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OPINION

The paradox of anti-Americanism in Iran

By **Nicholas Schmidle**

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Of all the governments in the Middle East, the Iranian regime remains the most resolute in confronting the United States. The Iranian leaders' persistence in vilifying the U.S. illustrates the deep antagonisms between the two countries. Indeed, regime-generated anti-Americanism is the product of the Islamic ideology promoted by the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, but also a reflection of the tense and complex history of their relationship.

Yet Iran itself suffers from internal contradictions that the mullahs wish did not exist. The Iranian people love America, and there is very little the government in Tehran can do to cool pro-Americanism on the streets. In an ironic twist of political fate, 25 years after the Islamic revolution, Washington probably influences public opinion in Iran more than the Islamic regime. The Iranian government unwittingly created pro-Americanism in their country; Washington should be diligent not to unwittingly destroy it.

Many of the reports coming out of Iran in the past few years have shared a sense of bewilderment in describing the overabundance of pro-Americanism there. In a country where chanting "Death to America" is a provision of political assembly, the thought of being treated like a celebrity because of an American passport is almost unthinkable. After recently spending two months in Iran, my experiences attest that Iranians do, in fact, love America. But I also discovered that their love is a complex and twisted one.

Iranians' fondness for America is nearer to that of a secret admirer than what exists between lifelong chums. By distancing itself from the United States, the Islamic regime has allowed many of its citizens to create "America" in their own minds. For the older generations, "America" recalls an era of economic affluence that the mullahs have been unable to reinstate since overthrowing the shah. For the younger ones, "America" evokes a fantasy of liberal social attitudes. Many young Iranians now openly defy the regime's prohibition of alcohol and coed activities.

The other way the regime has strengthened fondness for American is by, well, being itself. Because the regime portrays America as its No. 1 enemy, and the population sees the regime in the same way, Iranians have come to love America out of detestation for their own government as much as for any other reason. And while many Iranians are certainly enticed by Western-style democracy and social freedoms, being pro-American is largely an issue of domestic politics. Proclaiming a love for America offers Iranians the chance to shoot a quick jab in a domestic tiff with the uncompromising mullahs in Tehran.

Just beneath the veneer of avid pro-Americanism, the Iranian mind is crowded with a vivid sense of nationalism and memory of past American deeds. Kaveh, a doctoral student at Tehran University's faculty of law, illustrates the complexity of Iranian relations with the United States. One evening, Kaveh railed against the Islamic regime. "This government is not a 'national' government," he said. "They only care about their family, friends and their pockets." The next night, Kaveh knocked at my door and handed over a note. It explained that he thought my room was under surveillance and our conversations were being recorded. He wanted to resume our discussion "on tape," but this time, direct his diatribe toward the America government. It quickly became apparent to me that he was

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as passionate in his criticism of the U.S. as he was of his own government. "The United States is only looking to establish an economic and militaristic foothold in the region," he contended. "They want Iraq to be another Okinawa."

Frankly, America has done much to feed this ambivalence. In 1953, a CIA-sponsored coup overthrew the only democratically elected prime minister in Iran's 2,500-year history, Mohammad Mossadeq. Eleven years later, Mohammad Reza Shah, the U.S.-backed ruler in Tehran, signed an agreement granting diplomatic immunity to U.S. citizens in Iran, provoking Khomeini to rant: "Even if the shah himself were to run over a dog belonging to an American, he would be prosecuted. But if an American cook runs over the shah, the head of state, no one will have the right to interfere with him." The next day, Khomeini was exiled to Turkey.

When Khomeini returned to Tehran 15 years later in the midst of the revolution, he pushed the anti-American float to the front of his parade. "But for the Iranian people," said Reza, a 34 year-old former revolutionary-turned-reformer, "the only period of anti-Americanism was the two years before and after the shah left."

Now, 25 years later, anti-Americanism remains at the core of the government's rhetoric, only now Iranians aren't listening with both ears.

One problem Iranians constantly face is determining the credibility of the information that they read and hear. Most people acknowledge that the Iranian media contains little more than party-line propaganda expressing an unrelenting and perpetual harangue against America. But this doesn't prevent many of these same Iranians from believing that the American and English news sources are colored by their own bias. "I don't know who to believe," exclaimed one engineering student. "When I go to CNN.com or the BBC online, I know that they are only telling the story as America and England want the story told."

Even at most renowned bastion of anti-Americanism in Iran, the Friday sermon at Tehran University where thousands gather to hear the regime's weekly wrap-up of world events, some people are unconvinced by the government's rhetoric. I went there one morning eager to observe the "other half" of the Islamic Republic, the half that reverses the fundamentalism espoused by the hard-liners and the half that actually does despise "The Great Satan." After a couple of hours spiked with rousing stanzas of "Marg bar Amrika," or Death to America, it appeared that I discovered one of the revolution's enduring strongholds. But on the way out of the front gate, a security guard stopped me. "You are American? It is very good to meet you," he said. "I like America very much. I wish you a nice visit in Iran." As he said this, a stream of sermon-goers exited behind us, resuming chants of "Marg bar Amrika" and "Marg bar Bush."

While many Iranians remain predominantly pro-American in a region where anti-Americanism spreads quickly, U.S. policymakers should respect the prevailing complexities of the Iranian polity. Just because there is a reserve of good will for America doesn't mean Washington can take it for granted. For while keeping a lid on Tehran's nuclear program might not be within Washington's means, preventing an explosion of Iranian nationalism is.

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As I was cautioned by Hamid, a 25 year-old student activist, "If one U.S. soldier comes to Iran, all this [positive sentiment toward America] will change. It is like we are in the 90th minute of a soccer match. Anything can happen."

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