

*Khatami's Trip to the US Begins a New People- to-People Dialogue* Hooshang Amirahmadi

On September 12th, former President Mohammad Khatami completed a 12-day private speaking tour across the United States, which took him to New York, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Charlottesville, VA, and Boston. He arrived in New York on Aug. 31, just as U.N. Ambassador John Bolton was declaring that the deadline had passed for Iran to comply with the U.N. demand that Iran suspends uranium enrichment. While in the US, Khatami spoke at the United Nations, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the Washington National Cathedral, the University of Virginia, and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He also discussed his views in private gatherings at MIT and Georgetown University and gave several interviews to the American and European media.

The American Iranian Council believes that the tour was successful in achieving its main objective: to initiate a sincere dialogue (and particularly an interfaith dialogue) with certain private non- governmental groups in the United States. It was also successful in indirectly suggesting that dialogue and negotiation between the United States and Iran would be the best ways to settle the current dispute between the two great nations. More importantly, the tour made clear to President Bush that the voices coming from Tehran represent many different viewpoints and that the Islamic Republic is not a monolith. This last point is especially important, as the Bush Administration has long viewed the Islamic regime as an outlaw in its entirety. By contrast, the Clinton Administration always made a distinction between the best and the worst sides of the regime in Tehran. Both positions are wrong as factional politics differ on issues, and on US-Iran matters the truth is somewhere in the middle!

In a private discussion with President Khatami, I asked him whether he plans to ask Tehran to reciprocate American hospitality by extending invitations to former Presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. He said he was in favor of doing so, but that he lacked the authority to make such invitations. In his own personal capacity, he said, he has communicated his desire to these former presidents to establish dialogue with them. I pointed out that it was not fair that the Iranian authorities use American hospitality to deliver their messages but refuse to reciprocate. I also pointed to the fact that the US has allowed Iran to establish an extensive special interests section in Washington DC, despite the fact that Tehran has refused to reciprocate. President Khatami expressed hope that such imbalances will be remedied in due course.

We at the AIC urge the Iranian authorities seriously to consider reciprocal exchanges of this sort, and to help expand the people-to-people dialogue that is now gradually taking shape and becoming increasingly acceptable to the Bush Administration. While President Bush views the current government in Tehran with suspicion, he is becoming increasingly persuaded that establishing cultural and academic exchanges with Iran is ultimately in the best interests of the United States. We believe such exchanges are also in the best interests of Iran and hope that they will rapidly expand before obstacles develop and the enemies of relations between the two countries divert the course again towards a more hostile environment between them. The time has come for Tehran to reciprocate American goodwill, and that time is now.