There are 2 ways to approach relationship with Iran

By Ahmed Kanna
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The United States is at a crucial moment in its relationship with Iran. As an article in the September issue of Atlantic by the pro-war neoconservative Jeffrey Goldberg indicates, the drumbeat of war against Iran continues among Washington's hawks. Acting on this impulse would be catastrophic.

With more than 74 million people and covering more than 636,000 square miles (approximately one-fifth the size of the continental United States), Iran is one of the largest and most culturally important countries of the Middle East. It is one of the world's leading oil exporters, and with Iraq directly to its west; Turkey and the former Soviet republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan along with the Caspian Sea to its north; Afghanistan and Pakistan to its east; and the Arabian or Persian Gulf to its south, Iran's strategic importance also is obvious.

While Americans tend to associate Iran with the Shiite Muslim theocracy that prevailed after the revolution in 1979, Iran's modern history is far more complex. The revolution was the culmination of a long process in which many diverse social groups participated. The revolutionaries were a cross section of Iranian society, from leftists, liberals and feminists on the secular side to those invested in a religiously guided polity on the other. The reason Iran came under theocratic rule by 1979 was the successful intimidation and marginalization of more secular and democratic formations within the revolutionary movement. The leader of the religious faction was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who for many years before the revolution had been formulating his idea of the theocratic state in his theory of wilayat al-faqih, literally, "government by clerics."

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Whether secular or theocratic, the activists of 1979 were opposed to the Shah, Iran's king, who governed with an iron fist and terrorized Iran's population with the dreaded internal security service, the SAVAK. One of the West's staunchest allies, Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi could depend on Western, and particularly American and British, support any time pro-democracy forces threatened his grip. For example, when the opposition National Front movement, under Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq, attempted to nationalize Iranian oil and it take out from under British control in the early 1950s, the Shah
could depend on his friends in the CIA and the British secret services to overthrow Mossadeq's overwhelmingly popular government and reinstall the Shah to a position of supreme power.

Although popular memories of the coup against Mossadeq played an important role in the 1979 revolution and continue to underpin Iranians' strong sense of national sovereignty, Iran and the United States have much more in common politically and culturally than is apparent. First, because it wants to avoid unrest on its borders, Iran wants stability in Iraq and Afghanistan, and given less anti-Iranian bellicosity by Washington, it seems very willing to work with the United States; second, the United States is very popular with many Iranian people, unlike their Arab neighbors. The 9/11 attacks were commemorated with mass candlelight vigils in Tehran, and then-Iranian President Mohammad Khatami expressed solidarity with the United States against the terrorists.

If the United States wants to undermine the Iranian democracy movement and moderate forces, such as those represented by Khatami, then there is no better way than to threaten war. Moderates and liberals risk a great deal: Religious conservatives can easily paint them as instruments of American hegemony. When the United States takes a more bellicose position, the moderates tend to become more timid, not wanting to risk being painted as traitors.

Let us hope that President Barack Obama's relatively conciliatory position, which de-emphasizes force, prevails over the views of someone like Goldberg.

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