



LESTER
CROWN CENTER
ON US FOREIGN POLICY

Americans Say a Nuclear Iran Is Unacceptable, Divide on Using Force

Dina Smeltz, Senior Fellow, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy
Bettina Hammer, Intern, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

September 2019

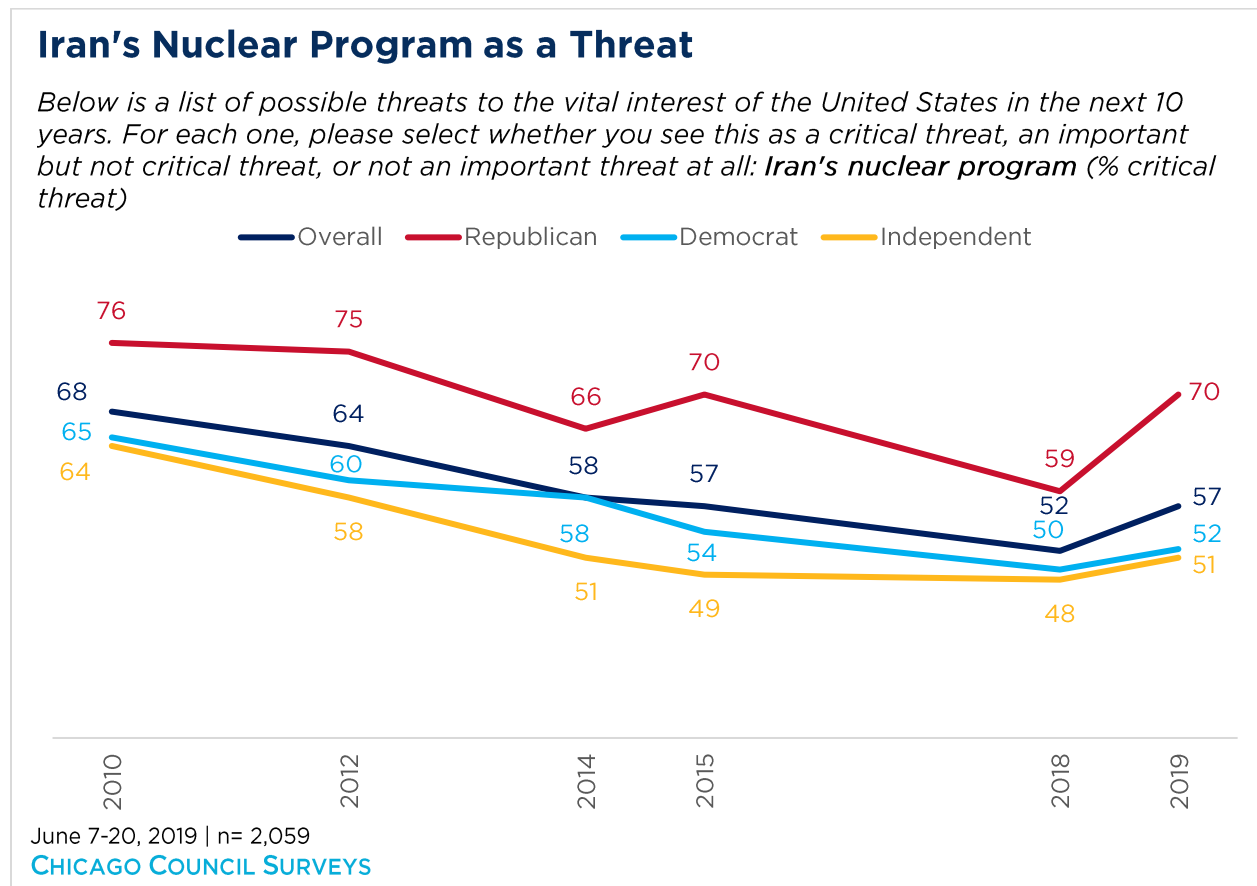
After potentially setting the stage for a historic meeting between Tehran and Washington, Iran has pulled back on the idea in the wake of US allegations that Iran was involved in the September 14 attacks against Saudi oil installations. For his part, President Trump announced new sanctions against Iran, although Saudi and American experts are still analyzing intelligence to determine the exact culprit. The 2019 Chicago Council Survey, conducted in June, finds a majority of Americans still consider Iran's nuclear program a critical threat, but at lower levels than before the signing of the 2015 nuclear deal. While majorities favor diplomatic and economic measures to punish Iran if it withdraws from the nuclear agreement, there is more limited support for military action.

Key Takeaways

- At the time of this survey, six in ten Americans (57%) considered the Iranian nuclear program a critical threat and 77 percent oppose accepting that Iran will acquire nuclear weapons.
- If Iran abrogates the terms of the Iran nuclear deal and restarts development toward a nuclear weapon, around half support conducting cyberattacks against Iran's computer systems (52%) and airstrikes against Iran's nuclear facilities (48%); just 40 percent back sending US troops to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities. In a separate question, seven in ten favor using US troops to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.
- Eight in ten (81%) support continuing diplomatic efforts to get Iran to stop enriching uranium and imposing tighter economic sanctions on Iran (78%). And while only a minority, a third of Americans (36%) favor trade with Iran, up from two in ten (20%) in 2010.

Americans Concerned about Iranian Nuclear Capabilities

In June, six in ten Americans rate the Iranian nuclear program a critical threat (57%, up slightly from 52% in 2018). This put Iran's nuclear program in the top tier of critical threats including cyberattacks on US computer networks (77%), international terrorism (69%) and North Korea's nuclear program (61%). The increase in overall American concern is driven mainly by a jump among self-described Republicans over the past year saying Iran's nuclear program is a critical threat (now 70%, up from 59% in 2018). Democrats' and Independents' concerns remain stable over the past year at around 50 percent. Across the board, however, levels of concern in June are lower than those expressed in 2010 and 2012, prior to the nuclear deal negotiations.



When asked what policies they would support or oppose if Iran withdraws from the nuclear agreement with the remaining signatories and restarts development towards a nuclear weapon, eight in ten Americans oppose accepting that Iran will acquire nuclear weapons (77%). The bipartisan consensus on the topic shows that Iranian nuclearization is a non-starter for most Americans. Large majorities support

continuing diplomatic efforts to get Iran to stop enriching uranium (81%) and imposing tighter economic sanctions on Tehran (78%).¹

The public is more divided on forceful measures. About half support cyberattacks against Iran's computer systems (52%) and airstrikes against Iran's nuclear facilities (48%). Four in ten (40%) support sending US troops to destroy Iranian nuclear facilities. In a separate question testing support for using US troops in various situations, seven in ten Americans support the use of US troops "to stop Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons,"² similar to 2014 and 2015 levels.

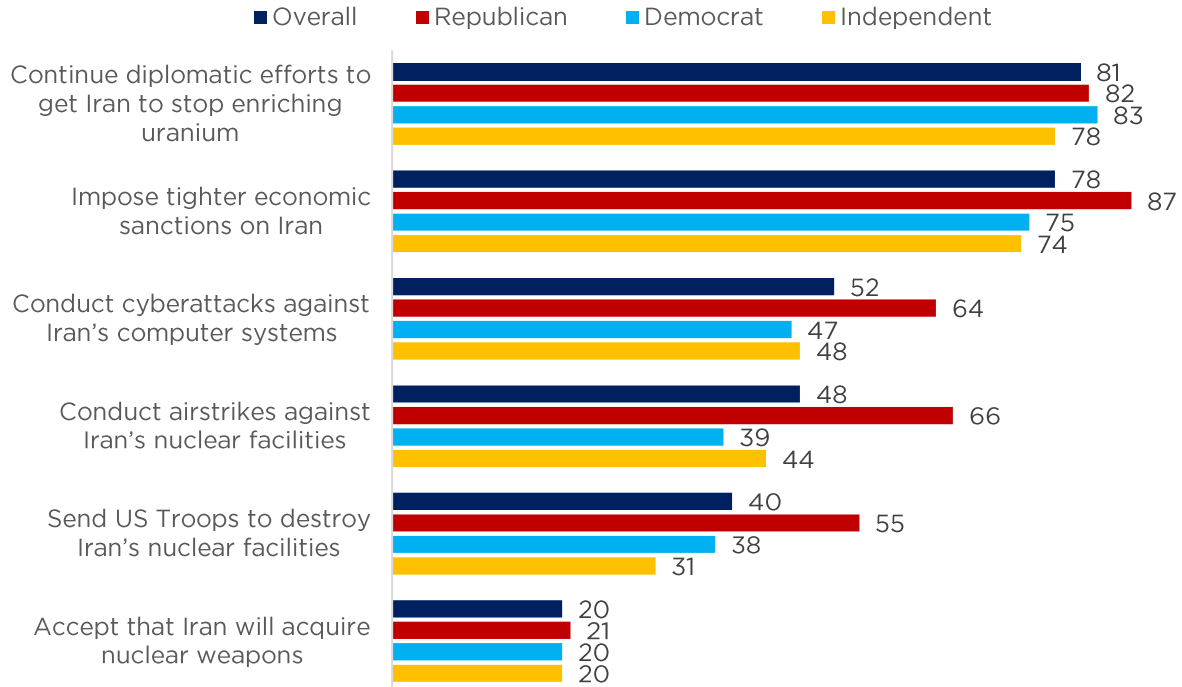
Republicans have a lower threshold for using force, possibly related to the fact that they are more likely to consider Iran's nuclear program a critical threat. Majorities of Republicans, but not Democrats or Independents, support conducting cyberattacks, airstrikes, and sending troops to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities. A larger majority of Republicans (82%) than Democrats or Independents (66% each) also favor sending US troops to stop Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

¹ In addition, when last asked in the 2018 Chicago Council Survey about participating in the Iran agreement that lifts some international economic sanctions against Iran in exchange for strict limits on its nuclear program for at least a decade, two-thirds of Americans (68%) thought the United States should participate, with majorities of Democrats (82%), Independents (60%), and Republicans (53%) favoring participation.

² This particular question could evoke higher support for using force because of the preventative framing of the question (which could imply lower risk than the previous question). By comparison, a [July 2019 Fox News poll](#) found that 53 percent of Americans favored US military action to keep Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

Policies to Deal with Iran

If Iran withdraws from the nuclear agreement with the remaining countries—the UK, France, Germany, Russia, and China—and restarts development towards a nuclear weapon, would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose the U.S. taking each of the following actions: (% net support)

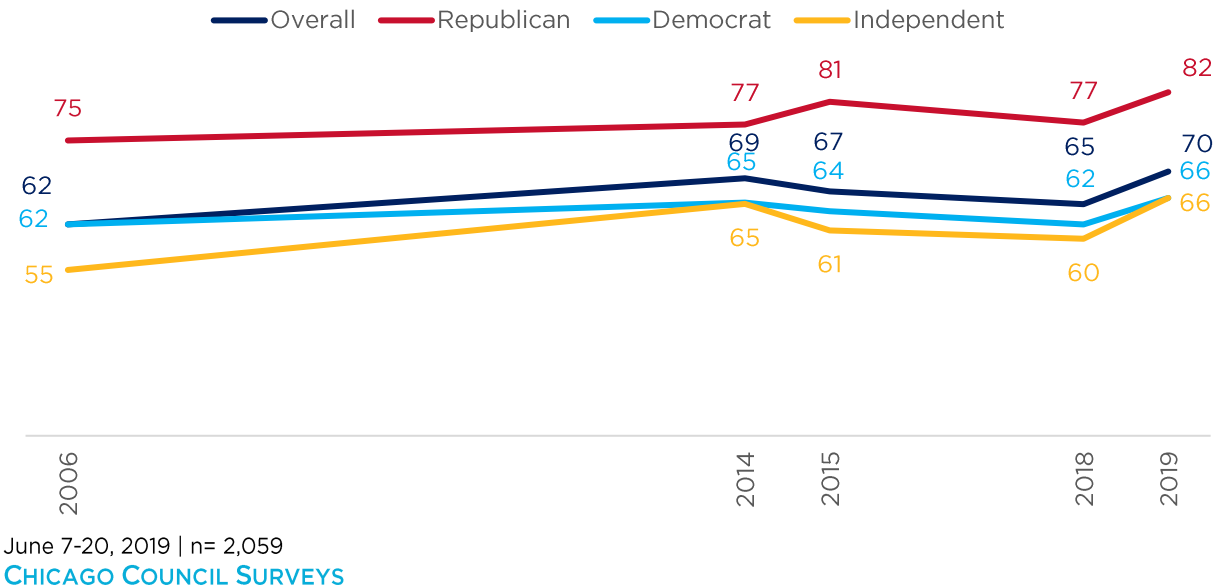


June 7-20, 2019 | n= 2,059

CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

US Troops

There has been some discussion about the circumstances that might justify using U.S. troops in other parts of the world. Please give your opinion about some situations. Would you favor or oppose the use of U.S. troops: To stop Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons (% favor)



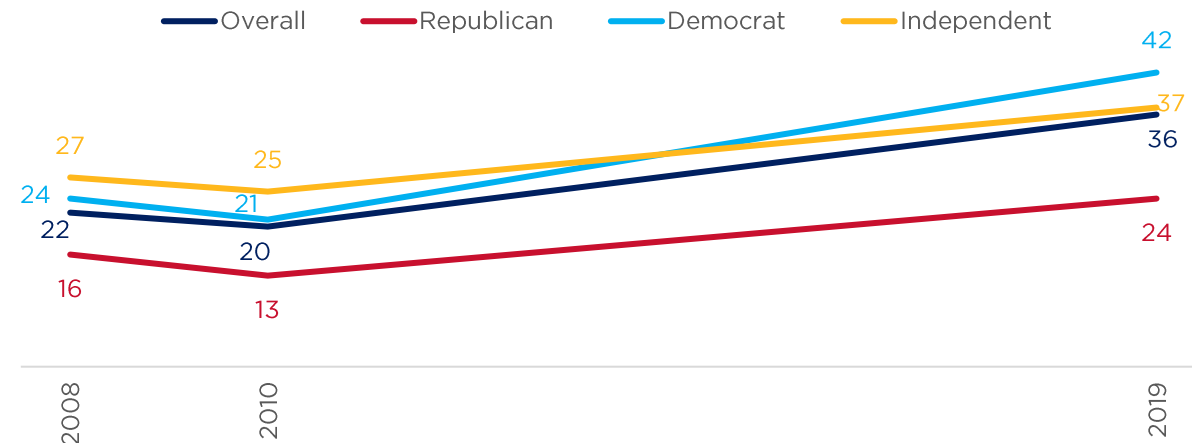
Taken together, the findings suggest that Americans would prefer to exhaust diplomatic options first before taking any type of military action. A [July 2019 Gallup poll](#) corroborates this implication. When asked a two-part question about what the United States should do to get Iran to shut down its nuclear program, 18 percent favor using force as a first measure; 35 percent preferred to take military action if diplomatic/economic efforts fail; and 43 percent favored not taking military action even if diplomatic/economic efforts fail.

Percentage of Americans Supporting US-Iran Trade Has Grown

Americans' preference for diplomatic action is also reflected in growing openness to trade with Iran. While only a minority, 36 percent of Americans support trade with Iran, an increase from 20 percent in 2010. The increase in support for trade is bipartisan, with the share of Republicans and Independents supporting trade with Iran increasing by 11 percentage points since 2010 and the share of Democrats supporting trade increasing by 17 percentage points.

Trade with Iran

Do you favor or oppose engaging in trade with the following countries? **Iran** (% favor)



June 7-20, 2019 | n= 2,059

CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Americans Unfavorable toward Both Iran and Saudi Arabia

When last asked in 2014, two thirds of Americans and majorities across party lines favored meeting and talking with Iranian leaders.³ Despite this longstanding openness toward meeting with Tehran, the country itself is unpopular with Americans. But in the current context, it is important to note that majorities are also skeptical of Saudi Arabia. A [February 2019 Gallup poll](#) found that solid majorities expressed unfavorable views of both Iran (82%) and Saudi Arabia (67%). The 2019 Chicago Council Survey also found Americans fairly divided on whether US relations with Riyadh do more to strengthen (45%) or weaken (50%) US national security.

³ See the 2014 Chicago Council Survey report, [Foreign Policy in the Age of Retrenchment](#).

Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on data from the 2019 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. The 2019 Chicago Council Survey was conducted June 7-20, 2019 by IPSOS using their large-scale nationwide online research panel, KnowledgePanel, among a weighted national sample of 2,059 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 ± 2.3 , including a design effect of 1.1607. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups or for partial-sample items.

Partisan identification is based on respondents' answer to a standard partisan self-identification question: "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?"

The 2019 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Crown family and the Korea Foundation.

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).