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COMMENTARY

What Iranians Really Think

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Keen observers of Iran have insisted for years that the Iranian people are pro-Western, indeed pro-American, while opposed to the largely unelected clerical regime that rules them. For the first time, Terror Free Tomorrow's unprecedented nationwide poll of Iran offers indisputable empirical proof that these commentators are dead-on in their assessment of the "Iranian street."

Discontent with the current system of government, the economy and isolation from the West is widespread throughout Iran. In this context, nuclear weapons are the lowest priority for the Iranian people. The overwhelming popular will to live in a country open to the West and the U.S., with greater economic opportunity, is a powerful plea from every region and segment of society. Iranians also speak with one voice in rejecting the current autocratic rule of their supreme leader and in courageously asking for democracy instead.



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Iranian students: A new survey shows their fellow citizens want democracy too.

These are among the significant findings of the first uncensored public opinion survey of Iran since President Ahmadinejad took office. The survey was conducted in Farsi by telephone from June 5 to June 18, 2007, with 1,000 interviews covering all 30 provinces of Iran (and a margin of error of 3.1%). The last poll to ask similar controversial questions was conducted in September 2002 by Abbas Abdi inside Iran. He was imprisoned as a result.

Developing nuclear weapons was seen as a very important priority by only 29% of Iranians. By contrast, 88% of Iranians considered improving the Iranian economy a very important priority. 80% of Iranians favor Iran offering full international nuclear inspections and a guarantee not to develop or possess nuclear weapons in return for outside aid.

Moreover, close to 70% of Iranians also favor normal relations and trade with the U.S. Indeed, in exchange for normal relations, a majority of Iranians even favor recognizing Israel and Palestine as independent states, ending Iranian support for any armed groups inside Iraq, and giving full transparency by Iran to the U.S. to ensure there are no Iranian endeavors to develop nuclear weapons.

Yet the most significant finding of our survey for the future of Iran's present rulers is the opposition to their current system of government.

Some 61% of Iranians were willing to tell our pollsters -- over the phone no less -- that they oppose the current Iranian system of government, in which the supreme leader rules according to religious principles and cannot be chosen or replaced by direct vote of the people.

More telling, over 79% of Iranians support a democratic system instead, in which the supreme leader, along with all leaders, can be chosen and replaced by a free and direct vote of the people. Only 11% of Iranians said they would strongly oppose having a political system in which all of their leaders, including the supreme leader, are chosen by popular election.

Iranians across all demographic groups oppose the unelected rule of the supreme leader in favor of electing all their leaders. While these views run stronger in Tehran, they are also held across all provinces of Iran, and in both urban and rural areas.

Terror Free Tomorrow's path-breaking survey of Iran demonstrates that the Iranian people are the best ally of the U.S. and the West against the government in Tehran. The considerable challenge is how to support the Iranian people while also achieving important U.S. goals, such as preventing the Iranian government from developing a nuclear arsenal.

There are no easy answers. The U.S., with France, Germany, Britain and the international community, however, should not spurn the clear will of Iranians. The implicit bet Iranians seem to want the world to make is to engage Iran now, and place the burden squarely on Iran's rulers to reject an offer that would clearly improve the life of the Iranian people themselves.

This does not mean that the U.S., Europe and the international community should abandon current sanctions or indeed fail to strengthen future sanctions against the regime. Yet since military options for responding to Iran entail even greater unknowable risks, and sanctions alone so far have proved inadequate, a strategy that also recognizes the consensus of the people of Iran themselves may realistically offer the best hope for all.

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