

Iranian Public Opinion on the Nuclear Program

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Brief Analysis

On July 17, 2006, Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog and Patrick Clawson addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. General Herzog, an active officer in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), is a visiting military fellow at The Washington Institute. General Herzog recently published *Iranian Public Opinion on the Nuclear Program: A Potential Asset for the International Community*, an Institute monograph available for free [download \(templateC04.php?CID=243\)](templateC04.php?CID=243). Dr. Clawson is deputy director for research at The Washington Institute, and recently published *Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos*. Mehdi Khalaji also contributed to the panel; his remarks appear in a separate [PolicyWatch \(templateC07.php?pf=1&CID=2490\)](PolicyWatch (templateC07.php?pf=1&CID=2490)). The following is a rapporteur's summary of General Herzog and Dr. Clawson's remarks.

MICHAEL HERZOG

There is much reason to doubt that the Iranian public unwaveringly supports the Islamic Republic's nuclear ambitions. Polls that ask leading questions produce desired answers, and therefore the phrasing of the question is as important as the answer. The official Islamic Republic News Agency highlighted a January 2006 poll in which 85 percent of Iranians supported resuming the nuclear program. But that same poll found support dropped to 74 percent in case of referral to the UN Security Council, 64 percent in event of economic sanctions, and 56 percent if there were military action against Iran. In other words, the public support for a nuclear program drops as the cost of maintaining the program rises. Furthermore, other polling and anecdotal evidence show that the Iranian public makes the distinction between peaceful nuclear technology and a nuclear weapons program, which they do not support. One window into public opinion over which the regime seems to have relatively little control is the 70,000 Farsi blogs, an estimated half of which are written inside Iran. On the blogs, skeptical questions about the nuclear program are common.

Another misconception is that Iranian leaders do not care about public opinion. In fact, public opinion is a point of

consideration in the regime's decisionmaking process. To illustrate the Iranian government's concern for public opinion, consider a leaked speech by Hasan Rowhani, the former secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, in which he argued that the Iranian government needed to go slow in the nuclear program because it needed to build public support -- implying both that the regime needs public support and that it did not yet have it. Another indication that the Islamic Republic fears public backlash against the nuclear program is the fact that the regime exercises strict control over reports about nuclear matters, stifling dissent -- although some courageous individuals have written critiques of the program's cost and environmental dangers, among other issues. The need to stifle dissent is also indicative of the program's tenuous standing in Iranian public opinion.

There is much opportunity for the West to build on ordinary Iranians' ambiguous feelings about the nuclear program. The Iranian public does not want to see the mullahs tighten their grip on power; the West should reach out to Iranians to emphasize that nuclear weapons will strengthen the mullahs' regime. Most Iranians are feeling the daily effects of an economy in dire straits and the poor quality of social services. A strong link exists between the nuclear program and Iran's economic woes. That creates an opening for the West to emphasize that the billions spent on the nuclear program is money not available for more pressing needs. Further, the West can build on public anxiety about economic sanctions to illustrate how the nuclear program isolates Iran.

To date, the West has concentrated on international diplomacy as its main tool for curbing Iran's nuclear program. Reaching out to Iranian public opinion could be an important complement to this approach. The West, including the United States, needs to develop a more active program to bring information to the Iranian public that the regime has kept from them.

PATRICK CLAWSON

The confrontational rhetoric from Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad suggests that it would be difficult to reach a diplomatic resolution of the nuclear issue with him. But the historical record suggests that Iranian presidents have not been able to carry through on their most cherished objectives. Previous Iranian presidents, namely Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Muhammad Khatami, came to office promising to make dramatic policy changes -- economic reform and political reform, respectively. Both arguably enjoyed considerable popular support when they took office, at least as much as Ahmadinezhad. However, after only a few years, Rafsanjani and Khatami each found their plans stymied. The Iranian president is simply not very powerful, and the Islamic Republic has a system with many checks and balances that impede change. The last two Iranian presidents have not been successful; it is quite possible that Ahmadinezhad will be the third president in a row who will fail at bringing about the changes he wants.

The real decisionmaker in Iran is Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. He has long been cautious -- indeed, indecisive. For eighteen years, his policy has been low-level confrontation with the West, rather than either reconciliation or open and direct conflict. He has been willing to allow Ahmadinezhad to pursue a more confrontational policy because it seems to work: Iran pays little price for its president's outrageous statements, and Tehran faces few impediments to continuing with its nuclear program.

With time, it becomes more likely that Ahmadinezhad will be unable to solve Iran's economic problems, which may worsen because of his confrontational stance. He has not been able to deliver on his campaign promises, namely, to bring to the dinner table the benefits of oil revenue and to curb corruption. The failure of his populist promises put at risk what public support he has. If he is weaker at home, there is a greater likelihood that Khamenei will cut him out of decisionmaking about the nuclear issue. In other words, there is much merit in waiting, if the Iranian nuclear program can be slowed enough in the interim.

To date, Iran has shown little interest in freezing its nuclear program in response to inducements. It would be

optimistic to expect this approach to change. Indeed, at present, the grave risk is that Iranian leaders conclude that hardline policies work; for instance, that Iran's confrontational stance led the United States to agree to multilateral negotiations it had previously rejected. To the extent that the Islamic Republic thinks that hardline policies are the best way to get concessions, then it can be expected to implement hardline policies.

In contrast, the prospect for diplomatic resolution is greater if Iran fears that the West has a credible military option. Any decision to resort to a military option should be based on the assumption that the Iranian public would react badly to an attack. That said, the Iranian public's response may vary according to the specifics of the situation. Military strikes could be seen as a result the regime's confrontational policy toward Western rapprochement, in which case blame for the strikes will fall on the regime's hardliners rather than on the United States.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Peter Badal. ❖

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