

Congressional Testimony

THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC OPINION INSIDE IRAN

Written Testimony of Kenneth Ballen

President

Terror Free Tomorrow: The Center for Public Opinion

House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

National Security and Foreign Affairs Subcommittee

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TERROR FREE TOMORROW
THE CENTER FOR PUBLIC OPINION

www.TerrorFreeTomorrow.org

Statement of Kenneth Ballen, House National Security Subcommittee

I. Introduction: The Iranian People Are Speaking. Are We Listening?

I would like to commend Chairman Tierney, Ranking Member Shays and the Subcommittee for starting its series of hearings on Iran with the topic of the Iranian people and their attitudes. It is not the topic most would begin with, but it is the right place to start.

The United States has now imposed new economic sanctions against Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, while also designating the elite Quds Force of the Guard as a terrorist organization.

But these measures—or any other economic sanctions—are likely to fail against the current Iranian regime, unless the United States begins to address the people of Iran themselves.

President Reagan told us that America's greatest ally against the Soviet Union in winning the Cold War was the average Soviet, "Citizen Ivan," Reagan said.

This is no less true with Iran today.

In what can only fairly be described as an act of every day courage by average citizens, this past summer Iranians told our pollsters over the phone—not knowing whether the Iranian government itself was the party on the other end of the line—that they reject the current autocratic rule of the Supreme Leader and want full trade and normal relations with the West instead of nuclear weapons.

In the first uncensored nationwide public opinion survey since September 2002 (when the Iranian pollsters were jailed), 79 percent of those surveyed across Iran want free elections and normal relations with the outside world, and almost 70 percent with the United States itself. Only 11 percent of Iranians said they support the current Iranian system of the unelected religious rule of the Supreme Leader.

These results should not be taken as routine.

At about the same time that we conducted our phone survey of Iran, we conducted a similar poll of Syria. While three quarters of Syrians expressed that they also want better relations with the West, almost no Syrian felt free to directly criticize the Syrian government, let alone their Syrian "Supreme Leader," Bashar Assad.

Indeed, criticizing the Supreme Leader and the nature of his religiously determined right to rule is a line inside Iran publicly crossed at personal risk. Yet in our poll, the Iranian people bravely and collectively are crossing that line.

The question is: Are we listening?

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II. The Results of Our Unprecedented Public Opinion Survey

The Terror Free Tomorrow survey showed that four out of every five Iranians would prefer the freedom to elect their own leaders, and economic opportunity with international engagement, over building nuclear weapons. People widely rejected the policies of President Ahmadinejad, and want renewed and normal relations with the United States.

The survey was conducted in Farsi by telephone from a nearby country by our field manager D3 Systems (www.d3systems.com) During June 5th to June 18th, 2007, our random sampling covered 1,000 interviews across all 30 provinces of Iran, with a margin of error of 3.1 percent.

The complete results and methodology of the survey can be accessed at www.TerrorFreeTomorrow.org As noted above, the last poll to ask similar controversial questions inside Iran was released in September 2002 by Abbas Abdi. The pollsters were imprisoned as a result.

Developing nuclear weapons was seen as a very important priority for the Iranian government by only 29 percent of Iranians. By contrast, 88 percent of Iranians considered improving the Iranian economy as a very important priority for their government.

Rather, four-fifths of Iranians favor Iran providing full international inspections and a guarantee not to develop or possess nuclear weapons in return for outside aid. Moreover, 68 percent of Iranians also favor normal relations and trade with the United States. 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 Iranian people's opposition to their current system of government.

Specifically, 61 percent of Iranians were willing to tell our pollsters 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.

More telling, over 79 percent 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 percent of Iranians said they would strongly oppose having a political system in which all of their leaders are chosen by popular election.

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Iranians across gender, age, income and every demographic group oppose the unelected rule of the Supreme Leader in favor of electing all their leaders. While these views run stronger in Tehran, they are held in each province of Iran, and in both urban and rural areas.

An important caveat: Even though most Iranians do not support their current system or the regime's policies, there is a significant and committed minority of Iranians who do. 11 percent favor the current unelected rule of the Supreme Leader, and that number rises to anywhere from 23 percent to 34 percent when questioned about specific policies of President Ahmadinejad. There is a strong, faithful and committed minority behind the current system and government.

In addition, general discontent is also reflective of the fact that the Iranian economy is the number one issue of concern for Iranians from every age, region, education level and class. 80 percent think the present economic situation in Iran is fair or poor, and 9 out of every 10 Iranians believe that creating new jobs and curbing inflation should be very important priorities for their government.

Indeed, three-quarters favor Western investment to create more jobs, while trade and political relations with the West were the second highest priority Iranians chose for their government. Support for Western and outside relations in general was also much stronger than support for the United States alone. For instance, Iranians chose normal trade with China and France by a nearly 2 to 1 margin over the United States.

Lastly, almost two-thirds of Iranians support financial assistance to Palestinian opposition groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, as well as Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militias. However, only a third consider the Iranian government providing financial support to these groups as very important, as opposed to nearly half who think that seeking trade and political relations with Western countries is very important.

The bottom line is that while most Iranians want political change, opening to the outside world and free economic exchange, not all do. And there remains a powerful undercurrent of distrust towards American policies in particular.

Whatever Iranians feel, the survey results indicate that they want to determine the nature of the future of Iran for themselves.

If approached with respect for their own priorities, however, Terror Free Tomorrow's path-breaking survey of Iran also demonstrates that the Iranian people could be the best ally of the U.S. and the West against the government in Tehran.

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III. The Impact of Our Public Opinion Survey inside Iran

The Terror Free Tomorrow poll did not go unnoticed inside Iran. Circulated throughout Iranian blogs, it was particularly cited by student organizations, with a prominent group headlining the results: "Iranian Students: Your Fellow Citizens Want Democracy Too."

And the poll did not go unnoticed by the regime either.

Three weeks following our survey's dissemination, the Iranian government published their own poll in official government media, refuting the Terror Free Tomorrow findings point by point.

More than simply clinging to power, many in the Iranian ruling class are "true believers," with a powerful ideological stake in having the people behind them.

Hence, continual polls sponsored by the government are regularly published in the Iranian press.

These polls generally reflect support for current government policies. Since the government does not release the exact questions or methodology, it is hard to assess the discrepancy between our independent survey and the government polls. It could be that people simply answer differently when they know the government is asking the questions. Or it could be that the government polls are weighted to the minority demographic that strongly supports its policies.

With its ongoing series of government polls, the Terror Free Tomorrow survey represents the only alternative outlet for public opinion polling inside Iran.

IV. The Role of Iranian Public Opinion in Setting Future Policy

While the Iranian people are expressing their true voice, the Iranian regime is busy expressing the voice of the people it wants the world to hear.

But the world is silent.

Sanctions are imposed, military threats made, the regime is talked to by some, shunned by others, and in all of this debate, no one is reaching out over the head of the regime to address the Iranian people directly.

The United States and the larger international community, with one clear voice, need to tell the Iranian people that we support their priorities of trade, technology and economic opportunity.

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The world should tell Iranians that it entirely shares their goals of democracy, human rights and a positive agenda of a future Iran proud, secure, and a fully respected and participating member of the community of nations.

By publicly, repeatedly and forcefully letting the Iranian people know that the United States is on their side, popular pressure on an unpopular regime could increase.

Moreover, by taking the leadership role of prominently setting forth a positive vision of what the future can be, whatever actions the United States and other nations actually take now, or later, at least could be understood inside Iran as trying to isolate the regime, and not the people themselves.

The irony is that the Iranian regime is now engaged in a determined effort to win over, represent and speak for the Iranian people. But as much as it may try, the regime doesn't. While the rest of the world, and the United States in particular, remain painfully silent.

If the United States and other nations did try to directly address the concerns of the Iranian people, they would find their most receptive audience to be inside Iran itself.