

## **CNN: Transcript of interview with Iranian President Mohammad Khatami [Excerpt]**

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CHRISTIANE AMANPOUR: Mr. President, a month ago you announced that you had a historic message to deliver to the people of America. I understand that message will take the form of a short address and then we'll discuss the issues.

PRESIDENT KHATAMI: In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. At the outset, I would like to congratulate all free and noble women and men especially the followers of Jesus Christ (peace be upon him), on the occasion of the New Year. I take as a good omen the concurrence of the Christian New Year with the Islamic month of Ramadan, the month of edification and self- restraint that has been the goal of all divine prophets.

We are at the close of the 20th century, leaving behind a century full of inequality, violence, and conflict. We pray to the Almighty to enable us to begin a new century of humanity, understanding, and durable peace, so that all humanity would enjoy the blessings of life. Once again I would like to present my felicitations to all the followers of Jesus Christ, to all human beings, and particularly to the American people.

I have said earlier that I respect the great American people. In this short span of time, I wish to briefly present my analysis of the American civilization so that my remarks would not be taken as political nicety or a mere play on words.

The American civilization is worthy of respect. 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 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. The reason why the American people respect this rock is that it was the place where the Puritan pilgrims first landed. From then on, the Americans celebrate the last Thursday of November as Thanksgiving Day, thanking God for this success bestowed upon them.

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 U.S. But the American nation has never celebrated their arrival and never considered it to be the beginning of their civilization. The Puritans constituted a religious sect whose vision and characteristics, in addition to worshipping God, was in harmony with republicanism, democracy, and freedom.

They found the European climate too restrictive for the implementation of their ideas and thoughts.

Unfortunately, in the 16th, 17th, and even 18th centuries, there was a serious clash between religion and liberty. In my opinion, one of the biggest tragedies in human history is this confrontation between religion and liberty which is to the detriment of religion, liberty, and the

human beings who deserve to have both. The Puritans desired a system which combined the worship of God and human dignity and freedom.

This civilization was founded in New England and gradually spread to the entire America and it even clashed with certain evil trends which has 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 which was Abraham Lincoln, the strong and fair-minded American president.

This civilization is best described by the renowned French sociologist Alexi de Toqueville who spent some two years in the U.S. in the 19th century and wrote the valuable book entitled Democracy in America, which I am sure most Americans have read. This book reflects the virtuous and human side of this civilization. In his view, the significance of this civilization is in the fact that liberty found religion as a cradle for its growth, and religion found protection of liberty as its divine calling. Therefore, liberty and faith never clashed. And as we see, even today Americans are a religious people. Therefore, the Anglo- American approach to religion relies on the principle that religion and liberty are consistent and compatible. I believe that if humanity is looking for happiness, it should combine religious spirituality with the virtues of liberty.

And it is for this reason that I say I respect the American nation because of their great civilization. This respect is due to two reasons: the essence and pillars of the Anglo- American civilization and the dialogue among the civilizations.

You are cognizant of the great heritage of the Iranian nation with its glorious civilization and culture. Irans glorious civilization was concurrent with the Greek city states and the Roman Empire. After the advent of Islam, the Iranians ardently embraced it. The blend of Iranian talents and the sublime Islamic teachings was a miracle. Without intending to deny the share of other nations in the formation of the Islamic civilization, I believe the great Iranian civilization had a major role in developing and promoting the Islamic system.

Over the past two centuries, the Iranian nation has striven to establish liberty, independence and a noble way of life. The Constitutional Movement colonialism. Ultimately, the Islamic Revolution had-and should have-two directions: First, an interpretation of religion which couples religiosity with liberty. Of course, now that four centuries have passed since the beginning of the American civilization, human experience has taught us that prosperous life should hinge on three pillars: religiosity, liberty, and justice. These are the assets and aspirations of the Islamic Revolution as it enters the 21st century.

In terms of the dialogue of civilizations, we intend to benefit from the achievements and experiences of all civilizations, Western and non-Western, and to hold dialogue with them. The closer the pillars and essences of these two civilizations are, the easier the dialogue would become. With our revolution, we are experiencing a new phase of reconstruction of civilization. We feel that what we seek is what the founders of the American civilization were also pursuing four centuries ago. This is why we sense an intellectual affinity with the essence of the American civilization.

Second, there is the issue of the 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.

Finally, I should refer to the struggles of the Iranian people over the last two centuries which culminated in the quest for independence during the Islamic Revolution launched by Imam Khomeini. When Imam Khomeini launched the revolution, Iran was in a terrible condition. In other words, the Iranian nation had been humiliated and its fate was decided by others. You know that a remarkable feature of Imam Khomeini's struggle was his fight against capitulation which the Shah was forced to ratify making the American advisors immune from prosecution in Iran.

This was the worst humiliation for our people. They rose up, fought for independence, and emerged victorious. Of course, the war of the revolution was one of words not weapons. We, therefore, endeavored to obtain a novel experience of religion and to gain independence. Both these features are salient in the American civilization and we feel close to them.

But here I have to express pity over a tragedy which has occurred. Unfortunately, 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 of domination had three setbacks: One was severe damages that it incurred upon the deprived and oppressed nations, including our own. The other setback was that 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. When the policies for domination were implemented in the name of the American people, the nations lost their trust in the Americans. This represents a grave damage done by the U.S. policies on the American nation. The Third and most important of these setbacks is that what was implemented was done in name of a great people that had risen for freedom. I feel that the American politicians should realize this fact and adjust themselves with the standards of Anglo-American and American civilization and at least apologize to their own people because of the approach they have adopted.

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