

Number of prisoners in own country predicts attitude towards Iran

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The attitude governments adopt towards Iran strongly depends on the number of prisoners in their own country and whether the government trades in oil with Iran. The more prisoners a country has, the more aggressive the attitude of its government towards Iran. However if a government trades oil with Iran then it adopts a milder attitude towards the country than those nations without such an oil connection . These are the findings of research by NWO-funded scientists Wolfgang Wagner and Michal Onderco from the VU University Amsterdam. They published their research results this week in the journal International Studies Quarterly.

How Iran acts has for a long time been regarded as a threat to international peace and security. However up until now it was not clear why the one democratic country (such as Germany) adopts a more reticent [attitude](#) with respect to its stance towards Iran, whereas another country (like the United States) is in favour of a tough approach. Now it has been found that this attitude is related to the percentage of the population behind bars. The larger the percentage of the population serving time in prison, the stricter the government's stance towards Iran.

Dealing with deviant behaviour

According to the researchers, [countries](#) with many prisoners have a harsher legal system that is less forgiving and less focused on rehabilitating prisoners. 'Our research reveals that such countries also

adopt a stricter stance towards Iran', says Michal Onderco. 'Strict cultural standards with respect to dealing with deviant behaviour within a state clearly influence the stance adopted in international situations as well'.

However if there was an intensive trade relationship where a lot was at stake, as is the case for the oil trade, then governments were less inclined to make negative pronouncements about Iran. The attitude countries adopt towards Iran is therefore guided by both the standards within the country with respect to dealing with deviant behaviour and, albeit to a lesser extent, by self interest (in the case of the oil trade).

International experts

The researchers studied various characteristics derived from datasets (such as the prison population, size of the army, [political ideology](#) of the government and the extent to which trade is conducted with Iran) for 34 democratic countries. They also analysed the behaviour of these democracies towards Iran between 2002 and 2009. For this they made use of questionnaires completed by 173 experts in the area of international security and nuclear limitation. Based on these the researchers assessed the extent to which democratic countries exhibited a reticent attitude (preference for a diplomatic approach) or an aggressive attitude (threatening with sanctions or military actions) towards Iran.

Armed forces and political ideology

How much more money was spent on the [armed forces](#) compared to Iran had only a small influence on the attitude towards this 'rogue state'. Countries with larger armed forces than Iran were slightly more inclined to adopt a tough stance than countries with smaller armed forces than Iran. The political ideology of the government was found to have little

influence on the attitude towards Iran.

The researchers expect that the [research results](#) are also applicable to countries other than Iran, which violate international standards and therefore pose a threat to security.

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