

GAMAAN POSITION PAPER: SURVEY RESEARCH ON RELIGION AND POLITICS IN IRAN

Written for a roundtable conversation with the Foreign Affairs committee on 23 October 2024.

Introduction

GAMAAN, the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran, is an independent, non-profit research foundation registered in the Netherlands. We conduct online surveys to capture the real opinions of Iranians about sensitive topics. The rationale for our approach—spreading surveys on a large variety of digital channels and, since 2022, collaborating with VPN providers active in Iran—is that conventional survey modes like face-to-face and telephone interviews cannot yield valid results in the current Iranian context. In a country ranked 153rd in The Economist’s Democracy Index (2024), many questions that are routine in democratic countries—especially those concerning religion and politics—are seen as dangerous to answer. Even if interviewers do not request personally identifiable information during phone or face-to-face surveys, many Iranians still feel uneasy due to the constant presence of the state in the back of their minds. To obtain representative samples, we use balancing methods; we then compare our weighted results with external data and other survey institutes’ results for non-sensitive questions such as on employment, household income, healthcare insurance types, and languages spoken at home. This helps us understand the extent to which our results can be considered representative. The challenges of conducting surveys in authoritarian states and our methodology are explained in detail by journalists and writers¹, survey reports accessible at GAMAAN.org, academic publications², and recorded public presentations³.

Secularization under theocracy

Social scientific research and journalistic reports confirm a rapid secularization of the Iranian population⁴. Sociologist Kazemipur claims that the Iranian case resembles “extreme cases of secularization in the modern West” (2022: 7), while anthropologist Schielke notes that the country is one of the “most important bases of atheism in the Middle East” (2013: 642). Surveys conducted on-site by the World Values Survey and via telephone by IranPoll, however, indicate that nearly 100% of the population identifies as Muslim, and that around 80% support a theocratic political system⁵. These numbers failed to predict or explain the 2022 nationwide protests after the death of Jina (Mahsa) Amini and must be understood in the context of self-censorship and preference falsification, as the regime considers atheism and critique of religion as heresy, and conversion from Islam to another religion as a severe crime, for which judges have ordered capital punishment⁶. Facts such as declining use of Muslim baby names⁷, reports of emptying mosques⁸, and openly expressed disrespect for religious authorities⁹ indicate widespread secularization. Waves of protests in 2017, 2019, and 2022 are interpreted by experts as part of a movement to reclaim Iran from the Islamic regime, which protestors view as an alien element that has “usurped the country and its resources”. Notably, the protestors’ discourse is “secular, wholly devoid of religion”¹⁰. GAMAAN’s online surveys confirm that “tectonic cultural and ideological shifts are occurring within Iran”¹¹, finding that in multiple surveys conducted between 2020 and 2024, only around half of the literate adult population identifies as Muslim. **Rather than homogenous in terms of religious identification, the Iranian population should be understood to contain significant secular and religious diversity (fig. 1).** Unlike democratic European states, which endorse a secular constitution, secular attitudes in Iran have developed from below, in opposition to the theocratic political system. For example, in a December 2022 survey conducted during the nationwide protests, with voluntary assistance from satellite television channels Iran International and Voice of America Persian, VPN provider Psiphon, and through social media and communication applications, over 150,000 respondents residing inside the country participated. After weighting, it was confirmed that **the majority of Iranians, around 80%, do not want to live in an Islamic Republic**¹². Our other surveys indicate that a majority supports separating mosque and state¹³.

Opposition and political diversity

Surveys conducted by GAMAAN between 2022 and 2024 confirm **political diversity beyond the so-called moderates and hardliners who support the current political system (fig. 2)**. While during the height of the 2022 protests, proponents of “regime change” spiked to 60%, surveys conducted before the protests, and most recently in June 2024, show that this number hovered around 40%. Those in favor of a “structural transformation and transition away from the Islamic Republic” climbed to around 25%, while Reformists and Principlists who support the regime combined for around 24%.¹⁴ It is important to note that, given the unfair nature of presidential elections in Iran, the act of voting does not necessarily indicate support for the theocratic political system. GAMAAN’s election surveys repeatedly show that a majority of those who vote for so-called moderates would vote against the Islamic Republic in a hypothetical referendum under free

conditions. In the last survey we conducted on the first round of the 2024 presidential elections, our prediction was a turnout between 22% and 35%, with 65% saying they would definitely not vote¹⁵. The announced turnout was 40%. In comparison, the regime-backed pollster ISPA predicted a turnout of 51%. Further, **GAMAAN's June 2024 survey revealed a significant division among Iranians regarding their preferred political system: 22% favour a monarchy, 25% a secular republic, 19% an Islamic republic, and 34% remain undecided due to lack of knowledge or disillusionment.** Notably, while personal autonomy is strongly supported, evident in protests against compulsory hijab and slogans like "Woman, Life, Freedom", GAMAAN has found authoritarian tendencies not only among supporters of the regime but to a lesser extent also among those who support a republic, and significantly more so among monarchists.¹⁶ Additionally, debates persist among opponents of the Islamic Republic regarding the status and rights of ethnic and religious minorities, as well as centralization versus federalism. This political diversity is also evident in new charters, manifestos, and statements¹⁷, and in competitive transnational Iranian public debates on social media and satellite television channels, which continue to erode the Islamic Republic's broadcasting monopoly.

Attitudes toward international relations

According to one IranPoll survey, 85% of Iranians reportedly support the activities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in the region. However, this survey was conducted by telephone. When asked anonymously via Psiphon VPN, 40% of respondents said they would not answer politically sensitive questions honestly over the phone¹⁸. Furthermore, researchers from three Japanese universities conducted a 2021 telephone survey with IranPoll, using the list experiment method to detect self-censorship and preference falsification. The researchers conclude that "results show that only about 35% of respondents across Iran support the IRGC's deployment abroad"¹⁹. In the same year, GAMAAN conducted a survey on international relations and found similar results: **34% agreed that the IRGC's Quds Force's regional activities increase Iran's security (fig. 3). Around 70% disapproved of the Islamic Republic's support for groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis.** Moreover, GAMAAN's surveys consistently show that Iranians overwhelmingly believe the Islamic Republic's inefficiency and corruption is the main cause of the country's economic woes. Only 10% of respondents thought that sanctions and foreign pressure are at the origin of the current state of the economy²⁰. In December 2022, we found that **73% of those inside the country believe that Western countries should defend protestors' rights by seriously pressuring the Islamic Republic's government, and 70% agree with Western governments proscribing the IRGC as a terrorist organization.** Before October 7, 2023, GAMAAN found that 65% opposed chanting "Death to Israel", and 64% agreed with the statement "Neither Gaza, nor Lebanon, I sacrifice my life [only] for Iran". In February 2024, **GAMAAN surveyed Iranians on the Israel-Hamas conflict and found that 35% primarily blamed Hamas for the conflict, 20% blamed Israel, and 31% blamed both parties.**

Conclusion

Survey research on Iranians' attitudes toward politically sensitive questions must account for sampling bias, as well as mechanisms of self-censorship and preference falsification. GAMAAN's findings reveal a nation diverse in its religious and political orientations. Nevertheless, a majority do not want an Islamic Republic and support international pressure on the regime. For millions, the Islamic Republic is "irredeemable"²¹. Moreover, secularization entails an ideological shift toward appreciating personal autonomy, exemplified by protests against compulsory hijab, which continue to exert pressure on the theocratic system from below. Contrary to images of Iranians chanting "Death to America" and "Death to Israel", the majority is critical of the IRGC's regional activities. Indeed, protestors have repeatedly chanted, "Our enemy is right here; they lie to us that it is America", expressing resentment toward a government that prioritizes attacks against Israel over the interests of its own people²².

About us

GAMAAN operates under the supervision of Dr. Ammar Maleki (founder and director), an assistant professor of comparative politics at Tilburg University, and Dr. Pooyan Tamimi Arab, an assistant professor of religious studies at Utrecht University (member of De Jonge Akademie, KNAW). In 2022, GAMAAN was awarded the President's Medal of the United Kingdom's Market Research Society for making an "extraordinary contribution to research." Its research has been cited in articles and reports published by, among others, the Atlantic Council, the United Nations, The Economist, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Deutsche Welle, and Die Zeit.

Figures

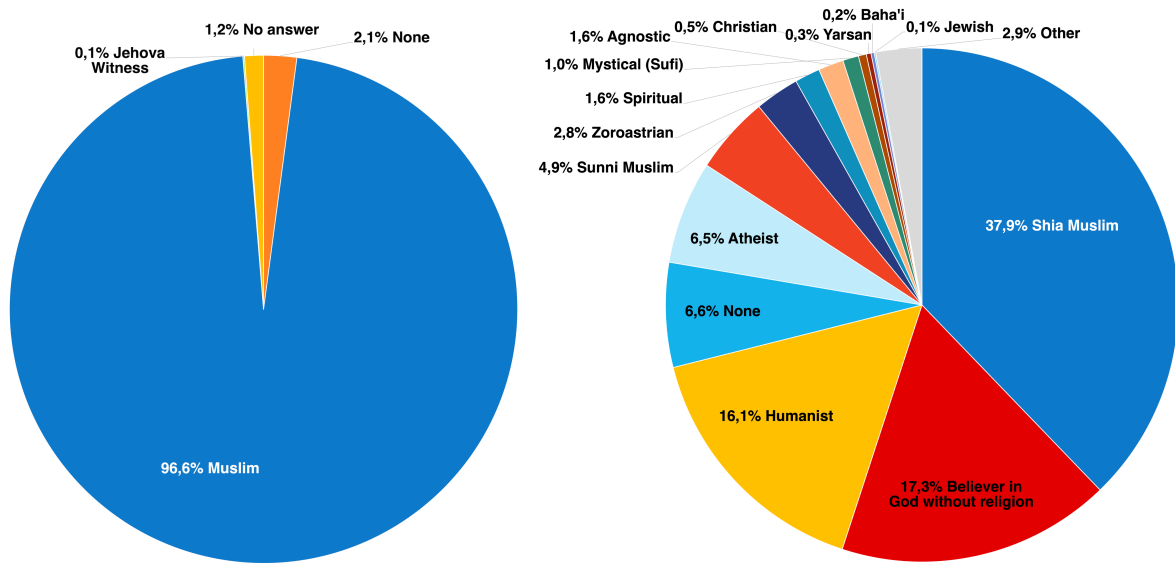


Fig. 1. Comparison of religious identification according to a 2020 World Values Survey conducted through face-to-face interviews (left) and a 2023 GAMAAN survey conducted through VPN sampling by providers Psiphon and Lantern, and social media and communication applications (right).

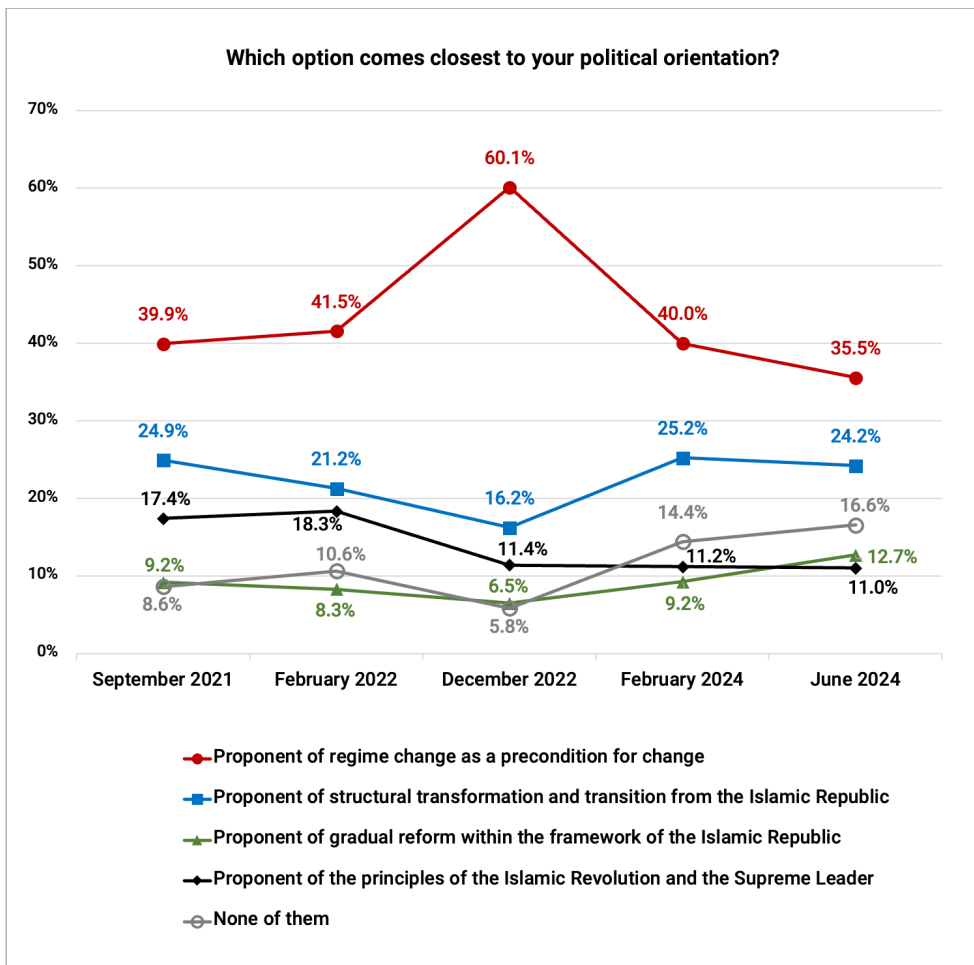


Fig. 2. Iranians' political orientations according to five GAMAAN surveys.

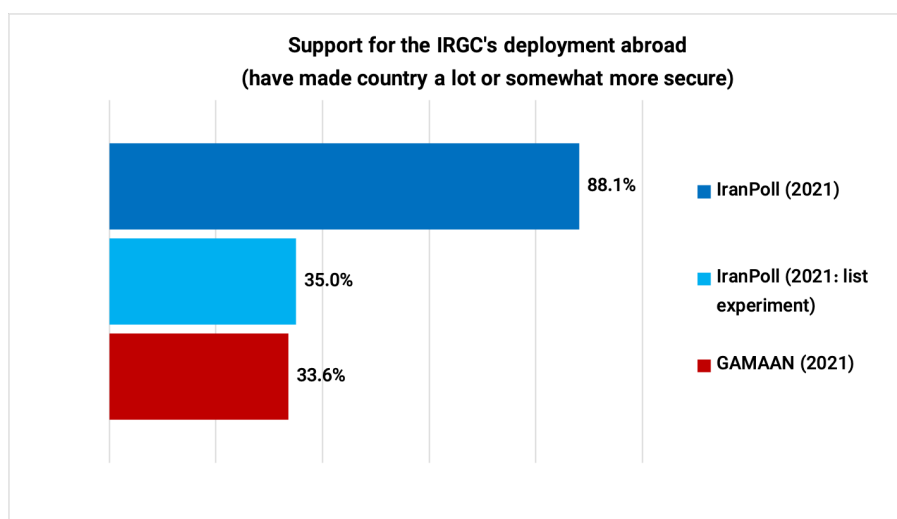


Fig. 3. Comparison of support for the IRGC's regional activities according to a 2021 IranPoll survey, a 2021 IranPoll list experiment designed to detect self-censorship and preference falsification, and a 2021 GAMAAN survey.

Notes

¹ Dina Nayeri. [Why Is Iran's Secular Shift So Hard to Believe? How two researchers got to the heart of a polling problem: the skewing effect of fear](#). *New York Magazine*, 21 October 2022; Sanne Blauw. Poetin afvallen in een peiling; in Rusland is dat een daad van verzet. *De Correspondent*, 4 April 2022; Pooyan Tamimi Arab and Ammar Maleki. Iran protests: majority of people reject compulsory hijab and an Islamic regime, surveys find. *The Conversation*, 28 September 2022.

² Tamimi Arab, P., and Maleki, A. 2025. "The secular-religious divide in Iran: An analysis of GAMAAN's online surveys." In *Nonbelievers, Apostates, and Atheists in the Muslim World*, edited by Jack D. Eller and Natalie Khazaal. London: Routledge, 112-142; Stausberg, Michael, Tamimi Arab, Pooyan, and Maleki, Ammar. 2023. Survey Zoroastrians: Online Religious Identification in the Islamic Republic of Iran. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 62(4): 823-844.

³ Ammar Maleki. [Protest vs. Power in Iran: A Break with the Past?](#) Studium Generale, Tilburg University, 19 October 2022; Pooyan Tamimi Arab. [Wat de Iraanse bevolking echt wil](#). De Balie, 9 November 2022.

⁴ See, for example: Kazemipur, Abdolmohammad. 2022. *Sacred as Secular: Secularization under Theocracy in Iran*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press; Pargoo, Mahmoud. 2021. *Secularization of Islam in post-revolutionary Iran*. London: Routledge; Schielke, Samuli. 2013. "The Islamic World." In *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, edited by Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 638-650.

⁵ World Values Survey. 2020 (Wave 7). Iran; Chisaka, Tomoyo. 2021. *2021 Opinion Poll in Iran: Sampling Method and Descriptive Statistics*. RSGC-Online Paper Series No. 13: Research Report No. 6, 25 November, 2021.

⁶ The Islamic Republic's Intolerance to Christian Converts, Explained. *IranWire*, 25 August 2021; Iran hangs two men for blasphemy as executions rise amid unrest. *The Guardian*, 8 May, 2023.

⁷ In the year 2000, 6.2 percent of boys were named Muhammad; by 2017, the percentage had dropped to 2.7 percent. In the same period, the important Shi'a name Ali for boys decreased from 7.9 percent to 2.5 percent, and the name Fatimah for girls decreased from 13.8 percent to 5.1 percent. After 2017, the Islamic Republic's National Organization for Civil Registration (Sabt Ahval) stopped publishing the exact numbers online.

⁸ Fall In Mosque-Goers In Iran Now 'Highly Alarming' - Minister. *Iran International*, 12 December 2023.

⁹ Negar Partow. Headwear and hegemony: how 'turban tossing' protests are threatening Iran's ruling clergy. *The Conversation*, 30 November 2022.

¹⁰ Bayat, Asef. 2023. Is Iran on the verge of another revolution? *Journal of Democracy* 34(2): 19-31.

¹¹ Boroumand, Ladan. 2020. Iranians turn away from the Islamic Republic. *Journal of Democracy* 31(1): 169-181.

¹² Maleki, Ammar, and Tamimi Arab, Pooyan. 2023. *Iranians' Attitudes Toward the 2022 Nationwide Protests*. Published online, gamaan.org: GAMAAN.

¹³ Tamimi Arab, P., and Maleki, A. 2025. "The secular-religious divide in Iran: An analysis of GAMAAN's online surveys." In *Nonbelievers, Apostates, and Atheists in the Muslim World*, edited by Jack D. Eller and Natalie Khazaal. London: Routledge, 112-142.

¹⁴ Maleki, Ammar. 2024. *Iranians' Attitudes Toward the 2024 Snap Presidential Election*. Published online, gamaan.org: GAMAAN, Figure 9.

¹⁵ Maleki, Ammar. 2024. *Iranians' Attitudes Toward the 2024 Snap Presidential Election*. Published online, gamaan.org: GAMAAN.

¹⁶ These figures on preferences for political systems and authoritarianism have not been published. Ammar Maleki has presented these and other results on political diversity in a [recorded event](#) (in Persian), the 4th Iran: Transitional Justice conference, in Oslo, 31 August 2024.

¹⁷ From 2023 alone, these include the "Charter of Solidarity and Alliance for Freedom (The Mahsa Charter)", the "Iran Women's Bill of Rights", and the "Manifesto of the LGBTIAQ+ Community of Iran and Afghanistan".

¹⁸ This research conducted by Psiphon VPN in collaboration with GAMAAN in 2023 has not been published.

¹⁹ Chisaka, Tomoyo, Yamao, Dai, and Suechika, Kota. 2023. How Iranians View Deployment of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Abroad: Analysis of a Survey Experiment in 2021. *Ajia Keizai* 64(1): 2-26 (in Japanese, Abstract in English; for an English report on the sampling method and results used in the analysis, [click here](#)).

²⁰ Also see: [Detailed findings of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran](#). *The United Nations Human Rights Council*, 19 March 2024.

²¹ Holly Dages. Iran's Gen Z Is Still Waiting for the Revolution. *The New York Times*, 10 July 2024.

²² Karim Sadjadpour. How Iran and Israel Are Unnatural Adversaries. *The New York Times*, 8 May 2024.