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# TECHNICAL REPORT

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## What Do Iranians Think?

A Survey of Attitudes on the  
United States, the Nuclear Program,  
and the Economy

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Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited



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## Summary

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The RAND Corporation conducted a phone survey of Iranian public opinion in order to gauge Iranian attitudes on critical issues affecting U.S. interests. Respondents constituted a nationally representative sample of 1,002 members of the Iranian public, age 18 and older, who lived in households with landline telephones, spoke Farsi, and were willing to participate. These respondents participated during December 10–28, 2009.<sup>1</sup> The survey’s goal was to gauge Iranian attitudes on a number of issues important to American analysts and policymakers, including U.S.-Iranian relations, the effects of sanctions, and the Iranian nuclear program. The survey demonstrated that Iranians were divided on certain issues at stake between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States, such as the development of nuclear weapons. But on other issues, including the economy and the prospect of reestablishing U.S.-Iranian ties, respondents expressed more-unified opinions. Our key findings are that

- **A majority of respondents view the economy as being “average” or better**, though many may have hesitated to express their dismay with the economic situation.
- **A majority of respondents did not view sanctions as having a negative effect on the economy**, though a significant number viewed sanctions as having a negative impact. Women, poorer respondents, and those most comfortable with the survey rated the impact of sanctions as most negative.
- **Respondents were divided on the issue of nuclear weapons, with a significant portion favoring their development.** Those most comfortable with the survey, men, and those with the highest level of education expressed the most opposition to development of nuclear weapons. The lower classes and those with the lowest level of education supported the development of nuclear weapons.
- **A majority of respondents expressing an opinion opposed the reestablishment of ties with the United States.** Women and less-educated respondents were least likely to favor the reestablishment of diplomatic relations, but those most comfortable with the survey were more likely to favor such reestablishment.
- In general, gender and education level were important predictors of attitudes. Women and less-educated respondents tended to voice views on security and overall relations that were unfavorable to the United States. Men and those with greater social means tended to be more favorably inclined.
- **Views of historical and current events in U.S.-Iranian relations did not correlate substantially with attitudes toward the reestablishment of relations.** Rather, personalized

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the survey’s methodology, see Appendix A.

views of the American people and the Obama administration played a more-significant role in preferences regarding the reestablishment of relations with the United States.

The findings suggest that many of the Islamic Republic's policies, including opposition to U.S. interests and the pursuit of a nuclear civilian and (possibly) nuclear weapon capability, were supported by a significant portion of the Iranian population. It should be noted, however, that a portion of respondents appeared uncomfortable with participating in the survey, and these respondents tended to express views sympathetic to the Iranian government and its interests. Those who felt most comfortable with the survey tended to express views sympathetic to U.S. interests. Had a larger portion of respondents felt comfortable with the survey, more of them might have expressed support for policies favorable to U.S. interests.<sup>2</sup>

The extent of popular support for Iranian government policies revealed by respondents may be due to the Islamic Republic's consistent efforts to sway public opinion through its control of most forms of media. The survey revealed that Iranians were highly reliant on state-controlled media and educational sources and did not have extensive access to other sources of information that may provide a positive picture of the United States.<sup>3</sup> U.S. broadcasts to Iran and the provision of antifiltering technology to Iranian web users may be beneficial in this regard. In addition, we recommend that policymakers not call particular attention to more-distant historical events in their communications with the Iranian population, as Iranian public opinion tends to focus on personalized images of the Obama administration and of the American people rather than on past events.<sup>4</sup> Our results also suggest that it is worth considering how opinions differ across subgroups of the Iranian population—such as men and women, those with different educational backgrounds, and those of different classes—when crafting communications meant for the Iranian public.

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<sup>2</sup> Respondents who felt uncomfortable may have feared that their responses were being monitored by government officials. In order to gauge respondents' comfort levels, survey interviewers assessed respondents' tone of voice and pauses. Whenever respondents' comfort level made a difference in the results, we examined how responses to each question differed depending on comfort level.

<sup>3</sup> One possible caveat concerns the most-educated respondents. At all levels of educational achievement, respondents were most likely to obtain information from state-dominated media. However, compared with the least-educated respondents, the most-educated respondents reported a slightly higher tendency to obtain information from nongovernment media as well, especially on the topics of the U.S. response to the 2009 Iranian election and the Obama administration's policies for reestablishing relations with Iran. This report's companion website supplies statistics and figures related to this finding.

<sup>4</sup> Once again, it should be noted that comfort levels with the survey affected responses on a number of issues, thus preventing an exploration of public opinion on "sensitive" topics, such as the 2009 Iranian presidential election. Research on Iranians' use of social media, such as Twitter, blogs, and Facebook, may lead to more in-depth analyses of Iranian public opinion.