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## Iran's Challenge

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While speculation swirls around the Bush administration's intentions toward Iran, wouldn't it be valuable to know how the Iranian people view the world and their government? It certainly would be especially valuable to know how they view the Iranian regime and its nuclear ambitions, particularly since our actions might either drive them to rally around their leaders, no matter how odious, or, alternatively, encourage their desire for a free, democratic Iran.

Insights into the thinking of Iranians is offered by the organization Terror Free Tomorrow, which for the past several years has been conducting opinion polls in Muslim countries in the interest of giving U.S. policy-makers the most complete and nuanced understanding of one of the most important foreign-policy challenges we face in the 21st century.

In fact, not only has Terror Free Tomorrow recently conducted polling in Iran, but in Syria and Pakistan as well, and the way the three stack up against each other is fascinating and thought-provoking. Syria remains as closely controlled a police state as it ever has been. Freedom of thought is practically an unknown phenomenon, and any criticism of the government is unheard of. Indeed, 83 percent said they preferred a single-party system with a strong leader.

Pakistan, for its part, is a country adrift — in a very troubling direction. The popularity of al Qaeda is on the rise in Pakistan, and the United States has lost the entire advance made in public opinion in Pakistan after the massive U.S. relief effort following the earthquake. Osama bin Laden is more popular than President Pervez Musharraf (46 percent to 38 percent), and U.S. military action against the Taliban and al Qaeda is overwhelmingly opposed by 87 percent. A majority of respondents register deeply anti-American feelings.

How is polling possible at all in societies like Iran, Syria and Pakistan, you might well ask. Ken Ballen, president and founder of Terror Free Tomorrow, explains that in countries like Iran and Syria, the best you can do is random calling from outside the country using trained native speakers. "The last independent internal opinion poll in Iran," he points out was done in 2002. "Every person who was interviewed got a visit from the secret police, and the pollster, Abbas Abdi, is still in jail." On the other hand, Iran is fairly advanced technologically. The country has 90 percent coverage in terms of landlines.

The Terror Free Tomorrow phone poll was conducted by random sampling, and not only were the 1,000 respondents surprisingly willing to talk, but they were willing to vent about the deficiencies of the Iranian government. They were, in fact, much more eager to talk than Americans tend to be; Americans can get pretty testy with pollsters who call them up in the middle of supper or their favorite TV program. In Iran, two-thirds of those selected spoke at length with the interviewer. In the United States, a 10 percent success rate is more typical.

In Iran, people were very dissatisfied with the lack of government services and job opportunities. In fact, 88 percent wanted the government to improve the economy. It is a highly educated society with an underdeveloped economy that relies almost solely on its oil industry. More than 30 percent of young men of prime working age are unemployed and educated women find themselves with very few opportunities. Only 29 percent had any desire for nuclear weapons, though a majority did think that a nuclear power program was in Iran's interest, and 80 percent approved of full inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Some 70 percent wanted normalized diplomatic and trade relations with the United States, and a majority wanted the opportunity to vote democratically for their government. A majority was even prepared to support a two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Mr. Ballen noted, though, that France and China beat the United States in popularity polls, no doubt due to Iran's long-standing trade relations with both countries.

As great a challenge as the Iranian government is — with its support for terrorist groups, aid to insurgents in Iraq and ambitions for Middle Eastern regional dominance — no action on our part should be taken without concerted efforts to reach out to the Iranian people, who are thirsty for credible news and information and eager to join the rest of the world. The Iranian mullahs could go the way of the Soviet leaders if we play our cards right.