

# **Iranian Public Opinion on Governance, Nuclear Weapons and Relations with the United States**

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(Based on surveys taken in Iran in early 2008 by WorldPublicOpinion.org and Terror Free Tomorrow)\*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The findings of the WorldPublicOpinion.org (WPO) and Terror Free Tomorrow (TFT) surveys offer two messages to those wanting to see change in Iran's policies: (1) Iranians want their government to talk with the U.S. about specific issues and approve of their government's making policy concessions on both regional issues and its nuclear program in order to achieve normalized relations with the U.S. (2) At the same time, Iranians are relatively content with their government's responsiveness to their needs. The shortcomings many Iranians perceive in their economy are not widely blamed on President Ahmadinejad's government. While most Iranians reject the idea of a religious autocracy, most are not unhappy with the way they see their leaders being chosen and governing the country.

While Iranians, like many other Muslim populations, have negative opinions of the U.S. government and U.S. foreign policy, they have a mildly positive image of the American people, and believe "common ground" can be found between the two societies. Most Iranians desire closer ties with the U.S., including more trade, investment and tourism.

Iranians mainly say they want "cooperative relations" with other countries in their region, rather than a "dominant power" role for their country. At the same time, Iranians support the military assistance their government provides Hamas, Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias. Apparently, this assistance is not viewed by most Iranians as an effort to expand Iran's influence, which would be incompatible with their preferred goals of cooperative relations with its neighbors and normalized relations with the U.S.

The findings section below is organized partly according to Iranians' responses to TFT's questions on the importance of various long-term goals for the Iranian government: "Improving the Iranian economy" remained the top goal on the list presented to Iranians (73% very important), despite a 15-point drop since June 2007. It was followed by the long-term goals of "ensuring free elections" and "ensuring a free press" (55% and 50% very important, respectively), "seeking trade and political relations with Western countries" (36%), "providing financial support for Arab and other foreign groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah" (31%) and, lastly, "developing an arsenal of nuclear weapons" (23% very important). [TFT, QQ 14a-f]

## **FINDINGS**

## **Economy**

Iranians are on the whole dissatisfied with their economy, but don't necessarily blame their leaders for their economic difficulties. A plurality of Iranians express dissatisfaction with Iran's economy (49% vs. 36% satisfied). This is a sharp contrast with their predominant satisfaction with Iran's foreign relations (64% satisfied vs. 28% dissatisfied) and their belief that, on the whole, "things in Iran are going in the right direction" (65% vs. 24% wrong direction). [WPO, QQ. 13, 14a, 14c] However, problems with the economy are not widely blamed on President Ahmadinejad's administration. The number of Iranians who say their personal economic situation is worse than it was when President Ahmadinejad took office in 2005 (24%) is matched by those who say it is better (28%), while nearly half (48%) indicate their personal economic situation is basically the same as it was in 2005. [TFT, Q. 6].

## **Political Freedom and Governance**

Most Iranians support a number of democratic principles, including the long-run goals of "ensuring free elections" (82% important, including 55% very important) and "ensuring a free press" (78% important, including 50% very important). Iranians express much greater support for a government in which "the Supreme Leader, along with all leaders, can be chosen and replaced by a free and direct vote of the people" (86% support, including 71% strongly support) than for a government in which "the Supreme Leader rules according to religious principles and cannot be chosen or replaced by a direct vote of the people" (38% support, including 19% strongly support). [TFT, QQ 14e-f, 23a-b]

Nevertheless, on separate questions a clear majority of Iranians express satisfaction with the "process by which the authorities are elected in this country" (62%, including 18% very satisfied and 44% somewhat satisfied) and approved of "the way President Ahmadinejad is handling his job as president" (66%). [WPO, QQ 40, 45] These approval ratings lie roughly midway between Iranian support for the "ideal" of a free and direct popular vote for political leaders (86% support - see paragraph above) and support for a religious autocracy (38%). While many observers characterize the present Iranian political system as a religious autocracy, evidently many Iranians do not see it that way.

Low pressure for more press freedom -- Although a majority of Iranians support the principle of having a free press, support for this principle can drop sharply under certain circumstances. When asked a two-sided question, more Iranians opted for government "having the right to prevent the media from publishing things that the government thinks would be destabilizing" (45%) than for the media "having the right to publish news and ideas without any government control" (31%). Iranians tend to perceive that their press enjoys some freedom (45%); the proportion who believes the Iranian press enjoys a lot of freedom (17%) is matched by those who believe Iran has little or none (21%). Nevertheless, only a third of Iranians believe the press in Iran should be given more freedom (34%), compared to about half who prefer either the same amount of press freedom (43%) or less press freedom (9%). [WPO, QQ 57c, 66-68]

Will of the people -- On the whole, Iranians appear to be relatively content with their government's responsiveness to the people. Iranians on average give their country a positive score of 5.9 (on a 0 to 10 scale, 0 meaning "not at all" and 10 meaning "completely") on being "governed according to the will of the people."<sup>1</sup> Asked what the ideal level of government responsiveness would be, Iranians said an 8.4 on the same 0 to 10 scale. The 2.5 point gap between the average perceived rating, 5.9, and the average ideal rating, 8.4, is considerably less than the average gap on this scale obtained for 19 countries on a WorldPublicOpinion.org survey conducted between November 2007 - March 2008 (8.0 average ideal - 4.5 average perceived = 3.5 gap, across 19 countries).<sup>2</sup> [WPO, QQ. 55-56. Also, see ["World Public Opinion on Governance and Democracy,"](#) May 13, 2008]

### **Relations with the West**

Iranians are not ideologically opposed to closer ties with the West, including the U.S. Most Iranians (64%) believe "common ground" can be found between Muslim and Western cultures; only a small minority believes "violent conflict" between these two cultures is "inevitable" (12%-down from 25% in December, 2006). [WPO, Q 42].

Iranians are open to a variety of contacts with the West. A large majority of Iranians favor investment from Western countries "to create more jobs" in Iran (76%, including 52% strongly favor) and also welcome Western humanitarian assistance to Iranian people in need (84%, including 61% strongly favor). Regarding U.S.-Iranian relations, most Iranians favor greater tourism (71%), more trade (64%) and cultural exchanges (63%) between the two countries, and especially greater Iranian access to "peaceful nuclear technology" (86%). [TFT, QQ 11a-b, 20b, and 22a-f; WPO, QQ 43a-e]

### **Iran's Regional Role**

Iranians favor cooperative relations with other countries in their region, but at the same time approve of some foreign policies that could complicate these relations. Most Iranians express satisfaction with "Iran's relations with neighboring countries" (74% vs. 18% dissatisfied). [WPO, Q 14b] Regarding Iran's desired role in the Persian Gulf region, the Iranian public's general preference is that Iran should be "part of a cooperative arrangement in which Iran is one of many countries" (48%). No more than one-third of Iranians want their country to play the role of the "dominant power that exerts the most influence" (31%). Another 14 percent prefer Iran to isolate itself from other countries in the region. [WPO, Q 15] An example of the preference for cooperative relations is that a sizeable majority of Iranians approve of their country having talks with the U.S. about "trying to stabilize the situation in Iraq" (69% vs. 21% disapprove - similar to the 73-22% majority in the U.S. favoring such talks), Also, a slim majority of Iranians said it would be a bad idea for "Iraq's neighbors to provide weapons to Iraqis fighting U.S. forces in Iraq" (51% vs. 39% good idea). [WPO, QQ 21, 22]

At the same time, however, Iranians by nearly two-to-one approve their government providing

"military and financial assistance" to each of three militant groups in the region: "Lebanese Hezbollah" (61% support vs. 32% oppose), "Palestinian opposition groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad" (61% vs. 32%), and "Iraqi Shiite militias" (59% vs. 33%). [TFT, QQ 15a-c]

Israeli-Palestinian relations -- Iran's official anti-Israel policy statements are mirrored in the responses of its public. Three-fourths of Iranians express an unfavorable opinion of Israel (74%, including 61% very unfavorable). This contrasts sharply with the positive views Iranians have of two other major countries in the region-Turkey (66% favorable) and Saudi Arabia (58%)-as well as their positive views of Arabs in general (56%). A 63-percent majority of Iranians express opposition, in principle, to an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty if it leads to recognizing the State of Israel (24% would favor it). However, much of this opposition would diminish in the context of negotiations with the U.S. to gain normal relations. In that case, a small plurality of Iranians said they would be willing to "recognize Israel and Palestine each as separate, independent states" (45% favor vs. 40% oppose). [TFT, QQ 9-10, 16, 21b]

## **Nuclear Weapons**

Both the TFT and WPO polls show the vast majority of Iranians want their country to develop nuclear energy. TFT found that 89 percent of Iranians favor (including 78% who strongly favor) "the Iranian Government developing nuclear energy." [TFT, Q 12a] WPO found that 90 percent of Iranians believe it is important (including 81% very important) for Iran "to have a full fuel cycle nuclear program." [WPO, Q 28]

Both polls also show that the Iranian public's support for the development of nuclear weapons is considerably less than that for nuclear energy, but how much less depends considerably on how the question was posed. TFT asked about Iran's government developing nuclear weapons immediately after its question on nuclear energy and found a slim majority in favor (51% vs. 39% opposed). [TFT, Q 12b] WPO asked several questions about Iran foregoing nuclear weapons in the context of different international proposals that did not limit Iran's nuclear energy program. Each of these questions found a clear majority willing to accept the proposal. For example, 58 percent favor (vs. 26% oppose) the following offer:

"Suppose the U.N. Security Council were to say that it would accept Iran having a full fuel cycle nuclear program limited to the enrichment levels necessary for nuclear energy, if Iran agrees to allow the IAEA permanent and full access throughout Iran to ensure that its nuclear program is limited to energy production." [WPO, Q 34; also see QQ. 27 and 74]

TFT found large majorities of Iranians saying they would be willing to forego developing nuclear weapons in return for "trade and capital investment to create jobs" (70% support vs. 22% oppose) and "technological assistance for developing peaceful nuclear energy" (71% vs. 20%). [TFT, QQ 13a, 13d]

## **Views of the United States**

The WPO and TFT polls found sharp contrasts in how Iranians view the United States, its government and people. The American people are predominantly viewed positively (about 50% positive vs. 30% negative, averaging the WPO and TFT surveys), while the U.S. government and President Bush are viewed very negatively (less than 10% positive compared to about 80% negative on the WPO survey). Iranian opinion of the "United States" is a composite of these and other impressions about American society and falls between these two extremes. About 30 percent of Iranians have a favorable opinion of the United States, compared to 60 percent unfavorable (average of the two surveys). [WPO, QQ 2a-2c and 49a; TFT, QQ 9b, 10c]

Many Iranians have an inflated perception of U.S. power in the world, along with a very negative perception of U.S. foreign policy objectives. Asked "how much of what happens in the world today is controlled by the U.S.," nearly two-thirds of the Iranian public replied either nearly all (33%) or most (32%), compared to only 27 percent who perceive more limited U.S. influence in the world.<sup>3</sup> [WPO, Q 12]

Three-fourths of Iranians see the U.S. as having a mainly negative "influence in the world" (75% compared to only 9% mainly positive),<sup>4</sup> and this general perception permeates their view of U.S. objectives in the Middle East. More than four-fifths of the Iranian public believes U.S. foreign policy goals include maintaining control over Middle East oil resources (71% definitely and 13% probably a U.S. goal compared to only 6% who said it is not a U.S. goal). A majority of Iranians (55%) believe U.S. bases in the Middle East pose a real threat to Iran (29% major threat and 26% some threat), but the perception of this U.S. threat has declined nearly 20 percentage points since December, 2006. [WPO, QQ 7, 10, 17f]

## **U.S.-Iranian Negotiations**

Despite the very negative perceptions that each public has of the other country's leadership, the Iranian and U.S. publics want their governments to talk to each other about certain issues, such as Iraq. WPO found a 69-percent majority of Iranians approve of Iran having talks with the U.S. "on trying to stabilize the situation in Iraq" (21% disapprove). A similar majority of Americans (73%) approve of U.S. talks with Iran on this issue (22% disapprove). [WPO, Q 21] TFT found a similar majority of Iranians favor their government "working with the United States to help resolve the Iraq war" (71% favor, including 47% who strongly favor, vs. 21% oppose). [TFT, Q 17]

Iranians were asked whether they would be willing to make concessions to the U.S. on several issues in return for normal relations with the U.S. A slight majority said they would be willing to end Iranian support for armed groups inside Iraq and apply Iranian influence solely to support a peaceful, democratic government in Iraq (52% vs. 32% oppose). As noted earlier, a small plurality of Iranians (45%) said they would be willing to recognize both Israel and Palestine as independent states in return for normalization of relations with the U.S. Iranians are closely divided about their government giving the

U.S. "full transparency to assure there are no Iranian efforts to develop or possess nuclear weapons" (41% favor vs. 43% oppose). [TFT, QQ 21a-c]

What do Iranians want most from talks with the U.S.? Sixty-three percent said that both a "free trade treaty between the U.S. and Iran" and "increasing visas for Iranians to come to study or work in the U.S." would enhance their opinion of the United States. However, U.S. efforts "to spread democracy inside Iran" are less welcomed by the Iranian public: Only 32 percent said this would improve their opinion of the U.S. [TFT, Q 22a, 22d, 22f]

## CONCLUSION

Governance in Iran - WPO and TFT surveys show that aiding Middle East militants and developing nuclear weapons are relatively low-valued objectives for the Iranian public, which gives much higher priority to improving Iran's economy and developing nuclear energy. At the same time, these surveys also show that most Iranians do not blame President Ahmadinejad's government for their economic difficulties and are generally satisfied with the way governing authorities are elected in Iran. The Iranian public's approval of their government and election process (about three-fifths approval) lies roughly midway between Iranian support for the "ideal," in which all their leaders would be democratically elected (over four-fifths approval), and support for a religious autocracy (about two-fifths approval). Apparently, a considerable number of Iranians are content that their political system contains some of the features of democratic rule, particularly relative to Iran's own history and current prevailing norms in their region. All in all, about half of the Iranian public clearly supports its national government, believing it can usually be trusted "to do what is right;" about one-fourth could be described as no more than lukewarm toward their government; and about 10-15 percent of Iranians are clearly alienated, with little or no respect for their national leaders.

U.S.-Iranian Relations - The WPO and TFT surveys indicate that Iran's public would be very supportive of a U.S.-Iranian agreement that promised to improve economic conditions through trade and investment ties and guaranteed Iran's nuclear energy program in return for foregoing nuclear weapons development and ending support for anti-government militants in Iraq. It is less clear how a much reduced U.S. military presence in Iraq will affect Iranian attitudes. Most Iranians ascribe immense power to the United States and likely feel threatened by nearby U.S. forces. Most Iranians support their government's aiding militant groups in the Middle East, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, and may justify this aid in part as a defense against a powerful U.S. adversary, rather than as an Iranian provocation causing alarm in the U.S. and other countries. If this is the case, productive negotiations with Iran and a reduced U.S. military presence near its borders would probably lead to reduced Iranian public support for aiding militants in the region.

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\* The WorldPublicOpinion.org (WPO) survey is based on personal interviews with a national representative sample of 710 Iranians ages 16 years and older, interviewed between Jan. 13-Feb. 9, 2008 by "a major Iranian survey organization." Their report,

including the complete questionnaire and results, is available at: <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnaficara/468.php?lb=brme&pnt=468&nid=&id=>. Many of the same questions were posed to an American sample of 703 between January 18-27, 2008. Sources of the findings summarized here are indicated by the question numbers in brackets for the WPO and TFT surveys. I would like to thank Steven Kull for his editorial suggestions and Evan Lewis for his assistance in analyzing attitude relationships within the WPO survey.

The Terror Free Tomorrow (TFT) survey is based on telephone interviews conducted from a CATI facility outside Iran by D3 Systems. A national representative sample of 1,001 Iranians ages 18 and over was interviewed between Feb. 15-24, 2008. The full report, including complete questionnaire and results, is available at [www.terrorfreetomorrow.org](http://www.terrorfreetomorrow.org).

<sup>1</sup> Fifty percent of Iranians gave their country a positive rating (6-10), compared to 20% who gave it a negative rating (0-4) and 18% a neutral rating (5) on Iran being "governed according to the will of the people."

<sup>2</sup> Only one of the 19 publics surveyed gave its country a higher rating than Iranians gave Iran for being "governed according to the will of the people": China received the highest rating of 6.7 from its public, compared to 5.9 for Iran and for Indonesia, 4.9 for Great Britain, 4.7 for Russia, 4.0 for the U.S., 3.2 for Egypt, and the lowest rating of 2.8 for the Ukraine.

<sup>3</sup> Americans' own view of their country's control over world events is much more modest. About one-third believes the U.S. controls most (28%) or nearly all (4%) of what happens in the world, compared to two-thirds believe the U.S. has some (56%) or very little (12%) control.

<sup>4</sup> This perception is reciprocated by the U.S. public's perception of Iran's influence in the world: 80 percent mainly negative vs. 10 percent mainly positive.