
Persian Aversion

Treacherous Alliance:
The Secret Dealings of Israel,
Iran, and the United States

by Trita Parsi

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Reviewed by
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WHAT LIES at the heart of the conflict between Israel and Iran? The usual answer is the virulently anti-Semitic ideology of the Islamic Revolution, whose founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, sev-

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ered ties with Israel when he came to power in February 1979. *Treacherous Alliance*, a new book by Trita Parsi, offers a radically different explanation.

Parsi heads the National Iranian American Council, a Washington lobby seeking to “foster greater understanding between Iran and the United States.” *Treacherous Alliance* is an expansion of his 2006 Ph.D. dissertation at the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins. While hardly the first treatment of Israeli-Iranian relations, it is distinguished by the in-depth interviews Parsi conducted with 130 Israeli, Iranian, and American policymakers and analysts, offering a rare look behind diplomatic barriers erected nearly three decades ago.

Framed by an introduction and a conclusion containing policy prescriptions for the United States, *Treacherous Alliance* presents the nearly 60-year history of Israeli-Iranian relations in two parts, the division between them marked by the 1991 Gulf war and the more or less simultaneous end of the cold war. These two events, writes Parsi, were what turned Iran and Israel into the region’s most powerful rivals for preeminence.

Defying the conventional view, though, Parsi argues that the conflict between the two countries was “not sparked by an ideological difference, nor is it ideological fervor that keeps it alive today.” Instead, “the major transformations of Israeli-Iranian relations have all coincided” with large shifts in the geopolitical order. In *Treacherous Alliance*, he sets out to recount those transformations and assess responsibility for them.

PARSI’S NARRATIVE begins in 1947, with Iran’s vote in the United Nations against the partition of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states. Although one might have supposed the Shah would have welcomed the establishment of Israel as another non-Arab, pro-Western state in the

region, he was wary of angering his neighbors and therefore adopted a policy of “calculated ambivalence.” While never formally recognizing Israel, he offered de-facto recognition based on the two nations’ many common interests.

Despite numerous setbacks and betrayals along the way, Iran and Israel cooperated over the years to create a joint ballistic-missile program, finance an Israeli oil pipeline, forge a military counterweight to the states that lay between them, and undercut the threat from Iraq by supporting the Kurdish rebellion in that country. The Shah also facilitated the escape of thousands of Iraqi Jews. For its part, Israel presented Iran with highly valued agricultural know-how and training, intelligence on Egyptian military movements and planning, and schooling for Iran’s pilots, paratroopers, and artillery soldiers.

Admittedly, Parsi writes, things

changed in 1979, when the Islamic Revolution brought with it the seizure of American diplomatic hostages and a severe reversal in Iran’s policy toward Israel. But, he insists, Khomeini’s “venomous rhetoric against Israel was just that—words.” What with Saddam Hussein’s September 1980 invasion of Iran, and the eight years of war that followed, the Islamic Republic “could ill afford a confrontation with the Jewish state.” If anything, according to Parsi, Iran’s conduct in that war demonstrated the supremacy of its national interests over its pan-Islamic ones: casting ideology aside, Khomeini’s regime secretly purchased desperately needed arms from Israel.

As for Israel, many of its leaders believed Khomeini’s regime was destined to fall and hoped that, by ignoring his bellicose rhetoric, they could restore an old alliance and

weaken their common enemy—Iraq. Parsi quotes the alleged words of Yitzhak Rabin, then Israel’s defense minister, in October 1987: “Iran is Israel’s best friend, and we do not intend to change our position in relation to Tehran, because Khomeini’s regime will not last forever.” In any case, Parsi adds, how troublesome could Iran have been if Israel was arming it?

AFTER KHOMEINI’S death in 1989, Parsi continues, the surviving leaders of his war-torn regime sought to end their isolation and reestablish “the Shah’s economic and—to some extent—politico-military ties to the West.” Iran successfully secured the release of a number of American captives held in Lebanon by its proxy Hizballah, toned down its rhetoric against the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, lowered its profile on the Palestinian issue, and even cooperated with the American-led coalition during the 1991 Gulf war. Unfortunately, however, both Israel and the United States ignored these gestures—Washington, out of arrogance, stupidity, and bitter memories of the 1979 hostage crisis; Israel, out of calculated but short-sighted self-interest.

After Saddam’s army was driven out of Kuwait and crushed in 1991, Parsi explains, Israel no longer needed Iran as a check on the Iraqi threat; instead, it came to view the Islamic Republic as a strategic rival. Meanwhile, the collapse of the Soviet Union was seen by Israel as potentially undermining its strategic value to Washington, a value further eroded by the possibility of “a breakthrough in U.S.-Iranian ties,” which “could wipe out what little strategic significance Israel retained.” An alarmed Israeli government therefore organized a campaign to “convince the United States and the EU that Iran was a global threat.”

Soon enough, “in response to Israeli pressure—and not to Iranian actions—Washington’s rhetoric on Iran began to mirror Israel’s talking

points.” The effect of all this on the Islamic Republic was predictable and understandable:

Convinced that Washington wouldn't grant Iran its legitimate role in the region, Tehran concluded that it was left with no choice but to make America's non-recognition as costly as possible by sabotaging its policies.

With its efforts at international re-integration having been consistently rebuffed, Tehran began to push back against Western plans for a post-cold-war order in the Middle East. Primary among those plans was the Oslo peace process, launched in 1993, which Tehran vociferously opposed. Here, for the first time, the Islamic Republic's strategic and ideological interests could be said to have overlapped.

Yet even so, Parsi stresses, over the ensuing years and right up to the present, the logic of the rivalry between Israel and Iran remains unchanged. It is a strategic contest for regional preeminence, and ideology has had little to do with it.

THE INTRIGUING thesis of this book rests on three principal claims: that during the cold war, the Islamic Republic's opposition to Israel was limited to rhetoric; that after Khomeini's death in 1989, Iran's conciliatory gestures to the West were ignored; and that as a result of these rejections, Iran decided at the time of the 1993 Oslo accords to begin supporting Palestinian rejectionist groups. There are problems with each of these assertions.

During the period of its war with Iraq, Parsi writes, Iran vehemently denounced the Jewish state “without translating that rhetoric into practical efforts.” But any such claim is repeatedly disproved by the existence of Hizballah, the Lebanese Shiite Islamist group that Iran fostered in the 1980's. In November 1983, just twelve days after bombing the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, Hizballah's Islamic Jihad

wing claimed responsibility for killing at least five dozen people in a suicide truck-bombing of Israel's military and intelligence headquarters in Tyre, Lebanon—an event, like many other Hizballah attacks during the 1980's, that Parsi excludes from his narrative.

Next, Parsi asserts that as a result of Khomeini's death in 1989, Iran took steps toward a rapprochement with the West. With regard to the Israel-Palestinian dispute in particular, he cites a declaration by Hashemi Rafsanjani, the "pragmatist" elected as Iran's president two months after Khomeini's death, to the effect that Iran would agree to any solution acceptable to the Palestinians. But Parsi does not provide us with an actual quotation; nor does he share a more famous one from the same year, in which Rafsanjani urged Palestinians to hijack airplanes, blow up Western factories,

threaten U.S. interests throughout the world, and "kill and execute—and not just inside Palestine—five Americans or Britons or French" for every martyr of their own.

More tangible evidence of Iran's supposed desire for reunification with the West is provided in Parsi's depiction of the 1991 release of the last remaining American hostages in Lebanon, an overture that, he claims, went unreciprocated by the U.S. In fact, as Rafsanjani would go on tacitly to acknowledge, Washington gave the Islamic Republic \$278 million and an official statement clearing it of involvement in the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am passenger jet over Lockerbie, Scotland.

More to the point, Iran had engineered the release of the American hostages only after the disappearance of the central rationale for holding them. Throughout the arms-for-hostages negotiations of

1985 and 1986, Iran's primary demands had included the release from prison of the Tehran-backed militants who had bombed the U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait in 1983. In fact, they were finally released from a Kuwaiti prison during Saddam's 1990 invasion of that country. In the words of the UN's chief negotiator at the time, "Unwittingly, the president of Iraq had untied the most difficult knot of the entire hostage saga in one fell swoop." Parsi omits all of this.

According to Parsi, one of post-Khomeini Iran's most important conciliatory gestures occurred during the 1991 Gulf war, when the Islamic Republic "refrained from aiding the uprising of Iraq's Shiite population against Saddam"—thus abetting the first Bush administration's evident reluctance to press on to Baghdad. So welcome was this conduct that it "even won praise from U.S. Secretary of State James Baker." Parsi fails to mention Baker's rather contrary assessment of this same event in his 1995 book, *The Politics of Diplomacy*:

Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani called for Saddam to resign, and appealed to the Iraqi citizenry to rise against its discredited leaders. Throughout this period, Iran made several such appeals urging the overthrow of Saddam by the Shiites.

Finally, Parsi argues that after the U.S. had repeatedly shunned Iran's overtures, Israel's Labor government, elected in June 1992, initiated a campaign to convince Washington that Iran was "a threat to the region and the world"—this, "not because [Iran] had become more antagonistic toward Israel but because all previous threats had more or less evaporated." Yet, several months *before* the election of this supposedly "alarmist" Labor government, Iran's client, Hizballah, had bombed the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, killing 29 and wounding 242. The direct complicity of the Iranian

regime in the bombing of the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires two years later would be confirmed by Argentinian courts.

In short, it is hardly the case that, as Parsi would have it, "Iran began to translate its anti-Israel rhetoric into operational policy" only after the September 1993 signing of the Oslo Accords. As early as 1987, the *New York Times* was reporting that Islamic fundamentalist groups in Lebanon, the West Bank, and Gaza were "inspired and sometimes financed by Iran." Nor is it true, as Parsi writes, that "it would still take a few more years" post-Oslo before Iran's "relations with Hamas began to thaw." In truth, Iran hosted Hamas as early as 1990, when it convened a "Conference in Support of the Palestinian Intifada," and Hamas went on to open an official office in Tehran the following year. By 1992, the PLO's Yasir Arafat was publicly accusing Hamas of serving Iranian interests and of receiving \$30 million annually from the Islamic Republic. A 1989 State Department survey confirmed what was written in a declassified CIA report of the same year: "Iran is trying to assume a greater role in supporting violent Arab struggle against Israel."

These are the years to which Parsi blandly refers as Iran's cooling-off period.

THIS HARDLY exhausts the omissions and distortions with which *Treacherous Alliance* is replete, and which tellingly tend to concern Iran's most ideologically driven actions. Thus, there is not a word about the 1996 bombing of the U.S. military housing complex at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia (for which Iran was deemed responsible by a U.S. federal court, and over which President Clinton briefly considered going to war against the Islamic Republic); barely a mention of Iran's many assassination campaigns against Kurds and other dissidents in Europe; and scarcely an allusion to Iran's relentless subver-

sion of the Gulf monarchies, at a time when the warring Islamic Republic was on the verge of collapse.

A number of other, less significant omissions may result from simple negligence or ignorance. Parsi shows no evidence of having used Farsi or Hebrew-language sources, and he cites precious few government documents. He relies so heavily on interviews, many of them

anonymous, that he refers to them even on matters of easily accessible public record.

And then there are the errors, far too numerous to list in their entirety. Parsi misidentifies ethnic groups, calling Lebanese Christians a "non-Arab minority," for instance; misstates the duration of Khomeini's exile from Iran, the date of Arafat's visit to Tehran, and the identity of the

Iranian prime minister whose government granted informal recognition to Israel in 1950; bungles titles and tenures; muddles major diplomatic events and garbles well-known episodes (a Bible inscribed by Reagan did *not* accompany Oliver North to Tehran, nor was the cake brought by his delegation shaped like a key, though a key was involved); perverts chronologies (Iran's nuclear program began to be restarted no later than 1987 and not, as Parsi claims, after the Gulf war); and so forth. The book is also riddled with misquotations and apparently fictitious quotations, not to mention minor and major distortions of quoted words. None of this inspires confidence in the accuracy of Parsi's interviews, by far his primary source.

GLARING AS all this is, at least as troubling is the litany of praise that has been heaped on this book by authorities in American foreign policy and Middle East studies. In a warm review in *Foreign Affairs*, L. Carl Brown of Princeton calls *Treacherous Alliance* a "well-constructed history." John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago has hailed it as "outstanding," "trenchant," and "dispassionate." Former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was on Parsi's dissertation committee, lauds it as "a penetrating, provocative, and very timely study," while Francis Fukuyama, his Ph.D. adviser, claims it "contributes both to our historical understanding and our current policy debate." In the *New York Review of Books*, Peter W. Galbraith, a former U.S. ambassador, has extolled it as a "wonderfully informative account."

Like Brzezinski and Mearsheimer, Parsi is an adherent of the realist school of international-relations theory. One of realism's central tenets, laid out by Parsi in the opening pages of *Treacherous Alliance*, is that the internal dynamics of states (i.e., their ideology, system of governance, ethnic makeup, class structure, and religion), while important,

"have little or no impact on their respective foreign policies."

If that is in fact Parsi's working assumption, then he has neatly presupposed the answer to the question his book ostensibly set out to ask. As the head of a lobby promoting "greater understanding" of Iran, he may be merely doing his job. But the distinction between arriving at a conclusion and beginning with one is what separates the work of a historian from that of a lobbyist. In this case, it is a distinction that seems to be lost not only on him but on the luminaries who have lined up to endorse his defective scholarship and tendentious conclusions.