

## Iran calls for a dialogue of civilizations, among thinkers

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The picture that has been painted of Iran by the media in the West, led by the British and Israeli press, is that of a rogue state, committed to the annihilation of Western society and values, through the spread of "Islamic fundamentalism," the deployment of terrorist capabilities, and the development of weapons of mass destruction. It is, in fact, still official U.S. policy, to consider the Islamic Republic of Iran as supporting terrorism, seeking development of such weapons, and actively undermining the prospects for peace in the Middle East. On those grounds, to date, diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran, which have remained frozen, are where they were during the 1979 revolution.

However, just before Christmas, Iranian President Seyed Mohammad Khatami explicitly offered to open a dialogue with America, in terms which fly in the face of every cliché that has been respected in the West about his country and its political leadership. Khatami's proposal, made during a meeting with the international press in Teheran on Dec. 14, is to "address the American people" as a first step toward opening an official dialogue with the government. In his remarks, Khatami repeatedly expressed his "great respect for the nation and the great people of the United States," and stated his commitment to a "dignified peace" in the Middle East. Despite Iran's criticism of the process as it has unfolded since the 1993 Oslo Accords, he pledged that his country would do nothing to "impose its views on others."

Most significant in his remarks, was Khatami's focus on reopening relations with the United States as one expression of a broader "dialogue between civilizations," which, he said, should characterize relations among nations and cultures in the 21st century. To carry out such a dialogue, he proposed that political figures rise to the level of thinkers. "Of course,

it is our wish that all politicians should be thinkers," he said. "Although, perhaps, Plato's idea that rulers should be philosophers, or that philosophers should be kings, was wishful thinking, nonetheless, is it also wishful thinking to expect that the world's politicians should be thinkers as well?"

President Clinton's response to the outstretched hand from Teheran was measured and positive, despite his reiteration of the three allegations against Iran (terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and an anti-peace posture), which he said would be the stuff of talks. He said, "I was quite encouraged by the President's statement and I think the American people should be, too." He added, that he had always considered it "tragic that the United States was separated from the people of Iran." Clinton elaborated: "It's a country with a great history that at various times has been quite close to the United States." And added, "We have had the privilege of educating a number of people from Iran over several decades; indeed, some people in the present government were able to get some of their education in the United States. And Americans have been greatly enriched by Iranian, by Persian culture, from the beginning of our country."

### The Islamic world in conference

Although the formulations on both sides could be construed as diplomatic niceties, this is not so. In order to grasp the full significance of the new language which the Iranian President has used to shape his offer for dialogue, it is necessary to locate it in the context of profound changes taking place in the Islamic world, and in Iran, at its center. President Khatami delivered his bid for a dialogue with America, in fact, at the conclusion of the summit of the

Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), which was held in Teheran on Dec. 9-11. The summit was extraordinary on several counts. First, it was held in Teheran, capital of a nation blacklisted by the West, and isolated within the Islamic world for much of the period since the 1979 revolution. Iran has become the rotating chairman of the OIC, a position it will hold for three years. Second, the meeting was not merely a ceremonial get-together of members of a club, as some earlier such conferences have been; it gathered all the members of the 56-nation organization, and, in most cases, at the highest political level. Third, the agenda of the conference addressed urgent political affairs, including the Middle East, Afghanistan, economic cooperation and development, and the issue of international terrorism. In addition, it reached agreement, in the form of final resolutions, which contributed workable, thoughtful proposals to address many of the crises identified. Finally, and most importantly, the conference constituted a step forward in redefining the identity of the Islamic world—Islamic culture and civilization—in the modern context.

Participation in the conference included heads of state, or of government, or government ministers from countries with which Iran has had hostile, or conflictual, relations, like Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the other Arab states of the Persian Gulf, as well as Egypt. Thus, in a spirit of reconciliation which pervaded the conference, Iran welcomed Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Taha Yasin Ramadhan, with all due respect. The call by Iraqi Foreign Minister Mohammed Said Al-Sahhaf to normalize relations with Iran and exchange of prisoners of war was prominently featured in the Iranian official press. Prince Abdullah, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, was the most celebrated guest at the summit, bearing testimony to the immense diplomatic efforts conducted by former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani, to mend fences with the Gulf neighbors. The summit also provided an important opportunity for Sudan and Egypt to resume talks, as the Egyptian foreign minister met with his Sudanese counterpart. Relations between the two had been strained since an assassination attempt against President Hosni Mubarak had been blamed on the Sudanese, who, in turn, were accused of using Iranian terrorist training facilities.

Iran's success in achieving such participation, came as the result of organizing efforts by the previous and current government. Former President Rafsanjani and his foreign minister, Velayati, as well as the new foreign minister, Dr. Kamal Kharrazi, travelled far and wide to present heads of state with the official invitations to the conference. In the course of these diplomatic encounters, Iran's officials sought to overcome differences, and to define relations from the vantage point of the new role which Iran has assumed, in the Eurasian Land-Bridge context, linking Central Asia, and Europe, and Africa.

Iran was thus most appropriate as the venue for a confer-

ence, which placed the issue of improving economic cooperation at the top of its agenda. As a founding member of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO, which includes Turkey, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, and the five Central Asian republics), as well as of the D-8 grouping of Islamic countries in Africa (Nigeria, Egypt), the Middle East (Turkey and Iran), and Asia (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia), Iran is at the center of overlapping associations dedicated to establishing regional stability through economic cooperation. At the OIC summit, it was a matter of expanding this to include the totality of the member nations, in an Islamic common market. As Iran's permanent representative to the OIC, Sabah Zangeneh, told the Iranian news agency IRNA, at the outset of the summit, "To make the Islamic world ready to enter the 21st century and to take practical steps for the creation of an Islamic common market" were to be the two prominent issues which the summit "would try to resolve and find ways and means to achieve these objectives."

In the debate on the Islamic common market, which Iranian Industry Minister Gholamreza Shafeie characterized as "a must," cooperation was proposed in various areas of manufacturing, including the automobile sector, electronics, shipping, construction, and so forth. Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, who has been in the forefront of a campaign among Asian nations, to defend their economies against the ravages of speculation and the "free market," intervened to support the proposal. Stressing the enormous economic, industrial, and technical capabilities of the member states, especially Iran, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Turkey, he "said formation of an Islamic common market is one way to deal with the monopolistic policies of the West against the developing nations, especially the Islamic states," according to an IRNA dispatch. Dr. Mahathir furthermore "underlined that the Islamic countries should adopt the most advanced economic system through which they would be able to play an active role in the modern world," according to a Dec. 10 IRNA release. The Malaysian prime minister recommended, to this end, that the OIC members "should endeavor to form elite, scientific, and expert groups which would then help the countries improve their academic and economic system."

In his endorsement, the secretary general of the OIC, Dr. Azeddine Laraki, pointed to the different technological levels of the Muslim economies, whereby some are forced to import from industrialized countries to satisfy internal demand, at disadvantageous terms of trade. He proposed that the OIC members adjust their trade tariffs, to transform their activities into a concerted economic unity, i.e., the Islamic common market, which was in fact included in the final declaration of the summit. Also contained in the final document was support for fair trade relations, in the form of a "call to regard the D'Amato bill [which imposes sanctions on nations investing in Iran] as null and void, as if it never existed."

## The two most sensitive issues

The two most sensitive political issues concerned the Middle East peace process, and Afghanistan. Although press accounts tended to play up the remarks made at the beginning of the conference, by Iran's supreme religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who denounced the Middle East peace process, President Khatami had a differentiated approach, and the final resolution in fact upheld the peace process. Ayatollah Khamenei had said, "Our opposition to the so-called Middle East peace process is because it is unjust, arrogant, contemptuous, and finally illogical." He said, the "imposed principle of 'peace for land' means that the Zionists would return the lands of all neighboring countries, provided that we accept that Palestine belongs to them." In contrast, Khatami argued, "It is obvious that for peace to be lasting it should be just and honorable. As the crisis in the Middle East has made it fully clear, genuine peace can be established only through the realization of all the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, including the inalienable rights of self-determination, return of refugees, liberation of all the occupied territories, in particular Al-Quds al-Sharif [Jerusalem]."

In its concluding document, the summit endorsed a resolution which called for the implementation of the peace accords reached between Israel and the Palestinians according to the "land for peace" principle. In addition, it called for the guarantee of the rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination, establishing a state with Jerusalem as its capital, and the right of the Palestinian refugees to return to their homes in Palestine. The document denounced the "Israeli occupation of the Palestinian and Arab territories including Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, and southern Lebanon, while hailing the steadfastness of the Palestinian and Lebanese people in resisting the Israeli occupation."

Khatami qualified his government's position, by questioning the credibility of making peace with the Israel. "It is a fact, though, that the hegemonic, racist, aggressive and violent nature of the Zionist regime, amply manifested in the systemic and gross violation of international law, pursuit of state terrorism, and development of nuclear weapons, seriously threatens peace and security in the region," he said.

As for Afghanistan, the final document called for Islamic countries to act in the spirit of solidarity, to find a solution to the war which is bleeding the country and destabilizing the entire region. Although not spelled out in black and white, it was apparent that some progress was made at the summit, in discussions among the Iranians and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub, to map out a joint strategy to stop the war. This would mean tempering support from some sectors in Pakistan for the Taliban, and agreeing on an all-party political solution. According to press reports after the OIC summit had concluded, contact meetings took place at the United Nations, with the ambassadors from Afghanistan, Iran, China, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Russia, as well as U.S. Assistant Secre-

tary of State Karl Inderfurth.

On terrorism, the "Teheran Declaration" contained a resolution which included "denouncing all terrorist acts and considering any armed attack against civilians as a crime according to Islamic law." It asserted "the determination by the member-states to hold an international conference aiming at reaching an agreement on terrorism." Most important, it made a "call to the international community to stop providing safe havens for terrorists, help in bringing them in front of justice, and to take all the possible measures to dismantle the networks that support and provide help to terrorist." This clause dovetails with actions taken by the Egyptian government against Britain for harboring terrorists.

## A dialogue among thinkers

Thus, when President Khatami issued his invitation for rapprochement with America, he was doing so from a position of new strength, embodied in Iran's successful organization of the OIC summit, representing 1 billion people. His opening speech focussed on the challenges posed to the entire Islamic world, in the 21st century. Here, Khatami identified the kind of "dialogue among thinkers" which he later proposed be opened with America.

In his address, "Islamic Civil Society as a Means of Attaining Unity Justice and Equity," Khatami posed the question, how could the Islamic world solve the outstanding issues facing it, and find a "status and position befitting Muslim states?" He addressed the problem from an historical perspective. "Our predicament," he said, "is that the *ummah* [Islamic nation], once the flag-bearer of knowledge, thought, and civilization, has, in the past few centuries, eclipsed into weakness, regressed into backwardness, and . . . has, with painful passivity, failed to fully harvest the fruits of this civilization . . . which used to illuminate the destiny of human races and whose radiance of achievements and influences are yet praiseworthy and to which the modern civilization is truly indebted." It is possible to re-create a "civilization of preeminence," he said, if people uphold the cultural identity and achievements of the past, yet "acquire a precise perception of the era they are in." This means, recognizing the advances made by Western civilization. Islam should derive the "constructive benefits from the achievements of Western civilization in the area of science, technology, and social norms, . . . an inevitable means to a successful entry into the future."

He concluded, "In parallel with joint efforts toward fulfilling this historic mission of the Islamic world in contributing to the shaping of a new human order in the world, the full-fledged cooperation of Muslim countries toward the provision and preservation of world peace is an undeniable necessity."

When such a dialogue may begin, we can truly say, that there is indeed hope for mankind to create a 21st century worthy of the best of our predecessors, whether in Islam, Judaism, or Christianity.