

Is the time ripe to negotiate with Iran?

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A number of serious voices are saying it is time for a new approach on Iran. U.S. Senator Diane Feinstein and former high-level U.S. government officials have called for the United States to enter into negotiations with Iran without preconditions, at the same time proposing ideas to surmount the current impasse over Iran's nuclear program. Combined with new polling suggesting that public opinion in Iran and the United States echo these views, conditions appear to be ripe for renewed efforts to improve U.S.-Iran relations.

A poll conducted by WorldPublicOpinion.org in partnership with Search for Common Ground in February found that substantial majorities in Iran (57 percent) say they favored Iranian and American "direct talks on issues of mutual concern," and 69 percent say they also favor talks focused on stabilizing the situation in Iraq.

Iranians also support various other steps for improving Iran-U.S. relations, with large majorities favoring greater trade (64 percent), "more access for each others' journalists" (70 percent), and "greater cultural, educational, and sporting exchanges" (63 percent). All of these numbers were up sharply from just over a year ago.

While views of the United States are still quite negative, the poll found some signs of thawing. Those with a very unfavorable view of the United States have dropped from two-thirds to one-half. And a growing majority (now 64 percent) believes that it is possible for "Muslim and Western cultures" to "find common ground."

These results may be related to the release of the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate, which concluded that Iran is not currently building a nuclear weapons program. Several poll findings suggest that Iranians appear to have interpreted this as a decline in the U.S. threat to use military force against them.

The American public shows a corresponding readiness to enter into closer relations. Large majorities in WorldPublicOpinion.org polls conducted by Knowledge Networks express support for all of the steps mentioned above, with 82 percent of respondents favoring direct talks.

When Americans were asked how the United States should deal with the Iranian government, only 22 percent favored "implied threats that the United States may use military force against it" while 75 percent favored "trying to build better relations."

Of course, the thorniest issue is Iran's nuclear program, with its growing capacity to produce nuclear fuel that can be used for nuclear energy and, with more advanced enrichment, for nuclear weapons.

Eight in 10 Iranian respondents are quite determined that Iran should have the capacity to produce nuclear fuel for nuclear energy. However, most endorse the government's position that it should not produce nuclear weapons. More significantly, six in 10 say that producing nuclear weapons would be contrary to Islam – consistent with fatwas, or legal opinions, that have been issued by a number of prominent Iranian clerics.

This does not disprove the idea that some members of the Iranian government may have aspirations for such weapons. It does reveal, however, that in the moral and political environment of Iran today, a prohibition of nuclear weapons has been generally established and changing this position would likely encounter some public resistance. Similarly, proposals predicated on Iran not having nuclear weapons, while still being able to produce nuclear energy, may be difficult for the government to simply reject.

A proposal endorsed by U.S. Senator Diane Feinstein has been put forward by former government officials William Luers, Thomas Pickering and Jim Walsh, calling for a multi-national enrichment facility inside Iran under extensive international supervision, which would give Iran the capability to produce nuclear fuel for energy but not for nuclear weapons.

Iranian respondents in the poll were presented a possible deal whereby Iran would have a limited right to produce nuclear fuel provided that the International Atomic Energy Agency has full and permanent access to ensure that Iran is not producing nuclear weapons. Fifty-eight percent said they supported such a deal while just 26 percent were opposed.

Such a deal was also endorsed by Americans and others in a recent 31-country BBC World Service poll, conducted by GlobeScan and PIPA. The deal was endorsed by 55 percent of Americans, 71 percent of the British, 56 percent of the French and a majority of other nations polled. The BBC poll also found that tougher options for dealing with Iran, such as economic sanctions or military strikes, receive very low levels of support.

The George W. Bush administration has limited time left in office, and faces widespread disapproval of its foreign policy. A new approach to the Iranian challenge may be one of the last and best options for the administration to shore up its legacy at home and abroad by contributing to a more stable world.

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