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Sometimes hip meets history in Iraq and the Middle East. Here a hipster uses a donkey as a dump truck in a construction project in a village between Erbil, Kurdistan, Iraq, and the Turkish border.

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# Why S. Dakotans can't understand Middle East

## Perceptions of God, fair play, other issues are wedge between cultures

By **TODD EPP**  
 For The Daily Republic

You and me as typical South Dakotans can't really understand the Middle East.

It's not that you or I are stupid or prejudiced or uneducated. We're not. But we come from a society and ways of thinking that are unlike those in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, etc.

After a year and a half of living and working in northern Iraq, after spending a month in Palestinian villages and refugee camps, after touring Israel and after visiting and representing a former client in Syria, I believe I understand less about the Middle East now than I did when I made my first trip to the region in 1985.

At first impression, not understanding how the Middle East works doesn't have much direct impact on our daily lives. But for our presidents, their administrations, our congressmen and women and diplomats to not understand means continued American missteps in the region. On closer inspection, however, the greatest impact



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Safety on the roads is not always top of mind in Kurdistan and much of the Middle East. On Christmas Day 2012, this group of Kurds was moving furniture — and themselves — in the back of a moving van. The lightshade on the head may have been for the photographer.

ters in uniform when we send them to the Middle East to try to fix our politicians' and diplomats' failures. Our taxes are also affected, both in military spending and veterans' benefits for those who come home wounded.

Most important are the lives lost here and abroad based on American ignorance and arrogance.

• **Big difference No. 1: Americans value individualism, while most Middle Eastern cultures value the tribal chief, elder, leader, etc.**

Much of the Middle East is not much beyond (or is still in the grip of) what I call "The Great Man Syndrome." While most South Dakotans and Americans respect authority, we also have a greater desire to act as individuals and take action if we think something needs to be done. My observation of Middle Eastern culture is that because of dictators and the dependence upon the "great man," most ordinary people are reluctant to take action without fear of repercussions, even if what they want to do is right.

An example makes the best point. I was talking to a Kurdish colleague about a point of law that I thought was pretty clear based on Kurdish and Iraqi law. It was not what a certain government official wanted to hear.

As I pleaded my case, my Kurdish colleague barked, "He is the law," thus settling the matter.

• **Big difference No. 2: The dependence upon Insha'Allah (God willing).**

Most of us say, "Thank God" or "God willing" in certain instances, whether we are religious or not. Yes, some South Dakotans and Americans will say "It's God's will," particularly if something bad happens. But my experience, at least in Iraq, is that the expression Insha'Allah is not a colloquialism but an excuse.

Let me explain.

While working on a project, we had problems with a radar system that hadn't worked properly. We spent months and months on the issue — engineers, ATC experts, contractors and management. Finally, one of

This is the second in a series of first-person accounts by South Dakotan Todd Epp about his recent

time spent in Iraq as a legal consultant. Look for a final installment in a future edition of The Daily Republic.

my very competent Kurdish colleagues said, "Let us hope the radar works, Insha'Allah." It was something I had never heard him say before and I knew he meant it. The Insha'Allah attitude can be both a nice thought and an excuse in Middle Eastern culture. I told my colleague that there was no Insha'Allah involved in making the radar operational; people designed it, people installed it and people — i.e., us — would make it work.

Another example of Insha'Allah at work involved the horrible deaths of some foreign construction workers from Third World countries who died at a construction site in Kurdistan. The owner of the site said, in cold hard newspaper print, it was God's will that they died that day. Never mind that some basic health and safety practices might have kept these poor souls alive.

When faced with difficulty or failure, in the Middle East, God often gets the blame.

• **Big difference No. 3: Negotiating is good; corruption is bad.**

Indeed, most everything is up for negotiation in the Middle East. Buying a scarf in the souk, ordering a Ping-Pong table for your apartment, even trading an old cell phone for a new one involves negotiation. But when negotiation crosses over into "scratch my back and I'll scratch yours," and when many transactions have this undercurrent, then there is a problem.

As one Kurdish colleague of mine said, corruption is "like the ghost in the room." You can't see the bribes but you can feel a presence of graft. People make decisions for odd reasons. Others suddenly change a position they were advocating. Or more blatantly, you meet someone's cousin.

It's not that corruption is unknown here in the United States. It is just not our default position. American culture disapproves of graft

and those who purvey it. In Middle Eastern culture, it is far more accepted.

• **Big difference No. 4: A lack of a sense of fair play.**

The rule of law is, in my opinion, the greatest gift our British cousins gave America and much of the Commonwealth. We South Dakotans and Americans believe in fair play, which is a less academic way of saying "rule of law." South Dakotans and Americans expect fairness and adherence to the rules — be they the rules to Monopoly or the United States Constitution.

In the Middle East, thanks in part to the whole Insha'Allah thing noted above and centuries of oppression, there is little expectation of life being fair.

Take my Kurdish friends.

Under Saddam Hussein's brutal decades of rule, some of them saw their houses taken from them, family members exiled, others killed and all sorts of education and job opportunities denied. It is understandable optimism might not spring eternal.

For example, treatment of many of the foreign workers from poor Third World countries bothered me. It wasn't fair, at least to me, that some of them lived in conditions akin to a POW camp. But fair isn't always a big concern in the Middle East.

Such are my impressions about life in the Middle East. The region is a riddle we Americans can't understand except through extensive travel and language and cultural study. What we Americans think is "common sense" or shared knowledge is often considered neither "common" or "sense" by even the highly educated in the Middle East.

So, before we allow the United States to go on another military adventure in the region, our politicians need to ask themselves one question: What do I really know about the Middle East? The self-aware will answer honestly, "not much."



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