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Kuwait lesson

If the world can learn only a single lesson from Iraq's brutal invasion of Kuwait, it should be the sheer stupidity in lumping all Arabs in the same pile. Nothing could be further from reality.

Language is the sole characteristic that sets them apart, as a group, from their fellow Muslims. However, to paraphrase George Bernard Shaw's observation about Brits and Americans, the Arabs are very much a people divided by a common tongue.

In fact, compared to Moroccan berbers and Lebanon's druse, Romans and the citizens of Paris understand each other others' every nuance. The French, Italians, Spanish and Portuguese share more empathy by any standard than Arabs who live only in the Middle East.

Saddam Hussein's sneak attack on his weaker neighbor was merely the most recent episode in the region's tradition of intertribal warfare. The tradition raged despite attempts at control by the Ottoman Empire. It ceased only under the stress of colonial power, mostly British.

Today's Middle East remains the Middle East, a land whose infertility breeds the covetousness and murder, including fratricide, that both the Bible and Islam's Koran expressly outlawed.

At the same time, the meanness of their natural heritage contributes to that inordinate sense of pride that marks the Arabs. The Latino machismo, so despised by feminists, derives directly from the centuries Spain languished under Muslim rule.

In attacking Kuwait, Saddam Hussein used his military machine to avenge his offended pride, outraged by his neighbors' failure to kowtow to his image of himself as the savior of the Arabs against the ayatollahs' Iran. Money and oil were awaiting him at the bargaining table.

On their part, the royal Kuwaiti family luxuriated in self-righteousness by virtue of the billions it had provided Iraq in a war started by Saddam (as Mr. Hussein is known among the Arabs). The rulers also appeared to enjoy the illusion their fortunes invested in America and Europe had bought protection from

the West. They were wrong on both counts.

Make no mistake. I have precious little sympathy for Kuwait's royal family and its hangers-on, and not much more for the Saudis. The oil-rich Arabs' drunken bad manners earned them a stinking reputation in Cairo when I lived there. Recent news stories reported that there has been no let up in their insulting, degrading behavior out-of-country.

Nor can any experienced observer of the region dispute Saddam's pretext that Kuwait's rulers denied their subjects even the pretense of democracy. On that score, I can think of no single Arab government, including Egypt, which respects individual rights any better than the former Iron Curtain countries.

A great irony in the present crisis comes from its timing on the world stage. With no Soviet threat in the Middle East, the United States and its allies lack all geopolitical motive for intervention.

Suffering still a post-Vietnam syndrome (deepened by Nicaragua's contras) Washington simply cannot order U.S. forces to fight in Kuwait's

sands. But it was considerably less a political risk to send Marines into the maelstrom of Liberia's bloody slaughter to save a handful of U.S. citizens than to take any measures to protect the estimated 3,000 Americans caught in the Iraqi invasion.

Realistically, George Bush's initial reluctance to throw a military shield around Arabs can be understood. The prejudice in this country against Muslims is too strong, thanks in no small degree to the demagoguery practiced by Mr. Bush's predecessor, Ronald Reagan.

In short, this mighty nation is trapped in its ignorance of a region that for years has posed the greatest threat to world peace. And that fact has not changed.

Unfortunately, the ignorance starts with the American people who have been unwilling to take the time to regard Arabs as human beings, worthy of thoughtful consideration.

But that

But that situation appears improving.

Let me tell you about a conversation that took place on a sidewalk in New Market last Saturday. A reader asked if the president of Iraq and the king of Jordan belong to the same family. "They're both named Hussein," he pointed out.

I explained the two Arab leaders are not related. Jordan's Hashemite ruler claims descent from Muhammad, Islam's founding prophet. Iraq's president has no pretension to such noble roots.

The reader's confusion, however, was perfectly understandable. The world's nearly 900 million Muslims share a limited number of names principally taken from their religion.

In my time among the Arabs there was always the problem of attempting to identify strangers to friends. The difficulty arose because family names are a very recent addition in their society, and used chiefly in dealing with outsiders, including the government.

At any rate, confusing their names stands as the least harmful form of prejudice Arabs suffer in Western minds. In trying to sort out the different Husseins the reader encouraged me to believe my fellow Americans may be readjusting their view of the Middle East. I devoutly hope so.

The most damning approach to this nation's interests in the region is the deplorable tendency to treat Muslims as a single people, when in fact they are as ranked by differences as Christians.

Among Muhammad's followers, no group is more diverse, nor more divisive, than his fellow Arabs. Islam's Koran enjoins fraternal unity on all believers. The ideal was unrealized in his time.

In recent years, politicians in the Middle East have glorified the concept of an Arab nation, looking to glorify themselves. Saddam Hussein is only the latest. His greatest strength derives not from weaponry but from the bigotry which blinds the world to a clear consideration of Arabs.

Under those bad governments live more than 150 million men, women and children, who deserve the opportunity to share in the new dawning of human rights, signalled by the Berlin Wall's fall. *Insha'llah* (God willing) they shall. With Americans' help, they will.