

July 4, 2010 Sunday 22 Tammuz 5770 8:52 IST  Print

THE JERUSALEM POST

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To attack or not to attack Iran?

By YOEL
GUZANSKY
01/07/2010

Anyone who thought that Muslim countries would evince an absolute rejection of the military option should look at the results in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Indonesia of a recent Pew poll on the Islamic Republic.

To attack or not to attack Iran? That is the question – or rather, one of the questions – asked as part of a “global attitudes survey” conducted by the Pew Research Institute in Washington. And the results? Surprising, especially with respect to attitudes toward Iran and its nuclear program.

The survey canvassed 22 countries, was conducted in the mother tongue of the respondents, and included relatively large sample groups. Eight out of 10 Germans, seven out of 10 Frenchmen and six out of 10 Britons hold negative views about Iran.

Even in countries with a predominantly Muslim majority, 66 percent in Egypt, 63% in Jordan and 60% in Lebanon hold a negative opinion of Iran.

It is interesting that in Turkey, whose leadership seems to be moving closer to the Islamic Republic, 58% hold a negative opinion about the Shi'ite state. This may be explained by the fact that most Turks are Sunni.

Indeed, the results from Lebanon demonstrate how severe the Sunni- Shi'ite rift actually is – 80% of Sunnis hold a negative position with respect to Iran, while 95% of Shi'ites support it.

A clear majority also oppose nuclear weapons in Iran; 98% of respondents in Germany, 96% in Japan, 95% in France, 94% in the US and 90% in Britain do not want to see nuclear weapons in Iran.

Although 66% in Egypt, 64% in Lebanon and 63% in Turkey do not want to see nuclear weapons in Iran, only some of them see this as a serious threat.

SURVEYS ARE problematic.

Beyond the ability of these tools to reflect public opinion, it can be argued that they reflect “only” public opinion, some in nondemocratic rule. But even in nondemocratic regimes, perhaps especially in them, a survey might be the only way to know what people think.

Why is it important to know where world opinion is tending regarding Iran? Because answers have considerable impact on the policy response that may be adopted vis-à-vis the nuclear-aspiring state. More importantly, the survey shows that of those who oppose Iran's nuclear program, more respondents are willing to consider military action to prevent it from obtaining nuclear weapons over those who prefer to avoid confrontation.

Anyone who thought that Muslim countries would evince an absolute rejection of this option should look at the results in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Indonesia, where 55%, 53%, 44% and 39%, respectively, say Iran should be denied nuclear capability even at the cost of military confrontation.

It seems that world opinion supports more than ever an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. Indeed 66% of Americans, 59% of French and half of the Spanish, German, British, Brazilian and Indian respondents prefer to keep Iran from nuclear weapons even at the cost of conflict.

However, there are still opponents of the move, even if their number is lower: 41% in France, 39% in Germany, 37% in the UK, 34% in Spain and 24% in the US can be very “vocal” and have a greater impact.

In addition, one can argue that the questions were phrased with the notion that military action will prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons built into them. What if military action won't be successful? It is unclear whether the survey reflects world public opinion and what impact, if any, it has on decision makers. It seems that half the population understands that the military option carries a fair price, but that the price of a nuclear Iran is higher, and perhaps justifies use of that option.

For all its limitations, the survey provides a glimpse into attitudes on the subject, and it might help those considering all options against Iran to better understand where the wind is blowing.

The writer is a research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv University. He joined INSS after coordinating work on the Iranian nuclear challenge at the National Security Council in the Prime Minister's Office.



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