

Western Intrusion Collides With Tradition in the Middle East

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In the Damascus office of President Hafez al-Assad of Syria, there is a mural depicting the Battle of Hittin: in July 1187 near Tiberias in the Holy Land, Saladin won a crucial victory over the Crusaders. Seven years ago, while standing in front of that painting, I commented to the Syrian president that the Battle of Hittin was where the Muslims soundly defeated the Christians. "No," he said with a teasing smile, "this was where the Arabs defeated the West."

Whether one accepts President Assad's interpretation or not, the global response to Saddam Hussein's preemptive invasion of Kuwait is the latest event in a thousand-year encounter between Western and Arab political cultures. Saddam's invasion of Kuwait amalgamated personal and national incentives. Laced with the emotionally charged concepts of pan-Arabism, anti-Westernism and anti-Zionism, the invasion fundamentally purported to enhance Iraqi preeminence in the Arab world and the Gulf, as well as within the oil-producing community. Saddam's effort to remake Kuwait's identity in his own image was an obvious acknowledgement that Iraq had squandered billions of dollars in the unsuccessful eight-year Gulf war against Iran; it was a distinct admission that Iraq's financial recovery was torturously retarded by a huge external debt, in part held by what Saddam considered to be an uncooperative and hughty Kuwaiti leadership. With the avowed purpose of erasing a major creditor and preemptively filching Kuwait's oil reserves, Saddam backed his national resource truck into Kuwait. He viewed this acquisition as the initial step in restoring Arab control of Arab oil riches and in ultimately liberating Palestine from domination by the modern "Crusader Kingdom" of Israel. Like Iraqi leaders before him, Saddam Hussein justified his actions by denying the historical legitimacy of Kuwait's borders. As his foreign minister said in an August 31, 1990 interview in *Le Figaro*, Kuwait's boundaries were merely "a British invention."

Saddam assumed territorial entitlement to Kuwait. Employing the same instruments of power that characterize his internal politics, Saddam brutally and forcefully re-drew the map of the Middle East. He blithely eliminated a state. In

summarily dismissing the 250-year history of the al-Sabah family's presence in Kuwait, Saddam asserted his own village origins, family stature and interpretation of history to be paramount. He challenged the international community to stop him from consuming all or a portion of Kuwait. Saddam's military action, pillage of Kuwait and repeated threats of regional de-stabilization traumatized the leadership of other Arab Gulf states. Uncertainty about the eventual outcome of this crisis sent oil and financial markets careening aimlessly.

Saddam's sense of entitlement demonstrated total disregard and complete disdain for the international standards of state-to-state relations. Rarely, since the founding of the United Nations and the Arab League of States in the aftermath of World War II had one sovereign state simply obliterated the existence of another. But for Saddam to be the modern Saladin - to confront the international community and to strengthen the Iraqi nation both territorially and economically - he had to dismiss the international conventions constraining his actions. He believed that Iraqi self-determination and self-fulfillment were being unfairly held hostage by neighbors he condemned and by borders that denied him independence of political action.

Embedded in the heart of Saddam's premeditated deed was a mixture of indigenous and external factors that have shaped Middle Eastern history: ecology, geography and relationships with external powers (especially the West). Ecological constraints stimulated the development of a political culture reliant upon small social units. Geography determined the political organization of space, access to trade routes, and unequal distribution of wealth. Interaction with the West challenged native norms of behavior, potentially transforming traditional modes of conduct for individuals as well as for nation-states.

The Roots of the Tradition

In the Middle East, the physical facts of scarce water supply, limited amounts of cultivable land and rugged interior necessitated the development of close kinship associations. Self-preservation and personal welfare were historically secured through blood relationships. Reliance on the extended family, coherence of the clan, harmony of the tribe or security of the village unit were required when the majority of Middle Eastern peoples lived on the margins of survival in the inhospitable terrain of marshes, deserts, mountain ranges and terraced areas. Urban centers served as key communication hubs to support transit through the region's harsh interior. Except for the river valley civilizations of the Nile and Tigris-Euphrates, some coastal areas and a few inland valleys, the region had only enough water and rainfall to sustain subsistence-level agriculture. Nomadic tribal associations evolved because there were not always sufficient land, water and shelter for maintenance of continuous settlement. Both sedentary and nomadic units were traditionally skeptical of outside groups, fearing competition for scarce resources. Protection of territory and allegiance to the social unit were the primary reactions against the threat of intrusion. Conversely, it was common

to engage in military forays to usurp and plunder resources belonging to a weaker tribe or neighbor.

Even after the Prophet Muhammed's death in 632 A.D. and the subsequent spread of Islam northward beyond the Arabian peninsula, the preeminence of the family, clan, tribe and village unit remained the anchor of Middle Eastern political culture. A central motivation for expansion was economics. Neither the development of Islamic allegiance to a community with prescribed beliefs nor the recent emergence of multiple Arab states in the Middle East has fully negated the centrality of familial, tribal or ethnic affiliations. For example, Jordan's King Hussein traces his lineage directly to the Prophet Muhammed's clan. Syria's political elite is commanded by a minority Islamic sect of Alawites. Saddam Hussein's family and village compatriots who hail from Tikrit on the Tigris River north of Baghdad dominate Iraq's political and military establishment. Among Gulf states, power has long been held by particular families, notwithstanding their more recent sharing of influence with other tribal groups and technocrats. Almost seven decades after its creation, Saudi Arabia remains staunchly controlled by scions of the family that founded the Kingdom. Just as the al-Sabah family settled in Kuwait in 1756, the House of al-Khalifa has endured in Bahrain from 1783 to the present.

In the Middle East, borders shift like the sand.

For some Middle Eastern countries like Egypt, Turkey and Iran, there is a long tradition of independence and autonomous political action. But for many other Middle Eastern countries, there have been ethnic, linguistic and religious groups that were forced into new political entities with borders arbitrarily delineated by Britain and France during World War I. Vigorous retention of previous core identities prevented full integration and hindered the development of unswerving loyalty to the new state. Lebanon is the most blatant example of a modern country ruptured by confessional, ethnic and sectarian divisions. The Kurds in Iraq, Iran and Turkey have always sought to preserve their own identity and prerogatives. Only under the specter of potential or actual threats of physical annihilation have the Kurds conceded a measure of authority to the Baghdad central government. A residue of antagonism remains among some ethnic, sectarian and religious groups. Because they were not "native" Arabs, these groups were repeatedly and explicitly denied social and political privileges by the dominant ruling establishment. Particularly in recent years, Yemeni workers in Saudi Arabia, Egyptian laborers in Iraq, and Jordanian and Palestinian employees in Kuwait have tolerated varying degrees of government-sanctioned discrimination in exchange for employment. When Saddam invaded Kuwait, he sought to appeal to the many expatriate workers whom the al-Sabah family had treated with aloofness.

Territorial Disputes

Middle Eastern history has indeed been framed by territorial and dynastic struggles. Political power was habitually wielded by dynastic, religious and landowning elites. The source of this power generally rested with those who had access to or possession of precious land or water, or by people who controlled passage to the sea and coastal land areas. Consequently, borders between regions or states and between individual land plots within a village were constantly contested. For centuries, the area was replete with land feuds. Individuals, tribes, states and dynasties disputed grazing rights, cultivation privileges, water rights, river basin management, mineral use and general territorial claims. It was the exception rather than the rule to have accurate land records to demarcate plots, boundaries or rights. Border and property divisions were perennially blurred because written records were nonexistent, incomplete or incorrect. Central government control of territory along the margins of mountains and deserts and in distant regions was sporadic, allowing provincial officials and local leaders to assert their own, often capricious, definitions of border and land use.

In the area between Kuwait and Iraq, there were no clearly defined topographical divisions that would permit an unmistakable demarcation of boundaries. Treaties of the last century refer to boundaries between the two entities with cryptic references to intersections of a *wadi* and certain creeks, to a particular latitude, and to a southward direction in relation to specific wells. Only three weeks after his invasion of Kuwait, Saddam announced a willingness to resolve his dispute with Iran over the use of the strategic Shatt al-Arab waterway, a dispute that goes back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Though he was at war with Iran for eight years, Saddam arbitrarily decided to return 2,200 square kilometers of Iranian-captured land in exchange for the hope that Iran would violate the international trade embargo arrayed against him. By late October 1990, after a dozen weeks of the crisis, maps in Baghdad apparently claimed that forty percent of former Kuwaiti land (oil fields and territorial access to the Persian Gulf) belonged to Iraq. By invading Kuwait, Saddam sought to escape the geographic confines of borders which gave him only fifteen kilometers of coastline along the Persian Gulf - which, he claimed, gave him insufficient access to trade through open waters. Geography had forced Saddam to depend uncomfortably on neighboring Turkey and Saudi Arabia for the overland transshipment of oil through pipelines.

Repeated regime changes in the Middle East have further complicated disputes about boundary demarcations, land ownership and land usage. This pattern began in the early Islamic period with Muhammed's successors and continued with preemptive intent to rearrange the Middle Eastern political map. Indigenous regimes and dynasties had arbitrarily divided peoples and had previously allocated land areas to meet their own strategic, economic and personal interests. Foreign interests rearrange borders as well. Since the Middle East is situated geographically between continents, it was routinely subjected to encroachment, occupation, transit and manipulation by outside powers. In the

latter part of the nineteenth century, foreign competition to secure strategic interests in the Middle East and the Arabian peninsula were carefully but opportunistically welcomed by local politicians, families and tribes. Interests converged between rulers wanting acknowledgement of their local suzerainty and foreign powers seeking protection of specific strategic advantages. With the impending collapse of the Ottoman Empire during World War I, Britain and France communicated the outlines of their desired spheres of geographic influence. Through public and private protocols, treaties, understandings or merely exchanges of letters, families and tribes willingly received confirmation of their claims to control amorphously defined geographic areas. Such agreements entailed present and future political affiliations with the foreign power: accepting financial stipends, obtaining military assistance and sometimes promising to use local forces to help the foreign power rebel against the Ottoman Turkish authority, the enemy of Paris and London during World War I. For example, in 1914 and 1915 the British assured the Hashemites in the Arabian peninsula's Hejaz region (controlled by King Hussein's great-grandfather) "independence" if they rebelled against the Turks. Sheikh Mubarak al-Sabah was promised that Kuwait would be an independent principality under British protection if he helped capture the Ottoman city of Basra in southern Iraq. In 1916, the Sheikh of Qatar willingly accepted British protection and arms in exchange for suppression of the slave trade and for providing British nationals with broad economic privileges in the Gulf.

Anti-Western Sentiment

Gradually Arab contact with outsiders resulted in intense antagonism toward the West. Saddam's own personal resentment of the West derives from a favorite uncle's loss of a military job in the 1940s due to British intervention in Iraqi domestic politics. Indeed, anti-Western sentiment is a core belief in Saddam Hussein's *Ba'ath* political ideology. By being physically dominant in the Middle East, the British and French (like the Ottomans before them) were held responsible for denying the natural development of a unified Arab state. Additional, generalized Arab antipathy toward the West was sustained when the international community supported the recognition of Israel in 1948. Hostility for the West and opposition to its physical presence were cardinal axioms after Britain and France left Egypt and Algeria, respectively, in the 1950s and 1960s. The tripartite military effort by Israel, Britain and France in October 1956 to take the Suez Canal from Egypt and topple Egyptian President Nasser was viewed as another example of the West's desire for physical control of Arab political destiny. There was overt revulsion for Western presence on Arab soil. Prior to the attempted rescue mission of American hostages in Iran in April 1980, the Saudis did not permit the United States to fly even a small American aircraft from Saudi territory in order to evaluate the feasibility of landing sites in the Iranian desert. Thus, a decade later, the Saudis' open invitation to foreign troops to protect the Kingdom against possible Iraqi aggression is historically unprecedented and culturally unexpected. Saddam Hussein perceived himself as the modern

Saladin, fighting a new Western encroachment on Arab oil and Arab petrodollars. He felt the West internationally denied the Arabs modern technology in order to deter their intellectual development and physical progress.

Dr. Kenneth W. Stein

Over the last century, Western physical presence has brought political corollaries to the region: allegiance to a nation-state and to individual rights. These concepts were contrasted with the earlier custom of identifying with smaller local, ethnic or religious groups wherein exclusive privileges were exercised by the few. Norms of Western political behavior germinated in the Middle Eastern political landscape. Western intrusion has partially helped to erode traditional attachments such as kinship bonds, some Islamic values and communal solidarity. After last contesting Kuwaiti sovereignty in 1963, even Iraq had dropped its claims to Kuwait and recognized its pre-invasion borders. Saddam Hussein has portrayed his invasion of Kuwait in August 2, 1990, as a way of reasserting his self-defined entitlement in reaction to the ongoing changes in the Middle East, but today, many Arab Gulf countries are more than sects or tribes within arbitrary borders and a seat at the United Nations. They are entities forging links among their various social units, creating a common civic pride and collective identification with the state. Saddam Hussein's neighbors are becoming more cohesive political entities. They now wield power over larger territorial areas and diverse populations that have acquired no less a degree of internationally sanctioned legitimacy than that of Iraq.

Middle Eastern people and their leaders continue to react to outsiders' notions of political organization - nationalism, modernization and secularization - and to the evolving rules of international behavior. But now they have greater control over their own affairs. They can choose which values to preserve from their rich pasts - shaped by ecology and geography - and which Western influences to accept, reject or modify. In aiming to be a contemporary Saladin, Saddam Hussein has blended his own ruthless concept of traditional rules with his personal aspirations to build and govern a tightly-controlled state that takes from its neighbors and from the West only what he wants. In addressing the Arab Lawyers Union in Baghdad on November 28, 1988, Saddam Hussein said: "God forbid, if Iraq should become intoxicated by its power and moved to overwhelm another Arab state, the Arabs would be right to deploy armies to check it. How will it be possible for us to live together and trust each other if the minimum mutual trust is lacking. If you walk with our brother with your gun ready it is like keeping the company of Chicago gangsters. If this is the type of relations we maintain we cannot go far."

In the same speech, Saddam Hussein said that "regardless of religion, the enemy is a foreigner." When he invaded Kuwait, he not only held the West in disdain, but also ridiculed Arab state sovereignty. He violated the spirit and principles enshrined in the Arab League Charter and the Arab League's Joint

Defense and Economic Cooperation Treaty. Many of his neighbors have joined the international trade embargo, geographic quarantine and physical encirclement arrayed against him. They have aligned themselves with the international community's values and have condemned Hussein's flagrant disregard of international law. Unlike Saladin, Saddam Hussein is reacting both to the West and, equally important, to his Arab brothers. •