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COMMENTARY

What Iranians Really Think

By **KEN BALLEEN**

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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.



Getty Images

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.

Mr. Ballen is president of Terror Free Tomorrow.

Poll: Iranians want democracy, nuclear inspections

(CNN) -- Most Iranians support nuclear inspections, a democratic government and normal relations with the United States, a poll by a U.S.-based organization has found.

Terror Free Tomorrow found 80 percent of Iranians support full inspections and a guarantee not to develop nuclear weapons in return for aid from other countries.

Slightly more than half, however, said they still favor the development of nuclear weapons and think the country would be safer with them. Developing the weapons is considered a "very important" priority for just 29 percent of those polled.

But when presented with an option to give up [nuclear weapons](#) development in return for outside aid, only 17 percent still supported nuclear weapons development.

The economy is more important to Iranians than developing nuclear weapons. Eighty-eight percent said they want economic improvement to be the government's top priority.

The poll also found 56 percent think [President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) has failed to keep his campaign promise to "put oil money on the table of the people themselves."

Additionally, 61 percent of those interviewed "were willing to tell our pollsters over the phone that they oppose the current Iranian system of government, where the Supreme Leader rules according to religious principles and cannot be chosen or replaced by direct vote of the people."

Instead, 79 percent support a democratic system in which leaders are elected through free, direct elections.

And while nearly two-thirds support financial assistance for opposition groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, 55 percent of Iranians support recognizing Israel and Palestine as independent states in exchange for normal relations with the United States.

Terror Free Tomorrow, which has prominent Democrats and Republicans on its advisory board, conducted interviews in Farsi with 1,000 Iranians by telephone last month. The sampling error is plus or minus 3 percentage points.

"Face-to-face interviewing in [Iran](#) can be difficult for interviewers who risk possible prosecution and imprisonment. The last poll to ask similar controversial questions was conducted in September 2002 by Abbas Abdi inside Iran, who was imprisoned as a result," Terror Free Tomorrow said in its report on the poll.

The group said its interviews, about evenly split between men and women, were "proportionally distributed according to the population covering all 30 provinces of Iran."

The group's advisory board includes Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, and the co-chairs of the 9-11 commission, Lee Hamilton, a Democrat, and Tom Kean, a Republican. The group says it was also chosen as a participant in the 2006 Clinton Global Initiative.

Examples of Editorials/Columnists Citing Terror Free Tomorrow Iran Survey

The New York Times (7/19/07)

“A recent opinion poll in Iran found that 70 percent of Iranians want to normalize relations with the U.S., and 61 percent oppose the current Iranian system of government. Any visitor to Iran knows that it is — at a people-to-people level — the most pro-American Muslim country in the region, and the regime is as out of touch and moribund as the shah’s was in the late 1970s.”

The New York Post (7/16/07)

“A rare glimpse into the minds of the Iranian people - via a telephone survey of Iranians conducted for Terror Free Tomorrow - shows that... Iranians do not much care about getting the bomb and very much worry about global isolation... These data emphasize the importance of a Western willingness to bring Iran in from the cold in return for a no-nuclear-weapons agreement. The palpable thirst of the people for an end to their isolation speaks volumes about the attractiveness of such a proposition.”

The Huffington Post (7/13/07)

“A poll of Iranians released by a bipartisan anti-terror group, [Terror Free Tomorrow](#), shows results that will startle casual observers (but not those who follow the Middle East closely)... Terror Free Tomorrow's only agenda is reducing worldwide terrorism, and the message is clear: An attack on Iran would turn its essentially pro-Western population against us, creating yet another breeding ground for anti-American terrorists. Diplomacy, not war, is the right move now - to avoid war, to promote regime change, and to prevent the further spread of terrorism.”

FrontPage Magazine (7/13/07)

“An unusual new telephone poll, conducted in Iran by Terror Free Tomorrow, shows that the Iranian people overwhelmingly want to see democracy develop in their country and would like their country have normal relations with the West and with Israel. This ground-breaking poll – the first of its kind since Ahmadinejad took over as president – “demonstrates that the Iranian people are the best ally of the U.S. and the West against the government in Tehran,” [Ballen says](#). Ken Ballen is right. When Iranians lose their fear of the regime, the regime is in trouble.”

The Washington Post

July 10, 2007

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.