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What's in a Name? General Franks and the Franks
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In the weeks and months leading up to the invasion of Iraq, President Bush and official administrative spokespersons were careful to make clear that their objective was focused solely on Iraq, and that they did not intend to broaden their goals to the Middle East in general. This consistent claim has failed to convince many people that the United States does not intend a wholesale take-over of the Middle East or the Persian Gulf. One reason for this failure is the frequent comments by commentators, politicians and others about the need for "regime change" in many Middle Eastern countries. Another reason is that American rhetoric about bringing democracy to Iraq implies that the United States might forcibly bring democracy to other non-democratic countries.

But one reason for Middle Eastern disbelief in the limited nature of U.S. military objectives in the region has gone unnoticed by us, even though it stands out in the open and we talk about it every day. We have not noticed it because it is of no significance to us, but in the Muslim world, it carries a wealth of meaning, and its associations bring to the fore centuries of Islam's perceptions about its negative experiences with the West.

I am talking about the name of the American leader of the allied forces in the Middle East: Gen. Tommy Franks. Although "Franks" is a perfectly ordinary name in American and European contexts, in the Muslim world it signifies people who invade, attack and despoil innocent people and families, women and children. "Franks" is the Arab name for the Christian crusaders who invaded the Middle East in the 11th through 14th centuries in attempts to wrest the Holy Land from Muslim sovereignty. The French dominated the first crusade, and so the Muslims called the first

crusaders "Franks" and the name stuck through all of the later crusades.

Muslims did not see the Franks as merely invaders and warriors. The Franks were known for being bloodthirsty, for breaking oaths and treaties, and for indiscriminate slaughter of people without consideration of their age, gender or religion. The crusaders often killed Christians and Jews along with Muslims. In one or two famous incidents, a few Franks publicly barbequed human limbs and ate human flesh -- earning all Franks a reputation as cannibals.

So in the Muslim world, when Gen. Franks is mentioned, and his name is frequently in the news these days because of his leadership position, the name conjures up images of the cruelty and unbridled ambition that have been associated with the Franks/crusaders for centuries.

There is also an association with the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, for the crusaders wanted the Holy Land, which today is the nation of Israel and the territory of Palestine. The Muslims see the Israeli presence there as a re-enactment of the crusader occupation of that land and they are reminded of the American support for what they see as Israeli occupation and oppression.

So the associations linked to the name of Gen. Franks, although completely in ignorance from the American perspective, add to the Muslim world's lack of belief in the U.S. intentions to limit the war to Iraq. This inspires their belief that this is an attack on all Islam, as was the last coming of the Franks.