



Many Iranians Privately Reject State-Mandated Religious Conservatism

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,925, February 9, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A recent online survey by two Dutch universities of Iranian attitudes toward religion has revealed a stunning rejection of state-imposed adherence to conservative religious mores as well as the role of religion in public life.

A recent survey by scholars at two Dutch universities of 50,000 respondents, the overwhelming majority of whom said they resided in the Islamic Republic, suggests that Iranians are on the front lines of the region's quest for religious change.

The survey's results, which are compatible with a trend across the Middle East, put a dent in the efforts of Iran as well as its rivals, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE, to best one another in the quest for religious soft power and leadership of the Muslim world.

Among the rivals, the UAE, which has a majority non-national population, is the only one to have taken steps to acknowledge changing attitudes and demographic realities. In November 2020, UAE authorities lifted the country's bans on alcohol consumption and cohabitation among unmarried couples.

The change in attitudes threatens to undercut the efforts of Iran as well as its Middle Eastern competitors to cement their individual interpretations of Islam as the Muslim world's dominant narrative by rejecting religious dogma and formalistic and ritualistic religious practice propagated and/or imposed by governments and religious authorities.

"It becomes an existential question. The state wants you to be something that you don't want to be," said Pooyan Tamimi Arab, one of the organizers of the

Iran survey, speaking in an interview. "Political disappointment steadily turned into religious disappointment... Iranians have turned away from institutional religion on an unprecedented scale."

In a similar vein, Turkish art historian Nese Yildiran recently warned that a fatwa issued by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) declaring popular talismans to ward off "the evil eye" as forbidden by Islam fueled criticism of one of the best-funded branches of government.

The fatwa followed the issuance of similar religious opinions that forbid tattoos, the dyeing of moustaches and beards, the feeding of dogs at home, and playing the national lottery. Other religious opinions are perceived as condoning or dismissing child abuse and violence against women.

Funded by a Washington-based Iranian human rights groups, the Iranian survey, coupled with other research and opinion polls across the Middle East and North Africa, suggests that not only Muslim youth but also other age groups who are increasingly skeptical toward religious and worldly authority aspire to more individual and more spiritual experiences of religion.

Their quest runs the gamut from changes in personal religious behavior to secret conversion to other religions, or to an abandonment of religion entirely in favor of agnosticism or atheism. Such changes occur in secret because apostasy is banned and in some cases punishable by death.

Responding to the Iranian survey, 80% of the participants said they believed in God but only 32.2% identified themselves as Shiite Muslims, a far lower percentage than asserted in official figures of predominantly Shiite Iran.

More than a third of respondents said they either did not belong to a religion or were atheists or agnostics. Between 43% and 53%, depending on age group, suggested that their religious views had changed over time, with 6% of those saying they had converted to another religious orientation.

Sixty-eight percent said they opposed the inclusion of religious precepts in national legislation. Seventy percent rejected public funding of religious institutions while 56% opposed mandatory religious education in schools. Almost 60% admitted that they do not pray, and 72% disagreed with obliging women to wear a hijab in public.

An unpublished slide of the survey shows that an increasing number of Iranians no longer name their children after religious figures, another illustration of the overall change in religiosity.

A five-minute YouTube clip allegedly related to Iran's Revolutionary Guards attacked the survey despite having distributed the questionnaire. The attack was a response to the disclosure by the pollsters that the survey had been supported by an exiled human rights group.

"Tehran may well be the least religious capital in the Middle East. Clerics dominate the news headlines and play the communal elders in soap operas, but I never saw them on the street, except on billboards. Unlike most Muslim countries, the call to prayer is almost inaudible... Alcohol is banned but home delivery is faster for wine than for pizza... Religion felt frustratingly hard to locate and the truly religious seemed sidelined, like a minority," wrote journalist Nicholas Pelham based on a visit in 2019 during which he was detained for several weeks.

The survey's results as well as observations by analysts and journalists like Pelham conform to responses to various polls of Arab public opinion in recent years. Those polls revealed that while 40% of those surveyed defined religion as the most important element of their identity, 66% saw a need for religious institutions to be reformed.

The polls suggested further that public opinion would support the reconceptualization of Muslim jurisprudence to remove obsolete and discriminatory concepts like that of the "kafir", or infidel.

Responses by governments in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere in the Middle East to changing attitudes toward religion and religiosity demonstrate the degree to which they perceive the change as a threat, even an existential one.

In one of the latest responses, Muhammad Mehdi Mirbaqeri, a prominent Shiite cleric and member of Iran's powerful Assembly of Experts, which appoints the country's Supreme Leader, described COVID-19 as a "secular virus" and a declaration of war on "religious civilization" and "religious institutions."

Saudi Arabia went further by legally defining the "calling for atheist thought in any form" as terrorism. Saudi dissident and activist Rafi Badawi was sentenced on charges of apostasy to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes for questioning why Saudis should be obliged to adhere to Islam and asserting that the faith does not have answers to all questions.

Analysts, writers, journalists, and pollsters have traced changes in attitudes in the Middle East and North Africa for much of the past decade.

Kuwaiti writer Sajed al-Abdali noted in 2012 that “it is essential that we acknowledge today that atheism exists and is increasing in our society, especially among our youth, and evidence of this is in no short supply.”

Pooyan Tamimi Arab argued nine years later that his latest survey “shows that there is a social basis” for concern among authoritarian and autocratic governments that employ religion to further their geopolitical goals and seek to maintain their grip on potentially restive populations.”

Dr. James M. Dorsey, a non-resident Senior Associate at the BESA Center, is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg’s Institute for Fan Culture.