

Iranian President opens 'dialogue of civilizations'

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

That the President of Iran should take to the television to address the American people, borders on the unthinkable. That he should use this form of direct communication, to launch a dialogue with the "great American people," is even more extraordinary. The temptation is to think, either that his interview with Cable News Network on Jan. 7 was not honest, but was a clever piece of demagoguery, or, that the situation in Iran has changed so fundamentally, that the values and images associated with the 1979 revolution, have become a thing of the past.

Neither assumption is correct. President Seyyed Mohammed Khatami's address was the most straightforward, courageous articulation of his foreign policy orientation, that has been presented publicly thus far. At the same time, what the President said to the American people delivered a shock to his own population, whose relationship to the issues he discussed, is extremely complex. There is no simple way, in which the internal political debate in Iran will be concluded; yet, at the same time, the nature of the response which comes from Washington, to the dialogue which Khatami has offered, may go far in contributing to a fruitful outcome.

A message to the American people

President Khatami's message to the American people officially opened the dialogue of civilizations he had proposed, at the summit of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in Iran in December. His concept is, that such a dialogue must proceed from the self-understanding of one's own past civilization, and the understanding that great civilizations have been guided by religious principles. At the same time, it must be rooted in present reality. Reviewing the past centuries, Khatami acknowledged that Islamic civilization, which had made great achievements for all mankind, had fallen into

passivity in recent centuries, while Western civilization had contributed fundamental advances to all mankind. To be able to benefit from Western civilization, he said, "we need to penetrate deep down below the surface, ignoring its superficialities to get to the root of the basis of its foundation, theoretical principles, and its values."

This is the what Khatami did in his CNN address: He located the identity of American civilization, from which standpoint America should proceed in relating to another civilization, for example, that of Islam. Specifying that he wanted to present his "analysis of the American civilization so that [his] remarks would not be taken as political nicety or a mere play on words," he explained his respect for American civilization: "When we appreciate the roots of this civilization, its significance becomes even more apparent. As you know, in Plymouth, Massachusetts, there is a rock which is respected and revered by all Americans. The secret of American civilization lies in this rock. In the early 17th century, those 125 men, women, and children who left England in search of a virgin land to establish a superior civilization finally landed on this rock." He added, that the Puritans had come to America, because "they found the European climate too restrictive for the implementation of their ideas and thoughts." The Puritans were "a religious sect whose vision and characteristics, in addition to worshipping God, were in harmony with republicanism, democracy, and freedom."

Most important, Khatami went on to identify the opposite political faction, which has also maintained a continuity in U.S. history: "The American civilization is founded upon the vision, thinking, and manners of the Puritans. Certainly, others, such as adventurers, those searching for gold, and even sea pirates, also arrived in the United States. But the American nation has never celebrated their arrival and never considered

it to be the beginning of their civilization.” The moral outlook, he said, “clashed with certain evil trends which caused slavery in certain states and ultimately succeeded in abolishing slavery. There were numerous martyrs who gave their lives for this cause, the most famous of whom was Abraham Lincoln, the strong and fair-minded American President.”

The main point stressed, was that the true tradition of America was based on the notion that “religion and liberty are consistent and compatible.” He went on: “I believe that if humanity is looking for happiness, it should combine religious spirituality with the virtues of liberty.” Khatami pointed to the Enlightenment, as “one of the biggest tragedies in human history,” because it was a “confrontation between religion and liberty which is to the detriment of religion, liberty, and the human beings who deserve to have both.”

Moving then to his own country’s tradition, Khatami reached back in history, from ancient Persia to Islamic Iran. Over the last 200 years, he said, “the Iranian nation has striven to establish liberty, independence, and a noble way of life.” He pointed to the Constitutional Movement at the beginning of this century, which waged “an incessant struggle with colonialism,” and, passing to the Islamic revolution, asserted that it “had—and should have—two directions: first, an interpretation of religion which couples religiosity with liberty,” which, together with justice, are the “assets and aspirations of the Islamic Revolution as it enters the 21st century.” Then, “second, there is the issue of independence. The American nation was the harbinger of independence struggles, the initiator of efforts to establish independence, for whose cause it has offered many sacrifices, leading ultimately to the Declaration of Independence, which is an important document on human dignity and rights.” Khatami compared this to Iran’s struggle for independence, and liberation from the “humiliation” which had been imposed on it through foreign domination over centuries.

The point emphasized, is that Iran’s fight for independence and for a society based on religious principles, should be comprehensible to Americans, on the grounds of their own experience.

The problem in relations between the two civilizations has arisen as a result of the fact that “policies pursued by American politicians outside the United States over the past half a century since World War II are incompatible with the American civilization which is founded on democracy, freedom, and human dignity. We ardently wished that those who enforced this foreign policy were representatives of the prominent American civilization, a civilization which was achieved at a heavy cost, and not the representatives of those adventurers who were defeated by the American people themselves.”

This “flawed policy,” he went on, damaged the “deprived and oppressed nations,” it “dashed the hopes of the people of the colonized world who had placed their trust in the U.S. tradition of struggle for independence,” and, “when the policies for

domination were implemented in the name of the American people, the nations lost their trust in the Americans.”

Although the Iranian President did not name the two opposing traditions in American history, as the British System and the American System, the phenomenon he laid bare corresponds precisely to the fundamental problem in U.S. foreign policy. The essence of his proposal to Washington was: Return to your own noble past tradition, and deal with the rest of the world from the standpoint of the moral principles which informed that achievement.

Iran today

Following this masterly introduction, Khatami was subjected to questions by interviewer Christiane Amanpour, who focussed on “hot button” issues: the 1979 hostage-taking at the American Embassy in Teheran, and the allegations hurled at Iran today, that it supports terrorism, develops weapons of mass destruction, and undermines the Middle East peace process.

Khatami rejected the allegations, referring to Iran’s signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, as well as its cooperation with inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Iran considers the current peace process as unworkable, but is “prepared to contribute to an international effort to bring about a just and lasting peace in the Middle East.”

The more important points raised by Khatami in response, should help explain to Americans, why the anti-American mood in Iran has endured. Khatami listed several outrages, including the downing of an Iranian airliner with 300 passengers, the reported allocation of \$20 million by Congress, to overthrow the current government in Teheran, and the infamous D’Amato sanctions.

His treatment of the hostage-taking, was central. Asked whether this were an “excess” of the revolution, he answered: “The feelings of our people were seriously hurt by U.S. policies. And as you said, in the heat of the revolutionary fervor, things happen which cannot be fully contained or judged according to usual norms.” In contrast to that time, he said, “With the grace of God, today our new society has been institutionalized, and we have a popularly elected powerful government, and there is no need for unconventional methods of expression of concerns and anxieties.” Asked then, whether he thought things might have been handled differently, he replied, “As I said, everything must be analyzed within its own context. The events of those days must be viewed within the context of revolutionary fervor and the pressures to which the Iranian nation was subjected, causing it to seek a way to express its anxieties and concerns.”

The debate inside Iran

If President Khatami’s interview launched a dialogue with America, it provoked a ferocious debate within Iran. Even before the broadcast had taken place, voices had been raised in Iran, through the press, against the very idea that an

Iranian President should address Americans. *Jomhuri Islami*, for instance, a daily reflecting the views of the opposition clergy, wrote on Jan. 4, "Any positive signal toward the Americans means betraying the legacy of the late Imam Khomeini." It recommended, "The officials of the Islamic Republic must keep the fury and grudge against America alive in the people's hearts." On the day of the scheduled interview, the paper published a list of grievances against the United States, and stated, "Any hands which reach out to America should be cut off," and "Our officials should know that we have not given them a [government] post for them to seek friendship with the enemy of our people." Even the *Teheran Times*, which reflects the views of government layers, ran a banner headline saying the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, was the "only authority to decide on resumption of ties with the U.S." An opposition paper, *Kayan*, warned, "It is simple-mindedness if we imagine the hand the U.S. has extended toward us for friendship is not holding a dagger," and "The U.S. is still the enemy number one and Great Satan for our nation."

What President Khatami did in his interview must have confirmed the worst fears of this faction. Not only did he praise America, but his explanation of the anti-American protests was considered by many, to be tantamount to a betrayal of the revolution. What he said about the hostage-taking affair, was interpreted as an apology. This action, it should be recalled, had been hailed by Khomeini as the "second day of the revolution," and has remained impressed in the popular image of the revolution.

Many among those in the population who were responsible for voting him into office last May, were also dismayed. Khatami won a landslide victory, because he promised to improve economic conditions, and to liberalize "cultural life," meaning the internal social, administrative, and political climate. His promotion of press freedom, which has been translated into the licensing of numerous new newspapers and magazines, was a leading issue. In foreign policy, he had campaigned for a dialogue with "the West," but not with America specifically. Even among those most ardent supporters of Khatami, are people who consider America the Great Satan. At the August confirmation hearings in Iran's parliament, the nominees who were most hotly contested by the opposition, were those who had had experience in the United States, as students or diplomats. The most controversial was Ayatollah Mohajerani, Minister for Culture and Islamic Guidance, who, as Vice President under Rafsanjani, had launched a trial balloon in 1990, proposing direct talks with the United States. The balloon had been shot down, and no mention of such rapprochement was made thereafter.

The new President has thus taken an enormous risk, laying his political life on the line. Although he was cautious in formulating proposals for dialogue, rejecting political relations at the present time, and suggesting the "exchange of professors, writers, scholars, artists, journalists, and tourists,"

still, the overall import of his message constituted a *fundamental challenge to the axioms governing the ideas and behavior of many of his citizens, and leading political figures and institutions.*

CNN's interviewer addressed this issue head-on, when she asked him if he had the "authority and room to maneuver" to fulfill his promises, against a strong opposition. "Surely," he answered. "After being elected, one should abide by one's promises and not retract on them. I am determined to fulfill my promises, and *I believe the atmosphere is conducive and would improve day by day.* Each person will carry out his tasks in his legal capacity. The President shoulders the important task of enforcing the constitution. I have set up a constitution monitoring group for the first time ever, and this group is actively working to locate instances of violations or incorrect enforcement of the constitution. And *we shall succeed.* Iran has *one government* which makes decisions on domestic and foreign policies within the framework of its duties" (emphasis added). He continued, clarifying the relationship between the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, who determines overall policies, and the government, which enforces them.

Khatami defended the right of the opposition to exist, while drawing the line between legal and illegal protest: "When we speak of democratic government, or government of the people, it means that we accept opposition. We cannot possibly have a society with no opposition at all. . . . We should learn not to allow such differences to turn into confrontation, but to direct them into their legal channels."

Khatami hammered away at this theme, insisting that his majority vote was decisive, and that no dual power situation would be tolerated. "Of course," he said, "there are various tendencies, which were present during the elections as well. *The people have made their decision.* What I have said and continue to insist on is that rule of law should be paramount, and no one should consider himself above the law and try to impose his views on others. . ." (emphasis added).

How will Washington respond?

President Khatami, leader of the most important country in the Persian Gulf-Central Asian region, has broken the rules governing Iranian-U.S. relations, or, to be more precise, he has changed them. In so doing, he has also redefined the parameters of the political process inside Iran. If the response which comes from the U.S. President—and it should come at that level—is not appropriate, the very delicate balance which exists in Iran, could be jolted. This is no time for inflammatory statements out of the State Department or precipitous actions by people like Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), who thrust himself forward, uninvited, as a candidate to visit Iran right away. The moment requires extremely sensitive, thoughtful steps. If President Clinton takes up the invitation to initiate a dialogue of civilizations, among "thinkers," this will be decisive in strengthening the process inside Iran, which President Khatami has started.