadr City, which used to be called Saddam City – an overpopulated and troublesome Shia district 3km from the centre of Baghdad, which the late dictator tried to subdue, partly by punishing its people with neglect. So deep was the poverty, so overflowing the sewage and garbage, that the city was of particular concern to the Americans keen to win the approval of the local population. They set up shop in an old cigarette factory and called it Camp Marlboro. The locals, though, were not amused. When I visited a hospital there with Abbas a few weeks after the fall of Saddam, Shia clerics had beat the Americans to the task and taken charge, delivering supplies and posting guards at the gate. A stronghold of the radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, the city soon became a battleground as Shia militias joined in the fight to force the US out of Iraq. The Hospital of Martyr Sadr couldn't keep up with the flow of dead and injured.

As Abbas had warned me, the drive to Sadr City takes two and a half hours, despite the short distance, because every single car is inspected at the entry checkpoint. Two days earlier three bombs had exploded in the area, and it is one of the locations in the city which continues to be regularly targeted. Entering Sadr City, we pass a new amusement park with a ferris wheel. It is called "Fantasy Land". The district feels more crowded than I remember, and not much cleaner. So little space is left that property prices have skyrocketed. The pavements, meanwhile, have been taken over by traders.

Salam Khalaf, the spokesman for the Martyr Sadr hospital, moonlights as a photographer and is also taking evening classes in economics and management. He says the hospital has been renovated and expanded, with a new operating theatre and a lab. The militias are no longer on the streets (the main one in Sadr City, the Mahdi Army, is "dormant", according to its supporters, and others are now more active). The hospital is guarded by 50 policemen and another 30 soldiers: a bomb was detonated in the car park last year. "There's relative improvement in Sadr City – relative," says Khalaf.

As I wait for him to get permission to speak to me – the ministry of health told him to proceed but stress the positives – the leg of a desk in the director's reception room cracks and two

security guards rush to hold the top together. One turns to me with a chuckle: “Here’s how Iraq has improved.” The crumbling desk, he says, was damaged when a disgruntled family of a patient who had died at the hospital stormed the office determined to punish the doctors. One of the problems for hospitals – indeed for many other sectors – is the tribes who demand compensation when accidents befall one of their own.

The tribes have always been powerful in Iraq, and were bolstered by Saddam before the 2003 war. They are now even more influential as police and security forces, busy chasing car and truck bombers, have little time to uphold the law. One of the many Iraqis who dream of a modern state and is outraged by the power of the tribes is Hana Edward, a leading human rights activist I meet in central Baghdad. A small and fiery woman who opposed the Saddam regime for 30 years, she now challenges the Maliki government.

Edward tells me that despite the phenomenal expansion of security agencies in Iraq, tribes and militias still get their way if they don’t like a doctor or a judge or if a teacher fails a student. In fact, members of tribes donate to the leaders what amounts to an insurance policy so that they can pay someone off if they get into trouble. It is a system that is supported, if not promoted, by the police, which, in many reported cases, suggests that people settle their differences through their tribes. “There’s no state, no institutions, no system to protect you,” she says. “Even if someone is sentenced by the courts, the tribes will interfere and try to find a different solution.” Edward related the story of an electronics store owner who died when his shop went up in flames. The shop was then looted by thieves, one of whom suffered an electric shock and also died. “The family of the dead thief went to the tribe of the dead owner and asked for compensation. They had to pay,” she says.

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I am dressed in the black shroud of Umm Haidar, Abbas’s wife, and sitting with my head down on the back seat of the car. We are driving to Fallujah, the Sunni town that prides itself as the hub of the insurgency against the American forces (though in the past it was better known for its numerous mosques and the quality of its kebabs). In one of the most bloody and controversial episodes of the US occupation, Fallujah was devastated by a major American offensive in 2004, after insurgents killed four American contractors and hanged their mutilated bodies from a bridge.

To avoid any questioning and delays I’m told by Abbas not to look the soldiers in the eyes at the highway checkpoints – they rarely if ever ask for a covered woman’s identity papers. We go past spectacular palm groves and the notorious Abu Ghraib prison before a Fallujah minaret appears in the distance. Ali Ghazal Abbas al-Hiali, who heads a development organisation in the Anbar province, takes me on a tour of the town.

Though some buildings still bear the scars of fighting, much has also been rebuilt, including a hospital. In the neighbourhood that saw some of the worst confrontations with US troops, al-Hiali points to a destroyed minaret. “It was kept as a memorial of Fallujah’s resistance,” he says.

Fallujah is still in rebellion, but this time peacefully. The main attraction in town is the protest camp that has been set up on an empty plot at the entrance, part of a wave of demonstrations in the Sunni region that was triggered by the December arrest of the Sunni finance minister's bodyguards. "The intifada of Fallujah" reads a banner above a stage, flanked by Iraqi flags from the era of Saddam Hussein, with the three stars restored. Tribes have set up tents at the camp, with green and white plastic chairs and reed mats across the floor.

The country's Sunni population were the big losers in the new Iraq. The more radical among them joined the ranks of the insurgency. Many others were alienated by the American decision to dissolve Saddam's army and impose a policy of de-Baathification, rooting out members of the Ba'ath party from the Iraqi bureaucracy. The Americans eventually realised their appalling mistake and tamed the insurgency by enlisting – and paying – the tribes who had tired of war, turning them against al-Qaeda. The Iraqi government, however, did not live up to its promise to integrate and keep these fighters on the payroll, instead pursuing a heavy-handed policy that human rights organisations say includes unfair arrests and detentions without trial.

One of the leaders of the Fallujah protest is Sheikh Khaled Hammoud Mahal al-Jumaili, a powerful cleric with a bushy white beard. Iraqis in general and the Sunni in particular have had enough, he says, of both the government and what he calls the occupation of Iraq by Iran (the state with the greater influence on the Shia parties). When the protests started, he tells me, two of their major demands were repeal of antiterrorism legislation that the Sunni feel targets only them and the release of prisoners held without charge. But since January 25, when clashes with the army left several protesters dead, the demands have hardened. Fallujah wants to get rid of the government and of the constitution.

When he steps on to the podium to address a crowd, the Sheikh declares that Fallujah rejects "Bremer's constitution", in reference to Paul Bremer, the former de facto American governor of Iraq and the man most Iraqis blame for the catastrophic US handling of the Iraq occupation.

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Back in Baghdad, I hear words of sympathy for the Sunni from both Shia and Kurdish politicians, perhaps because of the widespread political disillusionment with Maliki's rule. "It's unusual for a person who heads the government to have all his partners telling him that he should change his policies – and he thinks they are all wrong and conspiring against him and against Shia Islam," says Diaal-Asadi, a senior official in Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's bloc. "There are attempts to bring the cult of dictatorship back. But no one is going to allow it to happen."

I go to see Hussein Shahrestani, Iraq's deputy prime minister and the point man on the Sunni crisis. In an ironic twist of fate, the former nuclear scientist's office in the Green Zone is in a sumptuous palace that once belonged to Izzat al-Douri, Saddam's ex-vice-president and the presumed leader of the post-2003 insurgency. He tells me that the "legitimate" demands of protesters, including releases of prisoners and pensions and salaries for those deprived of them, are now being met. "But people demanding the abrogation of the constitution and people carrying al-Qaeda flags and Saddam's flags, are not really a problem; they are part of the old political system and still see Saddam as their hero. They are a small minority," he says.

When I suggest that the Sunni problem is a symptom of a larger political malaise, Shahrestani is dismissive. “People used to sell their doors and windows to feed their children, now they have mobiles and cars. We have to take our time practising democracy, improving the system and the standard of living.”

One evening, I visit an art gallery in one of Baghdad’s upscale districts, Mansour, expecting to hear of a reinvigorated art scene in the era of greater freedom. But Mazen Iskandar, the gallery owner, is grumpy. Many artists have left Iraq and people who appreciate art and can afford it also fled the violence of the last decade. “In the past some of the houses in this neighbourhood were like museums but now they’re empty. Foreign embassies that also bought art are in the Green Zone, they don’t come here. And people with money now aren’t interested in buying art.”

Later on, I hear more hopeful talk over dinner at Reef, a pizza restaurant that has been popular since the Saddam era. A band is playing a Shirley Bassey song while a group of professionals explains that Iraq’s failures today are also opportunities for the future. Suha Najjar, an old Iraqi friend who lives in London but visits Baghdad almost every month, is starting an investment fund to buy stocks on the Iraqi exchange. She says Iraq needs so much reconstruction and infrastructure that an economic boom is inevitable. Her friend Seif Abu Altimen, whose family trades wheat and rice, is a rare example of a young professional who has returned to live in Iraq, taking up a job at a telecoms company and helping develop the family business. “I thought I had an edge here,” he says. Although he was injured in an explosion, he is staying put.

Najjar, my friend, had arranged a meeting for me at a prominent business organisation run by Ibrahim al-Baghdadi – a rotund man, known as a savvy and energetic lobbyist for business. Over tea, juice and multicoloured biscuits, company representatives grab the microphone and launch into PowerPoints about projects they are working on worth billions of dollars. There’s a housing project and a cement factory in Najaf, a sports city in Basra, and malls and hotels in Baghdad.

Beyond business, too, young people are trying to find a purpose in Iraq. Hamad al-Sayyed, the engineer who works in media, is a co-founder of “I am Iraqi, I read it”, an association that encourages donations of books in ballot-like boxes on a Baghdad street and redistributes them for free, an initiative inspired by similar groups in other Arab states. “We’ve had so many problems in Iraq that people don’t read, they focus on basic needs,” says al-Sayyed.

Another group of 30 young volunteers who met on Facebook have launched a campaign intended to persuade voters to register their support for a civic state, accumulating votes that can then be channelled towards nonsectarian candidates. “Society is becoming tribal and sectarian, and we don’t want this to become enshrined. If we don’t move now the situation will get worse, there’s no time left,” says Ahmad Ibrahim, one of the founders of the initiative. “No one is happy with the situation except the parties which are benefiting.” Religious-based parties claim they are fighting in the name of religion, he goes on, “but they’re all fighting for money – Iraq is a treasure”.

People such as Ibrahim are still in a minority, though he is convinced that the mismanagement of Iraq by the current political class can only increase the numbers of those who reject sectarian parties. “Change will come with the new generation,” Hana Edward reassures me. “That’s what

gives me hope.” For the sake of Iraq and the Middle East, I hope that Edward is right, though I know that political sectarianism is difficult to dislodge once it is entrenched.

When I leave Baghdad, I say goodbye to Abbas at the hotel. He can’t drive me all the way to the airport because it’s a restricted area. Passengers board buses long before the departure lounge, and then submit to a series of searches in an impressive security operation that is no doubt a legacy of the American occupation.

What I leave behind are two different Baghdads. The first one belongs to a people tired of conflict and eager for a normal life that goes beyond the ability to consume and talk freely: in this Baghdad desperate people have been forced to turn to party and tribe for guidance. The second Baghdad hides behind concrete blast walls: it is a city inhabited by greedy politicians struggling for control of the state. For this political class, sectarianism and patronage are the only means of survival.

One former senior official who spoke to me privately described Iraq’s problem. “No one wants to reform the state,” he said, “and because it is rich in oil, no one feels the need to reform it.”

Against the hope of its young people stands the formidable reality of Iraq’s poisonous politics.