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Iranian Democracy and US Public Diplomacy: Offering an Alternative Perspective ^[1]

It has now been a year since the historic Iranian presidential election and its volcanic aftermath. Some in Iran, proud of the highest turnout (85%) in Iranian election history, consider the day (June 12) a time for glory, while others, in the defeated Reformist camp, consider it a memorial day for those who lost their lives in the violence. Like so many other issues in Persian politics, the 2009 election has also sparked much discussion and debate. Throughout the whole period, experts and politicians inside and outside Iran, and especially here in the United States, have been grappling with the question, "How should we help democracy in Iran?". In answering that, some have used the opportunity to excoriate Iran and push the U.S. towards yet another war, some have urged United States to be "on the right side of history" by supporting the opposition, and some have argued for a policy of non-interference as the best U.S. can do to help democracy in Iran. The burning question now is: whose lead to follow?

Regarding the first notion, a military option, a quick look at circumstances in the ten-year-old Afghanistan war and the deteriorating sectarianism in Iraq should make everyone well aware of the catastrophic consequences of another military move, let alone one on Iran, the so-far island of stability in the Middle East.

While the war discourse seems to be far from being even close to dominance these days, the second paradigm, supporting internal and external Iranian opposition groups through different public diplomacy programs, seems so captivating that it is really hard for any other alternative thought to be heard. Here I would like to move a bit against the flow by proposing another way to deal with Iran. But before jumping to other alternatives, let's speculate on the possible outcomes of supporting opposition in a country like Iran, weighing the pros and cons.

Based on the historical data, the United States, at its best, might be able to engineer another coup d'état (or color revolution) bringing a friendly government to power in Iran, a scenario very similar to the one in 1953 (a small opposition which toppled Mossadeq and brought back the Shah). But is this a desirable outcome for the United States? While at face value, the Shah was friendly towards the U.S., Iranians saw his dynasty repressive at home and subservient abroad. This built up a huge reservoir of anti-American sentiment among Iranians, swelling day by day until the Iranian revolution erupted in 1979 with its well-known hostility towards the U.S. Since then, for nearly three decades, relations have been sour, leaving missed opportunities of shared interest behind. If the status quo is undesirable and is a result of a coup in Iran 50 years ago, why should the United States make the same mistake again? Such a notion, that toppling governments in other countries will lead to favorable results, is not only against international norms but also naïve and far from being practical these days. Critics might then argue - if not regime change, how about helping the opposition to gain momentum itself

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There are experts who oppose that view too. From their point of view, various congressional legislations and presidential plans for three decades have provided the opposition with millions of dollars, hoping it would strengthen the flow. The results, however, have been nearly insignificant and sometimes even counterproductive. For one thing, such financial aid has a bad reputation in Iran. Iranians are fiercely independent and they are sensitive to internal interference from other countries, especially the United States (even with good intentions), unless they approve. Any word or deed, based on the policy of supporting opposition in Iran, is viewed as interfering in Iran's affairs and those involved, even though themselves Iranians, are viewed as traitors to their home country. Iranian Opposition groups seeking outside financial support will do nothing but separate themselves from Iranian politics and remain incapable of playing constructive roles.

If there is any change it will be from within. In fact, two important anti-government protests in Iran (1999, 2009) have been grassroots, orchestrated by groups inside the country. U.S. support has been nothing but detrimental to their cause, their wishes are quickly interpreted to be those of foreigners and thus de-legitimized not only in the eyes of the leaders but also among people.

Should the United States stay aside and do nothing? Well, here is an alternative perspective. The 2010 U.S. National Security Strategy asserts: "Many years of refusing to engage Iran failed to reverse these trends; on the contrary, Iran's behavior became more threatening". Let's take President Obama's platform of "change" seriously and apply it to U.S. public diplomacy towards Iran. For once, instead of taking the so-far impotent measures, the United States should make a departure from the old path. It should follow the policy of rapprochement, mutual respect, and non-interference in Iran's affairs. This will not only open the gate for cooperation on common grounds, but also build up trust among Iranians, decrease anti-Americanism, and give some space to those who want to criticize the government without getting associated with a foreign country. Likewise, public diplomacy funds, if not reduced, should be directed at projects of mutual concern such as sports, environment, health, education, and new energy.

As for the democratic movement in Iran, we should not forget that Iranians, on their own, were capable of launching a revolution thirty years ago while the United States and many others were taking the opposite side. Today it is still the same nation, and if there is any strength in the opposition movement for change, it should be derived from a spontaneous and perfectly Iranian grassroots level. The current American strategy of taking sides with particular groups is harmful not only to its national interest but also to the process of democracy in Iran.
