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Must Haves: Cellphones Top Iraqi Cool List

By [DAMIEN CAVE](#)

BAGHDAD, [Iraq](#), Aug. 7 — The cool kids in Iraq all want an Apache, the cellphone they've named after an American military helicopter. Next on the scale of hipness comes a Humvee, followed by the Afendi, a Turkish word for dapper, and a sturdy, rounded Nokia known as the Allawi — a reference to the stocky former prime minister, [Ayad Allawi](#).

Even more telling are the text messages and images that Iraqis share over their phones. From all over the city, Baghdad cellphones practically shout commentary about [Saddam Hussein](#), failed reconstruction and violence, always the violence. One of the most popular messages making the rounds appears onscreen with the image of a skeleton.

"Your call cannot be completed," it says, "because the subscriber has been bombed or kidnapped."

Cellphones have long been considered status symbols in developing countries, Iraq included. But in an environment where hanging out is potentially life threatening, cellphones are also a window into dreams and terrors, the macabre local sense of humor and Iraqis' resilience amid the swells of violence.

The business here is booming. According to figures published last month by the State Department, there are now 7.1 million cellphone subscribers in Iraq, up from 1.4 million two years ago. In an economy where jobs can be as scarce as rain, billboards for phones are among the only advertisements updated regularly in the capital.

Some Iraqis report spending as much as \$800 on phones like the Humvee, and from the rooftops of Sadr City, the poor Shiite district where trash lines the streets, visible cellphone towers outnumber minarets 15 to 2.

It is the relentless violence — which now claims dozens of Iraqis every day — that seems to have fertilized the industry's growth. Insurgents use phones to communicate and to detonate bombs, while Iraqis of all sects rely on their phones to avoid danger.

Jabar Satar Salaum, 50, the owner of a cellphone store on a busy street in the middle-class Shiite area of Karada, said he used his phone (a Nokia that is a step up from the Allawi) mostly to tell his wife that he was safe. On the ride to and from work across Baghdad, he said he called every few minutes.

"I call to tell her I am leaving," he said. "I call to tell what district I am in when I am driving, or if the roads are blocked by checkpoints, I call to tell her that as well."

Four of the eight stores on Mr. Salaum's block sell cellphones, and most have window displays where each phone is covered in plastic.

Between customers, his sons, Amjad, 17, and Muhammad, 15, said that cellphones were desirable not just because they were cool but also because they provided one of the country's only safe forms of teenage self-expression.

In May, a tennis coach and two of his players were shot to death in Baghdad because they were wearing shorts. Cellphones, in contrast, have attracted little religious outrage.

“For young people, buying phones is a habit,” Amjad said. “Everybody buys different phones all the time. Whenever something new comes out, they have to have it.”

He reached into his jeans and pulled out his newest acquisition, an orange Sony Ericsson that sells for about \$300. It was protected by a hard, clear plastic case. On the wall to his left hung a poster of Nokia phones, showing images and model numbers displayed like the Popsicles on an ice cream truck.

“I’ve had all of these,” he said. How many exactly? “At least 20,” he said. “Every one.”

The nicknames for phones, he and other Iraqis said, are a mnemonic device derived in part from their shapes. The Allawi, a Nokia 3660, is broad and has a rounded bottom, resembling the physique of the former prime minister; the Apache is a Nokia flip-phone with a bottom that swivels, like a rotor blade.

The prices the phones command are rather high for Iraq, of course. But with a booming aftermarket in cellphones, people can sell their old ones for nearly the original price and move up to a fancier model. Service is relatively cheap, with most people relying on \$10 and \$20 prepaid cards rather than the more expensive monthly plans.

And the powerful are as vulnerable to consumer culture as the young are. Brig. Gen. Jaleel Khalaf Shwayel of the Iraqi Army said that he buys a new phone every few weeks. During a recent interview at his office about deteriorating security in Baghdad, he spent several minutes wiping off his latest purchase, a titanium Nokia 8800 that he said he bought for \$800.

He said he kept up on the latest styles through glossy technology magazines from the United Arab Emirates, setting him apart from the insurgents who use cheap phones to detonate roadside bombs. His phone, or phones (he has three), also help him keep in touch with the areas his soldiers patrol.

“I give my cellphone number to people in the neighborhoods, and I receive calls every day,” he said. A day earlier, he said two tips came in.

“In the el-Adil district, I received a call that people there had put mines in the road,” he said. “I gave an order to investigate, and we discovered it was right.

“Someone else told me about some bandits in a BMW. When we went to arrest them, we found R.P.G.’s,” he said, referring to rocket-propelled grenades.

For human rights workers in Iraq, cellphones play a darker role. Omar al-Jabouri, who heads the human rights office for the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party, said he often received pictures of men tortured or killed by death squads, many of them taken with the cellphones of witnesses or the victims’ relatives. At bombings, Iraqis are often seen recording the carnage in pictures or short videos.

But mostly, people here use their cellphones for commiserating, searching for laughs among the tears or trying to knock the powerful off their pedestals. Over the past year, American soldiers, Saddam Hussein and the current Iraqi president, Jalal Talabani, have all been the subjects of humorous clips passed from phone to phone.

“In Iraq, there is such an accumulation of frustration,” said Fauwzya al-Attiya, a sociologist at Baghdad University. “If an Iraqi does not embrace humor in his life, he’s finished.”

These days, some of the most popular clips poke fun at Islamist radicals. In one amateur video, a masked man, pictured at dusk with a knife, threatens to behead a fish because “all the fish did not come out of the sea.” With an exclamation of “God is great,” he bends over and slices off the fish’s head, laying it on top of the scaly body.

Another video captures young men trying to decapitate a victim with a fake, dull knife and failing; like Hans and Franz, the muscle-bound weightlifters famously mocked on Saturday Night Live, the supposed killers are all talk, dense and incompetent.

Electricity and gas are also popular topics. One doctored photograph claims to offer an explanation for why Iraqis still have only a few hours of electricity a day: Two transformer towers are flipping a wire in circles like a jump-rope while a third tower bounces up and down.

And in another video, a young, bearded Iraqi dances with abandon after successfully refilling his propane gas cylinder. With a spiraling Arabic song as the soundtrack, he wriggles and smiles, shaking the cylinder over his head like a trophy. He also kisses it.

Clips from official sources and those adapted from television, both Western and Arabic, are also shared. Some Sunnis are currently passing around video outtakes of the militant Shiite cleric [Moktada al-Sadr](#) talking casually to advisers or friends that they believe make him look foolish (in part because he criticizes people who are “Afendi,” well-dressed and flashing their cellphones).

Everyone seems to enjoy laughing at Mr. Hussein. His propaganda has literally become a joke: a 2003 broadcast from Iraq’s state-run station, just before the war, shows a gaggle of soldiers with machine guns dancing and singing along with Khasim al-Sultan, an Iraqi pop star.

“If you want the stars, we will reach out for the stars,” the men sing, offering a pledge to Mr. Hussein. “We will wipe America from the map!”

Firas al-Taie, 19, after showing the clip, laughed and tried to explain why Iraqis find the segment entertaining.

“It’s not matching the reality,” he said, in halting English. “They said this thing and then something else happened.”

Like many young Iraqis, he said that his cellphone was his most cherished possession. He said several of his uncles in Jordan pooled together the roughly \$300 he needed for the phone of his choice last summer after he graduated from high school.

Asked how his middle-class family could justify such an expense, Mr. Taie, an engineering student at Baghdad University, said it was all a matter of the violence and Iraq’s relentless state of alert.

“It’s important,” he said. “You have to have a cellphone. If I go to the college, or anyplace really, my parents call me like 100 times to see if I’m safe.”

He said he doubted the need would let up anytime soon.

Reporting for this article was contributed by Ali Adeeb, Omar al-Neami and Khalid W. Hassan from Baghdad, and Margot Williams from New York.