

IRANIAN ATTITUDES

SEPTEMBER 2013



On August 3, 2013, Hassan Rouhani took office as president of Iran. Shortly thereafter, from August 26 to September 22, 2013, we surveyed 1,205 adults across Iran in an effort to better understand the Iranian public's attitude toward their newly elected president—and how the views of those who supported Rouhani differ from those who opposed his election. We also wanted to learn: how Iranians rank their political priorities; their confidence in the Rouhani government's commitment to addressing these priorities; their attitudes toward Iran's foreign policy in the Arab World; and how they view their country's nuclear program.

Our poll found that with Rouhani's win Iranians, especially Rouhani supporters, have expectations that their situation will improve. Overall, our poll found that only 36% of all Iranians say they are better off now than they were five years ago, and 43% say they are worse off. But with Rouhani's victory, 43% now expect that they will be better off during the next four years under a Rouhani administration—with 65% of Rouhani's supporters maintaining this optimistic view of their future prospects.

One-half of Iranians say that they supported Rouhani's victory, with the rest of our respondents saying that they either opposed him or felt that the election didn't matter because nothing will change in their country.

POLITICAL PRIORITIES

When asked to rank their top political priorities, the issue of employment tops the list (29%). It is important to note that all of the other top tier priorities are political reform issues: advancing democracy (24%); protecting personal and civil rights (23%); increasing rights for women (19%); ending corruption (18%); and political or governmental reform (18%). It is also useful to note that at the very bottom of the list are: improving relations with the United States and the West (5%); continuing the nuclear enrichment program (6%); and resolving the stand-off that exists over Iran's nuclear program so that economic sanctions can be lifted (7%).

These numbers track the findings of our 2011 Sir Bani Yas poll where we found the rank order of political priorities to be: (1) expanding employment opportunities; (2) advancing democracy; (3) protecting personal and civil rights; (4) political or governmental reform; and (5) ending corruption and nepotism.

Of all the Middle East countries in which we have surveyed the public's priorities, Iran remains the unique case where concern with political reform issues consistently trumps most other issues—clear evidence of a deep dissatisfaction with the existing political order.

On all of these issues there is a division of opinion as to whether or not the new government will be committed to addressing them. Almost three-quarters of those who supported Rouhani are confident that he is committed to addressing the various political priority issues covered in the survey, while only a third of those who did not support his election share that confidence.

FOREIGN POLICY

When asked what motivates their country's foreign policy, the greatest percentage of respondents (76%) identifies "protecting vulnerable Shia communities" as the most important factor. Next comes "ensuring our nation's security" (63%), followed by "maximizing our regional influence" (59%) and "creating a more stable Middle East" (56%).

But Iranian opinion is divided when asked to identify whether their country's policies in several Arab countries have had a positive or negative impact. For example, slight majorities say that Iran's involvement in Syria and Iraq has been negative, while just one-half of Iranians say that their involvement in Lebanon and Bahrain has been positive (with 45% saying that their country's involvement in both cases has been negative). Only in Yemen and non-Arab Afghanistan do majorities of Iranians find their country's involvement to have had a positive impact.

NUCLEAR PROGRAM

Iranians rank their country's nuclear program as one of their lowest priority concerns. Nevertheless, more than two-thirds say that they support the goal of their country having a nuclear weapon either because Iran is "a major country" and should have one (31%) or because "as long as other countries have nuclear weapons, we need them too" (36%). Only 29% apparently agree with their spiritual leader's professed position that "nuclear weapons are always wrong and so no country, including my own, should have them."

It is also important to note that only 36% of Iranians say that sanctions have had an impact on their lives. This, or national pride, may be the reason why a majority of Iranians (96%) agree with the statement that "maintaining the right to advance a nuclear program is worth the price being paid in economic sanctions and international isolation."

Interestingly, those who self-identify as Rouhani supporters are more inclined to support Iran's right to a nuclear weapon (76%) than Rouhani opponents (61%). And Rouhani's backers also hold the more hardline view with respect to negotiations on the nuclear program (61% to 46%). This appears to contradict the notion that Rouhani's supporters might hold more moderate views on the nuclear issue than those who opposed his election.

CONCLUSION

Iran is a divided country, but not in the way it is understood in the West. For the most part, Iranians agree on the political priorities facing their country. While supporters of the new president have significantly higher expectations that he will address those priorities than do those who opposed his election, all Iranians share the same concerns and will judge the new administration on its ability to create jobs and advance needed political reform.

Iranians are divided on foreign policy with almost one-half of the country seeing their government's role in most foreign adventures having a negative impact. The new president, therefore, will be expected to address these concerns, especially in Syria and Iraq where dissatisfaction appears to be highest.

Finally, a substantial percentage of Iranians support their country's nuclear program, with a sizable majority claiming that they should have the right to possess a nuclear weapon. Possibly out of a strong sense of national pride, a majority does not appear inclined to surrender their nuclear program either to end sanctions or to improve ties with the West, both of which are among their lowest priorities. In negotiations with the international community, the Rouhani government may operate under some restraints. Our poll shows that these will come not only from the spiritual leader, but also from the opinions of the Iranian public.



BETTER OFF/WORSE OFF

Are you better off/worse off than you were 5 years ago?				
	Total	Reaction to Rouhani election		
		Support	Not Support	Doesn't matter/ Not Sure
Better off	36	31	40	39
Worse off	43	52	37	29
About the same	18	13	21	27

Do you feel you will be better off/worse off during the next 4 years under a Rouhani administration?				
	Total	Reaction to Rouhani election		
		Support	Not Support	Doesn't matter/ Not Sure
Better off	43	65	22	21
Worse off	27	13	37	46
The same	22	15	30	21

A plurality of Iranian respondents (43%) say they are worse off today than they were five years ago, while just over one-third (36%) say they are better off. Looking to the future, Iranians are slightly more optimistic, with 43% saying they expect to be better off during the next four years under a Rouhani administration and 27% saying they feel they will be worse off.

Those who supported Rouhani are more likely to say they are worse off today (52% vs. 37% of non-supporters) and three times more likely to expect to be better off under a Rouhani administration (65% vs. 22% of non-supporters).

POLITICAL PRIORITIES

Two top priority concerns you want your government to address this year				
	Total	Reaction to Rouhani election		
		Support	Not Support	Doesn't matter/ Not Sure
Expanding employment opportunities	29	27	29	35
Advancing democracy	24	23	26	28
Protecting personal and civil rights	23	22	25	20
Increasing rights for women	19	19	19	19
Ending corruption and nepotism	18	18	17	18
Political or governmental reform	18	18	17	17
Improve health care system	14	14	13	13
Improving the education system	12	12	11	16
Improving relations with our Arab neighbors	10	11	9	7
Combating extremism and terrorism	8	9	8	6
Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict	7	8	7	8
Resolving the stand-off that exists for our nuclear program so we can end economic sanctions against my country	7	7	7	6
Continuing our nuclear enrichment program	6	6	6	6
Improving relations with the United States and the West	5	6	5	2

Just as was the case in our 2011 poll, in Iran “reform” issues trump other concerns. In short, Iranians want political change. The top six issues that respondents want their government to address this year are: expanding employment opportunities (29%), advancing democracy (24%), protecting personal and civil rights (23%), increasing rights for women (19%), ending corruption and nepotism (18%), and political or governmental reform (18%).

Improving the health care system (14%) and the education system (12%) are in the next tier of priorities for Iranian respondents. Less important are issues related to foreign policy like relations with Arab neighbors (10%) and the United States and the West (5%), and resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (7%), as well as issues related to Iran’s nuclear program (continuing enrichment: 6% and ending sanctions: 7%) and combating extremism and terrorism (8%).

These priorities are quite consistent across most demographic groups as well as between Rouhani supporters and non-supporters, though men and women have different top priorities. Men are most concerned with expanding employment opportunities (44% vs. 14% among women), while women’s top priority for government is increasing women’s rights (31% vs. 7% among men).

CONFIDENCE IN THE GOVERNMENT'S COMMITMENT TO ISSUES

Extent of confidence in government's commitment to ...		
Expanding employment opportunities	Confident	51
	Neither	15
	Not confident	32
Political or governmental reform	Confident	49
	Neither	16
	Not confident	30
Improving the health care system	Confident	51
	Neither	14
	Not confident	32
Protecting personal and civil rights	Confident	50
	Neither	12
	Not confident	35
Increasing rights for women	Confident	46
	Neither	15
	Not confident	33
Advancing democracy	Confident	54
	Neither	15
	Not confident	26
Combating extremism and terrorism	Confident	51
	Neither	13
	Not confident	30
Ending corruption and nepotism	Confident	50
	Neither	15
	Not confident	30
Resolving the Israeli Palestinian conflict	Confident	56
	Neither	9
	Not confident	29
Improving the education system	Confident	53
	Neither	14
	Not confident	28
Continuing our nuclear enrichment program	Confident	52
	Neither	13
	Not confident	29
Resolving the stand-off that exists for our nuclear program so we can end economic sanctions against my country	Confident	55
	Neither	11
	Not confident	30

Improving relations with our Arab neighbors	Confident	54
	Neither	11
	Not confident	30
Improving relations with the United States and the West	Confident	51
	Neither	14
	Not confident	31

When Iranians were asked how confident they are that these issues will be addressed, the results for each issue are the same. Overall, about one-half are confident that the government is committed to addressing these issues and one-third are not. Among Rouhani supporters, three-quarters are confident in the government's commitment; among his opponents, about one-half are not confident that the government is committed to addressing these issues.

MODELS OF DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRESS

In your opinion, is the Iranian model a good one for other countries in the region to emulate?				
	Total	Reaction to Rouhani election		
		Support	Not Support	Doesn't matter/ Not Sure
Yes	49	59	40	34
No	44	33	52	57

Which of the following countries is the model for development and progress that you would most like to see your country emulate?				
	Total	Reaction to Rouhani election		
		Support	Not Support	Doesn't matter/ Not Sure
UAE	13	14	12	13
Turkey	18	19	16	24
Egypt	1	1	1	1
China	16	13	19	20
Russia	19	21	18	14
United States	16	17	16	12
Sweden	8	6	10	10
None of the above	7	7	8	5

Respondents are split on whether the Iranian model is a good one for other countries in the region to emulate or not (49% vs. 44%). Rouhani supporters are more likely to say Iran is a good model (59%) than those who do not support the president (40%).

When asked to select one country as a model for development and progress for Iran to emulate, respondents choose Russia (19%), Turkey (18%), China (16%), and the United States (16%) most frequently.

FOREIGN POLICY

My government's actions in the region are primarily. . .					
		Total	Reaction to Rouhani election		
			Support	Not Support	Doesn't matter/ Not Sure
focused on ensuring our nation's security.	Agree	63	81	51	35
	Disagree	31	16	40	57
aimed at creating a more stable Middle East.	Agree	56	66	50	35
	Disagree	36	26	40	59
aimed at protecting vulnerable Shia.	Agree	76	86	68	68
	Disagree	20	11	27	28
aimed at maximizing our regional influence.	Agree	59	56	61	57
	Disagree	32	35	30	35

Iranians appear to believe that their government's foreign policy is primarily motivated by protecting vulnerable Shia (76%) and ensuring their nation's security (63%). More than eight in ten Rouhani supporters agree that these are the primary motivators of the Iranian government (protecting Shia: 86%, ensuring security: 81%), while those who do not support Rouhani are far less likely to agree (protecting Shia: 68%, ensuring security: 51%). Majorities also say that the Iranian government is motivated by maximizing their regional influence (59%) and creating a more stable Middle East (56%).

Positive or negative impact on developments in . . .					
		Total	Reaction to Rouhani election		
			Support	Not Support	Doesn't matter/ Not Sure
Syria	Positive	44	49	41	39
	Negative	54	49	57	60
	No impact	1	1	1	-
Bahrain	Positive	50	54	45	50
	Negative	45	42	49	47
	No impact	3	3	4	2
Lebanon	Positive	50	55	44	50
	Negative	44	41	48	46
	No impact	4	3	5	3
Iraq	Positive	41	47	36	32
	Negative	52	48	55	63
	No impact	3	2	5	2
Afghanistan	Positive	55	56	52	61
	Negative	32	31	32	33
	No impact	9	10	11	4
Yemen	Positive	57	58	56	56
	Negative	32	32	32	34
	No impact	7	7	7	7

Respondents were asked to consider the impact of their government's policies on the developments in a number of countries. With respect to Bahrain and Lebanon, Iranians are largely split on whether the impact of their government's policy is positive or negative (50% vs. 45% and 50% vs. 44%, respectively). Opinion leans toward the impact on Syria and Iraq being negative (44% vs. 54% and 41% vs. 52%, respectively). But respondents are most decided on the positive impact that Iran's government has had on developments in Yemen (57% vs. 32%) and Afghanistan (55% vs. 32%). It is interesting to note that supporters of Rouhani are more positive than his opponents on the impact of past policies of the Iranian government.

What effect have sanctions had on your government's determination to exert regional influence?				
	Total	Reaction to Rouhani election		
		Support	Not Support	Doesn't matter/ Not Sure
They have limited its determination	39	42	37	35
They have increased its determination	38	36	39	43
They have had no effect	21	20	23	21

What effect have sanctions had on your government's ability to exert regional influence?				
	Total	Reaction to Rouhani election		
		Support	Not Support	Doesn't matter/ Not Sure
They have limited its ability	39	39	39	34
They have increased its ability	39	38	41	39
They have had no effect	18	17	17	24

Iranian respondents are split on the impact that sanctions have had both on their government's determination (39% vs. 38%) and their government's ability (39% vs. 39%) to exert regional influence.

IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

Which of the following statements comes closer to your views?				
	Total	Reaction to Rouhani election		
		Support	Not Support	Doesn't matter/ Not Sure
Statement A: My country is pursuing its nuclear program for peaceful purposes.	37	37	39	32
Statement B: My country has ambitions to produce nuclear weapons.	55	55	52	62

What is your opinion on nuclear weapons?				
	Total	Reaction to Rouhani election		
		Support	Not Support	Doesn't matter/ Not Sure
My country should have nuclear weapons because it is a major nation.	31	38	25	27
As long as other countries have nuclear weapons, we need them also.	36	38	36	30
Nuclear weapons are always wrong and so no country, including my own, should have them.	29	20	35	42

Do you agree or disagree that maintaining the right to advance a nuclear program is worth the price being paid in economic sanctions and international isolation?				
	Total	Reaction to Rouhani election		
		Support	Not Support	Doesn't matter/ Not Sure
Agree	96	97	95	96
Disagree	4	3	5	4

	Total	Reaction to Rouhani election		
		Support	Not Support	Doesn't matter/ Not Sure
Strongly agree	52	61	46	42
Somewhat agree	44	36	49	54

A majority of respondents (55%) believe that their country seeks to produce a nuclear weapon, and this view is consistent across all demographic and political groups.

Most Iranians seem to want their country to possess a weapon either because they are a major nation (31%) or because others do (36%). Less than one-third of respondents (29%) say that “nuclear weapons are always wrong and so no country ... should have them.” Rouhani opponents are about twice as likely as Rouhani supporters to oppose the pursuit of nuclear weapons (35% vs. 20%), indicating again that those opposed to Rouhani do not appear to be the hardliners.

There is a strong general consensus that the nuclear program is worth the price in sanctions—with 96% of respondents agreeing that the right to advance their program is worth the price in economic sanctions and international isolation. Among Rouhani supporters, 61% strongly agree with this sentiment, compared to 46% of his opponents who strongly agree.

IMPACT OF SANCTIONS

What impact have international sanctions had on you and your family?				
	Total	Reaction to Rouhani election		
		Support	Not Support	Doesn't matter/ Not Sure
"We have felt an impact."	36	33	38	40
"We have felt no impact."	42	44	39	40
Neither	18	16	19	17

A plurality (42%) say they and their families have felt no impact from international sanctions, while one-third (36%) say they have felt the impact of sanctions.

APPENDIX —METHODODOLOGY AND DEMOGRAPHICS

METHODOLOGY

The approach used for conducting the poll involved 1,205 face to face, in-home personal interviews conducted August 26-September 22, 2013. A multi-stage sampling methodology was employed for the selection of respondents. The sample obtained was nationally representative and comprised adult males and females, who were 15+ years of age. The interviews were conducted in both urban and rural areas, including Tehran, Rasht, Esfahan, Yazd, Shiraz, Kerman, Mashhad, Tabriz, and Ahwaz, to ensure robust data and representation of a wide cross-section of Iranians. Based on a confidence interval of 95%, the margin of error is +/- 2.9 percentage points. This means that all other things being equal, the identical survey repeated will have results within the margin of error 95 times out of 100.

Throughout the analysis, data in the tables may not add up to 100% because of rounding and/or because responses of “not sure” are not shown. In addition, for the purposes of analysis and data presentation, some responses have been aggregated. For example, responses of “very positive” and “somewhat positive” are aggregated into “Positive,” while responses of “somewhat negative” and “very negative” are aggregated into “Negative.”

DEMOGRAPHICS

Male	51
Female	49
15-34	54
35+	46
Live in city	68
Live outside city	32
Sunni	9
Shia	89
Other religion	2



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