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I'd like to thank the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform for asking me to appear today to analyze the relationship between Iranian public attitudes and Iranian policy on key issues of interest to the United States. I would ask that my testimony be submitted for the record.

I have been asked to assess, in particular, the difficulty of accurately gauging true public opinion in Iran and, beyond that, the degree to which public opinion might affect Iran's policies, if at all. I would note, at the outset, that my official responsibilities at CRS include analysis of U.S. policy toward Iran, Iranian politics and strategic capabilities, Iran's economy, and the social and human rights situation in Iran. I do not have professional expertise in analyzing polling data or assessing the accuracy or methodology of specific polls.

Assessing Iranian Opinion

My experience and analysis has been that Iranian political and social attitudes are extremely opaque and difficult to gauge. It is therefore important, one might argue, to try to correlate assessments of Iranian public opinion with known political events and outcomes, such as election results, removal or appointment of cabinet ministers or other officials, demonstrations, indicators of unrest, and like events.

As one example, the opinion poll by the group "Terror Free Tomorrow," which is discussed in the testimony of the organization's director, Ken Ballen, indicates that Iranians are generally favorably disposed toward the United States. That finding would appear

consistent with such observed events as the candlelight vigils held by thousands of Iranians the night of the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States. The findings are also consistent with the widely reported anecdotes of visitors to Iran such as American tourists, journalists, and academics. The explanation widely cited by experts on Iran is that the Iranian people do not hold the United States responsible for maintaining the Iranian regime – widely viewed as repressive – in power, because the United States and Iran have been at odds for almost all the period since the 1979 Islamic revolution. The Iranian public attitude toward the United States is often contrasted with attitudes in such U.S. allies in Egypt, with which the U.S. government has friendly relations, and Egyptian opponents of the government, who view the United States as cooperating or tolerating the official oppression and corruption.

Other observable events in Iran appear to corroborate poll findings that the Iranian people are discontent with their regime and system of government. Within the past few years, there have been a number of significant popular demonstrations against the regime by groups, such as women and labor unions, that are known to be discontented. In March 2006, for example, the police dispersed a rally in Tehran commemorating International Women's Day. In June 2006, police forcefully dispersed a women's rights demonstration. In December 2006, and then again in September 2007, students disrupted or protested appearances by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at Iranian universities. In the latter instance, the students mocked Ahmadinejad as a "dictator," and their use of the term appeared to indicate that there is student dissatisfaction about the lack of academic freedom and freedom of expression in Iran. Leaders of Iranian unions have been arrested for strikes and other labor unrest. For example, in July 2007, authorities arrested the leader of the Syndicate of Bus Drivers of the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company, Mansour Osanloo, for the third time in less than two years.

The polls indicate such discontent, but are not necessarily able to assess the depth of public discontent that would motivate Iranians to publicly challenge the regime. Demonstrations and strikes are good indicators of this depth of feeling. Still, these demonstrations have been relatively sporadic. It is therefore difficult to draw conclusions from these events that there is widespread popular discontent with the regime.

Another illustrative example are the Tehran University student riots of July 1999. There were few, if any, objective indicators of public opinion that showed that unrest was about to boil over in the manner it did then. A reformist, Mohammad Khatemi, was in power, and most Iran experts assumed that students were relatively content that politics in Iran were moderating, and were pleased that Khatemi had rolled back some of the excesses of his predecessors, such as press restrictions and enforcement of Islamic dress. Relatively unnoticed was growing student resentment over the degree to which Khatemi's conservative opponents in Iran were trying to undermine him and prevent fundamental reform of the economy. The conservatives were also frustrating Khatemi's efforts by using their influence over the security forces and the cleric-dominated justice

sector to conduct crackdowns on the press and on intelligentsia seeking to discuss the evolution of Iran's political system. The unrest evolved into several days of student riots and a crackdown by the security forces on the riots. Outmaneuvered by his opponents, Khatemi reportedly feared dismissal by the Supreme Leader if he did not back the crackdown on the rioting, and he did so publicly. His capitulation to the hardliners caused Khatemi to lose the student support that had helped sweep him to election victory in 1997. Still, support for reform, and the hopes that Khatemi would confront the hardliners (which he did not), carried him to another landslide victory in the presidential elections of 2001.

The same factors that limit public expression in Iran could also cast some doubt on objective polling results. As I have noted, the regime is quick to move to suppress any demonstrations of dissent. Not only does it arrest and imprison political or civil society activists, but it severely restricts freedom of speech and the press, according to the State Department human rights reports on Iran and other observers. In late 2006, the government increased confiscation of satellite dishes in homes, which are legally prohibited but use of which had been generally tolerated. The government also blocks foreign satellite transmissions, and controls use of the internet. It reportedly uses filtering software to block access to some Western newspaper web sites, as well as those of some non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The State Department asserts in its human rights report for 2006, released February 2007, that a 2004 poll by an Iranian press organ found that Iranian citizens trust the internet more than any other news media. Since the internet gives Iranians access to foreign media, it can be hypothesized that, if the poll is accurate, it indicates that Iranians do not trust much of their own media, but look to foreign media for more accurate representations of events and trends in Iran itself. Journalists are routinely arrested for stories critical of the government, and reformist newspapers are regularly closed, although they tend to reopen quickly under new names.

In several cases, polling data and other data have not been reliable indicators of political outcomes in Iran. In two recent major elections in Iran, press reports quoting polls and interviews with Iranians proved inaccurate. In the June 2005 presidential election, for example, not one major press report foresaw the emergence of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the eight candidate field. He was little known to Western journalists, and there was a clear consensus that senior leader and former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani would likely emerge victorious in the election. Some observers believed that other leading candidates would fare well, including Mohammad Qalibaf, the former security chief, and Mustafa Moin, the former Minister of Higher Education, and a well known reformist. Almost no one observed the clear shift, late in the campaign, and with the apparent backing of the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guard and Basij forces, toward Ahmadinejad. He went on to the second round run-off against Rafsanjani in which he soundly defeated Rafsanjani.

Conversely, the other major recent election "shock" was the earlier victory of Mohammad Khatemi in the 1997 presidential election. Khatemi's chief opponent in the election, Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri, a conservative, had the clear backing of the senior regime leadership. It was widely assumed by U.S. and other experts that the regime would, if necessary, fix the election somehow to ensure Nateq Nuri's victory, and that there was no way Khatemi would be allowed to win the election. Yet, on election day, Khatemi took nearly 70% of the vote, and the regime was clearly cowed by the overwhelming support

for the reformist Khatemi that there was no means to alter the result. Nateq Nuri publicly conceded defeat and Khatemi was sworn in in August 2007.

Assessing the Relationship Between Public Attitudes and Iranian Government Policy

From a policy analysis standpoint, many consider it significant to try to assess the degree to which Iranian public opinion affects Iranian governmental decisions and policies, because public opinion might give analysts and indication of how Iran might react to U.S. and international policies toward Iran. Yet, the Iranian political system is relatively opaque, and constitutes a hybrid of elected, appointed, and partially elected institutions. Some of Iran's institutions have close contact with the public, while other institutions are relatively remote and reflect the preferences of Iran's clerical or national security establishment.

First and foremost is the position of the Supreme Leader. That post was established by the Islamic republican constitution adopted after the 1979 fall of the Shah of Iran, and was held by the leader of that revolution, the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The current Leader is Ali Khamene'i, a Khomeini disciple who was elected president during 1981-89 and was named Supreme Leader upon Khomeini's death in June 1989. The Supreme Leader is named by an elected 83-seat "Assembly of Experts," which also has the official responsibility of amending the constitution and overseeing the work of the Supreme Leader.

The Supreme Leader has vast powers under Iran's constitution – he is the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and has the power to dismiss the elected President of Iran. He also makes half the appointments to the 12 seat "Council of Guardians" – an appointed body that reviews legislation to ensure that it comports with Islamic law. This also ensures that Iran's politics are relatively opaque, because subordinate leaders compete for the ear and favor of the Supreme Leader. Lines of authority are not clear, and it is often difficult to judge the relative influence over policy of the leaders below Khamene'i.

Although not directly elected, the Supreme Leader is not necessarily immune to or unaware of public opinion. Khamene'i, for example, is known to maintain close contacts with one of his key constituencies, the *bazaar* merchants, who are highly sensitive to the potential effects of any international sanctions on Iran's economy. The bazaar merchants are also able to filter up to Khamene'i complaints from the citizenry on such issues as inflation, unemployment, and the effects of a recently-implemented gasoline rationing plan.

One feature of the Supreme Leadership post is that Iran has aligned its laws and practices to shield the Supreme Leader from all direct criticism. It is illegal for publications to directly criticize the Supreme Leader, and citizens have been known to be arrested for criticizing him within earshot of security personnel. In the absence of direct criticism, it might be difficult for Khamene'i, or any Supreme Leader, to align his policies with the interests and hopes of the citizenry.

However, in some ways, Khamene'i might be more in touch with public opinion than is the elected President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Ahmadinejad reportedly has

surrounded himself with longtime allies from their time as Revolutionary Guard officers during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war. Many of these officers from Ahmadinejad's generation subsequently became provincial governors and local leaders; Ahmadinejad himself was Tehran mayor before being elected President. By the accounts of many observers, Ahmadinejad and his circle remember the time of the Iran-Iraq war as a heroic struggle against an Iraq that they perceived as backed by the West. Unlike Khamene'i and other more senior leaders, Ahmadinejad does not view the Iran-Iraq war as a time of severe economic deprivation and defeat. To some extent, Ahmadinejad is considered out of touch with many urban or more affluent Iranians who want economic growth and integration with Europe and Asia, not to mention eventually also the United States. It is these types of groups, and students and intellectuals are among them, that have protested and criticized Ahmadinejad recently. These groups perceive Ahmadinejad as unwisely pushing Iran into confrontation with the United States and Europe over Iran's nuclear program – a drive that, for the first time, has brought United Nations sanctions against Iran.

Some of these sentiments appear to be reflected in the "Terror Free Tomorrow" poll, as well as other polls and observations. The poll clearly shows that most Iranians would trade assurances that Iran is not developing a nuclear weapon for international assistance and enhanced investment from and trade with the West. This sentiment might account for what a wide range of observers say has been a decline in Ahmadinejad's popularity as his confrontation with the international community has escalated. The decline in his popularity was demonstrated in December 2006 when most of Ahmadinejad supporters, including his sister, lost their bids for seats on Tehran's elected city council. Pro-Ahmadinejad candidates won only three of the fifteen council seats, even less than the four seats won by the reformist candidates who were viewed as reeling from their loss in the 2005 presidential elections. The Terror Free Tomorrow poll, if accurate, would also suggest that most Iranians do not agree with Ahmadinejad that the three U.N. resolutions demanding Iran suspend uranium enrichment are not, as Ahmadinejad says, "torn pieces of paper."

Public preferences in Iran also have not translated into Iran's policy in the region. Polls, including the Terror Free Tomorrow poll, have consistently suggested that the Iranian public views itself as relatively remote from the Arab-Israeli dispute, and does not believe that it is Iran's role to try to determine the outcome of any negotiations to settle that long conflict. During the time of the Shah of Iran, Iran and Israel had full diplomatic relations. The current Iranian leadership, on the other hand, has consistently opposed Israel, and, judging from the reports of the State Department on international terrorism, it has provided material support to groups such as Hamas that do not accept a "two state solution" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Iran's support to such groups, as well as to Lebanese Hezbollah, has been a consistent source of friction between Iran and the United States.

A question that arises is whether or not the most representative institution in Iran, the Majles (parliament) reflects public opinion and can therefore influence policy. It could be argued that the public has a channel to express its views, through the Majles, and that the Majles is capable of writing laws to reflect those preferences. In practice, however, in the view of most experts, the Majles lacks substantial influence in the Iranian political system. It is fully elected, and therefore generally does reflect voter choices in particular time periods, but it has not been able to translate those choices into policy. In part, this

reflects the substantial influence of the unelected Council of Guardians, which is able to block the implementation of legislation it dislikes on the grounds that such laws are not Islamic. In addition, the Council of Guardians has the responsibility of screening candidates for all Iranian elections. Majles members who fear this screening process are considered reluctant to sponsor or vote for legislation that is not considered sufficiently in line with the preferences of the senior leadership, particularly the Supreme Leader.

Implications

The conclusion we might draw is that there are few means for Iranian public attitudes to affect policy. The public might appear amenable to suspending the militarily-useful aspects of Iran's nuclear program if doing so would ensure economic prosperity and avoid further sanctions, but this view has not translated, to date, into Iranian government policy choices. The implications are that U.S. policy efforts would likely need to affect the thinking of senior regime leaders, and not the public. If the United States is to succeed in persuading the Iranian government to suspend its enrichment of uranium, it would likely have to convince the senior leadership that an Iranian nuclear weapon would not ensure Iran's security, or that Iran's economic future is jeopardized by the continuation of that program.

The Iranian leadership is not impervious to public opinion. For now, public preferences on the nuclear issue are expressed in polls and in comments to journalists or other observers. At some point, however, were international sanctions to severely crimp Iran's economy, it is possible that public attitudes might evolve into overt public unrest. The Iranian public might not necessarily blame the international community for imposing sanctions and causing economic hardship, but might instead blame Ahmadinejad and the senior leadership for providing justification for international sanctions by provoking confrontation on the nuclear issue. The polls and other observations suggest that the quest for nuclear power is popular in Iran, partly because Iranians want to constitute a great nation that is technologically sophisticated. However, the polls also show that the public does not necessarily want to push the program so far that Iran ends up isolated and economically crippled by sanctions.

Serious unrest has always, in the past, attracted the focused attention of the Iranian senior leadership. However, as discussed, the leadership has shown little hesitation to react with repressive force to suppress rioting and demonstrations, and it is likely to do so in the future.