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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Cursed by Oil

By **THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN**

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■ visited the Japanese cellphone company DoCoMo in Tokyo 10 days ago. A robot made by Honda gave me part of the tour, even bowing in perfect Japanese fashion. My visit there coincided with yet another suicide bomb attack against U.S. forces in Iraq. I could not help thinking: Why are the Japanese making robots into humans, while Muslim suicide squads are making humans into robots?

The answer has to do in part with the interaction between culture and natural resources. Countries such as Japan, Korea, Taiwan and China have relatively few natural resources like oil. As a result, in the modern age, their first instinct is to look inward, assess their weaknesses, try to learn as much as they can from foreigners and then beat them at their own game. In order to beat the Westerners, they have even set aside many of their historical animosities so they can invest in each other's countries and get all the benefits of free trade.

The Arab world, alas, has been cursed with oil. For decades, too many Arab countries have opted to drill a sand dune for economic growth rather than drilling their own people — men and women — in order to tap their energy, creativity, intellect and entrepreneurship. Arab countries barely trade with one another, and unlike Korea and Japan, rarely invent or patent anything. But rather than looking inward, assessing their development deficits, absorbing the best in modern knowledge that their money can buy and then trying to beat the West at its own game, the Arab world in too many cases has cut itself off, blamed the enduring Palestine conflict or colonialism for delaying reform, or found dignity in Pyrrhic victories like Falluja.

To be sure, there are exceptions. Jordan, Qatar, Bahrain, Dubai, Morocco and Tunisia are all engaged in real experiments with modernization, but the bigger states are really lost. A week ago we were treated again to absurd Saudi allegations that "Zionists" were behind the latest bombing in Saudi Arabia, because, said Saudi officials, "Zionists" clearly benefit from these acts. Someone ought to tell the Saudis this: Don't flatter yourselves. The only interest Israelis have in Saudi Arabia is flying over it to get to India and China — countries that actually trade and manufacture things other than hatred of "infidels."

The Bush team has made a mess in Iraq, but the pathologies of the Arab world have also contributed — and the sheer delight that some Arab media take in seeing Iraq go up in flames is evidence of that. It's time for the Arab world to grow up — to stop dancing on burning American jeeps and claiming that this is some victory for Islam.

One thing about countries like Singapore, Korea, Taiwan and Japan, they may not have deserts but they sure know the difference between the mirage and the oasis — between victories that come from educating your population to innovate and "victories" that come from a one-night stand by suicidal maniacs like 9/11.

As I said, the Bush team has made a mess in Iraq. And I know that Abu Ghraib will be a lasting stain on the Pentagon leadership. But here's what else I know from visiting Iraq: There were a million acts of kindness, generosity and good will also extended by individual U.S. soldiers this past year — acts motivated purely by a desire to give Iraqis the best chance they've ever had at decent government and a better future. There are plenty of Iraqis and Arabs who know that.

Yes, we Americans need to look in a mirror and ask why we've become so radioactive. But the Arabs need to look in a mirror too. "They are using our mistakes to avoid their own necessity to change, reform and modernize," says the Mideast expert Stephen P. Cohen.

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A senior Iraqi politician told me that he recently received a group of visiting Iranian journalists in his home. As they were leaving, he said, two young Iranian women in the group whispered to him: "Succeed for our sake." Those Iranian women knew that if Iraqis could actually produce a decent, democratizing government it would pressure their own regime to start changing — which is why the Iranian, Syrian and Saudi regimes are all rooting for us to fail.

But you know what? Despite everything, we still have a chance to produce a decent outcome in Iraq, if we get our eye back on the ball. Of course, if we do fail, that will be our tragedy. But for the Arabs, it will be a huge lost opportunity — one that will only postpone their future another decade. Too bad so few of them have the courage to stand up and say that. I guess it must be another one of those "Zionist" plots.

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