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New survey finds polarizing, hardening of Iranian attitudes over nuclear program

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Iranians are increasingly divided over their country’s pursuit of nuclear weapons technology, according to the results of a telephone survey released today by Washington, D.C.-based media and public opinion research organization, InterMedia. In the survey of 2,003 randomly selected respondents, 41 percent ‘strongly’ support the development of a nuclear weapons program; 39 percent strongly oppose it. This left little room for either the undecided or those with more moderate levels of support or opposition.

Overall, 49 percent of those surveyed favor Iran’s development of nuclear weapons, down from 55 percent in 2005 when InterMedia asked the same question. Among those who support the program, InterMedia found a large majority (84 percent) would still endorse it even if the UN imposed economic sanctions on Iran, and 75 percent would back nuclear weapons development even if this policy provoked a military confrontation with the United States.

“Iranians genuinely disagree over this issue, a division that may sometimes be obscured by the rhetoric from the Islamic Republic’s leadership,” said Dr. Haleh Vaziri, InterMedia’s Regional Research Manager for the Middle East and North Africa. “Although the number of people who support the program dropped slightly, opinions have hardened. People feel passionately one way or the other, with those in favor of the nuclear program supporting it at almost any cost.” InterMedia commissioned the survey, which was conducted from 12 April to 8 May.

Iranian attitudes towards the United States are more negative than last year. Fifty-eight percent are unfavorably inclined towards the U.S., up 10 points from InterMedia’s 2005 telephone survey. Among those with anti-U.S. feelings, 87 percent are ‘very unfavorably’ inclined. This year’s study found few fence-sitters (7 percent)—those ‘neither favorably nor unfavorably inclined’ towards the U.S.—with fewer respondents who either refused to answer or claimed they ‘don’t know’ than in the previous survey (21 percent versus 27 percent in 2005).

“Rising anti-U.S. sentiment may be attributed to the presence of American troops next door in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as to the stand-off between Tehran and Washington over the Islamic Republic’s nuclear program,” said Vaziri.

Asked about the overall path their country is taking, 71 percent think Iran is headed ‘in the right direction’ — 18 points higher than in 2005 — while 12 percent disagree with this assessment. Significantly, 18 percent either refused to answer or said they ‘don't know,’ meaning almost one-fifth of respondents were uncomfortable addressing this question.

Selecting the political system best suited Iran’s future, 47 percent chose the ‘Islamic Republic as it is now, based on the clergy's guardianship,’ with less than 4 percent wanting a ‘secular, democratic republic’ or ‘democratic, constitutional monarchy.’

Iranians are avid media consumers and even more so this year than last. Television dominates the media market, with local sources most popular. Channels 1-4 sponsored by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) reach more than three-quarters of respondents. However, Iranian expatriate channels, based mostly in Los Angeles, and international broadcasters have also expanded their audience shares since 2005.

Iran is an increasingly high-tech, wired society: 22 percent of adults indicate owning a satellite dish, up 8 points from last year, despite the official ban on satellite ownership. Forty percent have dial-up access to the internet at home, 11 percent have high-speed access and 19 percent have logged on in the last week, even as the ruling clerics have moved during recent months to block sites they deem politically subversive or culturally offensive.

“There’s an interesting paradox of competition in the media market amid control: Iranian consumers are seeking alternative perspectives and entertainment unavailable on state-run media outlets, as well as new communications technologies, even as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's conservative administration tightens controls on all media,” said Vaziri.

InterMedia is a leading international media research, public opinion, evaluation and consulting organization creatively equipping clients to understand their audiences, gauge their effectiveness and target their communications in transitional and developing societies worldwide. Based in Washington, D.C., and active year-round in more than 60 countries, InterMedia helps clients understand complex issues in challenging research environments. The company’s strengths include its people—area experts skilled in scientifically-based research and focused on client solutions—its vast global network of local research partners and contacts and its rich data archive of close to 500 media and opinion surveys carried out over the past 15 years.

Survey note: The survey of 2,003 adults 15 and older took place between April 12 and May 8, 2006. Range of error with a 95 percent confidence interval is +/- 2.19 percent.

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For further details, or to arrange an interview with Dr. Vaziri, contact Alex Wooley, InterMedia’s director of communications and development, at 202-434-9332, or at wooleya@intermedia.org.