

If they penned up Arab-Americans —

By JOANNE E. MCKENNA

I spoke recently with a Greater Clevelander who is an American citizen of Iraqi birth. She has sisters and brothers in Baghdad, as well as nieces, nephews and other relatives. She is unable to phone them. The Red Cross can offer no help in checking on their status.

Each day, like the rest of us, she watches TV as our allied troops bomb the city of her birth and the place where her family lives. President Bush tells her that "Saddam is the enemy, not the people of Iraq."

She is frantic about the status of her family who are, according to media reports, without electricity, water, telephones, fuel, medicine and food. She prays for them and cries a lot.

Three days into the war, another Greater Clevelander told her that Arab-Americans should be rounded up and put in internment camps for the safety of the American people.

I heard that sentiment expressed on two talk shows during the first week of the war in the gulf. Callers said Arab-Americans should be interned for the duration of Desert Storm.

A friend reported hearing three women talking at a local bank. They insisted that Arab-Americans should be put into concentration camps because "they might try to poison our water supply."

I have friends in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Some are U.S. citizens. Others are Saudi Arabian citizens. I watch Patriots intercept Scuds with intense personal concern for the safety of people I hold dear. A citizen of Saudi Arabia phoned to check on my safety because he heard media reports that Arab-Americans are being harassed and threatened in Cleveland.

The FBI has contacted Arab-Americans throughout the country asking, among other questions, if they know of any potential terrorist activity and if they know anybody who wants to blow up a federal building.

These interviews unfairly stereotype Arab-

Americans who, like everybody else, have the right to be accepted and treated as individuals. The presumption of guilt by ethnic association is insidious and evil. Arab-Americans do not have innate knowledge of terrorism by virtue of their ethnicity.

There are about 3 million American citizens of Arabic-speaking origin. About 30,000 of us live in Greater Cleveland.

Many of us have taken the "melting pot" concept almost too literally and have blended into the American mainstream. I, for instance, am a third generation American citizen of Lebanese and Slovak descent. I don't speak, read or write Arabic but I am, proudly, an Arab-American. I have no knowledge of potential terrorist activity and do not know anybody who wants to blow up a federal building.

I've been thinking a lot about that Arab-American internment camp to which some of my fellow Americans wish to consign me.

White House Chief of Staff John Sununu would be there, as would Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell. They could discuss the legality of our internment with former Sens. James Abourezk and James Abdnor of South Dakota, Reps. Nick Joe Rahall of West Virginia and Mary Rose O'akar of Ohio, and former Reps. George Kasem of California and Abraham Kazen of Texas.

Additional input would come from the attorney general of Kansas, Robert Stephan, the treasurer of Rhode Island, Anthony Soloman, the secretary of state of Texas, George Bayoud, and the former governor of Oregon, Victor Attiyeh. They could also discuss their thoughts with the majority leader of the Tennessee legislature, James Naifeh, and the mayors and former mayors of several dozen U.S. cities.

For security in the internment camps, we Arab-Americans could consider Maj. Gen. Walter Safi, who fought beside Gen. George Patton, and Brig. Gen. Elias Stevens, who was

on Gen. Dwight Eisenhower's staff in World War II. In the Korean War, America's first jet ace was Col. James Jabara.

We would call on more contemporary Arab-American military, but they are busy fighting as members of the U.S. armed forces in the gulf. Perhaps they can be furloughed to the internment camps.

If we need a negotiator, we will have special presidential envoy Phillip C. Habib. To ensure that we do not make ignorant blunders there would be former Chief of Protocol Selwa Roosevelt.

Danny Thomas, founder of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, consumer advocate Ralph Nader, and Candy Lightner, founder of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), would inspire our social consciousness. Pioneer heart surgeon Michael DeBaakey could take charge of our health needs, assisted by at least 40 Greater Cleveland physicians of Arabic descent.

Helen Thomas of United Press International could be our historian. For inspiration we could read the poetry of Khalil Gibran or pass the time with a novel by William Peter Blatty ("The Exorcist") or a play by Fred Saidy ("Finian's Rainbow," "Bloomer Girl").

Entertainment would be provided by Paula Abdul, Paul Anka, Jamie Farr, F. Murray Abraham, Marlo Thomas, Tiffany, Michael Ansara, Tige Andrews, Khrystyne Haje, Danny Thomas, Casey Kasem, Don Bustany and Cleveland's own Larry Morrow. Danny Thomas and Casey Kasem received the 1990 Ellis Island Medal of Honor.

Programs could be produced by Emmy and Oscar winner Tony Thomas or "Halloween" producer Moustapha Akkad. For directors we would have Assad Kelada and John Bowab ("Who's the Boss," "Facts of Life," "Full House," "WKRP"). We could watch reruns of "Alice" featuring the late Vic Tayback, listen to an aria by Rosalind Elias or watch a ballet by Dennis Nahat.

Lest we become couch potatoes, we could toss a ball or two with NFL Hall of Fame line-

backer Bill George, Heisman Trophy winner Doug Flutie, Syracuse University basketball star Ron Seikaly, Indianapolis Colts' quarterback Jeff George, the Oakland A's Ron Hassey, Joe Lehoud of the Red Sox, Braves, Angels and Rangers, or UCLA basketball coach Jim Harrick.

We could talk cars with Indy 500 winner and National Race Car Champion Bobby Rahal, talk boxing with the world featherweight champ of 1936-37, Petey Sarron, or play chess with the 1986-87 U.S. national chess champion, Yasser Seirawan.

If we wanted to talk business, there would be Nick Shammass, the world's largest retail auto dealer; Mario Kassas, chairman of Carolco Pictures ("Rambo"); former Pan American Airlines CEO Najeeb Halaby; the president of Paramount Pictures' Domestic TV, Lucie Salhany; J.M. Haggas (slacks); the Farah brothers (slacks); the Maloof brothers ("Mod-O-Day" dresses); Ray Irani, chemist, inventor and president of Occidental Petroleum, and Fred Saigh, former owner of the St. Louis Cardinals. (The late Joe Robbie owned the Miami Dolphins.)

For education, we would seek the advice of Donna Shalala, the Greater Clevelander who is chancellor of the University of Wisconsin, and David Adamany, president of Wayne State University. Fuad Suleiman is former vice president of Ohio's Central State University.

We could enhance our fashion sense via the talents of Joseph Abboud, men's wear designer of 1990 as named by the Council of American Fashion Designers.

After pausing for a prayer in memory of Christa McAuliffe, the teacher/astronaut who died aboard the "Challenger," we Arab-Americans might then decide to file suit for reparations over the internment.

The head of our legal staff might well be Joseph D. Jamail, who won a record \$1 billion judgment for Texaco.

As I said, I am, proudly, an Arab American.

McKenna is past president of the national and Greater Cleveland associations of Arab-Americans.