

Unmaking Enmity: America and Iran

AN INTERVIEW WITH TRITA PARSI

Trita Parsi is the founder and president of the National Iranian American Council and an expert on Iran's relations with Israel and the United States. He holds a doctorate in international relations from Johns Hopkins University, as well as master's degrees in international relations and economics from Uppsala University and the Stockholm School of Economics, respectively. Parsi currently teaches international relations as an adjunct professor at Georgetown University. His most recent books from Yale University Press are *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran* (2015) and *Losing an Enemy: Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of Diplomacy* (2017).

Born in Iran and raised in Sweden after his family was displaced by the 1979 revolution, Trita Parsi came to the United States in the early 2000s to write his doctoral thesis under Francis Fukuyama at Johns Hopkins University. In the time since then, he has quickly established himself as an leading scholar of Iranian international relations, with a rare degree of access to the diplomatic establishments of the United States, Iran, and Israel alike. Parsi's first book *The Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States*, was acclaimed not only for its revelation of previously unreported historical events, but for its demonstration that the countries' path toward enmity was not an inevitable one—and accordingly still might be retraced. For this scholarly achievement, Parsi won the 2010 Grawemeyer Award for Ideas Improving World Order, a prize awarded annually by the University of Louisville

whose previous recipients include Ernest May, Richard Neustadt, and Mikhail Gorbachev. In recent years, Parsi has emerged as a prominent defender of the 2015 nuclear accord with Iran, which he helped to bring about as an advisor to the Obama Administration and whose negotiation he subsequently documented in *Losing an Enemy: Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of Diplomacy* (2017).

The following interview took place on November 1, 2017.

A Discussion with Trita Parsi

You have observed that Iranians have voted for the most moderate available candidate in three consecutive presidential elections. How much promise does this trend hold for the future of democracy in Iran?

Trita Parsi: In Iran there's an understanding that, unfortunately, whether you like it or not, democratic elections will at times—perhaps often—be a choice between bad and worse. And they have tried worse, essentially not voting at all. It didn't work out. That's how Ahmadinejad was elected in 2005 and it became very clear that bad is better than worse. As they don't have many other avenues for change, voting is one of the few avenues that is nonviolent, relatively cost-free, and doesn't have a significant negative side, whereas all other paths, except for gradual societal change, carry with them tremendous risks. They're in a region in which they've seen not only how American sponsored democratic progress has gone completely backwards in Iraq and in Afghanistan, but also how indigenous Arab uprisings have not produced any positive results with the exception of in Tunisia. But in those circumstances the distinction between bad and worse is much clearer than in the 2016 American elections. So you see a clear pattern in how they're voting, and that they vote to a much greater degree than in most Western democracies. It's not, in my view, because

they like their system or because they're trying to legitimize their system. It's because they don't see other paths that have the same likelihood of success combined with a low cost

You've written about an institutional enmity between the United States and Iran, a mutual hostility that has gone beyond real conflicts of interest to become something more entrenched. What political incentives sustain this enmity, and what might be done to overcome it?

Trita Parsi: It is really interesting to see how the incentive structure within both governments has essentially led to a scenario where enmity has become perpetual. One of the fastest ways to advance as a State Department official, and to even be able to get hired by the NSC (National Security Council) has been to work on sanctions against Iran. And there, you're not going to create huge benefits for your career by figuring out how to make a diplomatic strategy succeed. Most of the time, it is about to make life as nasty as possible for the other side. The same holds true on the Iranian side—it's simply part of the incentive structure. This is a very common problem; it's not only the US and Iran. The US and Iran case has just led to an institutional enmity that has become self-perpetual.

Take Israel, for instance. An Israeli general told me part of the reason why there is such a tilt towards focusing on worst-case scenarios is because no one remembers when you're wrong, but that one time that you're right you'll get four stars very quickly. So the incentive structure is to constantly think in those terms because there's no cost to it. Anyone who follows Washington knows how little cost you pay being for completely wrong in a prediction concerning foreign policy and geopolitics. If you were a stockbroker, you would be out of a job very quickly if you were as wrong as the people in Washington. So I would say that this is a systemic problem, one that's not just limited to the US and Iran but which has become

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particularly prevalent in the case of US-Iran sanctions.

With the Trump administration taking apparent steps to back out of the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, there's widespread expectation that the accord may collapse. Is there a third way between the present agreement and a return to international sanctions?

Trita Parsi: The US could try to re-impose sanctions. I think what could happen then is for the Europeans to decide to stand very firm, reject the American sanctions, protect their companies, and threaten countersanctions on the blocking mechanisms. If that succeeded, the deal potentially could survive, but it would be a deal without the United States. If the Europeans cave to the American pressure, then there's no incentive left for the Iranians to be in compliance, because they're not getting any benefits of being in compliance. Then we will likely see them walking out of the deal, and at that point you would probably see them restart their nuclear program. Short of that, I would say the first thing the Trump Administration is going to do is adopt a much tougher regional policy outside of the nuclear deal, rather than going against the nuclear deal itself.

There's no reason to believe that the type of international unity around principles and goals that characterized sanctions on Iran before 2015 can be recreated by this administration. Even if we could say that President Trump is an exceptionally competent president, which clearly is not the scenario we're in, you would have to consider how you are going to re-impose sanctions without recompense. We don't have a functioning State Department right now. The amount of work it took to convince so many countries that had longstanding trade relations with Iran to forsake that economic benefit to go along with sanctions was immense. The Spanish, with all their other



Trita Parsi is the founder of the National Iranian American Council. Trita Parsi 2017.

economic problems, were forced to buy oil on the stock market, which essentially meant they paid 20% more compared to what they were paying for when they were importing from Iran. That's a pretty heavy price. How are you going to get a country to accept it? Well, the Obama Administration was able because they managed to convince the world that Iran was at fault. There had been a genuine diplomatic effort by the United States in 2009, which the Iranians had rejected. Right now, the overwhelming consensus outside of Israel and Saudi Arabia is that Trump is at fault. So the possibility of getting other countries to go along with a policy that is economically costly for them is minimal.

One of your primary criticisms of the Trump administration's newly inaugurated policy in the Middle East has been the president's adoption and promotion of Saudi interests as his own interests. Could you provide some examples of that policy in action?

Trita Parsi: The first one is that I have not seen any vision presented by Trump as to what he wants the US's policy to be for the Middle East. It just seems to be a policy of opposing Iran regardless to what Iran does. Which makes sense if you're Riyadh because they're in a rivalry with Iran, and it absolutely makes sense for Riyadh to get a superpower on its side. The

Iranians would have done the same thing if they had the option, which they don't. They don't have the same need because they're much more powerful, but nevertheless you cannot blame the Saudis for trying, you can only blame Trump for allowing them to succeed. I don't see what the benefit is for the United States; I don't see the Trump administration even trying to explain that to the American people. They've gotten away with it because the media isn't asking what's in it for the US here. Which is particularly fascinating mindful of the fact that this is a president who says he's going to put America first, and that everything he does is aligned with that agenda. How is this aligned with that agenda?

Let me give you an example: guess the number of jobs in the entire coal industry which has become some sort of sacrosanct thing, an indicator as to whether we are making America great or not. There are 76,000 jobs in that entire industry. 76,000 in the entire industry. The Boeing deal that was signed as part of the nuclear deal, in which the Iranians are massively buying American airplanes again for the first time since 1955—is itself 41.6 billion dollars with subcontractors. That will support roughly 100,000 jobs. And these are not coal miners. Nothing against coal miners, but

Parsi at the 2010 United Nations Association of the United States of America (UNA-USA) Mid-Atlantic Regional Conference. Wikimedia Commons 2010.



building airplanes requires a completely different level of education and expertise. These are high-end jobs, whereas coal mining jobs are essentially a dying trade at this point. Killing the nuclear deal will kill a minimum of 100,000 jobs in the manufacturing sector and, as you'll remember, Trump was big about reviving America's manufacturing industry. I can see why ending the deal would be good for Saudi Arabia and I'm more than open to being convinced as to why it would be good for the United States, but it's difficult when Trump hasn't even tried to explain how this is in the U.S.'s interest.

Is there an example of promoting Saudi interests aside from dissolving the Iran deal that you see the Trump administration pursuing?

Trita Parsi: I would point to his first trip to Saudi Arabia. The last five or six presidents all made their first international visits to Canada or Mexico, neither of which was eager to host Trump. Instead he goes to Saudi Arabia and he gets a hero's welcome. But again, he went there to re-adopt a policy, outside of the nuclear deal, that is all about isolating and containing Iran. Again, I can see why some regional powers who don't have the capacity to balance Iran themselves would see this to be in their benefit, but why this advances US interests has been unstated.

What would the Middle East look like with an Iran that is integrated, rather than contained?

Trita Parsi: I think a fully integrated Iran, which is going to take some time, would pave the way for a very different Iran. Let me give you an example. According to a study by Virginia Tech, Iran's middle class constituted roughly 60% of the population in 2015. That's still one of the bigger middle classes in the entire region, but it's only 60%. If the deal is fully implemented, if sanctions relief is actually working and not undermined by the Trump administration, the Virginia Tech economist calculates that Iran's economy would grow in such a way that by 2025, Iran's middle class will constitute roughly 85% of the population. It's

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not guaranteed, but a country that has 85% middle class is far more likely to be a status quo power, to find its economic interests to be rooted in stability in the region and state-to-state relations rather than acting through sub-state actors. Again, there's no guarantee, but it becomes far more likely. Not many states with that large of a middle class behave like Iran has behaved in the last 40 years. I think there is far greater promise in diplomacy than in thinking that just isolating Iran for another ten years is going to produce a dramatically different result than the isolation of the past four decades.

You have two careers, first as an academic expert on US-Iran relations, and second as the founder and president of the NIAC (National Iranian American Council). How do those two pursuits contribute to one another, and what steps have you taken to separate them to the extent that you've found separation to be necessary?

Trita Parsi: Well, separation is necessary in many different ways but not in all. I teach at Georgetown; that's my complete academic persona. I give several different courses, including one on geopolitics of the Middle East. There, of course, it's a completely academic setting. We have readings from all different sides and perspectives, and my personal opinions are either largely kept outside of that classroom, or very explicitly stated as my personal view. When it comes to writing books, they hold academic status, in the sense that they are published by Yale University Press. It doesn't mean that I don't have opinions or anything like that, but an academic work requires balance and scrutiny of all sides.

I do reject the notion, however, that you can't be an academic and at the same time be involved in policy. In fact, you see that all the time, on many different issues. Perhaps it's been a little bit more unusual in my case, because there are not a lot of people who have both personas in the field of US-Iran relations, but

you certainly have it in many other fields. I do believe that for the protection of the academic, in particular, you do need to separate them in specific areas such as teaching classes, but I think largely they have been mutually beneficial. My work through NIAC provided me the access to the White House and to the Iranian side that enabled me to write my books, and my academic work was also one of the reasons why the White House kept on calling me in for advice. So it is not an uncommon thing to be both an academic and an advocate, but it is important to be able to recognize how and when these roles need balance.

The war in Iraq and Syria is not over, but from the perspective of the United States it's very much changed with the dissolution of the Islamic State and the onset of an uneasy status quo with the Assad regime in place. How do you think the isolation or integration of Iran in these next few years will affect that situation?

Trita Parsi: My biggest fear is that if the US-Iran rivalry gets further intensified and untamed, particularly but not only as a result of what the Trump administration is doing with the nuclear deal, it will negatively affect other existing conflicts and potentially give birth to new areas of conflict. The US and Iran, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and other adversaries prefer to compete with each other on someone else's territory, which is why the Saudis and the Iranians are careful not to hit each other directly. Instead they ruined the entire country of Syria. I fear that behavior will be intensified if we move further towards confrontation and further away from a diplomatic process. ♦