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OPINION

Britons are most cultured Europeans

By John Hooper in Rome

The Italians have Michelangelo, the French Moliere and the Germans Beethoven. But, according to an Italian survey, the British - the beer- swilling, tabloid-reading, supposedly sportscrazy British - are more cultured than any of them. They go to more concerts, films, plays, galleries and libraries than almost anyone in Europe. They even manage to visit more ruins and monuments than

But the one area where they lag behind the other major nations of Europe is sport. More French, Italians and Spanish than British go to a course or stadium. But the British are sportier than the Germans and, proportionately, attendances are above the average for the former European Union of 15

These and other findings are contained in a survey of European cultural consumption commissioned in Italy and due to be published next week. Interviewees in the countries that made up the EU until its enlargement last year were asked if they had been to any one of a series of cultural events in the previous 12 months.

The British scored higher than the French, Germans and Italians in every category except sport.

More than 60 per cent of Britons said they were film-goers, compared with only 52 per cent in the land of Renoir, Godard and Truffaut, and 49 per cent of Britons claimed to have been to a library, compared with 27 per cent in the homeland of Goethe. And almost a third of Britons claimed to have been to a gallery or museum, compared with barely 20 per cent of Italians.

Italy's relatively low "cultural consumption" is a source of growing concern in a country that is renowned for its artistic riches. Guido Venturini, director general of the Touring Club Italiano which carried out the survey, told the magazine Il Venerdi: "We are sitting in the most beautiful country in the world, but the Italians appear to be wholly unaware of

Part of the problem is that Italy's stagnant economy has prompted the government to cut the budget of its culture ministry as well as to slash allocations to local authorities, which are responsible for many of festivals, libraries, museums and galleries. But it is also true that contempo rary Italy's artistic output is modest. Antonio Paolucci, Florence's top arts official, said: "The next Michelangelo, if there ever is one, will certainly not be born in Italy, but rather Čhina, or the US, or **Šrazil**." (Guardian)

Iraq: Leave our country now

By Hassan Juma'a Awad in Basra

Te lived through dark days under Saddam Hussein's dictator ship. When the regime fall are in ship. When the regime fell, people wanted a new life: a life without shackles and terror; a life where we could rebuild our country and enjoy its natural wealth. Instead, our communities have been attacked with chemicals and cluster bombs, and our people tortured, raped and killed in our homes.

Saddam's secret police used to creep over the roofs into our homes at night; occupation troops now break down our doors in broad daylight. The media do not show even a fraction of the devastation that has engulfed Iraq. Journalists who dare to report the truth of what is happening have been kidnapped by terrorists. This serves the agenda of the occupation, which aims to eliminate witnesses to its crimes.

Workers in Iraq's southern oilfields began organising soon after British occupying forces invaded Basra. We founded our union, the Southern Oil Company Union, just 11 days after the fall of Baghdad in April 2003. When the occupation troops stood back and allowed Basra's hospitals, universities and public services to be burned and looted, while they defended only the oil ministry and oilfields, we knew we were dealing with a brutal force prepared to impose its will without regard for human suffering. From the beginning, we were left in no doubt that the US and its allies had come to take control of our oil

The occupation authorities have maintained many of Saddam's repressive laws, including the 1987 order which robbed us of basic union rights, including the right to strike. Today, we still have no official recognition as a trade union, despite having 23,000 members in 10oil and gas companies in Basra. Amara. Nassiriva, and up to Anbar province. However, we draw our legitimacy from the workers, not the government. We believe unions should operate regardless of the gov ernment's wishes, until the people are able finally to elect a genuinely accountable and independent Iraqi government, which represents our

interests and not those of American imperialism. Our union is independent of any political party. Most trade unions in Britain only seem to be aware of one union federation in Iraq, the

regime-authorised Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, whose president Rassim Awadi, is deputy leader of the US-imposed prime minister Ayad Allawi's party. The IFTU's leadership is carved up between the progovernment Communist party, Allawi's Iraqi National Accord, and their satellites. In fact, there are two other union federations, which are linked to political parties, as well as our own organisation.

Our union has already shown it is able to stand its ground against one of the most powerful US companies, Dick Cheney's KBR, which tried to take over our workplaces with the protection of occupation

We forced them out and compelled their Kuwaiti subcontractor, Al Khourafi, to replace 1,000 of the 1,200 employees it brought with it with Iraqi workers, 70% of whom are unemployed today. We also fought US viceroy Paul Bremer's wage schedule, which dictated that Iraqi public sector workers must earn ID 69,000 (\$35) per month, while paying up to \$1,000 a day to thousands of foreign mercenaries. In August 2003 we took strike action and shut down all oil production for three days. As a result, the occupation authorities had to raise wages to a minimum of ID 150.000

We see it as our duty to defend the country's resources. We reject and will oppose all moves to privatise our oil industry and national resources. We regard this privatisation as a form of neo-colonialism, an attempt to impose a permanent economic occupation to follow the military occupation.

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Terrorism

FOCUS

Kuwait's 9-11 and the proactive security forces

By Raymond Barrett

The outbreak of violence over the last month has been labelled by some as "Kuwait's 9-11," when the reality of sustained terrorist violence was finally witnessed on Kuwaiti soil. The series of shootouts that left three policemen and six terrorist suspects dead bear scant similarity to the attack on the World Trade Centre from a numerical point of view, but a comparison is more valid when you look at the reaction of the Kuwait govern-

In the aftermath of these shootings, liberal MPs were widely quoted in the local media as saying that the Kuwait government had been happy to ignore the issue of fundamental Islamic groups advocating violence, as long the actual violence took place elsewhere, Afghanistan and Iraq to name but a few locations. This policy of containment was believed to be the most prudent course of action given the considerable weight that Islamist groups hold both in parliament and in the general political firmament as a whole.

The incident that sparked the recent crackdown by the authorities has still to be clearly explained. Two policemen were killed while trying to detain militants on the same day that the US embassy in Kuwait issued a warning of impending attacks on West-erners; the alert had even described the colour of the car that was to be used in the attack. Obviously, it cannot have been a coincidence that this first clash occurred on the same day. By violating the unwritten rule of "not in your own backyard" those committed violence went beyond what was acceptable and the subsequent crackdown by the authorities was quick in coming.

While some commentators have attempted to make a connection, it would be erroneous to compare the violence in Kuwait over the last month to that in Saudi Arabia over the last vear, when Al-Qaeda linked groups launched a series of attacks against

western targets in that country. What makes the four separate shooting incidents in Kuwait distinctive is that they occurred as a result of action initiated by the police. It was the Kuwaiti security forces that were setting the agenda as opposed to simply reacting to attacks, as was the case in Saudi Arabia. The relative speed and efficiency displayed by the Kuwaiti security forces in "rounding up the usual suspects" once spurred in to action, begged the question from some commentators, why didn't these arrests happen sooner?

The answer is in fact a reassuring some of its neighbours, where the mere hint of dissention could have a political dissident in custody faster than you can say Mukabarat. For the most part, it is what you do in Kuwait that gets you in to trouble rather than what you say. However, the death in custody of one of those arrested in the raids over the last few weeks has raised questions that need to be

answered satisfactorily, if the government is to sustain the popular support it has received for its present hard line approach.

Ever aware that timing is a vital tool in politics, the government has used the violence directed against the police force as the justification for a series of sweeping legislative changes. Similar to the way that the US government used the September 11, 2001 attacks to pass the Patriot Act, the government in Kuwait has passed a series of laws designed to turn the screw on the more vociferous and radical Islamic groups while the public are

A 1984 law banning female drivers from wearing a veil that covers their faces was "reactivated" on the grounds that terrorists could use it to evade authorities. Unlicensed mosques built without planning permission (often made from galvanised steel) were ordered to be demolished on the grounds that they could be used as hiding places for militants on the run. New laws regarding searching private homes were hurriedly passed making it easier for the authorities not only to enter private homes but also to search the women's sections of these houses, despite that very idea being anathema to the more traditional residents of areas such as Jahra and Sabahiya. Such a triptych of potentially unpopular legislation would have been almost unthinkable before the violent incidents that lead to the deaths of the three policemen.

However, the problem with passing legislation in the immediate aftermath of shocking events such as what hapthe possibility of overkill. There has been strong opposition in the US to some of the legislation enacted following 9-11, with opponents arguing that the civil liberties that Americans hold dear have been dangerously compromised. One should be careful that in trying to counteract threats to civil society that you do not end up debasing that's society in the process.

Moldova and the next 'colourful' revolution

The Russian Duma approved a draft resolution Feb. 18 that threatens sanctions against Moldova for continuing to blockade the Transdniestria region. More than the blockade. however, the resolution is a direct result of the detainment earlier in the day of several Russian international election observers and of continuing calls from Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin for Russian peacekeepers to leave Transdnies-

Moldova's anti-Russian actions and Moscow's warning to Chisinau significantly increase the chances of another intercontinental showdown - pitting the United States and the European Union against Russia - over the future of an Eastern European state. At the very least, it will further worsen relations between the Western powers and Russia, leading Europe to drift away from its giant neighbour to the East.

The conflict over Transdniestria began when the Soviet Union ceased to exist in December 1991, and Transdniestria - a region lumped together with Moldova under the Soviet system announced it would break away from Chisinau. Transdniestria's majority population is ethnic Eastern Slavs. Russians and Ukrainians, with a minority of ethnic Moldovans. Moldova would like to keep Transdniestria attached for one key reason: it is the industrial heart of the country. Since Aug. 1, 2003, Transdniestria has been subject to "economic measures" from Moldova that amount to a blockade. Chisinau refuses to issue Moldovan customs documentation to any Transdniestrian companies that have not registered with the government (which entails paying

Moldovan taxes) Several hundred Russian peacekeepers" are stationed in Transdniestria - their presence part of an agreement signed in 1992 after Moldova tried unsuccessfully to reclaim the region. Voronin, despite being a Communist, is fervently anti-Russian and has called repeatedly for the peacekeepers to leave; they are tentatively scheduled to depart by the end of 2005. Voronin also seizes every opportunity to antagonize Moscow - most recently on Feb. 18, when police arrested and deported 18 "uninvited" international observers who. according to Moscow, were in Moldova to monitor the upcoming parliamentary elections. Fourteen of the deportees were Russian, along with two Ukrainians and two Kazakhs

A week earlier, Moldovan officials detained five Russian election observers for not registering with the country's Central Election Commission. It is possible the deportees were not actually election "monitors" at all, and that Russia, in order to save face over that little discrepancy, threatened sanctions over the blockade instead.

The Duma drafted its state ment calling for Russia to consider charging Moldova world market prices for energy supplies, banning Moldovan-produced alcohol and tobacco products, and requiring visas for citizens of Moldova - with special exemptions for Transdniestrian residents. Such sanctions, if enacted, would hit Moldova right where it hurts. Moldova imports all of its natural gas and oil from Russia, and pays well below market prices for both - thanks to a generous discount from Moscow.

But tiny Moldova does not seem particularly afraid of Russia largely because both the European Union and the United States have indicated they would support Moldova should Moscow move against it. Western support for the country, however, might not extend to the Moldovan government.

Moldovan opposition sources in contact with Western diplomats in the country say Moldova is next on the West's list for an "Orange Revolution" similar to what Ukraine experienced during the 2004 presidential elections. (In that case, the "orange" was the campaign colour of Western-backed candidate and Yushchenko).

Moldova plans to hold general elections March 6, and though Voronin is pro-Western and anti-Russian, the United States and European Union would prefer to see a different president in office most likely from the opposition, a mix of pro-Western nationalists and liberals. Voronin reportedly is aware that Washington and Brussels would like to knock him out of power, and to that end apparently is carrying out last-ditch efforts to prove how anti-Russian he can be. On the US side, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has encouraged "a reintegrated, sovereign Moldova" - and Voronin stands in the way

Sources on Capitol Hill said

has "dispatched" \$1.7 million "to support Moldovan democracy. Additionally, US organizations including the National Endowment for Democracy and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as George Soros' Open Institute back the Moldovan opposition financially and in other ways, similar to the support given to Georgian and Ukrainian opposition groups. Sources indicate these organisations are holding seminars for the Moldovan opposition that explain how to govern and how "root democracy" works to achieve democracy through protests.

In Europe, several NGOs and government groups also are supporting the Moldovan opposition. In particular, the Parliamentary

Assembly of the Council of Europe has accused the Moldovan government of anti-democratic tendencies and media manipulation. The US Ambassador to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Stephan Minikes, said during a Feb. 4 visit to Moldova that the country should follow the example of Georgia and Ukraine and that regime change in Moldova would help resolve the Transdniestria conflict and advance Moldova toward democracy. Support to this degree suggests

the West might attempt to use both the election and confrontation over Transdniestria as a chance to move against Russia for a second time in a matter of months. The events in Ukraine have emboldened Washington and Brussels to broaden a

sia in hopes of marginalizing its influence. The campaign began when moderate pro-Western Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze was replaced with completey pro-Western Mikhail Saakashvili December 2002.

Moldova likely will become the next battleground. Not only will relations between the West and Russia further deteriorate, an action in Moldova will represent the second time that Washington and Brussels have worked together to contain Moscow. Finally, a Moldovan "revolution" - no matter what colour - will show Russia that, despite the Europeans' sweet talk about wanting better relations with Moscow, Europe is slowly drifting

Is America's demand for Middle East democracy consistent?

By Dr Sami Alrabaa

Tt seems that the Shiite political parties in Iraq have won the nation-wide elections which took place last month. All in all, these elections were, by international standards, fair and democratic. And as such the elections were blessed by the Bush Administration. However, many political analysts are hypothesising: How would America react if the Shiite majority in the coming Iraqi Parliament decided to establish a regime a la Islamic Republic in Iran? Would America accept that? And how would America react if the majority of Iraqis per a nationwide referendum decided that Kuwait is part of Iraq? Would America accept that as well?

Historically speaking, America has not worried much about democracy in countries of the Third World as long as they are friendly to America and foster the American interests. This happened in Chile when the American administration at the time helped general Pinochet remove a democratically elected government by force. At present, the Bush Administration is using subversive means to undermine democratically governments in Venezuela

Certainly, the Iranian democracy is not perfect, but it is far better than many democracies supported by America. The Islamic Republic in Tehran recognizes the political rights of the country's minorities like the Turkomans and the Assyrians. Both ethnic/religious minorities have their own representatives in the Iranian Parliament.

On the other hand, the Saudi regime has been supported by successive American Administrations for vested interests. Until 9/11, the Saudi regime has never been criticized for its repressive means of rule and lack of democracy and human rights by all standards. When the new US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice was asked about Saudi Arabia in a press conference in London, during her recent tour of some European countries, she attributed the lack of democracy in Saudi Arabia to endemic cultural reasons. Some analysts asked why these reason do not apply to countries like Iran.

If the limited exercise of democracy that recently took place in Riyadh/Saudi Arabia, which excluded women and were absolutely undemocratic by all standards, happed else where, in an unfriendly country to America, Condoleezza Rice would be the first to condemn the election and declare undemocratic.

America is paying a high price for its double standard when it comes to promoting democracy in countries of the Middle East. People in countries like Jordan, Morocco, and Egypt, which lack real democracy, wonder why George Bush does not demand more democracy in these countries as forcefully as he does with Iran. The American double standard vis-a-vis democracy is eventually music to the ears of radicals in the region. And America should not wonder when the number of its enemies is increasing by the day. Consistency promotes credibility.