

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Another Way with Iran

by Jon B. Alterman

In 1973, it would have been hard to imagine anyone would ever wax nostalgic about the Cold War. How times have changed. There is nothing like almost three years of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to help burnish the memory of former Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev.

The Cold War was an expensive and deadly conflict, sapping trillions of dollars over four decades and resulting in tens of millions of lives lost. Energies that could have been devoted to human betterment were directed instead toward human destruction. The Cold War had its successes, from spurring scientific advancement to putting a man on the moon, but despite its progress, it diverted energy and attention from problems that remain unsolved decades later.

Yet, for all of the Cold War's costs, they were not as great as they might have been. Had a true shooting war broken out between the United States and the Soviet Union, the losses would have been infinitely greater. Huge standing armies could have wreaked havoc on each other, while vast nuclear arsenals could have laid waste to each other's major cities. Rather than tens of millions of deaths, there would have been hundreds of millions; the trillions of dollars in costs would have been many times more.

The United States and the Soviet Union understood their urgent need to manage Cold War competition, and for the most part, they did so successfully. We had ambassadors in each other's capitals, a regular exchange of academics and former officials (and sometimes spies), and a steady if unremarkable trade in goods. It is a far cry from current U.S. relations with Iran.

The U.S.-Soviet rivalry was just that, a rivalry between two vaguely equal superpowers competing for dominance. Today's U.S.-Iranian conflict is hardly a rivalry, so disparate are the powers of the contending sides. Record oil prices notwithstanding, the entire economy of Iran is smaller than that of Massachusetts, despite having ten times the population and the second highest proven gas reserves in the

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Jon Alterman's Testimony on the Hill

Jon Alterman testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee about Iran's activities in the Levant on June 5, 2008. Alterman discussed Iranian support for Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas, as well as the difficulties these actions pose for U.S. policy. Alterman said, "There is a school of thought that suggests that much of our problem in the Middle East is one of messaging. If we can talk about ourselves in the right way and inspire the right people, this thinking goes, we can regain our previous position of influence. I disagree. Our problem in the Middle East is what we have done, what we have said we will do and not done, and what we have not committed to do." For more information about the event or to read or watch the full testimony, please click [HERE](#). ■

Mega-Mosques

Driving along the waterfront in Abu Dhabi, the Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan Grand Mosque can be seen long before it is reached. The stark white arabesque confection stands out from the dun-colored desert. In a country that seeks superlatives, the mosque has many going for it: the world's largest carpet, the world's largest chandelier, and the world's largest Islamic dome. It can hold 41,000 worshippers at one time, or more than one in ten Abu Dhabians.

More than worship seems to be at play. The Mosque's impressive silhouette is displayed prominently on the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority's website, with an invitation to all foreigners to visit, take a tour, and see what Islam is all about.

Rulers have built large mosques for centuries, but in recent decades a race has been on to outdo all the others. The seven year-old Sultan Qaboos mosque in Oman holds 20,000 worshippers, for a time had the world's largest chandelier and its largest carpet. The fifteen year-old Hassan II mosque in Morocco holds 25,000 in an glass-floored room built over the Atlantic ocean. Saudi Arabia's largest mosque, in Mecca, can hold millions of worshippers during pilgrimage. The most ambitious plan is still on the drawing board: One to build the world's tallest structure in Kuwait, and to build a synagogue, a cathedral and a mosque at the pinnacles of three blades. Worshippers will be closer to the heavens, but it remains to be seen if they become closer to God. ■ KC

world. Iran's conventional military forces are no match for their U.S. counterparts. Unlike the Soviet Union, Iran is by no means a global power; it is a regional one, with quite limited abilities to act outside its own neighborhood.

Even so, Iran punches far above its weight in global affairs, and for all of the differences between the historic Cold War with the Soviet Union and the developing conflict with Iran, the similarities are striking. Iran's proximity to the world's largest deposits of hydrocarbons is a force multiplier for the country on the world stage, as was the Soviet Union's proximity to Western Europe. Both conflicts also have a strong overlay of ideology. Whereas Americans fought for freedom against the Soviet Union, they now struggle against a system that many see as empowering clerics, demeaning women and religious minorities, and preaching hatred. Americans saw Soviet support behind wars in Korea and Vietnam, and long-simmering battles in Africa; today, Iran supports groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the West Bank and Gaza, and Hezbollah in Lebanon, all of which attack U.S. allies.

Many in the United States are resistant to seeing the parallels, however. They see President Ahmadinejad's provocative statements as more specific and more threatening than those of the Soviet Union. Soviet leaders tended to talk about the inevitability of the decline of the West, whereas Iranian leaders take a seemingly more active view of the need to expunge Israel from the Middle East. There is also considerable concern that there is something fundamentally irrational about the Islamic Republic's leadership that makes them far harder to deter than the leadership of the Soviet Union ever was.

There is an argument to be made for the idea that words truly matter. Had the world paid attention to Hitler's 1925 manifesto, *Mein Kampf*, it would not have been engulfed in flames fifteen years later. But almost three decades into the Islamic Republic, there is a strong record supporting the proposition that Iran's leadership has been quite ruthless pursuing its own national interests, and that such interests have been calculated in realistic and cold-blooded terms irrespective of the passionate statements of the clerical and lay leadership.

Iran may not be a purely rational actor, but it is vital to test that proposition. There is a crucial difference between hostility and irrationality, and a hostile Iran should be a far more attractive proposition to the United States than an irrational one. A hostile Iran can be deterred through a whole range of policy instruments, but an irrational Iran must be dealt with much more aggressively.

Irrational regimes have a way of self-destructing, but hostile ones can linger on. The U.S. predilection is often to favor the destruction of hostile ones in order to "fix" lingering problems. If Iran is indeed a rational but hostile power, the United States should be seeking to apply the lessons of the Cold War and developing tools to manage Iran's actions. Such tools would almost certainly involve more engagement than there has been in the last several years, and building rather than severing ties between the two countries.

In the end, when U.S. and Iranian relations improve, people will argue why. Americans still ascribe the fall of the Soviet Union to a successful U.S.-led covert war in Afghanistan, a Strategic Defense Initiative that helped bankrupt the Soviet military, and a Soviet economy that finally crumbled under its own weight. Yet, one cannot ignore the fact that U.S. and Soviet leaders kept channels of communication open in order to defuse conflict, and sustained dialogues connected with the Helsinki Process eased the undoing of Soviet power and gently lifted the Iron Curtain.

What is important is that the conflict ended without a single Soviet soldier ever firing at an American soldier. That outcome could not have been predicted in 1979, and certainly not in 1949. There may yet be a way out of our impasse with Iran that is short of war and short of surrender. ■ 6/16/08

Links of Interest

The Middle East Program hosted Martin Kramer for a Congressional Forum on Islam entitled "Islamist Intelligence: What they think they know" on June 3, 2008.

The Middle East Program hosted Stéphane Lacroix for a Gulf Roundtable entitled "Fundamentalist Islam at a Crossroads: 9/11, Iraq, and the Saudi religious debate" on May 29, 2008.

Ethan Chorin wrote a commentary for the *Financial Times* on Iran's role in the Gulf on May 27, 2008.

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