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Iraq's Little Secret

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BAGHDAD, Iraq — The White House is right that Iraq is by far the most repressive country in the entire Middle East — but that's true only if you're a man.

To see how many Arab countries are in some ways even more repressive to women, consider how an invasion might play out. If American ground troops are allowed to storm across the desert from Saudi Arabia into Iraq, then American servicewomen will theoretically not be able to drive vehicles as long as they are in Saudi Arabia and will be advised to wear an abaya over their heads. As soon as they cross the border into enemy Iraq, they'll feel as if they are entering the free world: they can legally drive, uncover their heads, and even call men idiots.

Iraqi women routinely boss men and serve in non-combat positions in the army. Indeed, if Iraq attacks us with smallpox, we'll have a woman to thank: Dr. Rihab Rashida Taha, the head of Iraq's biological warfare program, who is also known to weapons inspectors as Dr. Germ.

A man can stop a woman on the street in Baghdad and ask for directions without causing a scandal. Men and women can pray at the mosque together, go to restaurants together, swim together, court together or quarrel together. Girls compete in after-school sports almost as often as boys, and Iraqi television broadcasts women's sports as well as men's.

"No one thinks that sports are just for men," said Nadia Yasser, the captain of the Iraqi national women's soccer team. "It's true that my mother was a bit concerned at first when I took up soccer, but I insisted, and so she accepted it and just started praying for me."

The point is not to be soft on Saddam Hussein, whose rash wars and policies have killed hundreds of thousands of women as well as men. Iraqi women would be much better off with Saddam gone, and in any case the relative equality of women in Iraq has little to do with his leadership. Iraq has been civilized more than twice as long as Britain, after all (it was old when Babylon arose), and Iraq got its first woman doctor back in 1922. Then the Iran-Iraq war boosted equality by sending men to the front lines and forced women to fill in as factory workers, bus drivers and government officials.

Still, we shouldn't demonize all of Iraq — just its demon of a ruler — and it's worth pondering this contrast between an enemy that empowers women and allies that repress them. This gap should shame us as well as these allies, reminding us to use our political capital to nudge Arab countries to respect the human rights not just of Kurds or Shiites, but also of women.

More broadly, in a region where women are treated as doormats, Iraq offers an example of how an Arab country can adhere to Islam and yet provide women with opportunities.

"I look at women in Saudi Arabia, and I feel sorry for them," said Thuha Farook, a young woman doctor in Basra. "They can't learn. They can't improve themselves."

At the Basra Maternity and Pediatric Teaching Hospital, 25 of the 26 students in ob-gyn are women. Across town, 54 percent of Basra University's students are female.

Iraqi women who work typically get six months' maternity leave at full pay and another six months at half pay. Subsidized day care is usually available at the workplace. Female circumcision, still common in American allies like Egypt and Nigeria, is absent in Iraq.

To be sure, aside from brutal political repression that is gender-blind, Iraqi women also endure groping on crowded buses and an occasional honor killing, in which a man kills a daughter or sister for being unchaste. Honor killings typically result in a six-month prison sentence in Iraq; they sometimes go completely unpunished in other countries.

A glance around any Baghdad street also demonstrates that Iraq doesn't have hang-ups about the female body that neighboring countries do. A man can travel widely in the Arab world and know about women's legs only by hearsay, but careful reporting in Iraq confirms that Arab women do have knees: In Baghdad I saw women volleyball players who felt uninhibited enough to roll up their sweats.

So as we invade Iraq for its barbaric and repressive ways, our allies in the Muslim world should feel deeply embarrassed that a rogue state offers women more equality than they do.