

ALMOST HOME

The hottest venue for Iranian music today isn't in Iran at all—it's in Dubai. When the Iranian spring holiday of Nowruz comes in March, thousands of Iranians will celebrate by traveling to Dubai to see performances by their favorite artists. In recent years, scores of Iranian musicians have gone there to hold concerts they cannot hold in Iran, turning the United Arab Emirates boomtown into one of the world's premiere venues for Iranian music.

The government of Iran bans owning or playing pop music, and it bars women from singing in public. The constraints pushed Iranian musicians out of the country, and in the 1980s Los Angeles replaced Tehran as a cultural center for Iranians. Smuggled and bootlegged products made their way back into Iran, but the live music scene was dead until Dubai emerged as an alternative concert venue.

The singer Googoosh was one of the pioneers. Wildly popular in Iran in the 1970s, the Islamic Revolution silenced her singing voice. In 2001, she was one of the earliest artists still living in Iran to take advantage of President Khatami's loosening of strictures on overseas travel. Her performance in Dubai attracted an audience of 30,000 people, seventy percent of whom flew in from the Islamic Republic. Since then, the number of concerts has grown sharply, as have the number of young fans who will not let a border get in the way of their music. ■-SM

MANAGING IRAQ

By Jon B. Alterman

We are as unlikely to lose Iraq as we are to win it. Instead, we will be trapped in a tie that falls far short of the unqualified success some predicted, and also short of the unmitigated disaster that some fear will accompany an American loss of nerve. The grey zone between the two outcomes has not been much explored, but it needs to be.

The U.S. enemy in Iraq is not an army, or an idea, or a cause. Instead, it is a rag-tag coalition of former regime loyalists, virulent nationalists, violent jihadists, sectarian militiamen, and Iranian agents. There is no coherence to their side, and no unifying principle except their desire to end the U.S. military presence in the country. Their battle will not end with our departure—and our departure will come one day in the next four years—but will instead turn ever-more inward.

Most of us look at Iraq and see a sectarian civil war. What is harder to see is the extent to which this war is increasingly a proxy war between Sunni Arab states that seek to contain Iranian influence in the Middle East, and an Iranian state that seeks to reassert its "natural" primacy both in the Gulf and more broadly in the Middle East. As a Gulf leader remarked to me two weeks ago, "Iran has only been Shia for four centuries, but it has been Persian for millennia."

Three important things flow from this. The first is that the conflict in Iraq, like most proxy wars, is likely to continue for some time. As combatants slug it out, outside resources keep the battle raging and spare one side or the other from exhaustion or defeat. Conflicts of this sort can last for decades, as we have seen in conflicts from Ireland to Kashmir, and across the Middle East itself.

The second is that each side is likely to seek to play this conflict to its advantage rather than to win a clear victory. The Arab-Iranian struggle for influence long preceded the fall of Saddam Hussein (and explains generous Arab financing for Saddam's fight against Iran in the 1980s), and it will not go away. The United States was able to patch things up temporarily when it was allied with both Saudi Arabia and Iran in the 1960s and 1970s and used the

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ISLAM ON THE HILL

On January 22nd, the Middle East Program hosted Yitzhak Nakash for its monthly Congressional Forum on Islam. Nakash's talk was entitled "Shi'a Rising? Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon." Nakash, a professor at Brandeis University and a 2006-2007 Carnegie Corporation Scholar, stressed the diversity of Shi'a communities and their interests across the Middle East. In the case of Iran, he argued that the country's national strategic interests define the country's political agenda far more than any overarching plan for Shi'a dominance. Nakash added that a lasting reduction in Sunni-Shi'a tensions in the Middle East will require coordinating efforts between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and he called on the United States to be a broker between the two. To read a summary of the event, please click [HERE](#). ■

two states as twin pillars of stability in the Gulf. Recreating that *pax americana* is much harder without a close U.S.-Iranian relationship to lubricate it.

The third is that Iranian behavior has far more to do with durable Iranian national interests than the rantings of the Iranian president. The nature of Iraq's government is a strategic problem for Iran, whose graveyards overflowed with the bodies of hundreds of thousands of young men and boys who fell fighting Saddam for almost a decade. Talk of the United States "turning right" after invading Iraq further persuaded Iran's leadership that outcomes in Iraq could pose an existential threat to their rule. The truth of the matter is this: Iran will seek to undermine U.S. goals in Iraq as long as the Iranian government is convinced the United States seeks to use Iraq to undermine it. This position is entirely separate from any issue of the Iranian nuclear program, Holocaust denial, or the supposed millennialist tendencies of the Iranian president. Having bled the Soviets for a decade in Afghanistan, we should understand the impulse to bog down one's adversaries in a guerrilla war that offers no clear exit.

The conclusion that follows from all three points is that Iraq is a problem that will have to be managed rather than solved for many years to come. Part of that management will be ensuring that the country (or portions of it) not emerge as safe havens for terrorist groups, and part will be ensuring that the country not be a puppet of the Iranian leadership. Another part of the management will be seeking to minimize the bloodshed that arises from forced migration, reprisal killings, and wanton acts of violence against civilian populations. Yet another part will be guiding the Iraqi government toward enough internal stability that increased oil can flow out of the country, supplying global markets and providing the government (or governments) with resources to meet the needs of the population. None of this is about winning or losing. It is about coping.

Perhaps the most difficult part of our management task will be resurrecting the U.S. role in the Middle East. For decades, the United States was rarely loved in this region, but it was respected and feared. We were the world's sole superpower, and the most powerful military force the world had ever known. The stumbling in Iraq—the unforced errors of peacekeeping and reconstruction, the scandal of Abu Ghreib, and the persistent inability to defeat a shadowy insurgency—has diminished that respect and curtailed that fear.

The United States remains an awesome force in world affairs with a strong economy, a highly capable population, a robust intelligence apparatus, and a military that remains far more capable than any potential foe. We are not on our knees. In the Gulf itself, there is no single country or collection of countries that can replace the United States in their security planning. At the same time, however, the limitations of American power have become abundantly clear. One consequence of that clarity will be that our friends in the Gulf will shy away from provoking Iran, fearing that our deterrent alone is insufficient to protect them. Iran alarms them, but they will insist on the further protection of broad international consensus before taking military or even financial action against the country, regardless of whether that consensus can be struck or not.

Our national attachment to the notion of victory has served us well in war, but it will not serve us well in Iraq. There is no treaty of surrender to be signed, and no one to sign it on the other side. We need to change our paradigm. The fact is, we do not need to win, we need to maximize our interests. We are not done giving up blood and treasure for this cause, but we do not have limitless reserves of either. We need to calculate more, and panic less. ■2/5/07

Links of Interest

The Iranian singer [Googoosh's official webpage](#).

CSIS hosted United Nations [Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon](#) on January 16, 2007.

Jon Alterman was interviewed about the [State Department's openings](#) on NPR's Morning Edition.

Jon Alterman discussed the "[Sunni-Shi'ite Divide](#)" on WAMU's Diane Rehm show.

A summary of [Yitzhak Nakash's talk](#) on January 22, 2007.

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