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Mideast Rules to Live By

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For a long time, I let my hopes for a decent outcome in Iraq triumph over what I had learned reporting from Lebanon during its civil war. Those hopes vanished last summer. So, I'd like to offer President Bush my updated rules of Middle East reporting, which also apply to diplomacy, in hopes they'll help him figure out what to do next in Iraq.

Rule 1: What people tell you in private in the Middle East is irrelevant. All that matters is what they will defend in public in their own language. Anything said to you in English, in private, doesn't count. In Washington, officials lie in public and tell the truth off the record. In the Mideast, officials say what they really believe in public and tell you what you want to hear in private.

Rule 2: Any reporter or U.S. Army officer wanting to serve in Iraq should have to take a test, consisting of one question: "Do you think the shortest distance between two points is a straight line?" If you answer yes, you can't go to Iraq. You can serve in Japan, Korea or Germany - not Iraq.

Rule 3: If you can't explain something to Middle Easterners with a conspiracy theory, then don't try to explain it at all - they won't believe it.

Rule 4: In the Middle East, never take a concession, except out of the mouth of the person doing the conceding. If I had a dollar for every time someone agreed to recognize Israel on behalf of Yasir Arafat, I could paper my walls.

Rule 5: Never lead your story out of Lebanon, Gaza or Iraq with a cease-fire; it will always be over before the next morning's paper.

Rule 6: In the Middle East, the extremists go all the way, and the moderates tend to just go away.

Rule 7: The most oft-used expression by moderate Arab pols is: "We were just about to stand up to the bad guys when you stupid Americans did that stupid thing. Had you stupid Americans not done that stupid thing, we would have stood up, but now it's too late. It's all your fault for being so stupid."

Rule 8: Civil wars in the Arab world are rarely about ideas - like liberalism vs. communism. They are about which tribe gets to rule. So, yes, Iraq is having a civil war as we once did. But there is no Abe Lincoln in this war. It's the South vs. the South.

Rule 9: In Middle East tribal politics there is rarely a happy medium. When one side is weak, it will tell you, "I'm weak, how can I compromise?" And when it's strong, it will tell you, "I'm strong, why should I compromise?"

Rule 10: Mideast civil wars end in one of three ways: a) like the U.S. civil war, with one side vanquishing the other; b) like the Cyprus civil war, with a hard partition and a wall dividing the parties; or c) like the Lebanon civil war, with a soft partition under an iron fist (Syria) that keeps everyone in line. Saddam used to be the iron fist in Iraq. Now it is us. If we don't want to play that role, Iraq's civil war will end with A or B.

Rule 11: The most underestimated emotion in Arab politics is humiliation. The Israeli-Arab conflict, for instance, is not just about borders. Israel's mere existence is a daily humiliation to Muslims, who can't understand how, if they have the superior religion, Israel can be so powerful. Al Jazeera's editor, Ahmed Sheikh, said it best when he recently told the Swiss weekly Die Weltwoche: "It gnaws at the people in the Middle East that such a small country as Israel, with only about seven million inhabitants, can defeat the Arab nation with its 350 million. That hurts our collective ego. The Palestinian problem is in the genes of every Arab. The West's problem is that it does not understand this."

Rule 12: Thus, the Israelis will always win, and the Palestinians will always make sure they never enjoy it. Everything else is just commentary.

Rule 13: Our first priority is democracy, but the Arabs' first priority is "justice." The oft-warring Arab tribes are all wounded souls, who really have been hurt by colonial powers, by Jewish settlements on Palestinian land, by Arab kings and dictators, and, most of all, by each other in endless tribal wars. For Iraq's long-abused Shiite majority, democracy is first and foremost a vehicle to get justice. Ditto the Kurds. For the minority Sunnis, democracy in Iraq is a vehicle of injustice. For us, democracy is all about protecting minority rights. For them, democracy is first about consolidating majority rights and getting justice.

Rule 14: The Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi had it right: "Great powers should never get involved in the politics of small tribes."

Rule 15: Whether it is Arab-Israeli peace or democracy in Iraq, you can't want it more than they do.