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Poll: Iranians Support Nuclear Weapons

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Small majorities of Iranians say their country should develop nuclear weapons and they would live in a safer world if Tehran possessed such arms, according to a rare public opinion poll of that nation's citizens.

Yet far fewer Iranians said it was as important to develop nuclear arms as a long-term goal as it was to strengthen the economy and normalize diplomatic and trade relations with the West.

The survey, provided to The Associated Press on Tuesday, was sponsored by Terror Free Tomorrow, a Washington-based bipartisan group that seeks to reduce worldwide support for terrorism and extremism.

The poll's responses pointed to internal divisions over President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's international confrontation over his country's nuclear program. He says the effort is aimed at producing energy, but the U.S. says he would build weapons and the U.N. has clamped sanctions on Tehran because of suspicions the work would lead to armaments.

The poll also showed that despite sentiment for re-establishing ties with the U.S., 58 percent said they support Iran helping finance Shiite militias in neighboring Iraq, some of which have battled American forces. Two-thirds said they support providing funds to Muslim groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, which the U.S. and Israel consider terrorist organizations.

"They want an opening to the West and to the United States," Ken Ballen, president of Terror Free Tomorrow, said of Iranians surveyed. "And nuclear weapons, given their other concerns, are their lowest priority."

The group's advisory board includes [Sen. John McCain](#), R-Ariz., a presidential contender. Another member is former Rep. Lee Hamilton, D-Ind., co-chairman of both the 9/11 Commission and the Iraq Study Group, which urged the Bush administration last year to involve Iran in seeking to reduce violence in Iraq.

Legitimate public opinion polls are unusual in Iran, an Islamic republic where dress codes and other rules of behavior are enforced. Though there is some public dissent, religious rulers recently imprisoned hundreds of students and others accused of threatening the Iranian system.

With face-to-face interviewers sometimes facing arrest, the poll was conducted by telephone from a nearby country that Terror Free Tomorrow requested not be disclosed.

Tension has long been high between the U.S. and Iran. Besides the nuclear dispute, the U.S. has seized some Iranians in neighboring Iraq and accused Tehran of helping extremists there and throughout the Middle East.

In the survey, 52 percent of Iranians said they favor their country developing nuclear weapons, with the same percent saying their world would be safer if Tehran acquires such arms.

Fifty-two percent also said it is important that Iran use its oil and gas revenue to develop nuclear arms. Yet that compared with nine in 10 who supported using the money to create jobs, tame inflation, buttress the oil and gas industry and develop nuclear power.

Iran's struggling economy is beset by soaring inflation and unemployment. Rising gasoline prices and fuel rationing prompted riots in Iran last month, shortly after the survey was taken.

The U.S. and Iran have not had diplomatic relations since the U.S. Embassy in Tehran was stormed in 1979 and American hostages held for 444 days.

Illustrating widespread domestic dissatisfaction, eight in 10 said they would support electing Iran's supreme leader, who has final say over state matters and is chosen for life by a small council. About the same number rated the country's economy poor or fair, while only one-third said Ahmadinejad's policies for taming inflation and unemployment have succeeded.

The telephone survey, conducted for Terror Free Tomorrow by D3 Systems of Vienna, Va., involved calls to 1,000 random Iranian adults nationwide. Interviews were conducted in Farsi from June 5 to 18. The poll has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

D3 says at least 90 percent of Iranians are reachable by landline telephones.