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New InterMedia survey finds Iranians see war with U.S. less likely even though more favor nuclear program since Ahmadinejad visit

WASHINGTON, D.C. – While both Washington and Teheran continue to ramp up their confrontational rhetoric, a new InterMedia survey finds a majority of Iranians, 68 percent, are ‘more inclined’ to support the Islamic Republic’s quest for nuclear weapons technology after their president’s New York trip last month. Yet more than half believe war with the United States is ‘less likely,’ according to results from a telephone survey released today by the Washington, D.C.-based media and public opinion research firm. Despite escalating rhetoric between the Islamic Republic’s officials and the Bush Administration, about 56 percent of respondents in four cities in Iran have lower expectations of hostilities.

Of those surveyed, 46 percent feel the United States did not accord their president the respect due a visiting head of state. Rising internal support for Iran’s nuclear program—at least for now—added to criticism of Ahmadinejad’s treatment, make respondents’ reduced expectations of military confrontation seem paradoxical.

“These attitudes may appear inconsistent, particularly as most Iranians realize the Bush Administration is determined to prevent atomic weapons development,” said Dr. Haleh Vaziri, InterMedia’s Regional Research Manager for the Middle East and North Africa. “Iranians are closely following news about U.S. policy towards their country—80 percent expressed interest in the events surrounding Ahmadinejad’s visit. Our survey shows well over half consider their president an effective representative of the Islamic Republic abroad and, more importantly, of their society at large, so they resent U.S. criticism of Iran’s foreign policy. Many perceive the disparaging treatment of Ahmadinejad during his New York visit as almost a personal and direct insult to the Iranians who elected him.”

Iranians feel Columbia University President Lee Bollinger's introduction of Ahmadinejad, during which he called the president 'a cruel petty dictator,' was especially inappropriate. In a society valuing "*taarof*"—the practice of ceremonious courtesy—and priding itself on hospitality particularly towards foreign visitors, Bollinger's remarks struck even Ahmadinejad's opponents as culturally insensitive. "Because 90 percent of those surveyed reported that they rely on local TV channels for news about their president's trip, they saw footage of Bollinger introducing Ahmadinejad played repeatedly. This scene is now ingrained in the nation's collective memory," explained Vaziri. "Of course, the government controls these channels and is using them to aggravate this sense of insult. Officials want to keep citizens distracted from domestic problems and focused on 'the great Satan.'"

Yet increasing support for nuclear weapons technology—an issue that split the public in InterMedia's 2006 national survey—coupled with wounded national pride, does not necessarily translate into a greater likelihood of war for most Iranians. A politically sensitive issue, 29 percent of those surveyed indicate they 'don't know' whether U.S.-Iran hostilities are more or less likely, or refused to answer, suggesting they felt uncomfortable addressing this question.

"Reluctance to discuss such a controversial subject over the phone is understandable, and many are arguably more concerned with their immediate economic woes than with a looming but hypothetical danger," said Vaziri. "As for those convinced war is improbable, there may be several reasons for this short-term prediction: politicians and some segments of society tend to underestimate American military prowess and overestimate their own. Dismissing the United States as a paper tiger bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, some think American troops would not dare take on the Islamic Republic's military."

Animosity between Washington and Tehran has existed for almost 30 years, but the governments have almost always avoided fighting on the battlefield. Vaziri notes, "Not everyone underestimates U.S. power, recognizing an attack on their country would be a crushing blow. Yet they still believe the Bush Administration knows it cannot afford a third warfront in the Muslim world."

"Finally, some have learned what Iranians are calling 'the lesson of North Korea'; they are convinced the faster their government obtains nuclear weapons technology, the sooner it will deter the United States from taking military action," Vaziri concludes.

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 more than 600 media and opinion surveys carried out over the past 15 years.

InterMedia conducted a RDD telephone survey of 500 respondents in four major cities in Iran (Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz and Tabriz) in October 2007. Interviewing was conducted upon the return of President Ahmadinejad's from his visit to New York. Margin of error is $\pm 4.4\%$ at the 95% confidence level or Margin of error is $\pm 3.7\%$ at the 90% confidence level.

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Dr. Vaziri will be available to the media for phone interviews from 1 to 3 p.m. EST on Monday Oct. 29, 2007. To arrange an interview or for more information, contact Alex Wooley, InterMedia's director of communications and development, at 202-434-9332, or at wooleya@intermedia.org.