Survey Illuminates Political Attitudes and Patterns of Political Participation of Iranian Americans in California

Executive Summary

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In collaboration with Susan Rasky
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The questions of whether and how the policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran endanger American interests and what the US should do about Iran tend to illicit a diverse array of responses from politicians, pundits, and attentive members of the general public.

Not much, however, is known about the orientations of the Iranian American community itself, which, according to the 2000 US Census, is among the most educated and affluent migrant groups to have ever sought refuge in the US.

This seems long overdue, particularly in California, where the majority of the community is concentrated. To remedy this deficiency, Dariush Zahedi, a Research Specialist at the UC Berkeley Institute of Governmental Studies, recently designed a questionnaire and commissioned the firm of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, and Associates to conduct the first comprehensive and random survey of the political attitudes of the Iranian American community in California.

In general, Iranian Americans who reside in the county of Los Angeles (41% of the respondents) and, to a lesser extent, the Los Angeles Area (which includes Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura counties and represents 26% of the respondents) as well as those who subscribe to Judaism (15% of the respondents) tend to be more mistrustful of the Islamic Republic of Iran than other respondents. Nevertheless, even a majority of these individuals (Los Angeles county 60%, Los Angeles Area 65%, Jewish respondents 51%) still favor the establishment of diplomatic relations between the US and Iran.

Indeed, even though the survey was conducted prior to the recent release of NIE, the majority of all respondents (66%) believe that the US should establish diplomatic relations with Iran. Significantly, the preponderance of Iranian Americans today, in contrast to Iraqi Americans in 2003, is adamantly opposed to war. Only 13% maintain that the US should engage in strategic
bombing of Iran's nuclear targets, while 8% favor the bombing of Iranian military and oil installations.

This is so in spite of the fact that 59% of all respondents agree that Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons. Among religious groups, comparable figures are—Muslims 50%, Jews 87%, Christians 66%, Bahais 76%, and Zoroastrians 81%. Among geographical regions, the breakdown is as follows: County of Los Angeles 66%, Los Angeles Area 58%, Bay Area 54%, Sacramento 40%, San Diego 38%.

Only 38% of all respondents, however, agree with the statement that Iran is a threat to the US in the Middle East. The breakdown along geographical regions is as follows: County of Los Angeles 46%, Los Angeles Area 36%, Bay Area 30%, Sacramento 14%, and San Diego 25%. 19% of Muslim respondents agree that Iran poses a threat to the US in the Middle East. The breakdown for other religious groups is Jews 72%, Bahais 65%, Christians 48%, Zoroastrians 44%.

As to what the future American foreign policy towards Iran should be, 26% of all the respondents believe that the US should remove economic sanctions against Iran, 13% are of the opinion that the US should bomb Iran's nuclear targets, 8% favor strategic bombing of military and oil targets, 25% think UN sanctions on gasoline should be tightened, and 66% maintain that the US should establish diplomatic relations with Iran.

The survey’s other important findings
- 22% of California Iranian Americans have an overall favorable opinion of George W. Bush, while 63% have an unfavorable view of President Bush.
- 25% of the respondents report to have been discriminated against by being singled out for special search or questioning at an airport since September 11th. 43% state that either their family members or friends have been denied visa or visit to the US since 9-11. 5% say they have been turned down for employment and 12% maintain that they have received general hostility from people in their local community in the aftermath of September 11th.
- 70% of the respondents believe that the US made the wrong decision in using military force in Iraq.
- 21% of the respondents think that American policy in the Middle East and Persian Gulf is to promote democracy and peace, while 60% maintain that US foreign policy in the region is largely self-serving and aimed at securing access to cheap oil.
- 74% of the respondents believe that US foreign policy in the Middle East favors Israel over Palestine.
- 52% (37% strongly) believe that Iran is a threat to its neighbors in the Middle East.
- 21% of the respondents think (12% strongly) that Iran and Israel are natural allies in the Middle East, while 65% (50% strongly) disagree with the notion that Iran and Israel are natural allies in the Middle East.
- 38% (25% strongly) maintain that Iran is the largest state sponsor of terrorism in the world, while 51% (39% strongly) disagree.
- 61% (38% strongly) believe that Iran’s nuclear program is a legitimate cause for concern.
- While 25% (11% strongly) of the respondents think that Iran’s nuclear programs are only for peaceful purposes, 56% disagree (38% strongly).
- Although 59% agree (36% strongly) with the statement that Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons, 21% disagree (10% strongly).
• 56% of all respondents think that the US should negotiate with Iran on nuclear weapons.

Socio-Economic Characteristics of the respondents
Unsurprisingly and in line with the results of the 2000 Census, the survey found that Iranian Americans in California are endowed with exceptionally high levels of educational attainment. While 1% of the respondents cite primary education and 6% list High School diploma as their highest level of educational attainment, 12% have attended some college or business/vocational school, 43% are college graduates, and 37% have done post-graduate work or attended professional school.

35% of the respondents identify their religious tradition as Muslim, 4% Bahai, 13% Christian, 15% Jewish, and 4% as Zoroastrian.

Patterns of Political participation and orientation
A relatively significant proportion of the respondents had engaged in forms of political participation other than voting. 31% had attended a public meeting, such as a city council meeting. 35% had contacted a public official. 14% were members of a political club or organization. 12% had volunteered for a political campaign. And 28% had contributed money to a political campaign. 42% of the respondents identified themselves as registered Democrats, 23% as Republicans, and 29% declined to state their party affiliation.

Methodology
The survey was conducted by telephone from August 20-28, 2007, with 800 successful interviews proportionally distributed according to the geographical distribution of the Iranian American community in California. The respondents were randomly selected from the White Pages on the basis of the names that appear in the Dictionary of Iranian Surnames. 96% of the phone interviews were conducted in English, while 4% of the interviews were conducted in Persian by native speakers. 51% of the respondents were male and 49% female. All of the respondents were above the age of 18.

The survey was compiled by Dariush Zahedi of the UC Berkeley Institute of Governmental Studies in collaboration with Susan Rasky, Senior Lecturer at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism.

The Survey was made possible through generous private contributions by Esmail Amid Hozour and Hamid and Tina Moghadam.

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The questions of whether and how the policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran endanger American interests and what the US should do about Iran tend to illicit a diverse array of responses from politicians, pundits, and attentive members of the general public. The recent reassessment of Iran's nuclear program by America's 16 intelligence organizations has only exacerbated this tendency.

The groups and individuals taking an active part in the debate include the usual suspects ranging from die-hard Neocons and peace nicks to current and former officials and officers in the armed forces and intelligence agencies to repentant journalists and academics ashamed of having served as cheerleaders for President Bush's decision to invade Iraq.

Not much, however, is known about the orientations of the Iranian American community itself, which, according to the 2000 US Census, is among the most educated and affluent migrant groups to have ever sought refuge in the US.

To the extent that Iranian American voices are reflected in the public debate, they are articulated by either hawkish or dovish activists, both of whom presume to speak on behalf of the community. Up to now, there have been no valid and reliable surveys of the political attitudes of Iranian Americans in regard to American foreign policy towards the Middle East in general and Iran in particular.

This seems long overdue, particularly in California, where so much of the immigrant community is concentrated, and particularly in light of the Bush Administration’s stated policy of promoting democracy in the Middle East in general and its stated objective of advancing the cause of liberty in Iran in particular.

To remedy this deficiency, Dariush Zahedi, an Associate at the Institute of Governmental Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, recently commissioned the firm of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, and Associates to conduct the first systematic, comprehensive, and random survey of the political attitudes of the Iranian American community in California. The survey concentrates on California because California is the state in which, according to the 2000 Census, the majority of Iranian Americans reside.

The 2000 Census estimates the number of Iranians in the United States at 330,000, a figure that reflects a major wave of immigration in the years immediately following the 1979 revolution. Iranian-American political and community groups believe the Census population estimate is vastly understated and that the population in fact may be as high as 1 million. Regardless of the degree of undercount, the Census figures indicate that
158,613, or 55.9% of those individuals who identified themselves as being Iranian or of Iranian ancestry, live in California.

Some of the more important and interesting findings of the survey are as follows: In general, Iranian Americans who reside in the county of Los Angeles (41% of the respondents) and, to a lesser extent, the Los Angeles Area (which includes Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura counties and represents 26% of the respondents) as well as those who subscribe to Judaism (15% of the respondents) tend to be more mistrustful of the Islamic Republic of Iran than other respondents. Nevertheless, even a majority of these individuals (Los Angeles county 60%, Los Angeles Area 65%, Jewish respondents 51%) still favor the establishment of diplomatic relations between the US and Iran.

Indeed, even though the survey was conducted prior to the release of NIE, the majority of all respondents (66%) believe that the US should establish diplomatic relations with Iran. Significantly, the preponderance of Iranian Americans today, in contrast to Iraqi Americans in 2003, is adamantly opposed to war. Only 13% maintain that the US should engage in strategic bombing of Iran's nuclear targets, while 8% favor the bombing of Iranian military and oil installations.

While 21% of the respondents subscribe to the notion that US foreign policy in the Middle East and Persian Gulf regions is to promote greater democracy and peace, 60% believe that American policy is largely self-serving and aimed at securing access to cheap oil. Although 59% agree that Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons, 55% think that President Bush makes too big of a deal of Iran's nuclear program.

61% of all respondents agree that Iran's nuclear program is a legitimate cause for concern. The breakdown along religious lines is illuminating. While 48% of those who identify themselves as Muslim view Iran's nuclear program as a legitimate cause for concern, the figure rises to 85% among Jewish respondents, 84% among Bahais, 72% among Christians, and 74% among Zoroastrians. The breakdown along geographical lines is equally illuminating. 66% of those who reside in Los Angeles County agree that Iran's nuclear program is a legitimate cause for concern. The figures for other areas are as follows: Los Angeles Area 58%, Bay Area 58%, San Diego 57%, and Sacramento 42%.

38% of all respondents agree with the statement that Iran is a threat to the US in the Middle East. The breakdown along geographical regions is as follows: County of Los Angeles 46%, Los Angeles Area 36%, Bay Area 30%, Sacramento 14%, and San Diego 25%. 19% of Muslim respondents agree that Iran poses a threat to the US in the Middle East. The breakdown for other religious groups is Jews 72%, Bahais 65%, Christians 48%, Zoroastrians 44%.

59% of all respondents agree that Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons. Among religious groups, comparable figures are—Muslims 50%, Jews 87%, Christians 66%, Bahais 76%, and Zoroastrians 81%. Among geographical regions, the breakdown is as follows: County of Los Angeles 66%, Los Angeles Area 58%, Bay Area 54%, Sacramento 40%, San Diego 38%.
As to what the future American foreign policy towards Iran should be, 26% of all the respondents believe that the US should remove economic sanctions against Iran, 13% are of the opinion that the US should bomb Iran's nuclear targets, 8% favor strategic bombing of military and oil targets, 25% think UN sanctions on gasoline should be tightened, and 66% maintain that the US should establish diplomatic relations with Iran.

The breakdown along religious lines is as follows: 30% of Muslims, 17% of Bahais, 24% of Jews, 18% of Christians, and 18% of Zoroastrians favor the removal of economic sanctions. 8% of Muslims, 7% of Bahais, 18% of Christians, 28% of Jews, and 14% of Zoroastrians think that the US should launch strategic bombings of Iran's nuclear targets. 6% of Muslims, 5% of Bahais, 9% of Christians, 15% of Jews, and 11% of Zoroastrians believe that the US should bomb Iran's military and oil targets. 20% of Muslims, 35% of Bahais, 26% of Christians, 33% of Jews, and 35% of Zoroastrians want to tighten UN sanctions on gasoline. 75% of Muslims, 73% of Bahais, 56% of Christians, 51% of Jews, and 60% of Zoroastrians favor the establishment of diplomatic relations.

24% of the residents of Los Angeles County, 23% in the Los Angeles Area, 29% in the Bay Area, 43% in San Diego, and 14% in Sacramento favor the removal of economic sanctions. 15% in Los Angeles County, 11 in the Los Angeles Area, 10% in the Bay Area, 14% in San Diego, and 13% in Sacramento think that the US should bomb Iran's nuclear targets. 10% in Los Angeles County, 10% in the Los Angeles Area, 5% in the Bay Area, 2% in the San Diego Area, and 0% in Sacramento believe that the US should bomb Iranian military and oil targets. 25% in Los Angeles County, 25 in the Los Angeles Area, 23% in the Bay Area, 20% in San Diego, and 18% in Sacramento favor the tightening of UN sanctions on gas. 61% in Los Angeles County, 65% in Los Angeles Area, 70% in the Bay Area, 78% in San Diego, and 76% in Sacramento believe in the establishment of diplomatic relations.

The survey’s other important findings are as follows

- 22% of California Iranian Americans have an overall favorable opinion of George W. Bush, while 63% have an unfavorable view of President Bush.
- While 44% of all respondents have favorable views of Democrats in Congress, 31% have unfavorable views of Congressional Democrats. 21% have favorable dispositions towards Republicans in Congress VS. 55% who view the Republicans in Congress with disfavor.
- 25% of the respondents report to have been discriminated against by being singled out for special search or questioning at an airport since September 11th. 43% state that either their family members or friends have been denied visa or visit to the US since 9-11. 5% say they have been turned down for employment and 12% maintain that they have received general hostility from people in their local community in the aftermath of September 11th.
- 70% of the respondents believe that the US made the wrong decision in using military force in Iraq. 24%, however, are of the opinion that the US made the right decision in using military force in Iraq.
- 25% of the respondents believe that the US should get its troops out of Iraq as soon as possible. 12% favor the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq within a year. 16% think that the US should stay as long as necessary to win the war,
while 21% think that the US should remove most combat troops immediately but keep some in Iraq to fight al-Qaeda, protect the government and deter Iran. 19% think that the US should work with Iran to stabilize Iraq.

- 21% of the respondents think that American policy in the Middle East and Persian Gulf is to promote democracy and peace, while 60% maintain that US foreign policy in the region is largely self-serving and aimed at securing access to cheap oil.
- 74% of the respondents believe that US foreign policy in the Middle East favors Israel over Palestine.
- 52% (37% strongly) believe that Iran is a threat to its neighbors in the Middle East.
- 21% of the respondents think (12% strongly) that Iran and Israel are natural allies in the Middle East, while 65% (50% strongly) disagree with the notion that Iran and Israel are natural allies in the Middle East.
- 38% (25% strongly) maintain that Iran is the largest state sponsor of terrorism in the world, while 51% (39% strongly) disagree.
- 38% (23% strongly) think that Iran is a threat to the US, while 54% (42% strongly) disagree.
- 61% (38% strongly) believe that Iran’s nuclear program is a legitimate cause for concern.
  While 25% (11% strongly) of the respondents think that Iran’s nuclear programs are only for peaceful purposes, 56% disagree (38% strongly).
- Although 59% agree (36% strongly) with the statement that Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons, 21% disagree (10% strongly).
- 56% of all respondents think that the US should negotiate with Iran on nuclear weapons.

**Socio-Economic and Demographic Characteristics of the respondents**

Unsurprisingly and in line with the results of the 2000 Census, the survey found that Iranian Americans in California are endowed with exceptionally high levels of educational attainment. While 1% of the respondents cite primary education and 6% list High School diploma as their highest level of educational attainment, 12% have attended some college or business/vocational school, 43% are college graduates, and 37% have done post-graduate work or attended professional school.

35% of the respondents identify their religious tradition as Muslim, 4% Bahai, 13% Christian, 15% Jewish, and 4% as Zoroastrian. 23% profess to subscribing to no religious tradition and 2% maintain that they are neither Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Bahai, or Zoroastrian.

51% of the respondents were male and 49% female. 8% of the respondents were between 18-24 years old, 5% were between 25-29, 4% between 30-34, 9% 35-39, 9% 40-44, 16% 45-49, 13% 50-54, 12% 55-59, 7% 60-64, 10% 65-74, and 5% 75 and over.

9% of the respondents were born in the US. 37% migrated to the US before 1979, 16% between 1979-1982, 12% between 1983-1985, 12% between 1986-1990, 4% between 1991-1995, and 6% between 1996-2007.
Patterns of Political participation and orientation
A relatively significant proportion of the respondents had engaged in forms of political participation other than voting. 31% had attended a public meeting, such as a city council meeting. 35% had contacted a public official. 14% were members of a political club or organization. 12% had volunteered for a political campaign. And 28% had contributed money to a political campaign.

42% of the respondents identified themselves as registered Democrats, 23% as Republicans, and 29% declined to state their party affiliation.

Other Relevant Information
70% of the respondents get their news from English media outlets, 4% from Persian media outlets, and 23% from both.

72% of the respondents get their news information from cable television shows, 59% from network television shows, 62% from websites on the internet, 15% from blogs on the internet, 58% from newspapers, 36% from magazines, and 30% from international satellite shows.

Breakdown of the Responses along Regional Lines
Los Angeles County 41%
Los Angeles Area 26%
Bay Area 24%
San Diego 7%
Sacramento/North 2%
central Valley 0%
Views of Iranian Americans in California

Religious Orientation of Respondents Viewing Iran As a Threat to the US in the Middle East
Regional Distribution of Respondents Viewing Iran's Nuclear Program As a Legitimate Cause for Concern

Religious Distribution of Respondents Who Believe Iran is Seeking to Build Nuclear Weapons
Regional Distribution of Respondents Who Believe Iran Is seeking to Build Nuclear Weapons

Future US policy toward Iran should be:

- remove economic sanctions
- strategic bombing of nuclear weapon's targets
- strategic bombing of military and oil targets
- tighten UN sanctions on gasoline
- establish diplomatic relations
Religious Orientation of Respondents favoring Removal of Economic Sanctions

Religious Orientation of Respondents Favoring Strategic Bombing of Nuclear Targets
Religious Orientation of Respondents Favoring Strategic Bombing of Military/Oil targets

Religious Orientation of Respondents Favoring Tightening of UN Sanctions on Gasoline
Regional Orientation of Respondents Favoring Tightening of UN Sanctions on Gasoline

Regional Orientation of respondents Favoring Establishment of Diplomatic Relations
Religious Orientation of Respondents of Whether the US Should negotiate with Iran on Nuclear Weapons or Take a Hardline Stance
Educational Attainment of Respondents

- Post Grad
- College Grad
- Some College
- High School
- Grades 1-8

Religious Tradition of the Respondents

- Muslim
- Bahai
- Christian
- Jewish
- ZRSTN
- None
Methodology and Background
The survey was conducted by telephone from August 20-28 2007, with 800 successful interviews proportionally distributed according to the geographical distribution of the Iranian American community in California. The respondents were randomly selected from
the White Pages on the basis of the names that appear in the Dictionary of Iranian Surnames. 96% of the phone interviews were conducted in English, while 4% of the interviews were conducted in Persian by native speakers. 51% of the respondents were male and 49% female. All of the respondents were above the age of 18.

Apart from demographic characteristics, (age, gender, income, level of educational attainment, time of migration, and religion) the survey attempted to gauge the community's attitudes toward domestic politics and policy as well as American policy towards the Middle East in general and Iran in particular. The study also inquired about time of arrival, party identification, and where community members get their political news. As an academically rigorous survey of the Iranian American community in California, the questionnaire consisted of 25 substantive questions and a completion level of at least 800 to ensure that subgroups are large enough to generate meaningful data.

The survey was commissioned by Dariush Zahedi of the Institute of Governmental Studies at UC Berkeley, who also helped to devise the questionnaire. In preparing the questionnaire, Zahedi was assisted by Susan Rasky, Senior Lecturer at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism.

Dariush Zahedi has taught at the Boalt Hall School of Law and the Departments of Political Science, Political Economy, and Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of California at Berkeley. He has been a Post-doctoral Fellow at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University, and his articles have appeared in such publications as the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review, and Middle East Policy. He is the author of The Iranian Revolution Then and Now: Indicators of Regime Instability, Westview Press, 2000 (paperback edition 2001) and the co-editor of Iran in the New Millennium: Opportunities and Challenges, AIC Press, 2001. He is currently an Associate at the Institute of Governmental Studies at the University of California at Berkeley.

Susan Rasky was the congressional correspondent for The New York Times. A winner of a George Polk Award for National Reporting, she began her career in Washington, D.C., covering economic policy for the Bureau of National Affairs, Inc. and later reported for Reuters from Capitol Hill and the White House. Rasky was a columnist and contributing editor for the California Journal as well as a frequent political commentator for the Los Angeles Times, The Sacramento Bee and NPR. She established and supervises the Graduate School of Journalism's California News Service, which gives students experience covering government and politics for news organizations throughout the country. She joined the faculty of the Graduate School of Journalism at UC Berkeley in 1991.

The Survey was made possible through generous contributions by Esmail Amid Hozour and Hamid and Tina Moghadam.

A survey of this dimension is a major undertaking, both in design and execution. Therefore, the firm of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates (FMM&A), an internationally recognized opinion research and public policy analysis firm, was hired to assist in all technical phases of the survey preparation and data collection. In addition to ensuring that the resulting survey data meets the most rigorous academic standards, FMM&A’s
involvement also means that the results of the survey can be processed in a form accessible for future use by journalists, other social scientists, and interested members of the public.

For over 20 years, Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates (FMM&A) has provided custom-designed quantitative and qualitative opinion research and strategic advice to political candidates, ballot measure campaigns, business sector clients, non-profit organizations and government agencies. FMM&A brings important advantages to its clients: FMM&A clients include political campaigns, major corporations, public agencies and non-profit organizations.

On an annual basis, FMM&A conducts as many as three hundred surveys and one hundred and fifty focus groups, in addition to providing ongoing strategic consultation to key clients. FMM&A research and analysis frequently focuses on issues of major economic and social concern, including communications technology; energy development, conservation and regulation; transportation planning and finance, health care; environmental quality; natural resource conservation and development; public finance; growth and property development, and the implications of public policy for ethnic and other demographic groups such as children and the elderly.

FMM&A’s clients include former presidential candidates (Howard Dean '04□Gore/Lieberman '00□Dukakis/Bentsen '88□Gary Hart '84□Mondale/Ferraro '84 Carter/Mondale '80), US Senators□(Joseph Biden (DE)□Barbara Boxer (CA)□Dianne Feinstein (CA)□Edward Kennedy (MA)), members of the House of Representatives (Glenn Anderson (CA)□Chris Bell (TX)□Jim Bilbray (NV)□Doug Bosco (CA)□George Brown, Jr. (CA)□Ben Nighthorse Campbell (CO)), major corporations, NGO’s, and educational institutions. □

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