

COMMENTARY

Syrian Survey

By **KEN BALLEEN**

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Despite powerful anti-American feelings and support for Iraqi fighters, 63% of Syrians still favor Syria working with the United States to help resolve the Iraq war.

This is the most stunning finding of a new and unprecedented nationwide survey of Syria by Terror Free Tomorrow. It was conducted from a country in the region by phone during July, and more than a thousand people were interviewed across all 13 provinces of Syria.

The issue of fighters coming from Syria to Iraq is a critical one for the American military. A U.S. military spokesman recently said that nearly three-quarters of the foreign suicide bombers in Iraq -- responsible for almost all the suicide attacks -- enter via the Syrian border. The fact that most Syrians favor working with the U.S. to resolve the Iraq war is particularly significant given the overall climate of Syrian public opinion: Iraqi fighters themselves are viewed favorably and the U.S. is not.

In another important finding, Syrians also favor peace with Israel. While almost 80% of Syrians support financial aid to Hamas and Hezbollah, 51% are ready to support a peace treaty between Syria and Israel -- if Israel withdraws in full from the Golan Heights and recognizes Syrian sovereignty there. Israel has occupied the Golan since the 1967 war with Syria. More than a third of Syrians oppose any peace treaty with Israel.

On the controversial issue of Lebanon, where the Syrian government has a long history of intervention, Syrians also seem to want a different approach from that of their government. Fully 88% favor Lebanese self-rule without interference from any country, including their own.

In marked contrast to Terror Free Tomorrow's recent survey of Iran, which had similar methodology, questions and timing, Syrians -- unlike Iranians -- oppose closer relations with the U.S., while expressing satisfaction with their current system of government.

In Iran, close to 70% of the people favor better relations with the U.S.; in Syria only 40% favor closer ties.

Similarly, 79% of Iranians support a fully democratic system, where the Supreme Leader, along with all leaders, is chosen and replaced by a free and direct vote of the people. By contrast, 83% of Syrians said that they favor their current system of a single-candidate

presidential referendum.

Perhaps Syrians simply feel more fear in their everyday discourse than Iranians. Indeed, Iranians felt free to directly criticize their government -- over the phone no less -- and Syrians did not. The surveys may also capture the growing depth and strength of Iranian popular discontent.

In distinct but equally compelling ways, public opinion in Iran and Syria argues for a new international approach to both countries' regimes.

For Iran, the consensus popular will to forego nuclear weapons in favor of outside aid and trade creates a real opening. Four out of every five Iranians would prefer the freedom to elect their own leaders, and economic opportunity with international engagement, over building nuclear weapons.

This palpable, vocal and widespread discontent of the Iranian people offers the U.S. the opportunity to go over the head of the regime and reach out to Iranians directly. By so doing, the U.S. can take advantage of Iranian public opinion in isolating the current and widely unpopular hard-line regime.

In Syria, there is no widespread and vocal popular opposition to the Assad government. And unlike in Iran, the U.S. is singularly unwelcome, so that any solely American outreach aimed at the Syrian people themselves is likely to fall on deaf ears.

However, like Iranians, two-thirds of Syrians want their government to make Western trade and investment a top priority, so a European-led proposal would undoubtedly be welcomed. And despite widespread anti-Americanism, Syrians still want their government helping the U.S. in three important strategic goals: resolving the Iraq war, respecting Lebanese sovereignty and achieving peace with Israel.

The U.S. should lead a broad-based international coalition to exploit public opinion in these two countries, and not give the Iranian and Syrian regimes a free hand in portraying the U.S. as the mortal enemy of their people.

Along with continued sanctions, the U.S, with Europe and as many other countries as possible, should also publicly put forward a positive economic agenda now, only to be enacted later when the Iranian and Syrian regimes change course. After all, both publics strongly favor economic engagement, with Iranians favoring nuclear inspections and Syrians wanting to help in resolving the Iraq war.

Even if the Iranian and Syrian regimes reject this offer, public opinion in these countries tells us that it is time for the U.S. and the international community to place the ball squarely in the court of the Iranian and Syrian people -- and let their respective governments play defense for a change.

Mr. Ballen is the president of Terror Free Tomorrow.

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Syrians Support Helping End Iraq War

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Most Syrians favor working with the United States to seek an end to the Iraq war, yet also support financing Iraqi fighters and other Middle East groups the U.S. considers terrorists, according to a rare poll of Syrians released Wednesday.

The survey also found that an overwhelming number of Syrians consider trade and political relations with Western countries important, but they narrowly oppose closer ties to the U.S.

The poll was sponsored by Terror Free Tomorrow, a bipartisan organization that seeks to erode support for international terrorism. Its advisory board includes Sen. [John McCain](#), R-Ariz., the presidential candidate, and former House Speaker Thomas Foley, D-Wash.

Earlier this month, the group released a survey of Iranians that found most favored their country developing nuclear weapons.

Objective public opinion surveys are unusual in Syria, whose regime -- led by President Bashar Assad -- has imprisoned pro-democracy supporters.

The United States has largely sought to isolate Syria, which it considers a major destabilizing influence in the Middle East.

The U.S. has repeatedly accused Syria of allowing foreign fighters to cross its border into Iraq to join forces with al-Qaida and anti-U.S. insurgent groups, which Syria denies. Syria has also been accused of helping [Hezbollah](#) in Lebanon, [Palestinian](#) radicals and other militant groups.

In the poll, 63 percent of Syrians said they favor their country working with the U.S. to resolve the war in Iraq. By a slight 44 percent to 39 percent margin, most said they oppose fighters crossing from Syria into Iraq.

Yet three-fourths said they support financial assistance for Iraqi fighters, the Palestinian groups [Hamas](#) and [Islamic Jihad](#), and Hezbollah. The U.S. considers Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah terrorist organizations.

In addition, seven in 10 said Syria should refuse U.S. investments and trade "to create more jobs in Syria," with similar numbers opposing U.S. investments in energy refineries and U.S. humanitarian aid.

"Even though they don't support the U.S. -- in fact that's an understatement, they're very negative about the U.S. -- they still want to work with the U.S.," said Ken Ballen, president of Terror Free Tomorrow. "They still want the war resolved, and they're willing for their government to work with the U.S. to resolve it."

Fifty-one percent said they would favor a peace treaty with longtime nemesis Israel if it withdraws from the Golan and recognizes Syrian sovereignty there. Israelis strongly oppose leaving the Golan, the boundary area between the two countries that Israel annexed nearly three decades ago.

In addition, 88 percent said they favored Lebanon ruling itself without outside interference, including from Syria. Syria controlled Lebanon for years until its military was pressured to leave in 2005 following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. The U.S. has accused Syria of seeking to weaken Lebanon's Western-backed leaders.

The telephone survey of 1,004 adult Syrians was conducted in Arabic for Terror Free Tomorrow by D3 Systems of Vienna, Va., from July 11 to 14. An estimated 75 percent to 80 percent of Syrian households have landline telephones.

The calls were made from a country near Syria that Terror Free Tomorrow did not identify, saying it wanted to protect the interviewers' confidentiality. Telephone interviews were used to speed the research process and because in-person questioners in Syria may face harassment, the group said.

The survey has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points. The results were weighted, or adjusted, to ensure that responses reflected the actual number of Syrians living in rural areas, and those over age 55.

On the Net:

Terror Free Tomorrow: <http://www.terrorfreetomorrow.org>