



HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Thousands of female sex workers are among the uncounted victims of continuing instability in Iraq, according to experts. The Organization for Women's Freedom in Iraq estimates that 3,500 Iraqi women have gone missing since the United States' invasion in 2003, and they assert that hundreds of these women in 2006 alone have been taken to neighboring countries in the region to work as prostitutes.

According to the most recent U.S. Department of State Trafficking in Persons report, Iraqi women who have been forced into prostitution have surfaced in countries as diverse as the United Arab Emirates, Syria and Yemen. They blend in among the thousands of refugees leaving Iraq every day. Once they arrive, traffickers often confiscate their passports, leaving the women with little recourse.

The United Arab Emirates passed a law against human trafficking in November 2006, which many hope will get the country off a U.S. government watch list. The law threatens violators with life imprisonment for trafficking of women and children. The State Department charges that the Syrian government has not only failed to protect victims or prosecute traffickers, but it has actually imprisoned children who were found to have been sexually exploited.

The flow of trafficking goes both ways as well. Numerous reports tell of South Asian men who were promised bona fide jobs in Iraq, only to arrive and be forced into indentured servitude. -FA

THE SILENT TREATMENT

By Jon B. Alterman

Of the 79 recommendations of the Iraq Study Group report that came out recently, the one that got the most attention—even before the report's release—was the recommendation that the U.S. government talk with Iran and Syria. That recommendation has also met with broad approval in the Arab world, not so much out of affection for the two countries but out of a conviction that dialogue will yield better outcomes than an effort at isolation. Indeed, the Gulf governments' response to more strident voices in Tehran over the last 18 months has not been a 1980s-style isolation policy by those governments. Instead, Gulf Arab governments have stressed dialogue and mutual security, much as they did during the Khatami period of the late 1990s. Dialogue, these governments suggest, relieves tensions and builds common interests, despite deep distrust and clashing strategic objectives across the Gulf.

Farther west, governments in the Levant have applauded the call for the United States to engage in dialogue as well, arguing that giving Iran and Syria the cold shoulder does nothing to solve the problems of either Lebanon or Iraq, and instead makes regional problems fester.

For all of their applause for dialogue, however, these governments have given scant thought to their own little effort at isolation, that of Israel. As Israel and Iran are major non-Arab powers in the region, one would think that the parallels would be obvious. Similarly, one would think that the failure of more than a half-century of attempted isolation to accomplish even minimal Arab goals would prompt a rethinking. Yet, when it comes to Israel, Arab governments (and Iran) default to what they criticize as a misguided Bush Administration policy: an insistence on obtaining the most fundamental concessions as a prelude to rather than as a consequence of negotiations.

Consider, for example, the Arab League Peace Initiative of March 2002. Then-Crown Prince Abdullah spurred the Arab League to adopt a plan he first leaked to *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman promising land for peace. But a funny thing happened on the

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ANTHONY SHADID AT CSIS

The Middle East Program hosted a talk by *Washington Post* Middle East correspondent Anthony Shadid on November 13. The talk marked the paperback release of Shadid's book *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War*. Shadid's book chronicles the lives of average Iraqis from life under Saddam Hussein continuing through the January 2005 elections. Drawing on his knowledge of Arabic and his understanding of the Middle East, Shadid's book portrays the hope and despair of Iraq's people with remarkable sensitivity. In his talk at CSIS, he discussed his book and his impressions upon his return to Iraq in October 2006. For more on the event or to listen to the audio, click [here](#). ■

way to Arab League endorsement. The requirements for Israel became more concrete, and the commitments of the Arabs remained vague. Israel was to withdraw from all lands occupied in 1967, accept the establishment of a Palestinian state on those lands with East Jerusalem as its capital, and agree to a just solution of the Palestinian refugee problem. On offer from the Arabs was the prospect of a peace agreement and “normal relations.” Tangible Arab gestures, such as land swaps, were omitted.

While the initiative may have been designed merely as an opening gambit, it neither sparked further discussion nor did it spur Arab-Israeli negotiations. Instead, the abruptness and finality of it all caused the Israelis to look at it skeptically, arguing that it required them to give up tangible things such as land that would be hard to take back in exchange for intangible things such as “normal relations” on which it would be easy to renege.

Israelis failed to see the potential promise in the Arab League proposal, to their detriment. But equally important, Arabs failed to see the importance of a sustained dialogue to build confidence with the Israeli public. Many meet in secret with Israeli officials, but those meetings do not create the politics that will allow dramatic concessions down the line. Too often, Arab governments have retreated behind the insistence of Israeli concessions before negotiations, and they have neither concessions nor negotiations to show for their efforts.

The United States and Arab governments make much the same error, arguing that in the act of public recognition they can confer legitimacy (and by the same token, by withholding recognition they withhold legitimacy as well). Such an argument may play well at home, but in the domestic politics of those whom they do not recognize, their acts of belligerence legitimize the very forces they seek to delegitimize. Iran’s polemical president builds his credibility on his willingness to stand up to the United States, and Syria’s leadership sneers at U.S. efforts to reform the Middle East. If they have problems at home, it does not seem to be because of U.S. opposition. To the contrary, they blame the United States for suffering at home while proclaiming their courage in their resistance. Meanwhile, more than a half-century of Arab efforts to isolate Israel have deepened Israel’s ties with the West, helped develop Israel’s economy and, perhaps most strikingly, have helped forge a national identity in which a fear of their neighbors unites Israeli Jews.

It is unlikely that merely reestablishing face-to-face contacts will solve any of the problems here—between the United States and Syria and Iran, or between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Two things, however, are clear. The first is that avoiding those contacts does not solve the problems either. It allows them to persist, and even to fester, and reinforces the animosity. Second, it precludes the sorts of small and sometimes trivial acts of cooperation that can help build a constituency in each country for reversing the negative relations in the future.

The Arab states are half-right in applauding the Baker-Hamilton Commission’s recommendations for a dialogue. They should heed the call for a dialogue in their own disputes as well. ■12/12/06

Links of Interest

The Iraq Study Group issued its report on December 6. Jon Alterman served as a member of one of the expert working groups that supported the Baker-Hamilton Commission’s work:

[Iraq Study Group Report](#)

[Jon Alterman was interviewed](#) about the Iraq Study Group on the Bloomberg Report

Arab League Secretary General Amre Moussa spoke at CSIS on December 7:

[Amre Moussa’s speech](#)

The [2006 State Department report](#) on human trafficking

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