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Saddam's No Robin Hood—Just a Thief

By SALAH AL-HEJAILAN

One particularly crafty justification for its invasion of Kuwait is now being given prominence by Iraq: Iraq is claiming that it attacked Kuwait to redress the balance in the Arab world between the rich and the poor.

Iraq obviously hopes that by casting itself in this Robin Hood role of robbing the rich to pay the poor it will split Western public opinion and create division in the Arab world. This stance has appeal to some segments of the Western public, not so much for ideological or intellectual reasons but because of the caricatures of the extravagant lifestyles enjoyed by some in the Gulf States. Iraq also hopes to gain the sympathy of two important groups in the Arab world—the religious fundamentalists, who claim to place no value on worldly goods, and the poor themselves.

Western governments have compelling cause to resist Iraq's exploitation of a bogus "rich/poor" division within the Arab world, since class warfare could result in huge short-term reductions in oil supplies and overall instability in the region. However, attempts to engineer such a division should also be resisted on less well understood, but equally valid, historical grounds.

It is easy to forget that oil is a very recently developed asset in the Gulf. Only since the end of World War II has oil been significant to local economies, and as late as 1972 the price was below \$2.50 per barrel. Prior to the mid-1960s the Gulf states were still poor, as measured by such indicators as their infrastructures. They had neither schools nor hospitals. My own family lived in tents when I was growing up. Those few children who received education had to be educated in foreign schools: the sick were treated in foreign hospitals. "For-

eign" in these circumstances meant Egypt or Baghdad. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that when the Gulf Arabs were the poor of the Arab world, the only thing we received in abundance from the rest of the Arab world was scorn.

It would be quite wrong for Western attitudes toward the region, either in the public mind or in official policy, to be colored by the media presentation of the extravagant lifestyles of some residents in the Gulf states. The vast bulk of the Gulf's oil wealth has been soundly invested to create a strong local infrastructure, similar to that found in developed Western nations. Although perhaps not appreciated in the West prior to the Kuwait crisis, the Gulf states have played a crucial role in supporting the economies of a number of Third World countries, by hiring workers from their populations. Sadly, it has taken the invasion of Kuwait to highlight this.

In every society there are always wealthy individuals who cannot resist the temptation to flaunt their wealth. The nouveau riche everywhere seek to fashion a gilded society—although not always in the glare of such intense media coverage. One finds no shortage of extravagant lifestyles among the leaders of the repressive military regimes and revolutionary movements in the Middle East. These "presidents" invariably present themselves to the world media as simple, austere "men of the people" but the reality is radically different.

The attempt by Iraq to create friction and division in the Arab world along the lines of rich and poor is particularly incredible because, by any objective economic test, Iraq should by now be one of the wealthier Arab nations. Not only does Iraq possess substantial oil reserves but the country is at the heart of the agriculturally productive Fertile

Crescent. The Iraqi regime has chosen not to make use of these benefits for the good of its people but rather has opted to engage in enormously costly and ultimately futile foreign adventures. A war machine of one million men and several thousand tanks, in a land with a population of only 17 million, is a waste of resources so great that economic development must grind to a halt.

The military dictators in Libya, Sudan and Yemen and other Arab states are invariably men whose rise to power has been achieved on a tide of chaos and is sustained by brutal military force. These men seem always to be drawn to challenge greater powers in the world in order to justify themselves and their regimes to their wretched subjects.

The slick argument that Iraq is defending the Arab poor must not be permitted to stand. The image of an altruistic Iraq must be seen for the mirage it is.

The Iraqi leader will doubtless continue to try to pass himself off as Robin Hood (although Yasser Arafat makes an unlikely Friar Tuck). The world should, however, keep in mind the testimony of history: When Iraq was rich, neither the Iraqi people nor their poorer neighbors shared in that prosperity nor did the Iraqi regime build a sound and prosperous society from the available wealth. Iraq was content for generations to be a land of plenty surrounded by poverty. It is too late now for Iraq to loot a prosperous neighbor and then hide behind poor Arabs for protection from the condemnation Iraq so richly deserves.

Mr. Hejailan is a Saudi lawyer and chairman of the Euro-Arab Arbitration System, a commercial dispute settlement body sponsored by European and Arab governments.