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Majority of Iranians Oppose Development of Nuclear Weapons

But Support Iran's Decision to Exceed Enriched Uranium Limits

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Both the United States and Iran have been among the countries worst hit by the coronavirus, but neither country has moved away from mutual confrontation. Nationwide surveys conducted by IranPoll this winter – before the spread of the virus and before the US strike against Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani – show that although Iranians say their country should not develop nuclear weapons, they have lost confidence in the nuclear agreement and think that the P5+1 countries (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council including China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—plus Germany) have not lived up to their obligations. Chicago Council survey results from January 2020 show that a majority of Americans say they would favor rejoining the agreement if Iran restarts its nuclear weapons program.¹

Key Findings

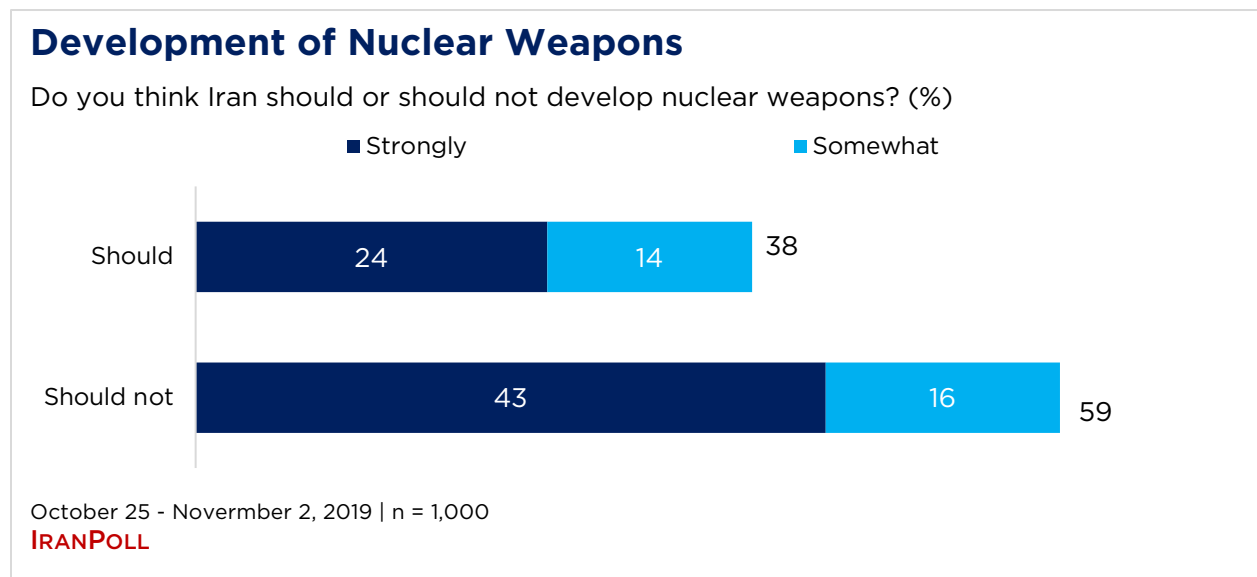
- The Iranian public says its government should develop a peaceful nuclear energy program (90%), but not nuclear weapons (59% say it should not).

¹ This brief is based on coordinated surveys conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (Chicago, United States) and IranPoll (Toronto, Canada). The details of the data from the Iranian population are available at www.IranPoll.com/Publications

- Many Iranians seem to have lost interest in the nuclear agreement reached between Iran and the P5+1 countries in 2015. Just 42 percent of Iranians approve of the nuclear agreement in the December 2019 poll, down from 76 percent approval in August 2015.
- Three in four Iranians (75%) support their country’s decision to exceed some limits it accepted under the nuclear deal, even if doing so makes it more difficult for P5+1 countries “to allow Iran to benefit from the agreement.”
- Seven in ten (73%) would reject the outlines of a deal that would require Iran to permanently give up the right to enrichment and to allow international inspections at any time in return for relief from most US sanctions.
- More than two-thirds of Iranians think their country should militarily respond if the United States, Saudi Arabia, or Israel were to attack an Iranian nuclear facility.
- If Iran restarts development toward a nuclear weapon, a January 2020 Chicago Council survey finds that two in three Americans would support the United States rejoining a nuclear agreement with Iran (66%); even larger majorities support diplomacy (85%) and sanctions (77%) to pressure Iran.
- Majorities of Americans would support cyberattacks against Iranian computer systems, airstrikes against Iranian military facilities, and targeted assassinations if Iran restarts a nuclear weapons program or attacks against US military or diplomatic personnel in the region.

Iranians Support Nuclear Energy, Not A Nuclear Weapons Program

Tehran claims that its nuclear program is exclusively for peaceful purposes and it has a right to enrich uranium to produce nuclear fuel. When the Iranian public is asked, an overwhelming majority (90%) believe that their country should have a peaceful nuclear energy program. At the same time, six in ten Iranians (59%) think that their country should not develop nuclear weapons and two-thirds (66%) believe that the development of nuclear weapons is against the teaching of Islam (17% say Islam does not prohibit).



Iranians Support Recent Increases in Uranium Enrichment

Since the US withdrawal from the Iran agreement in May 2018, the United States and Iran have increasingly blamed each other for aggressive behavior—with tankers, drones, and sanctions in play. In addition, Iran has announced that it is now exceeding the limits of enriching uranium that were agreed to in the 2015 Iran deal.

The Iranian public has lost confidence in the 2015 nuclear agreement, with just 42 percent approving in December 2019, down from 76 percent in August 2015.² Ayatollah Khamenei has publicly stated that he does not trust the remaining three European signatories. In a televised speech, he declared, “If you want to make arrangements with them get actual guarantees from them or they will also all do the same as America...if you can’t, then we cannot continue the JCPOA.”³

The Iranian public tends to agree. Seven in ten (73%) say they do not have confidence in P5+1 countries to live up to their obligations under the nuclear agreement (up from 35% in June 2016).⁴ In addition, a December 2019 IranPoll survey found that three in four Iranians (75%) support their country’s decision to exceed some of the limits it accepted under the agreement and threaten to withdraw from the JCPOA if P5+1 countries do not do more “to allow Iran to benefit from the nuclear agreement,” even if doing so makes it more difficult for the P5+1 countries to meet these demands.

Decision to Exceed JCPOA Limits

As you may know, in retaliation for US withdrawal from the JCPOA agreement and reimposition of the sanctions, our government has exceeded some limits it accepted under the JCPOA and threatened to withdraw unless the other P5+1 countries do more to allow Iran to benefit from the agreement. The other P5+1 countries have responded that Iran’s recent actions make it more difficult for them to take the steps Iran is demanding. With this in mind, to what degree do you support or oppose our government’s recent decision? (%)



December 18 - 22 | n = 1007

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² Also see: Dina Smeltz and John R. Cookson, “[Would Iranians welcome a new nuclear deal? Think again.](#)” Washington Post: Monkey Cage, March 27, 2019.

³ Kay Armin Serjoie, “[‘The Americans Cannot Be Trusted.’ How Iran Is Reacting to Trump’s Decision to Quit Nuclear Deal.](#)” TIME, May 9, 2018.

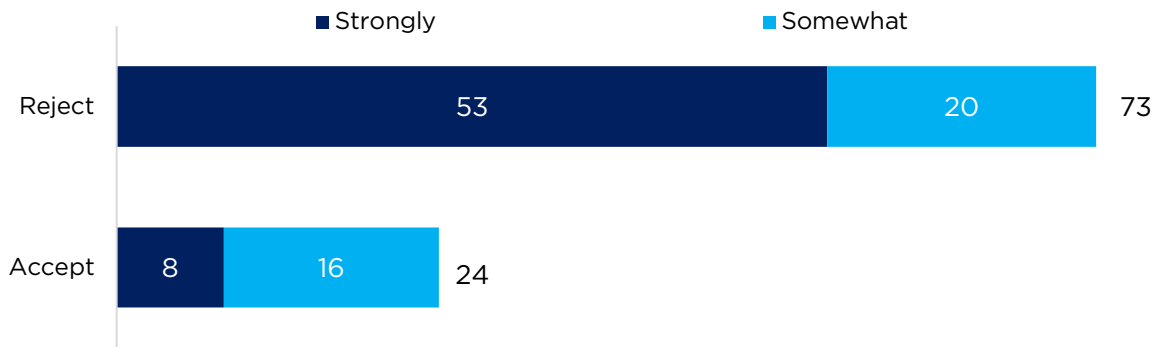
⁴ From an October 2019 CISSM/IranPoll survey: Nancy Gallagher, Ebrahim Mohseni & Clay Ramsay, “[Iranian Public Opinion under ‘Maximum Pressure’.](#)” Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland, October 2019.

Public Not Swayed by Promise of Sanctions Relief

Majorities among the Iranian public say sanctions have negatively influenced Iran's economy (45% a lot, 31% somewhat) as well as the economic conditions of their own families (53% a lot, 23% somewhat). Despite these assessments, seven in ten (73%) say that their country should reject the outlines of a hypothetical deal that would allow Iran to maintain a peaceful nuclear energy program, while requiring it to permanently give up the right to enrichment and to "always allow international inspection of its nuclear facilities" in return for the lifting of most US sanctions (53% reject strongly).

Accept or Reject Nuclear Deal

Suppose the United States were to propose a deal whereby: most US sanctions on Iran would be gradually lifted and Iran would be able to have a peaceful nuclear energy program in return for agreeing to fully and permanently give up the right to enrich uranium on its soil and to always allow international inspection of its nuclear facilities. Do you think Iran should accept or reject such a deal? (%)



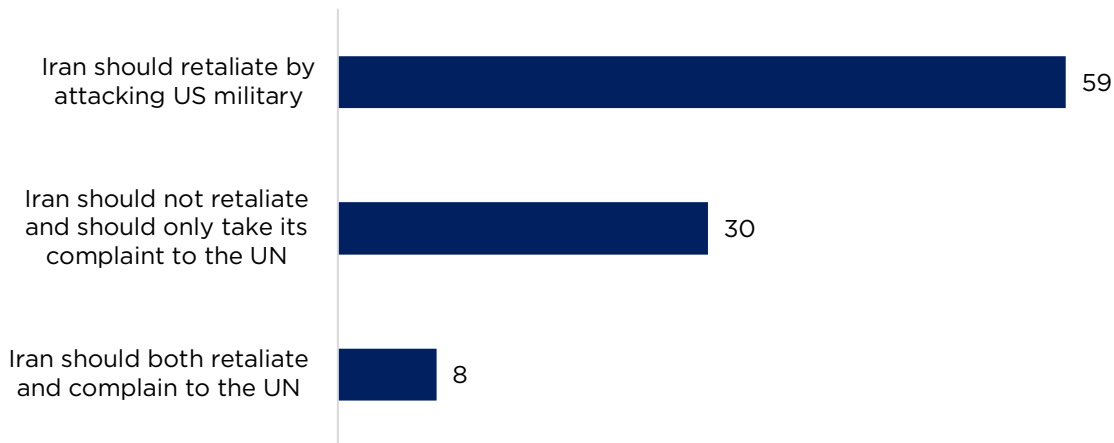
October 25 - November 2, 2019 | n = 1,000

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At the time of this survey among Iranians, November 2019, only a quarter (24%) of Iranians thought it was at least somewhat likely that the United States would militarily attack Iran if Iran continued to develop its nuclear program. If the United States were to attack Iranian nuclear facilities, 67 percent say Iran should retaliate militarily against the United States (30% say Iran should only take its complaint to the UN). If US allies were to allow the United States to use their bases to attack Iran, 56 percent of Iranians say they support attacking those host countries as well. Even larger majorities say Iran should retaliate militarily if Saudi Arabia (73%) or Israel (77%) carries out the attack. (see Appendix Figures 1 and 2).

Actions if the US Attacks a Nuclear Facility

If the United States militarily attacks an Iranian nuclear facility, do you think: (%)

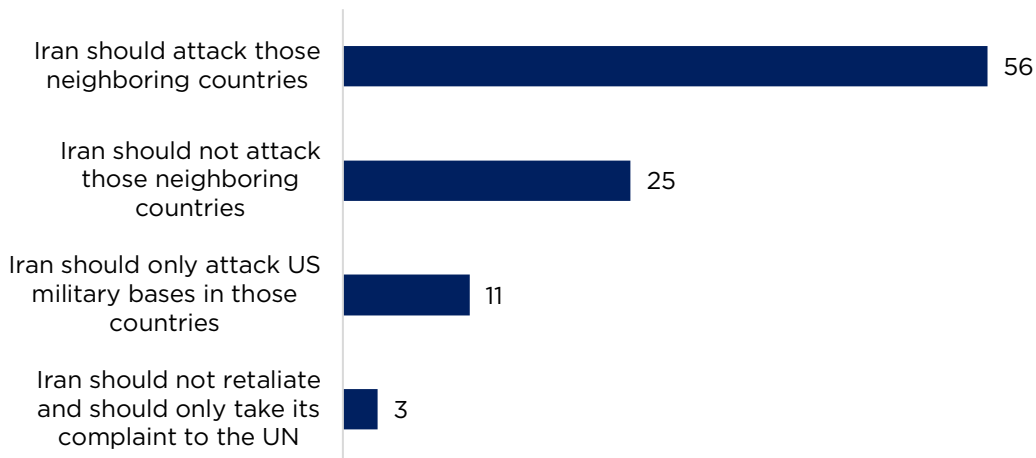


October 25 - November 2, 2019 | n = 1,000

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Actions if the US Uses Its Bases to Attack Iran

As you know, the United States has military bases in many of Iran's neighboring countries. If those countries allow the United States to use its bases in those countries to attack Iran and if the United States uses those bases to militarily attack Iran, do you think: (%)



October 25 - November 2, 2019 | n = 1,000

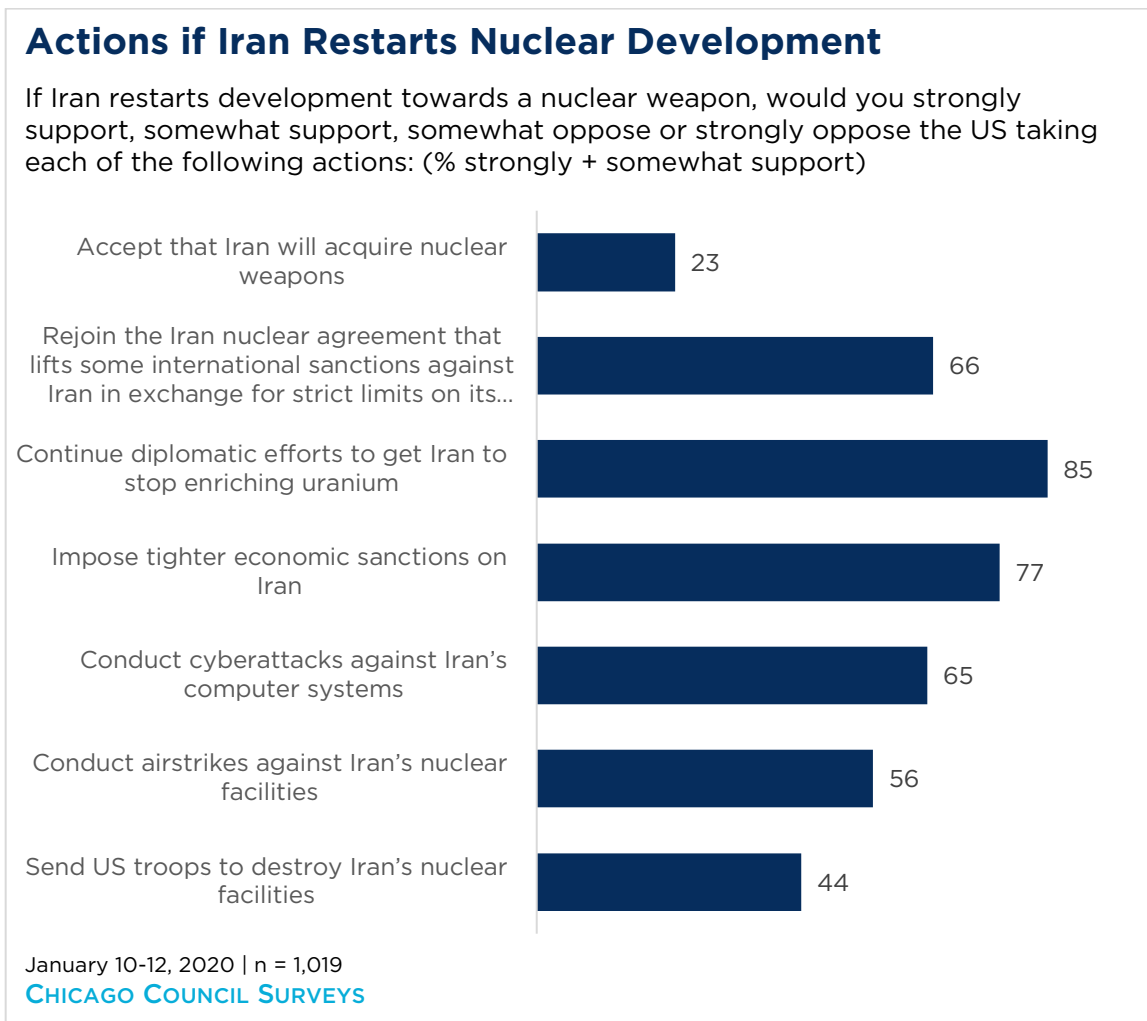
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Majority of Americans Would Support Rejoining Iran Agreement if Iran Restarts Nuclear Weapons Program

If Iran restarts development towards a nuclear weapon, relatively few Americans would find that acceptable (23%). Solid majorities would favor US diplomatic efforts

to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons (85%) and to impose tighter economic sanctions on Tehran (77%), similar to previous results.⁵ Two-thirds (66%) of Americans would support the United States rejoining the Iran nuclear agreement if it were to lift some international sanctions against Iran in exchange for strict limits on its nuclear program for at least the next decade.

Compared to a similar question asked in 2019, American public support has increased for military actions such as conducting cyberattacks against Iranian computer systems (65%, up from 52%) and airstrikes against Iranian nuclear facilities (56% up from 48%) to stem Iran’s nuclear program. Similar to last year, about four in ten (44%) would favor sending US troops to destroy Iran’s nuclear facilities (Appendix Figure 3).



In the case of an attack against US personnel, majorities of self-described Republicans and Democrats favor conducting cyberattacks against Iranian computer

⁵ For more detail on the US poll, see: Dina Smeltz and Brendan Helm, “[Americans Feel Less Safe after Killing of Soleimani](#),” Chicago Council on Global Affairs, January 23, 2020.

systems and conducting airstrikes against military facilities, but there are sharp differences on other options. Eighty-four percent of Republicans and 55 percent of Independents say they would support carrying out targeted assassinations of Iranian military personnel compared to only four in ten Democrats (38%).

Seven in ten Republicans (70%) support sending US troops to destroy Iranian military facilities versus fewer than half of Independents (46%) and Democrats (42%). Nearly six in ten Republicans support using US troops to overthrow the Iranian government (55%) while only minorities of Independents (32%) and Democrats (30%) agree. Majorities across the board oppose the idea of conducting airstrikes against Iranian cultural sites, but Republicans (39%) are twice as likely as Democrats (18%) to support this option (see Appendix Figure 4).

Appendix

Figure 1

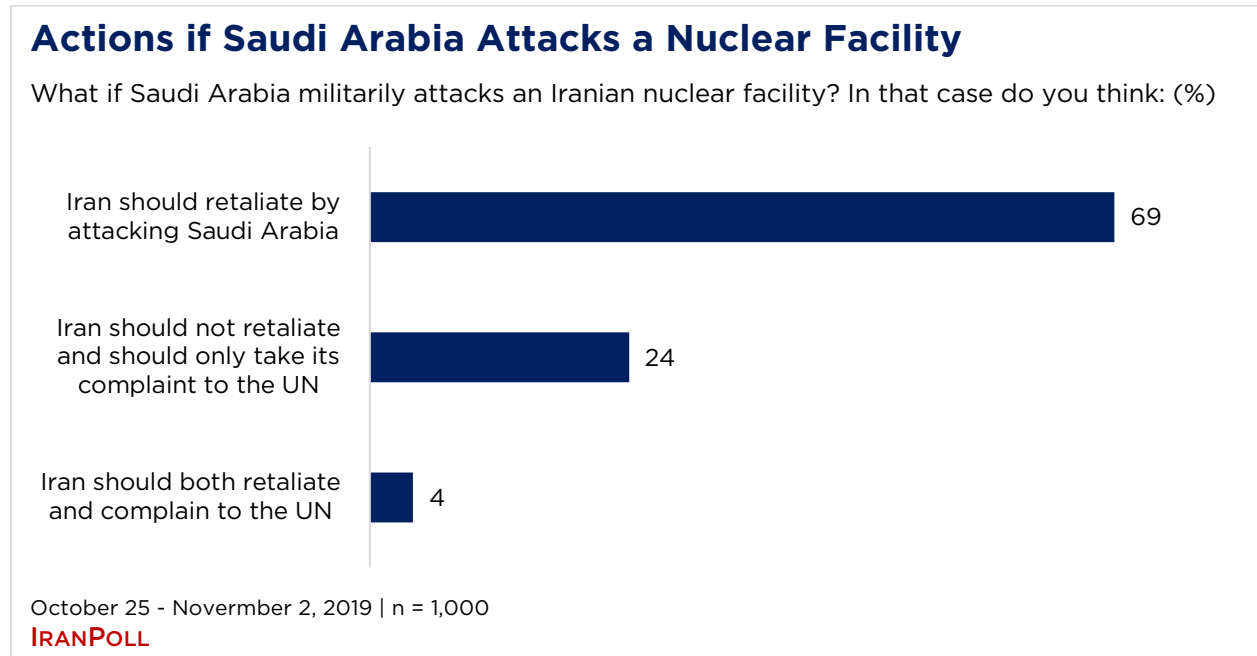


Figure 2

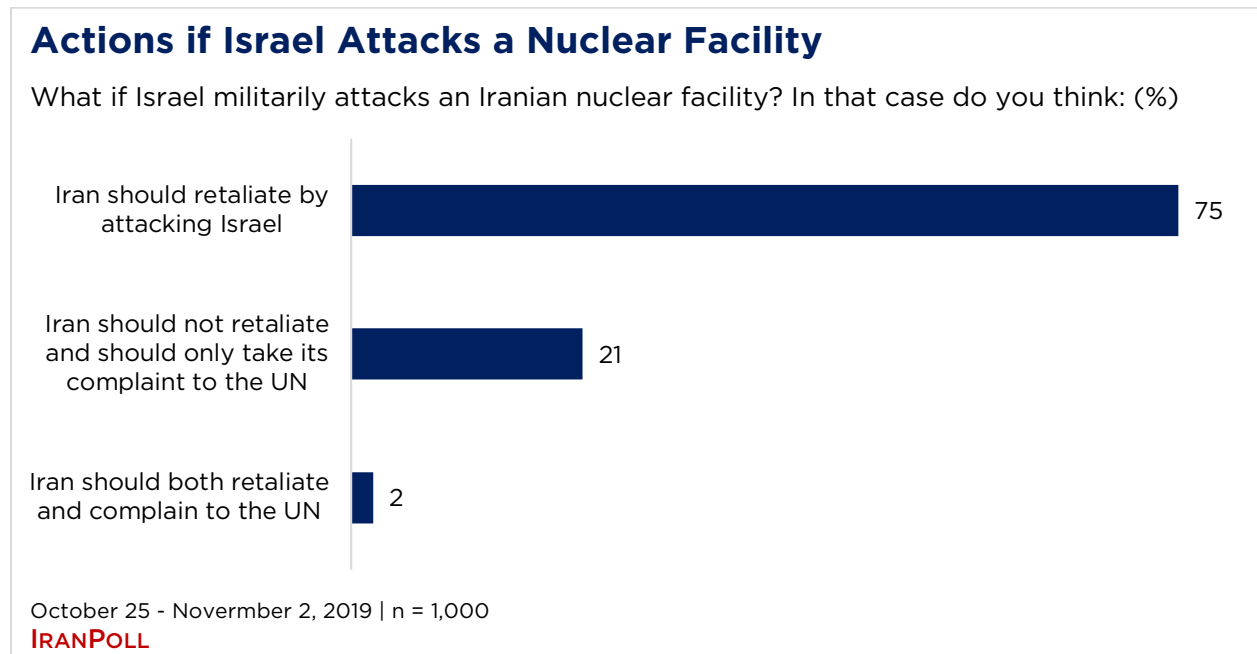
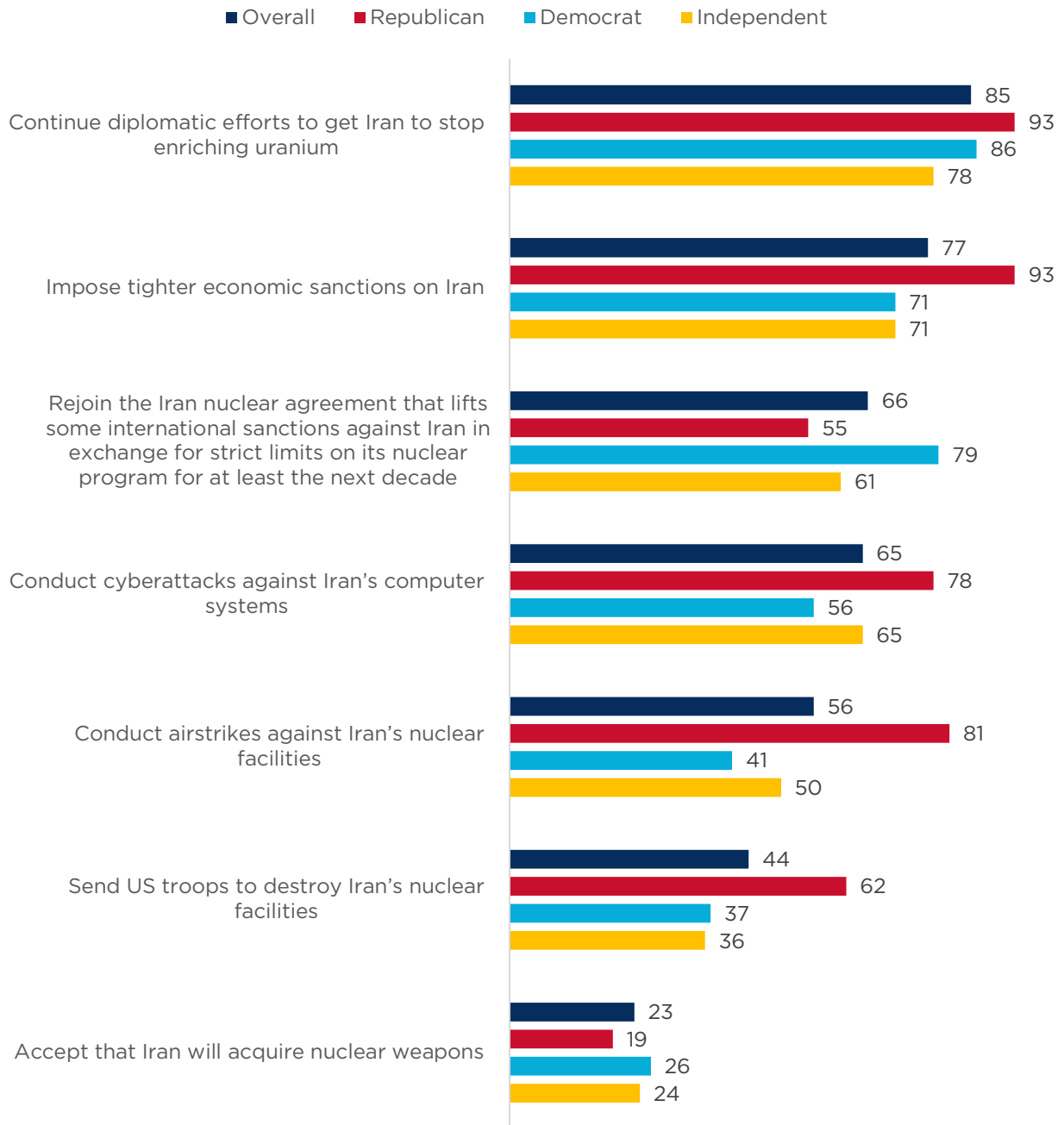


Figure 3

Actions if Iran Restarts Nuclear Development

If Iran restarts development towards a nuclear weapon, would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose the US taking each of the following actions: (% strongly + somewhat support)

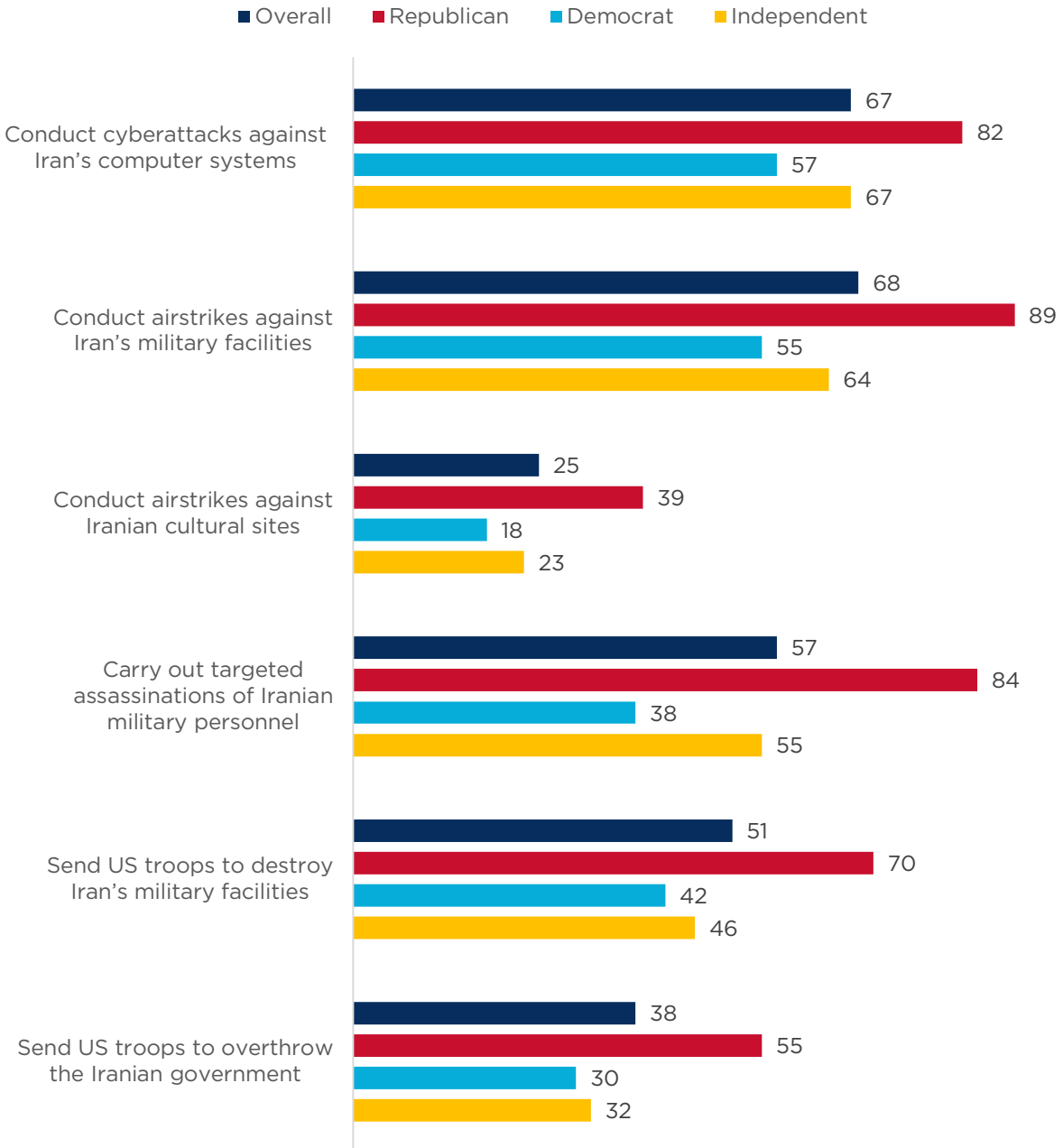


January 10-12, 2020 | n = 1,019
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Figure 4

Actions in the event of Iranian Attack

If Iran attacks US military or diplomatic personnel in the Middle East, would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose the US taking each of the following actions: (% strongly + somewhat support)



January 10-12, 2020 | n = 1,019
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on data from a 2020 Chicago Council survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. This omnibus survey was conducted January 10 to 12, 2020 by IPSOS using their large-scale nationwide online research panel, KnowledgePanel, among a weighted national sample of 1,019 adults 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is ± 3 . The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups or for partial-sample items.

Data from the Iranian population was collected by IranPoll based on two probability sample nationally representative telephone surveys. The fieldwork for first wave was conducted from October 25 to November 2, 2019 and the second wave in December 2019 (December 18-22), among a representative sample of about 1000 Iranians per each wave. The margin of error for both surveys is $\pm 3.09\%$.

The samples were RDD samples drawn from all landline telephones in Iran. The samples were stratified first by Iranian provinces and then in accordance to settlement size and type. All 31 Iranian provinces were represented in proportions similar to their actual populations, as were rural and urban areas. When a residence was reached, an adult was randomly selected from within that household using the random table technique.

An initial attempt and three callbacks were made in an effort to complete an interview with the randomly selected respondents. All of the interviews were conducted using computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI). All interviews were monitored in real-time by call-center supervisors. Further details about the data collection methodology is available here: www.IranPoll.com/method.

About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization that provides insight—and influences the public discourse—on critical global issues. We convene leading global voices, conduct independent research, and engage the public to explore ideas that will shape our global future. The Council is committed to bringing clarity and offering solutions to issues that transcend borders and transform how people, business, and governments engage the world. Learn more at thechicagocouncil.org and follow [@ChicagoCouncil](https://twitter.com/ChicagoCouncil).

About IranPoll

IranPoll® is an independent full-service opinion research company headquartered in Toronto, Canada, focusing exclusively on Iran. A division of People Analytics, IranPoll conducts research on Iranian public opinion using various modes of data collection including telephone polling (including a monthly Omnibus), in-depth interviews, focus groups, and online panel (B2B and 51k-member B2C). IranPoll operates multiple polling call centers with 106 calling stations and conducts over 160,000 interviews per year in Iran. Relying on scientific opinion research methods, IranPoll was able to provide a fully accurate prediction of the outcome of Iran's May 2017 presidential election, which was published by *The Economist* before the initial official results were declared. Complementing its extensive field capacity, IranPoll's databank is the single most comprehensive databank of Iranian opinion polls containing more than 3,000 questions on 430 topics and subtopics from more than 350 probability sample surveys conducted from 2006 to present. Powered by VoxDash™ data governance platform, IranPoll provides its clients with evidence-based consultancy on issues relating to Iran and the Iranian people.