



Throngs of young Iranians (far left), voting for the first time in May 2001, express their support for President Khatami; Khatami sits with the writer in his office at Sa'adabad Palace.

The Other President Speaks

***In his first interview with an American journalist in eight years, Iranian president Mohammad Khatami tells GQ about his country's alleged nuclear program, mocks George W. Bush's "axis of evil," and offers some surprising words on the 1979 hostage crisis**

by Hooman Majid

When the moderate and staunchly reformist Mohammad Khatami was elected president of Iran eight years ago, many observers hoped that the days of a rabidly anti-American, anti-Western, anti-Zionist Iran would soon come to an end. After his election, some Western journalists were quick to declare a new era in Iranian politics. But those who hoped for an eventual reestablishment of ties with the United States and a significant relaxation of Islam's social strictures were in for a disappointment, for although Iran has changed considerably since the early days of the revolution, it is still very much a theocracy and often a bastion of anti-Americanism in an increasingly American-dominated world.

The president of Iran does not readily grant interviews or audiences to foreign journalists. As such, I was told that my Q&A was to be "informal." The interview was held at Sa'adabad Palace on one of the two days a week that the president uses it as his office. Although not opulent by any stretch of the imagination, the palace has a sparse, midcentury-chic air about it, and the setting, in a park of mature trees comfortably set off from the smog-choked city, says much about why the president is keen to spend some of his working hours here. In the spirit of informality, he left his translucent black *aba* (cloak) hanging on the coatrack and joined me at the coffee table for tea and what proved to be an unusually candid conversation.

President Bush has included Iran in his "axis of evil" and is pushing for Iran's nuclear

program to be referred to the U.N. Security Council, which could result in sanctions. Is there any reason why America should be alarmed by Iran? Terrorists and warmongers and those who seek to negatively influence world public opinion: This is what constitutes an "axis of evil," and Iran has actually been the victim of both terrorists and warmongers. If humanity is respected everywhere and justice prevails everywhere, this kind of wickedness will disappear. There is nothing that proves or indicates that Iran is intending or trying to acquire nuclear weapons. And this is not just what we declare, for every international-agency report confirms it. No matter what we do, it is America's habit to lob accusations at us. This is not at all a question of our ability to acquire nuclear capability. The U.S. is simply opposed to Iran becoming an independent force in the region.

In a unipolar world, with America the lone superpower, what does Iran intend to achieve by retaining its anti-U.S. stance?

America has done us great harm, and the past few decades of Iranian history prove this. Many examples could be mentioned. Our policy of avoiding conflict and tension naturally applies to all countries, and we have no desire to be in conflict or to have tense relations with any country. The severing of relations between America and Iran was initiated by the United States, and I believe that for the reestablishment of ties or relations, it is America that needs to take the practical steps necessary in accepting Iranian principles for

approchement. But regrettably, it appears that it is in their interests to maintain the status quo.

But what can America do so that it will no longer be "the Great Satan" in the eyes of the Islamic Republic? Under President Clinton, Secretary of State Albright made an official apology for America's role in the 1953 coup against Prime Minister Mossadeq. Was that a missed opportunity for Iran to make a friendly overture to the United States?

With the many factions in American politics, there is no single policy toward Iran. I believe that the president of the United States, by including Iran in his "axis of evil," reversed the previous administration's positions with respect to Iran, and whatever progress could have been made was brought to a complete stop or, even worse, moved in the opposite direction. In spite of this, in the instances of Afghanistan and Iraq, we have shown our goodwill and made positive moves in the interest of peace and tranquillity.

Since your election to the presidency of Iran, you have repeated your desire for a "dialogue amongst civilizations" as a way to better understanding and world peace, and it became an initiative that the U.N. took up based upon your suggestion. Do you think your campaign has been successful?

The entire world welcomed the "dialogue amongst civilizations" initiative when it was introduced at the U.N., and this demonstrates that there is a powerful underlying

message within: that establishing peaceful coexistence in the world can be achieved through such an initiative. The wave of protests and strong public opinion against the American warmongers during the Iraq war is itself a sign that this initiative is affecting world public opinion. Of course, those whose interests lie in war and strife do not welcome this initiative or any spreading of the idea. I think that the criminal events of September 11 and the subsequent wars, terrorism, and upheaval were a direct response from those who oppose or don't find to their advantage the "dialogue amongst civilizations" initiative.

Americans' views on Iran are still somewhat influenced by the hostage crisis of 1979. The vast majority of Americans of a certain age vividly remember the images of blindfolded American hostages on their TV screens. How can Iranians and Americans put this episode behind them once and for all? In this connection, it has been said many times that we understand the feelings of the great American nation, and we regret that those feelings have been hurt. But it is the American nation, more than us, that should be unhappy with their leaders and should question why their leaders treat nations that wish to be independent in such a way as to provoke such harsh reactions—in the same way that American public opinion put the blame on their government during the Vietnam War. And in the case of Iraq, almost 50 percent of the American people showed their opposition to the war by voting for the opposing candidate.

In your recent appearance at Tehran University, which was covered extensively in the West for the boisterous questions and heckling directed at you, you remarked that Iran's democracy allows the people to openly criticize their president, something that was unthinkable in the past. Do you think this kind of political discourse will be tolerated in the future? The right to criticize leaders is part of our fundamental freedoms, and this has been recognized in our constitution. Our constant emphasis has been that all leaders are answerable to the people. It is natural that if the people themselves decide to exercise their freedoms, they can make those in charge answerable to their rightful demands. This freedom is a direct result of the Islamic revolution, and it should not be imagined that any change in leadership could deprive our people of this right.

The Western media portray Iran's youth as disaffected and unhappy with social progress and often point to inherent contradictions in a religious democracy. Can an Islamic republic be democratic and representative of its people? The outlook of Islam during the revolution resulted in democracy and social and political freedom and led to the important progress we have had in the scientific and technological fields. The confusion lies in the fact that in the West there is a tendency to interpret democracy solely on the basis of Western values, and this has created the notion that Islam is incompatible with democracy. And actions by certain narrow-minded and hawkish groups who, in the name of Islam, peddle their poisonous goods to the world have added to the misunderstanding. Our effort is twofold: for the correct and humanitarian interpretation of Islam, and to demonstrate the true relationship between Islam and democracy.

The prevailing Western view of Islam is that it is far too strict, particularly when it comes to women's freedoms. In Iran, women may have many of the same freedoms they might have in the West; however, the issue of the *hijab*, the

mandatory covering of the hair in public, is a flash point with both feminists and the general public. Do you think that Iranian women consider themselves less than free solely because of the *hijab*? *Hijab* is a fundamental Islamic principle, and Muslim women, being Muslim, freely choose the *hijab*. Of course, it is possible that narrow views and inherited tastes and opinions of the past could contribute to stricter controls in this matter. But in the meantime, there is this belief that Muslim women, while adhering to the *hijab* and dignity and chastity, can find the doors of opportunity and progress open to them. The kind of *hijab* that in society has effectively become law is respected on the basis that it is the duty of any citizen to obey the law. Of course, the government is not authorized to interfere in the strictly private lives of its citizens.

President Bush has made it clear in many speeches that he doesn't believe that America is at war with Islam; however, there are many on the right in the United States who believe exactly that, and there are some who even call for it. Is Iran, or indeed Islam, a natural enemy of Western civilization?

This picture of Islam—a picture that portrays Islam in confrontation with and at war with the West—is not only not a reality, but it seems to be manufactured by a few Western politicians to create confusion, with the ultimate goal being the continued domination of the Islamic world by the West. As has been stated many times, fundamentalism has roots in both Islam and the West, and of course what is happening is not a war between Islam and the West but a war between fundamentalism on one side and fundamentalism on the other. Both Islam and Christianity, both Eastern civilization and Western civilization, have exceptional capacities for creating peace, understanding, and justice. But unfortunately, at present fundamentalists on both sides are the most active.

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Lewinsky, hawkish foreign-policy experts in Washington were quietly planning the destruction of Saddam Hussein. Realizing that toppling Saddam couldn't happen overnight, they created a strategy for the long run. It had four parts: The hawks needed to make the intellectual case for regime change; they needed to obtain congressional support for their plan; they needed to enlist Iraqi exiles who could testify to the horrors of Saddam's regime and possibly serve as a credible opposition force; and they needed to win converts within the executive branch—true believers who would then plant the seeds at the Pentagon, the State Department, and the National Security Council.

In 1997 three powerful, prominent conservatives formed a Washington organization called the Project for the New American Century (PNAC). They soon got several hard-line Republicans and even a Democrat or two to sign on to the PNAC's first major product, a manifesto urging President Clinton to abandon the policy of containing Saddam Hussein and to implement a strategy for removing him. Many of the signers were neocons—conservatives who'd split from both the right and the left and were advocating long-term American-led restructuring of the Middle East, and the call of the manifesto was echoed in *The Weekly Standard*, the magazine that had become the mouthpiece of the neocon movement.

The *Standard* and the PNAC were small, but they were staffed by heavy hitters with connections to key members of Congress, and their efforts quickly paid off. In the fall of 1998, Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act, which called on the United States to provide nearly \$100 million in aid, including arms, to Iraqi dissidents. The act was crucial, because it stated clearly that "the policy of the United States [was] to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein." This meant it was now legal to work with groups inside and outside Iraq to foment regime change, even though Anthony Zinni, America's own military commander in the Persian Gulf at the time, dismissed the plan as a potential catastrophe.

After George W. Bush won the election in 2000, many of the men and women who'd signed the PNAC manifesto formally entered government. By 2001 the Pentagon had set up an internal intelligence-gathering cell focused on documenting links between Iraq and terrorist networks. The intel gatherers relied in part on information gained from Iraqi exiles who had themselves been funded by Pentagon allies in Congress. They'd formed a perfect circle. Now the only thing needed to get the American public to support spilling blood in the Middle East was a triggering event. September 11 could not have served them better. (continued on page 258)