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What Iranians Think?

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While Israeli and US congressional leaders warn that Iran may become emboldened after the Geneva interim nuclear deal, polling reveals that Iranians are looking for change at home above all.

We've heard what Israel's prime minister and members of the US Congress think about the interim nuclear deal the Iranian government concluded with the P5+1. What we don't know is how the Iranian people will react. What do Iranians want from their newly elected government, and how will this deal play at home?

In September 2013, Zogby Research Services (ZRS) conducted a nationwide face-to-face poll of 1,205 Iranian adults in an effort to better understand their political priorities and expectations, and, in particular, their attitudes towards their country's nuclear programme and its regional foreign policy.

What we found is that, overall, the top political concern for Iranians was the need to improve their economy. This was followed by a number of political reforms, including: advancing democracy; protecting political and civil rights; increasing the rights of women; ending corruption; and reforming the government. These 2013 results were identical to the findings of our 2011 poll of Iranian opinion. In fact, as we have found in past surveys, Iran is the only country in the Middle East where these political reform issues are consistently top tier concerns. It is noteworthy that at the very bottom of the list of priorities were: improving relations with the

West; continuing the nuclear enrichment programme; and resolving the standoff with the West so that economic sanctions could be lifted.

While Iranians were largely in agreement on the need for political change and the rank order of their priorities, they were divided on the fundamental question as to whether they believed that change could occur. More significant is the fact that almost one half of those polled appear to lack confidence in their new government and even in the Iranian system itself. The poll also found a surprising degree of consensus among Iranians with regards to their country's nuclear programme. Despite being a low priority (only six per cent of Iranians said the nuclear programme was a priority concern), when asked their views on the nuclear question it appears that nationalist pride kicks in.

Two-thirds of Iranians say they are supportive, not only of their country's right to enrichment, but of its right to possess a nuclear weapon. The reasons they give for this support are either because they believe Iran "is a major nation" and should have such a weapon or because "as long as other countries have nuclear weapons, we need them too." Less than a third of Iranians support the position espoused publicly by their religious leader that "nuclear weapons are wrong and no country should have them."

Similarly, when asked whether maintaining the right to advance a nuclear programme is worth the price being paid in sanctions and isolation, 96 per cent agree that it is worth the price. The deepest division in Iranian public opinion occurs with regard to their government's foreign policy ventures. While three-quarters say that they believe that their government's actions are primarily "aimed at protecting vulnerable Shia populations", a majority of Iranians say they find their country's involvement in Syria and Iraq to be negative and are divided about the impact of their involvement in Bahrain and Lebanon.

A final observation: It is interesting to note that the views of Iranians who say they voted for Hassan Rouhani are less liberal and in some areas more hardline than those who either opposed his candidacy or chose not to vote in the last election. Rouhani supporters are: less concerned with democratic and political reform; far more supportive of the Iranian system; less supportive of most of Iran's foreign policy engagements; and less supportive of their country's nuclear programme.

The other big difference between the two groups is that while three-quarters of Rouhani supporters appear to be confident that his government can make change, one-half of the new president's opponents are not.

The bottom line here is that Iranians appear to be somewhat exhausted by the current state of affairs. National pride may inhibit them from making the connection, but the bombast of the Ahmadinejad era, and the impact of their government's foreign and domestic policies, have taken a toll, resulting in international isolation.

Hassan Rouhani has won a mandate principally to improve the economy and to produce political reform. He does not have a mandate to continue to engage in what are believed to be negative foreign adventures. Since many of his supporters have bought into the proposition that Iran

“needs” a nuclear weapon, if he is to succeed in selling his P5+1 nuclear deal to his public he will have to establish the connection between this deal and the economic and political benefits that may accrue as a result. This will, in all likelihood, require a bit of “saving face”. For those who worry that Iran will pocket this deal and become more aggressive in the region, the poll results appear to indicate that the Iranian public is not interested in that outcome. The fact that the concerns of most Iranians are matters close to home should serve as some restraint on the government’s behaviour in the broader Middle East.