

**The Struggle for Iraq's Future**  
**Zaid Al-Ali**

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**Introduction**  
**[Extract]**

In 2013, politics in Iraq reached a new low. Apart from the usual depressing failures in terms of services, corruption, security and the environment, a number of other developments finally revealed the full extent of the government's incompetence.

For several years, the security services have used a small handheld device to detect explosives, known as the Advanced Detection Equipment (ADE) 651. These devices were purchased at a desperate time: car bombs had already claimed the lives of thousands of people, and there was an urgent need to improve security measures. Physical searches were effective but were far too time consuming and could cause traffic jams of epic proportions, bringing life to a grinding halt.

ATSC Limited, a UK company that was founded by Jim McCormick, a former police officer with no previous experience in electronics, programming or engineering, claimed that the ADE 651 was 'a revolutionary tool in the effective detection and location of Narcotics (drugs), Explosives, and specific substances at long- range distances' and that it functioned according to a principle that the company referred to as 'Electro- Magnetic Attraction'. The ADE 651 and similar devices had been used in other countries, including Afghanistan and Lebanon. The Iraqi government purchased an unknown (but large) number of the ADE 651 from ATSC for approximately US\$85 million. It required so many government departments and institutions to use the device that there were not enough to go around. A market sprang up overnight, with government departments buying and selling the devices to each other at a profit. One department in the ministry of justice obtained one for \$50,000 (even though each device cost just a few dollars to manufacture). The department's staff was so terrified of losing or damaging it that they placed it in their building's safe – out of harm's way – and never put it to use.

Even to the casual observer it is clear that the devices are useless. Yet for years they have been employed by security forces at checkpoints throughout the country and at the entrance to ministries and other institutions. The device consists of a small plastic handle with a horizontal antenna attached. When a vehicle approaches a checkpoint, the driver has to wait while a soldier holds the device so that the antenna is level horizontally. He then walks parallel to the car, bobbing from left to right. If, during the soldier's dance, the antenna tilts towards the vehicle, the suggestion is that the car may contain explosives.

Like anyone who has spent any time in Iraq outside the Green Zone, I have been through thousands of checkpoints where the ADE is employed. On occasion, during particularly long trips, I have been through more than a hundred checkpoints in a single day while travelling in the same car. Although the car's contents were always the same (empty apart from passengers and some computers), the ADE would sometimes tilt towards the vehicle and sometimes not. There was no clear pattern; it was pure chance. Even when it did tilt, we were never searched anyway. The troops manning the checkpoint would always ask if we had any perfume with us. An answer in the affirmative guaranteed that we would be politely waved through with a smile.

Years after the ADE was first deployed, explosions were still taking place with alarming frequency. The attackers' weapon of choice was the car bomb, and sometimes several of these would go off in a dozen locations throughout the country within just a few hours. Clearly the terrorists were transporting significant amounts of explosives about with relative ease. Certainly the presence of army and police checkpoints every few hundred metres, and their heavy reliance on the ADE 651, did not appear to impede their movements. Many Iraqis and international observers began to question the device's effectiveness.

Since ATSC was a UK company, and as its founder was based not far from London, the BBC took it upon itself to investigate the issue in 2010. In the presence of a BBC reporter, researchers from Cambridge University took one of the devices apart, the better to understand the technology and how it was supposed to work. The supplier would provide the purchaser with a number of cards, each of which was designed to detect a particular type of explosive.

The cards fitted into a holder that was attached to the antenna. In front of the BBC's cameras, university researchers took some of the cards apart and analysed their contents: they were empty. They contained no digital or electronic information whatsoever. There was no way that the ADE 651 could be used to detect anything. A number of other investigations were also carried out on the device, including by the US military. The conclusion was always the same. Some of the world's leading scientists therefore confirmed what just about any Iraqi who has been through a checkpoint had known for years.

Following the BBC's investigation, UK law enforcement officials banned the ADE 651's export to Iraq and Afghanistan. The affair led to criminal investigations and prosecutions in both Iraq and the UK. On 10 February 2011, al-Rasafa court of appeal in east Baghdad issued an arrest warrant against General Jihad al-Jabiri, who at the time was head of the counter-explosives department at the ministry of the interior and who had been responsible for purchasing the ADE 651 on the government's behalf. On 4 June 2012, al-Jabiri was sentenced to four years in prison. The court's spokesman said that the decision was motivated by the fact that the devices were overpriced and based on bogus technology.

In July 2012, the UK Crown Prosecution Service charged six people, including James McCormick, with the 'alleged manufacture, promotion and sale of a range of fraudulent substance detector devices', including the ADE 651, to countries such as Iraq. During the course of the investigation, it was discovered that the ADE 651 had been modelled on failed golf-ball detectors that were on sale in the US. In May 2013, the court sentenced McCormick to ten years in prison and confiscated the property that he had accumulated, courtesy of his contracts with the Iraqi government, including several homes and a yacht. In his sentencing remarks, the judge addressed McCormick: 'The device was useless, the profit outrageous and your culpability as a fraudster has to be placed in the highest category . . . [H]otel security staff and many other users trusted their lives to the overpriced devices sold by you, which were no more than crude plastic components with a disconnected antenna and a capability of detecting explosives no better than random chance.'

News of these developments spread far and wide in Iraq, and many wondered how the government would react. Clearly, there were few available options – and none of them attractive. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had cultivated a public persona as someone who was strong on security. He had largely taken credit for the reduction in violence in 2007 and 2008 and, following the March 2010 parliamentary elections, he had assumed control of the security services, including the ministries of the interior and defence. Security was unquestionably his responsibility, and there were significant grounds for holding him personally accountable for the use of the device (among other failures). It is unheard of for senior officials in Iraq to hold up their hands and admit 'mea culpa', so nobody expected the government to apologize. Given the weight of evidence against the ADE 651, however, no one believed that it would

keep them in use. It was most likely that the devices would be quietly withdrawn and the matter downplayed by senior officials.

On 21 May 2013, two weeks after the UK court decision, several explosions ripped through the capital, killing dozens of people. The devices were still in use. The prime minister organized a press conference a few hours later with a large part of his cabinet. He solemnly condemned the violence. The first question from the packed hall of journalists was about the ADE 651: how could it be that it was still in use, given the recent court ruling in the UK?

The prime minister's reply left me and others dumbfounded. Despite international consensus on the issue, he stood before his audience and insisted that the devices did in fact work:

We formed committees the day the claims [of corruption] and rumours took place. We formed three committees: a science and technology committee, a defence committee, and a mixed committee. The results were that the devices detect between 20 and 54 per cent under ideal conditions. 'Ideal conditions' means that the soldier has to have been trained in the use of the device, and that he knows how to use the cards, given that the card that is used to detect bombs does not detect arms, and the one that is used to detect arms does not detect bombs . . . Some Iraqi MPs are talking about corruption. The relevant people were taken to court and are now in prison. A court case was filed in Britain, and the person responsible for the forgery [is also in prison]. But what is the truth? *The truth is that some of the devices were real and those devices do detect bombs, while the devices which the court case was about were fake. The problem lies with those that were fake. As for the devices that are real, their problem is that using them correctly requires experience.*

For al-Maliki, the problem was that some of the devices were fake and others were not. This was a distinction that no one else had made or recognized and was purely of his own creation. One wonders what the deputy prime minister, Hussein al-Shahristani thought of the comments: he has a PhD in chemical engineering from the University of Toronto and throughout the press conference was standing with a poker face immediately to the left of the prime minister.

Officials in Thi Qar, one of the country's poorest areas, did not have the benefit of an advanced western education in science, but nevertheless they saw through the ruse and banned the ADE 651, committing themselves to purchase dozens of sniffer dogs instead. Meanwhile, in Baghdad, car bombs continued to rip apart the lives of the people that the government pretended to protect with a piece of plastic that was worse than useless. July 2013 witnessed more than a thousand security-related deaths. Still more people were maimed. Yet not a single senior official accepted any responsibility. I learned from a friend that an acquaintance of mine was among those killed. A few years back, he had lost his brother in another explosion and had taken in his brother's children, who had nowhere else to go. Following this new wave of attacks, they were left fatherless for a second time.

There were only two ways of interpreting the prime minister's comments: either he believed what he was saying (which would mean that he was incapable of understanding what was painfully obvious to just about everyone else) or he was deliberately twisting the truth (which would mean that the security and wellbeing of Iraqis was for him secondary to protecting his own reputation). It was a perfect illustration of how Iraqis' problems were caused not by religion and race, but by misgovernment. The question, for me and for many others, was how we had reached this point in our country's history and what solutions existed.

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**Chapter 3**  
**Creating a new political order**  
**[Extract]**

Like many of his colleagues in the Shia clergy, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani considered politics a dirty business. Its methods were unclear and encouraged dishonesty and corruption. Politics, however, is more than merely corrupting; it is also incredibly complex. Political actors have to administer the state and deliver services as effectively as possible, and have to manage what is always a difficult relationship with the public. Just as importantly, they also have to keep at bay their adversaries, who are always seeking to prey on the weaknesses of their enemies. Thus, even when agreements between political rivals are painstakingly negotiated and drafted, they are routinely violated by one of the parties, just when the other side has let its guard down. Even worse, manipulators can exploit the lack of detail in an agreement to bring about the opposite result of what was originally intended, without their adversaries even noticing.

Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani demanded a constitution that was crafted by the elected representatives of the people. The elected representatives that he insisted upon were in favour of a conservative vision of society, and a strong central government. However, despite the weight of his authority, democracy was rudely brushed aside in favour of secretive arrangements and special interests. The final constitution, which was supposed to be the result of a democratic process, was ultimately heavily inspired by the TAL, a deeply flawed document.

Although many were grateful that the leadership council had liberalized the final constitution's provisions on religion and women's rights, it had also created a terrifying system of government in which the country's only central authority (already deprived by the CPA of an effective army or police force) was now deprived of any real constitutional power. This was a system that was designed to be dysfunctional; if ever it were actually implemented, it would tear the country asunder.

Because many Iraqi officials were well aware of the constitution's implications, right from the start they devoted themselves to preventing any provinces from forming a region (as was permitted under the constitution). Despite all the rhetoric of building a state of law, of a new era in which Iraqis would all be equal under the guidance of a constitution drafted by the people, the document could never be applied. This contributed to the state of lawlessness that continues to this day. It also meant that, in the absence of law, governance and development, provinces would seek greater autonomy from the central government by whatever means they had at their disposal. In summary, the constitution set in motion a destructive cycle that has wrought havoc since the day it entered into force.

It is not a question of being wise after the event: the writing was on the wall from the very start. In September 2005, the United Nations prepared an analysis of the draft constitution a month before the referendum date and concluded that 'the provisions for the conversion of [provinces] into a region outside Kurdistan create a model for the territorial division of the State which in our view leaves the central government underpowered and possibly under resourced'.

Professor Yash Ghai, one of the world's leading constitutional scholars, was in Baghdad in 2005, acting as an adviser to Sheikh al-Hamoudi, the constitutional committee's chairman. Professor Ghai also wrote an analysis of the draft before the referendum, in which he said that the draft constitution: could sharpen even further the divisions within Iraq and pose a serious threat to the unity and territorial integrity of the country. There are also technical deficiencies in the draft which are to some extent tied to key substantive provisions and will be hard to remedy. We have serious reservations whether the

[draft constitution] as it stands can be fully and effectively implemented, *without grave danger to state and society.*

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**Chapter 8**  
**The Third Insurgency: Environmental Collapse**  
**[Extract]**

If corruption is Iraq's second insurgency, then the collapse of its environment since 2003 is its third.

From 2005 onwards, it became increasingly frequent for meetings with friends or colleagues outside Iraq to be delayed for several days at a time. At first the reason given tended to be security related, but more and more often a new explanation crept in: *'ajaj*, the Iraqi term for a dust storm. When they did arrive, friends would apologize profusely, but it was clear that they were relieved to have left the dust behind.

Over the years, security became less of an impediment to travel or work plans; but the storms started to become a regular obstacle. Until 2009, I had somehow managed to avoid the worst of them, but they were described to me in stark terms: red skies, thick air, an entire city at a standstill. It sounded incredible – exaggerated even. But in 2009 I saw it for myself.

As I approached central Iraq that summer, I became aware of a gradual process: from blue, the sky slowly turned grey and blotted out the sun; grey transformed into bright red, which then darkened considerably. I started worrying about breathing. Finally, I realized that I could not see more than a few metres ahead of me. Police officers and soldiers manning checkpoints wrapped whatever they could around their mouths to lessen the effects of their constant exposure to the dust. The skin around their eyes was all that was exposed to the elements, and it was deeply cracked. As we passed each checkpoint, the soldiers would strain to peer at us and would wearily and wretchedly raise an open hand, wave to us and wait for a response of some kind – as if merely to confirm to themselves that they could still be seen through the dust and that they had not been completely swallowed up by the storm. A thick layer covered everything: parked cars, garbage on the street, trees, bushes. . . Everything was the same red colour. Children played football just a few metres ahead of me, but I could barely make them out. Indoors, rooms that would otherwise be bathed in sunshine were dark in the middle of the day. And there was dust everywhere: on tables, inside closets, in bathrooms, on clothes, toothbrushes, on keyboards. Nothing was spared. Words cannot describe the phenomenon; it evokes utter despair.

Dust storms are distinct from sandstorms. The latter are a naturally occurring phenomenon that the Middle East has witnessed throughout recorded history. As strong winds blow across the Sahara, they carry with them particles of sand and dust in incredible rushes that engulf entire cities. Often referred to as *khamaseen* (from the Arabic word for 'fifty'), they typically occur during the spring and blow sporadically over a fifty- day period.

Dust storms are different. Winds have always blown across Iraq, but now, as they skim the surface of the land, they pick up parched and cracked biological material where once there were rich agricultural fields, lakes and marshes. Once upon a time they were a rare occurrence. Iraqis who lived through the 1990s recall as remarkable an event from 1994: a dust storm changed the sky's colour to red and reduced visibility to a bare minimum, forcing everyone to stay at home. A family friend had bought a red BMW earlier that year, and now his children and neighbours marvelled at how the colour of the air rendered the car almost invisible, even just a few metres away. This was a landmark event, but it was also a portent. These days the storms can blow up several times a week during summer.

During the storm that I experienced in summer 2009 (and which I reported at the Amman conference – see Chapter 7), all afternoon I could only see a few metres ahead of me when the dust cleared a little; for the rest of the time, the world was a red- tinged haze. At the time, NASA reported that particular

storm as 'the worst in living memory'. Since then, the storms have increased further in both frequency and intensity. The Iraqi environment ministry has estimated that the country could witness more than 300 days of dust storms a year for the next ten years (in 2008, the estimate was 238 days). Clear blue skies are set to become the exception rather than the rule.

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