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Iranians Favor Direct Talks with US, Mutual Access for Journalists, More Trade

Poll Finds Diminished Perception of US Threat, General Thawing of Hostility

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College Park, MD—A new WorldPublicOpinion.org polls finds that although Iranians continue to view the United States negatively, they strongly support steps to improve US-Iran relations including direct talks, greater access for each others' journalists, increased trade and more cultural, educational and athletic exchanges.

While majorities of Iranians think the United States threatens Iran and is hostile to Islam, these numbers have diminished over the past year. A growing number—now two out of three—believe it is possible for Islam and the West to find common ground.

“It appears that as the sense of threat has subsided, there has been some thawing of Iranian hostility and a greater readiness to enter into closer relations with the United States,” said Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org.

The poll also probed Iranian views on nuclear issues. Six in ten believe that nuclear weapons are contrary to Islam, but four out of five insist Iran should have the capacity to produce nuclear fuel for energy.

A nationwide random sample of 710 Iranians was surveyed from January 13 to February 9 by WorldPublicOpinion.org, an international research project managed by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland, in partnership with Search for Common Ground. Parallel questions were asked to an American sample as part of a larger study comparing American and Iranian views.

Iranians support a number of measures for building closer relations between Iran and the United States:

- 57 percent favor “direct talks on issues of mutual concern,” between the Iranian and American governments, while 69 percent favor talks “to stabilize the situation in Iraq,”
- 64 percent favor greater US-Iran trade
- 70 percent favor “providing more access for each others’ journalists”.
- 63 percent would like to see “greater cultural, educational, and sporting exchanges”

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- 71 percent favor having “more Americans and Iranians visit each others’ countries as tourists”

This support is especially striking given the widespread perception that the United States is hostile to both Iran and Islam. Most Iranians (84%) assume that a goal of US policy is to weaken and divide the Islamic world. About two in three (64%) also think the United States purposely seeks “to humiliate the Islamic world.” Fifty-five percent view US bases in the Middle East as a threat to Iran.

Nonetheless, there has been some lessening of the sense of threat and an easing of hostile attitudes toward the United States as compared to WorldPublicOpinion.org polling in Iran in late 2006.

The percentage viewing US bases in the Middle East as a threat to Iran has dropped 18 points from 73 to 55 percent. Those who think it is likely that the United States will strike Iran’s nuclear facilities in the near future has dropped from 48 to 34 percent.

While 69 percent of Iranians say they have an unfavorable view of the United States, this number is down from 76 percent. More significant, the percentage saying that they have a “very unfavorable” view dropped 14 points from 65 to 51 percent.

A slight majority of Iranians (51%) now express a positive view of the American people. Those with an unfavorable view have declined 12 points from 49 to 37 percent.

A growing majority believe that it is possible for “Muslim and Western cultures” to “find common ground,” rising from 58 to 64 percent, while those saying that “violent conflict between them is inevitable” has dropped from 25 to just 12 percent.

“This diminished sense of threat may be due to the release of the US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) which concluded Iran is not trying to develop nuclear weapons” said Kull. “Iranians seem to interpret this as a sign that the US is less likely to attack Iran.” The 55 percent of Iranians who said they knew about the NIE felt less threatened by the United States than those who did not.

Iranians have a nuanced view of their country’s nuclear program. Fifty-eight percent believe that producing nuclear weapons is contrary to Islam, while only 23 percent say that Islam does not prohibit the production of nuclear weapons.

But 81 percent say that it is “very important” for “Iran to have a full-fuel-cycle nuclear program” which would give Iran the capacity to produce nuclear fuel for energy production (and, with higher levels of enrichment, to produce nuclear weapons).

At the same time 58 percent say that Iran should be willing to accept an agreement with the UN Security Council that would allow Iran to have a full fuel cycle nuclear program in return for giving the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) “permanent and full

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access throughout Iran to ensure that its nuclear program is limited to energy production” and is not producing nuclear weapons.

For more information about this poll, its methodology, and other findings, please visit:
www.WorldPublicOpinion.org

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