

## The Islamic World and Modern Challenges

Statement by H.E. Seyyed Muhammad Khatami, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Chairman of the Eighth Session of the Islamic Summit Conference, Tehran, 9 December 1997.

I wonder whether to commence my words with a statement of woes and misfortunes that are, or with the joys and delights that are to be. Is it not a fundamental objective of the Islamic Conference to arrive at common remedies for the woes of Muslim countries, and the attainment of a stature and position befitting them? Is it not to achieve this lofty ideal that the present should be prevailed over and misfortunes remedied? No pain and affliction can be cured unless it is properly diagnosed in the first place, then the best solution is sought after with discretion and reflection, and finally, acted upon with resolve and firmness.

Our predicament is that the Islamic Ummah, once a flag-bearer of knowledge, thought, and civilization, has in recent centuries relapsed into weakness and backwardness and worse still, has even failed, due to the consequent painful state of passivity vis-à-vis the ostentatious dominant civilization of the time, to properly utilize the fruits of this civilization.

Our centuries-old passivity is the outcome of the decline of a once shining human civilization, whose achievements and remnants are still praiseworthy and to which the dominant world civilization is truly indebted. Today, the recreation of the replica of the old civilization is neither possible, for its time is long gone, nor desirable, even if it were possible. Considering civilization as the product of man's responses to his questions about existence, the world, and himself and also as representing the sum total of his efforts in the way of meeting his needs, then what is constant in man is his quest for knowing as well as his need and longing.

However, the form and content of the questions and needs change according to time and place. Civilizations continue to live as long as they possess the capacity to respond to the ever-renewing questions and the ever-changing needs of man, otherwise they are doomed to demise. As such, civilization, as a human affair, is subject to birth, development, and demise.

The questions and needs of man in our time are in many ways different from those of our predecessors. Our passivity in recent centuries in the face of Western civilization—which is itself a natural response to the quest of Western man—is due to the fact that for various reasons we have ceased to ask. The absence of question leads to the absence of thought, which in turn leads to inevitable passivity and subjugation vis-à-vis others.

What is important, though, is to discern that such passivity, indolence, and backwardness is not our preordained destiny. The people who once created one of the most glorious civilizations in history still enjoy the potential to create another, provided, of course, that they lend themselves to reason and reflection, and this cannot be accomplished without the realization of the following:

1—Return, with reflection, to the historical self which on the one hand is rooted in eternal Divine inspiration and on the other, carries a unique historical and cultural potentiality nurtured by the past.

2—Proper and deep understanding of the present time. In this respect, it is imperative to discern that between Islamic civilization or to be exact, civilization of Muslims—and our life today—there stands what is called 'Western civilization', a civilization whose accomplishments are not few, and whose negative consequences, particularly for nonWesterners' are plentiful.

Our era is an era of the preponderance of Western culture and civilization, an understanding of which is imperative. However, for such an understanding to be effective and useful, it is essential to go beyond its surface and the superficialities and to reach its theoretical basis and the fundamentals of its values.

Recognition of our past is equally imperative, not in order to return and stay in the past, which is pure regression, but rather for the rediscovery of the essence of our identity and its refinement in the mentalities and habits hardened by time and place, as well as for rational criticism of the past in order to find proper support for today's honor and dignity and a platform to go beyond the present towards a future more splendid than the past.

Undoubtedly, we will only succeed in moving forward along this path if we possess the requisite fairness and capacity to utilize the positive scientific, technological, and social accomplishments of Western civilization, a stage we must inevitably go through to reach the future. Painful and bitter though we find the passivity and backwardness of Muslim countries, nevertheless the mere happy reminder that we can transform our destiny through awareness, resolve, and solidarity is a matter of elation and delight.

We can certainly move the present as well as future generations towards a new Islamic civilization through setting our eyes on horizons farther away, being together with understanding and helping each other as brothers. For this to become a reality, all of us must put our minds to the realization of an 'Islamic civil society' in our respective countries.

The civil society which we want to promote and perfect in our society and which we recommend to other Islamic societies is fundamentally different from the 'civil society' that is rooted in Greek philosophical thinking and Roman political tradition and which, having gone through the Middle Ages, has acquired its peculiar orientation and identity in the modern world. The two, however, are not necessarily in conflict and contradiction in all their manifestations and consequences. This is exactly why we should never be oblivious to the judicious acquisition of the positive accomplishments of Western civil society.

While Western civil society, historically as well as , theoretically, is derived from the Greek city-state and the later Roman political system, the civil society we have in mind has its origin, from a historical and theoretical point of view, in *Madinat ul-Nabi*. Changing *Yathreb* to *Madinatun-Nabi* was not just a change of name, nor did the change from *Ayyam ul-jahiliah* (Days of Ignorance) to *Ayyam-Ullah'* (Days of Allah) represent just an alteration of designation. *Madinah* is not soil and territory just as *Yaum-Ullah* does not stand for time.

With *Madinat ul-Nabi* and *Ayyam-Ullah* there emerged in the early days of Islam a moral geography and history that ushered in the beginning of a new outlook, character, and culture. This culture, with its unique and distinct view of existence and man and their origin, has for centuries lived in the depths of the soul and collective memory of Muslims. Now, more than ever before, Muslims need to take abode in their own common home.

Despite the fact that ethnic, geographical, and social differences among Muslims have over time given different semblances and flavors to the Muslim individual, *Madinat ul-Nabi* remains as our eternal moral abode and *Yaum-Ullah* continues to flow as current time through all moments of our lives, or else they ought to. *Madinah* emerged through *hegira* (exodus) from the land of polytheism and oppression, as *Yaum-Ullah* began as the result of a break with the time of *Jahiliah* (darkness) and entry into the sacred realm of Divine 'Time and Presence'.

Taking abode in the 'common Islamic home' does not mean regression, rejection of scientific achievements, withdrawal from the modern world or seeking conflict with others. On the contrary, it is only after such a return to the common identity that we can live in peace and tranquility with other peoples and nations.

Living in peace and security can only be realized when one fully understands the culture and thinking but also the concerns as well as the ways and manners of others. Sophisticated understanding of the cultural and moral dimensions of other societies and nations entails establishment of a dialogue with them.

A genuine meaningful discourse can take place only when the parties concerned find themselves in their own genuine true position, otherwise the dialogue between an alienated imitator and others is meaningless and certainly void of any good or benefit. Seeking abode in the common Islamic *home*,

*Madinatun Nabi*—is tantamount to the assumption by Muslims of their true position; that is, securing their true Islamic identity.

In the civil society that we espouse, although it is centered around the axis of Islamic thinking and culture, personal or group dictatorship or even the tyranny of the majority and elimination of the minority has no place. In such a society, man, due to the very attribute of being human, is venerated and revered and his rights respected. Citizens of an Islamic civil society enjoy the right to determine their own destiny, supervise the governance and hold the government accountable.

The government in such a society is the servant of the people and not their master, and in every eventuality, is accountable to the people whom God has entitled to determine their own destiny. Our civil society is not a society where only Muslims are entitled to rights and are considered citizens. Rather, all individuals are entitled to rights, within the framework of law and order. Defending such rights ranks among the important fundamental duties of the government.

Respect for human rights and compliance with their relevant norms and standards is not a posture adopted out of political expediency or conformity with others. Rather it is the natural consequence of our religious teachings and precepts. Amir Al-Mu'menin Imam Ali (AS) enjoined his representative to observe the principle of justice and equity as regards all people and not Muslims. only, for 'they are of two groups; a group of them is your brothers in faith and the other is like you in creation'.

Our civil society seeks neither to dominate others nor to submit to domination. It recognizes the right of other nations to self-determination and access to the necessary means for an honorable living. Determined not to yield to force and coercion and in its drive to stand on its own feet, our civil society, as instructed by the Holy Qur'an, considers itself entitled to acquire all requisite means for material and technical progress and authority. The rejection of domination and subservience no doubt means the rejection of force and duplicity in relations among nations, and their replacement with logic and the principle of mutual respect in international relations.

The civil society we champion is based on our collective identity whose attainment requires the continuous and ceaseless endeavors of intellectuals and thinkers. It *is* not a treasure that can be unearthed overnight; rather, it is a fountain of life and morality from whose constant effusion we will benefit.

Therefore, enjoyment of this treasure is gradual and is dependent on scrupulous cognizance and re-examination of our *heritage* as well as our doctrinal and intellectual tradition on the *one* hand, and sophisticated scientific and philosophical understanding of the modern world on the other. Hence, it is the thinkers and men of, learning who is pivotal in this movement and play the central role: Our success along this path depends upon politics serving thought and virtue and not acting as a confined and restrictive framework for them.

What I have just stated is not an exercise in imagination but the panoramic outlook of a future situation, whose achievement is possible and for whose realization it is our urgent duty to strive. We are of the belief that movement along this clear path has commenced in Iran thanks to the victory of the Islamic Revolution.

The honorable people of Iran are pursuing their way with self-confidence and through perseverance in the face of difficulties and struggling against internal restrictive and regressive habits and mindsets on the one hand, and external pressure and conspiracies on the other. Along this path, they extend their hands, in fraternity and cooperation, to all Muslim nations and states and also to all nations and states who are committed to the principle of mutual respect.

Regaining Islamic honor and dignity, which God has discerned for us, and acquiring the requisite capabilities to claim our due share in the present world and in the creation of a new civilization, or at least, actively participating in the genesis of the civilization that will inevitably replace the existing one, we Muslims should rely on two important factors: one, wisdom and reason, and the other, cohesion and solidarity. In order to realize these two prodigious marvels can there be anything for us but recourse to the Holy Qur'an—the eternal heritage of the Glorious Prophet of Islam?

Which Divine Book or Message more than the Qur'an has so much emphasized reasoning, meditation, reflection, contemplation, and deliberation on existence and on the world, and on learning from the fate of past peoples and communities? Furthermore, against all 'racial, ethnic, linguistic and even religious differences, the Holy Qur'an is the most trustworthy anchor of bond and unity among us Muslims, provided, of course, that we appreciate it and rely on it, with wisdom, and enlighten with its bright rays our life today as well as our future horizons, without rigidity and habitually on the one hand, and a sense of inferiority vis-à-vis others on the other hand.

At this juncture and on the occasion of this august assembly, I briefly present to the distinguished audience, with deep fraternal feeling, the priorities that Muslim countries need to address and find remedies for, on which I seek the assistance of the conference.

## **1) Towards a New and just World Order**

Despite the efforts of American politicians to impose their will on others, as the remaining pole of power, around whose interests the world should gravitate, international relations are in the process of transition from the previous bi-polar system to a new stage of history. In our view, a new order based on pluralism is taking shape in the world that, God willing, will not be the monopoly of any single power.

What is imperative for us Muslim countries—is that while valiantly resisting all kinds of expansionism, we should strive to secure our proper position and stature in contributing to the shaping of the new world

political order and new international relations. This entails understanding, planning, and common endeavor.

It is imperative that Muslim countries should engage in a meticulous evaluation of their position and capabilities, and upon undertaking an objective assessment of their external environment, proceed to adopt appropriate policies to arrive at political solidarity and consolidation of all 'their internal resources, and thereby strive towards ensuring effective participation in international decision making. Initially, relying on principles, common heritage and interests as well as on negotiation, we should strive to bring our views closer together in all areas and then create a chain of well-connected complementing possibilities through proper utilization of capabilities.

## **2) Security and Peace in the Region and the World**

Parallel to joint efforts towards fulfilling the historical mission of the Islamic world in contributing to the shaping of a new humane world order, the full-fledged cooperation of Muslim countries towards the provision and preservation of world peace is an undeniable necessity.

However, the provision of security and lasting humane peace in the world entails that the cold-war paradigm, which was based on the necessity of the existence—for public opinion—of an actual or imagined external enemy, be cast aside. It is unfortunate though that certain expansionist tendencies in the world are seeking to create an imaginary enemy, of Islam.

It is, therefore, incumbent upon us all to strive, through effective and continual participation in the promotion of peace and security at regional and global levels, to strengthen confidence, reduce security concerns and moreover, render ineffective the wrong inculcations by the enemies of Islam. We should be vigilant, however, about what is most threatening to our security, that is, the trend of increasing threats against the very political, cultural, and economic existence of Muslims, particularly because the extension of the range of these threats, law, pursuit of state terrorism, and development of nuclear weapons, seriously threatens peace and security in the region.

In the sensitive and strategic region of the Persian Gulf, the regional states themselves should undertake to preserve security and peace. In our view, the presence of foreign forces and armada in this sensitive area serves not only as a source of tension and insecurity, but also has tragic environmental consequences.

What is happening in the dear land of Afghanistan is indeed a massive human tragedy, as well as a fertile ground for foreign intervention and disruption of security and stability in the whole region. Muslim countries, and for that matter, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, should insist that there is no military solution to the Afghan problem.

The painful predicament in this country should be resolved, initially through negotiation with the parties involved and finally, by the Afghan people themselves. The Islamic Conference is expected to help guide this country towards peace and tranquility through inviting all the parties involved to engage in negotiation.

The situation in Iraq, particularly in the north, is also a cause for concern. While inviting Iraq to cooperate properly with the United Nations, we believe that foreign intervention, particularly conflict and war in the northern area that has led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians, has created the grounds for widespread insecurity in the region. We attach great importance to the territorial integrity of Iraq and declare our readiness to undertake all humanitarian measures in this important country of the region.

The dangerous designs for foreign infiltration and penetration, particularly by Israel, in various parts of our region are a serious cause for concern, underlining the necessity of vigilance on the part of all countries of the region. We welcome the active and self-assertive presence of the states of Central Asia and the Caucasus in the process of independence and development towards the honor and dignity of the Islamic world.

At this point, while welcoming the trend of peace in the friendly and fraternal nation of Tajikistan, I deem it necessary to express our gratitude to President Rahmonov and Mr. Abdullah Noori, the chairman of the National Reconciliation Commission, for their cooperation towards the Conference to exert its utmost efforts in order to prevent the spread of ethnic differences as well as to strengthen the process of peace in this country.

Some Islamic countries are currently facing foreign threats and conspiracies and are also burdened with difficulties emanating from internal differences. The Islamic Conference in general and Islamic countries in particular should declare their solemn support for the independence and interests of these countries as well as their respect for the wishes and aspirations of Muslim nations. Moreover, the Islamic Conference should act and move in a manner and direction that Muslims everywhere in the world, including Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries, find in the organization a source of confidence and assured support.

In any eventuality, we should remain vigilant vis-à-vis visible as well as invisible sources of threat against our security. We believe that the Islamic countries have reached the requisite stage of maturity to undertake, through understanding and conclusion of collective agreements and treaties, to preserve their own security as well as that of the region in which they live. In this particular connection, the Islamic Republic of Iran, while emphasizing cooperation among states in the Persian Gulf region for the preservation of regional peace and stability, considers the conclusion of collective defense-security arrangements in the Persian Gulf an assured step towards the establishment of lasting security in the region and towards the defense of the common interests and concerns of all the countries and nations

concerned.

### **3)Comprehensive, balanced, and Sustainable Development of Islamic Countries**

Development constitutes another propitious basis for the preservation of the security, stability, and independence of Islamic societies as well as for the honor and dignity of Muslim nations. In our view, proper and preferred development is comprehensive, balanced, and sustainable; it should ensure participation of all individuals, groups, and segments of society, including women and youth. In development defined as such, the human being is the central factor, whose enjoyment of the material and spiritual blessings of life constitutes the very fundamental objective of development.

In order to achieve such development, we should, first and foremost, define and devise the proper patterns of development compatible with the particularities of our respective societies and the Islamic world. We should also acknowledge that no country could successfully overcome all the hurdles of development on its own.

Further, it is imperative that Islamic countries undertake a comprehensive, precise, and scientific assessment and evaluation of their capabilities and capacities, and help create through utilization of their respective comparative advantages—a ring of interconnected links of complementary developmental undertakings across the Islamic world.

Simultaneously, they should also properly exploit their God-given assets and resources, through efficient management and reliance on knowledge, technology, and manpower, as well as through suitable cooperation and exchange in scientific, technical, and economic fields and through exchange of specialized and skilled labor. The Islamic world will undoubtedly develop into an important pole of power, progress, and authority in the present as well as the future world through adoption and use of these steps and measures.

The existing religious bonds, spiritual affinities, and common cultural heritage among Muslim countries, once complemented with scientific, economic, political, technical, and cultural interaction and exchange, will certainly provide the requisite material and moral foundations and pillars for the establishment of a progressive, advancing and tranquil society and will bring them collective development and security.

### **4) Reassessment of the Role of the Organization of the Islamic**

## **Conference**

The Organization of the Islamic Conference, as the only universal multilateral organization in the Islamic world, plays an important role in the accomplishment of the aforementioned and, in general, the realization of the fundamental objectives of 'participation, dialogue, security, and development'. In light of the steadily growing role of religion in general and Islam in particular in recent decades in explaining and shaping human relationships, Muslims all over the world are well-justified to look upon the Organization of the Islamic Conference as a refuge and source to meet their supranational Islamic and human needs and aspirations.

The Organization of the Islamic Conference, with thirty years of experience, enjoys the requisite potential resources for a more effective presence at the international level. Hence, it is natural that we now take up the question of looking for new approaches and mechanisms to strengthen its organizational structure as well as to make more efficient its decisions and ensure their implementation.

Under the present circumstances, it is incumbent upon the Organization of the Islamic Conference to assume a more active and innovative presence internationally, particularly in the resolution of current conflicts among member states or the crises imposed on them from outside.

The Organization's initiative in defending the rights of the honorable people of Bosnia stands out as a good start for a serious change in the organization's approach to international difficulties and crises. Preservation and continuation of such a sensitivity and active support of the rights and interests of Muslim societies and Muslim communities and minorities in non-member countries, along with constructive engagement in finding a solution to such chronic cases as that of Kashmir, is imperative for the institutionalization of a more pronounced role for the organization.

All of us should help the Organization of the Islamic Conference so that it can strive, more forcefully and unequivocally, towards a sincere and compassionate resolution of differences within the Islamic world. We should also support the organization, financially as well as politically, in discharging its mandate. At the same time, more vigorous attention to the fundamental and pressing problems and issues of the Islamic world on the part of the organization, along with the enhancement of the content of its decisions;—and further reinforcement of its plans and activities, will certainly make the organization more energetic and dynamic.'

And finally, in closing, I would like to express my gratitude once again to our dear guests and wish every success for this august gathering and greater achievements for the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

And let our last word be 'Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds'.  
'Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Creation, will be the last of our prayers'.

*Was-Salamu Alaikum Wa Rahmattullah.*

---

**Source URL:**

<https://www.al-islam.org/islam-dialogue-and-civil-society-sayyid-muhammad-khatami/islamic-world-and-modern-challenges#comment-0>