

Iran's President Khatami pursues 'dialogue of civilizations'

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

The visit of Iranian President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami to Italy on March 8-11, marked a turning point in relations between the Islamic Republic and Europe. Coming as it did at a time when tensions in the Persian Gulf and Middle East were being exacerbated by the British-American-Commonwealth faction, the visit also constituted a powerful counterweight, a peace offensive. Although occurring in Europe, the event also sent an unmistakable message to President Clinton: that if Washington desires normalized relations with Iran, it can develop the means to do so, and benefit thereby; if not, then the United States risks becoming the isolated party, cut off from the development dynamic which Iran is engaged in, within the broader Central Asian and Eurasian context.

President Khatami, accompanied by a large delegation including Foreign Minister Dr. Kamal Kharazmi, spent three days in Rome, meeting with the government, as well as leaders of industry and banking. He concluded his visit with a private meeting with Pope John Paul II, and talks with Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano. Khatami made a brief visit as well to Florence, where he addressed students at the European University.

Contributions to progress

This was the first official visit of an Iranian President to any European country since the Islamic revolution of 1979. Although visits are also scheduled for France, Germany, and Spain, it was Italy which the Iranian government chose as the first venue. When asked about this, President Khatami told *La Repubblica*: "Some European countries have greater importance, among them especially Italy. The Renaissance, the movement that began contemporary civilization, had its cradle in Italy." He continued, "Iran, too, should be numbered among those countries which in the history of humanity have contributed significantly to the progress of civilization. The relationship between the Iran and Italy of today, is an easier relationship: It is the relationship between two consolidated civilizations." Further on, he said, "The important thing is reciprocal respect, and on this point I see a complete agreement between Italy and Iran: The relationship between Rome and Tehran can become a strategic relationship, for the long term." And, he pointed to the fact that Italy, "fortunately, has not had in our country or in the Middle East, a colonial presence."

Commenting on the ways to further improve Iran's rela-

tions with its neighbors, Khatami pointed to the country's "privileged" geographical position. Given its position on the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, its extraordinarily long coastline, and so forth, Iran "has a strategic position which allows it to mediate between the West and many developing countries," he said. He suggested that Italy should function as the "bridge between Islam and Christianity."

Italy, in fact, has historically occupied a privileged position in the region. In the modern period, it was under the political leadership of humanist and industrialist Enrico Mattei, that Italy pioneered relations with oil-producing countries in the Persian Gulf and northern Africa, defining such relations in a manner diametrically opposed to the looting approach championed by the big oil cartels, later known as the Seven Sisters. As Mattei's interest was to develop the raw materials resources of these countries, as an impetus to their industrialization, his conviction was that the producer countries must receive a fair share of the revenues, to be able to reinvest them in development. Thus, Mattei undercut the Seven Sisters, offering Iran and other countries 50% of the revenues. Mattei, a fervent Catholic, paid for his economic cooperation policy with his life, when he was killed in an airplane crash, suspected to be the result of sabotage, in 1962. Despite the tragic end of Mattei's life, his legacy has not died, and its spirit lives on, albeit weakened, in Italian industrial and economic institutions, including the national energy company ENI (Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi), which he created.

It is largely due to the revived Mattei impulse, that Italy took the initiative in Europe to reestablish full diplomatic relations with Iran, following the crises which ensued in the wake of the Salmon Rushdie affair and the Mykonos trial—a trial in Berlin, which charged high-level Iranian authorities with responsibility for the murder of four Iranians in 1992. Contacts developed between the two governments, with delegations exchanging visits throughout 1997-98, leading up to the visit to Rome of Speaker of the Parliament Nateq Nouri, and former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, in his capacity as head of the Expediency Committee. For its part, Rome sent Foreign Minister Lamberto Dini and Prime Minister Romano Prodi to Iran, during 1998.

Thus, when Khatami praised Italy for its honest efforts toward normalization, and for "reciprocal respect," this was not rhetoric.



The central square of Isfahan, Iran, the capital of the Safavid dynasty, which unified Persia as an Islamic nation in the 16th century. Although both Italy and Iran have imperial traditions in their past, it is the great humanist renaissance traditions which the two countries have highlighted, in establishing sister city relations between Isfahan and Florence.

Improved economic ties

On the economic level, the visit consolidated a process of Mattei-esque diplomacy, which included the institution of an Iran-Italy Joint Economic Commission, which held its third meeting last summer. The idea discussed during Khatami's visit, is that Iran could serve as a bridge to link Italy with Central Asia and Caucasus, while Italy would pave the way for consolidation of Iran's ties to the European Union. The volume of Iran-Italy trade was \$13 billion during 1992-96, and reached \$2.6 billion last year. In the course of consultations over the last year, it was agreed to reschedule Iran's debts to Italy, signed between the State Insurance Agency and the Central Bank of Iran. This involves 90% of Iran's debts, and was considered important in light of Iran's economic problems, due to the collapsing oil price.

Just one week prior to Khatami's landing in Rome, the Italian energy group ENI and the French Elf Aquitaine signed a \$1 billion deal with the National Iranian Oil Co., for development of the offshore Dorood oil field in Iran. ENI is the largest Italian company to participate in Iran's tenders, with a massive amount of investment.

During the visit, further agreements were made, in a series of memorandums of understanding: on overall economic, political, and cultural cooperation, signed by President Khatami and President Luigi Scalfaro; on scientific and technological cooperation, signed by Foreign Ministers Lamberto Dini and Dr. Kharazzi; on the joint fight against narcotics trafficking; and on joint investments, signed by the respective heads of the Joint Economic Commission: Iranian Minister of Mines and Metals Eshaq Jahangiri and Italian Foreign Trade Minister Piro Fassino. In a large meeting with the *crème de la crème* of Italian industry and banking, the Iranian delegation signed further specific contracts, among them one on "promotion and protection" of Italian investments in Iran. This agreement ensures firms the right to repatriate profits, and even initial

capital, as well as providing guarantees against future nationalizations of industries set up in Iran. As Khatami said, Iran is particularly eager to profit from Italy's rich experience in the small and medium-size industry sector.

The net effect of the economic agreements signed, is also political. Without any specific references having to be made in the texts of the deals inked in Rome, the fact is, they constitute a death certificate for the infamous sanctions policy, associated with the name of former U.S. Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.). Although the legislation is still on the books in Washington, it is a fact celebrated in the Rome events, that Iran does indeed have trade partners in Europe who are willing to sign contracts worth tens of millions of dollars, simply ignoring the existence of the sanctions regime. If sanctions against firms investing in Iran are not imposed—and they will not be—then they do not in effect exist.

Iranian Foreign Minister Kharazzi was explicit, when asked by *La Stampa* about the repercussions of the visit on relations with the United States. Kharazzi answered, "The visit will send a strong signal to Washington: Numerous European countries are eager to revive their relations with Iran. Now it is up to the United States to adapt to this, or not." He concluded, "If Washington makes a correction, it can improve relations, including trade relations, with us." As Dini had noted to the press, the U.S. government was watching the visit "with great interest."

The meeting with the Pope

The high point of President Khatami's visit to Italy was, without a doubt, his meeting with Pope John Paul II in the Vatican library, on March 11. It was, as Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro Valls said, "the first time that a President of the Islamic Republic of Iran" met John Paul II. It was a meeting of historic dimensions, considering that Khatami is a descendant of the Prophet Mohammad, and the Pope is the suc-

cessor to the founder of the church, St. Peter. Furthermore, Khatami is also rotating chairman of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), which includes 55 nations. His meeting with the Pope was therefore of even broader significance.

But the encounter assumes a significance which is deeper than institutional affiliations. The meeting showed that, when dialogue is defined on the highest conceptual level, and amid an awareness of the historical dimension, then minds representing different personal, cultural, and religious experiences, can meet in fruitful exchange.

It was President Khatami who first launched the proposal for a “dialogue of civilizations,” when he was elected President by an overwhelming margin in May 1997. Explicitly juxtaposed to the “clash of civilizations” thesis championed by Harvard geopolitical strategist Samuel Huntington, Khatami’s approach aims at finding common principles among different civilizations, by reference to the greatest achievements they have made in history, and building upon that heritage. The proposal made by Khatami during his address to the UN General Assembly in September 1998, for the first year of the millennium to be dedicated to this great theme, has been endorsed by the UN.

Thus, when asked why Italy was the first of the European countries he had visited, Khatami had answered with reference to the Renaissance tradition. Although both Italy and Iran have imperial traditions in their past, which he also noted, it is not these, but rather the great humanist renaissance traditions which the two countries have highlighted, in establishing sister-city relations between Isfahan and Florence. Isfahan was the magnificent capital of the Safavid dynasty, which unified Persia as an Islamic nation in the 16th century. The great art and architecture of the city, represents the high point of a tradition that spread throughout Central Asia.

Little detail is known about the meeting between Pope John Paul II and President Khatami, but it was reported that they covered relations between Christians and Muslims, and the situation in the Middle East and Jerusalem. The talks were “cordial, in the spirit of dialogue between Muslims and Christians,” said Vatican spokesman Navarro Valls. He added, that there were cordial gestures as well, including improvised ones. This may refer to the report that one of the Muslim clerics in Khatami’s delegation embraced the Pope at the end of the meeting.

At the close of their discussion, Khatami said to the Pope, “I ask you to pray for me, too. I pray to Almighty God that He give you success and good health. At the end of my trip to Italy, and after this meeting with you, I am returning to my country full of hope for the future. May God protect you!”

Khatami was presented with a gold key to the city of Rome, by the mayor. He was given a Pontifical seal and a bas relief of Saints Peter and Paul, by the Pope. In return, he presented an arras (a hand-woven tapestry) showing a scene of St. Mark’s in Venice, an old manuscript of the poems of Hafiz, and six videos of a series presented on Iranian TV, about Christians who had fled Roman persecution, to find

refuge in Persia. The purpose of the arras, was to show the historical interest in Persia in the country and culture of Italy, while the poetry by the 14th-century poet Hafiz was an example of the great tradition of Persian poetry which has had a profound impact on European letters.

In their talk about relations between Muslims and Christians, the Pope and Khatami explored ways through which they can be improved, particularly in situations where one is a minority community, like Muslims in Europe, or Christians in the Middle East and Persian Gulf.

The issue of Jerusalem

One word which sums up the type of problem presented here, is Jerusalem, which was very much a topic of discussion. Considered a Holy City by all three Abrahamic religions, Jerusalem was assigned a status as an international city, a “separate entity” by the United Nations in 1947. In 1948, Israel declared West Jerusalem to be its capital, and since the occupation and annexation of East Jerusalem in the 1967 war, considered it to be its “undivided and eternal capital”—although the Palestinians desire to establish the Arab part of the city, East Jerusalem, as the capital of a future Palestinian state. Jordan’s Hashemite monarchy has historically held responsibility as custodian of the Islamic holy sites there, among them the Al Aqsa mosque, which fanatical Jewish extremists have targeted for destruction, in their intention to rebuild the Temple of Solomon. The aggressive settlements policy of successive Israeli governments, most emphatically that of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, has aimed at altering the demographic identity of East Jerusalem, by moving in large numbers of Israelis, to outnumber the Arabs. Thus, the lines of conflict between the Jewish and Muslim community. But, a large part of the Arab population of Jerusalem is Christian; indeed, the Christian part of the city hosts churches from every denomination, most prominent among them the Roman Catholics, the Russian and Greek Orthodox, and the Armenian Apostolic. The continuing state of conflict, and aggressive settlements policy of Israel, has contributed to reducing the Christian community in the Holy City, a cause of great concern to the Pope. This de facto expulsion of Christians from Jerusalem, has been coupled with massive emigration of Christians from Lebanon, during and after the civil war there in the 1970s.

How to solve the question of Jerusalem, thus requires thinking at a level not currently in evidence in debates on its status in Tel Aviv. The position of the Vatican on Jerusalem, is that it cannot be the capital of any single nation, given its unique history and religious significance for the three monotheistic religions. As the Vatican’s secretary for relations with states, Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, stated during a U.S. tour in mid-March, the principles of the Holy See, as established in the “fundamental agreement” with Israel in 1993, are “the peaceful resolution of differences, rejection of the forcible occupation by one of the parties of an area of the city of Jerusalem, and the request for an internationally guaranteed

statute for the most religious parts of this unique city.”

The fact that Khatami met the Pope and Secretary of State Angelo Sodano, and discussed Jerusalem, indicates a desire on the part of Iran to utilize its position as chairman of the OIC to explore avenues toward a solution to the status of the city. It comes as no surprise that, on the heels of these talks, the Israeli government, ostensibly in reaction to a diplomatic gesture by the European Union, issued its most categorical statement to date, rejecting the relevant UN resolution 181, which established the city as a *corpus separatum*.

Respect the territorial integrity of Iraq

The other burning issue related to the region which was discussed, is Iraq. The absolutely principled position of the Vatican has been voiced repeatedly by Pope John Paul II, not only in public discourses, but also in diplomatic encounters, most recently his meeting with President Clinton. Since the catastrophic descent into barbarism with Margaret Thatcher and George Bush’s “splendid little war” in 1990-91, the Pope has been indefatigable in denouncing all use of force, and demanding that the genocidal sanctions against Iraq be lifted.

When queried as to Iran’s position on the “conflict between Iraq and two Western nations like the U.S. and Great Britain,” Khatami replied: “We had an eight-year war with Iraq, we suffered much damage from the war. Also for this reason, we have decided to solve all our problems with Iraq

peacefully. We condemn politically Iraqi aggressions both against our territory and that of other states of the region; Iraq must respect the resolutions of the UN, of the Security Council.” When asked what Iran could do to solve the conflict, he said, “Any solution to the problems of the Middle East must come through cooperation among countries of the region; foreign interference will do nothing but aggravate the existing crises. . . . We have condemned and we will condemn the attacks against Iraq by England and the U.S.A., we reaffirm the respect of territorial integrity of Iraq, we believe that the presence of foreign military forces in the region is a cause of instability and danger for the region.” He added, “Fortunately, we note that European countries like France and Italy have ideas similar to our own. These aggressions must cease as soon as possible; the countries of our region have the power and the political will to reach a solution to the crisis without any foreign interference.”

In the future, looking back on this visit, it may emerge that the meeting between Khatami and the Pope was of deepest significance. Not because any specific agreements were reached, but because an actual dialogue between the two was started. As Khatami has noted, in presenting his idea for such a dialogue of civilizations, it must be “launched among men of culture, intellectuals.” And, he added, “unfortunately, it is not always the politicians who embody the men of culture, the intellectuals of a country.”

‘We must better understand each other’

In a meeting with Pope John Paul II, Iranian President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami praised the role of the Pope and his responsibilities in the world of Christianity. Stressing that humanity needs peace, he said that the root of all conflict is the lack of “peace based on justice” in the international arena. “If Western man has overcome fascism and the dictatorship of the proletariat, despotism and prejudice still persist in international affairs. Hence to achieve lasting peace, injustice has to be removed, and divine religions should be at the forefront of the call for administration of justice,” Khatami said.

President Khatami addressed a group at the Florence European University, and expanded on his notion of a dialogue of civilizations. “Meeting a group of academics is always a pleasing experience for me. For it is in their presence that matters revolve around speaking, listening, and understanding.” In Oriental studies, he said, “it is the Orient which is the subject of study, not a party to dialogue. In order to attain a real dialogue among civilizations, the East should be transformed from the object of understand-

ing to a general party to dialogue.” This, he said, is not a one-sided matter. “As Iranians, Muslims, and Asians, we, too, are obliged to take long strides in the direction of understanding the realities of the West. Such understanding will help us improve and bring order to our economic and social way of life. Taking such strides, whether on our part or on the part of Europe, requires certain moral and mental dispositions, which were first recognized and promoted in Europe by Italians.

“However, to delve into past history without looking at the future can only be an academic diversion. To help human societies and improve the condition of the world, it is necessary to consider the present state of relations between Asian, in particular Muslim, countries, and Europe.

“Why do we say, in particular, Muslim? Because Islam is Europe’s next door neighbor; unlike individuals, nations are not free to choose or change neighbors. Therefore, apart from moral, cultural, and human reasons, out of historical and geographical necessity, Islam and Europe have no choice but to gain a better and more accurate understanding of each other, and thus proceed to improve their political, economic, and cultural relations. Our future cannot be separated from each other, because it is impossible to separate our past.” — *Muriel Mirak-Weissbach*