

Reexamining the Middle East

By Khody Akhavi | August 15, 2007

The last few years have produced an enormous trove of literature about conflict and violence in the Middle East, no doubt because there appears to be so much of it.

Academics, policy-makers, and media pundits remain fascinated by the “nature” of terrorism and the impending threat of a nuclear-armed Iran. The superheated rhetoric of leaders in Iran and Israel has only accelerated the possibility of confrontation between the two countries, while the cumulative effect of the media echo chamber has added to the clamor of war drums and saber-rattling inside the Washington Beltway.

Out of this cacophony emerges a book with the clarity and insight that so often elude U.S. policy-makers. Trita Parsi’s *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States* is a deft account of the back-channel relationship between the three countries from Israel’s inception in 1948 through the present.

In revealing interviews with 130 decision-makers in Iran, Israel, and the United States, Parsi, an analyst who also heads the National Iranian American Council and sometimes writes for the Inter Press Service, crafts an alternative view of a conflict that is often couched in ideological terms.

In the opening chapter, Parsi shatters several myths about the Israel-Iran rivalry, or the “800-pound gorilla,” as he refers to it several times throughout the text. For example, while Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad publicly condemns Israel and questions the validity of the Holocaust, the Islamic Republic is actually home to the second-largest population of Jews in the Middle East, after Israel.

Few Iranian Jews take Ahmadinejad’s rhetoric seriously, writes Parsi, “and they point to the fact that little has changed for Iranian Jews under him.”

In fact, Iran’s sole Jewish representative in the Majlis, Maurice Mohtamed, spoke out against the president’s comments, and during the height of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa protecting Jews as a religious minority contingent on their rejection of Zionism and the Israeli state, according to Parsi.

In Israel, Parsi complicates the notions of separate Israeli and Iranian identities through his exchanges with several Iranian Jews who left Iran not for ideological reasons as much as for economic ones. Interestingly, some of Israel’s most prominent public officials are originally Persian, including scandal-tainted President Moshe Katsav, and former Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Dan Halutz (born to Persian immigrants).

But Parsi’s book is remarkable for its detailed look at the international relations dimension of the Israel-Iran relationship. There exists, beneath the vitriolic public exchanges, a history of intelligence cooperation, arms sales, and secret dialogue between the two countries. And the dialogue continued even after Iran turned from a monarchy into an Islamic theocracy.

The “alliance of necessity” initially formed out of a mutual concern over the threat of neighboring countries—purely pragmatic and practical, the epitome of realpolitik. Israel viewed Iran as a possible periphery ally, outside the orbit of its immediate threats (Syria, Jordan, and Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Egypt). Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, envisioned his country as the dominant hegemon in the Middle East, and viewed neighboring Iraq as its most immediate threat.

In Parsi’s narrative, the Shah, who ultimately fled Iran during the Islamic Revolution and died in exile in 1980, exhibits all the signs of megalomania. He’s a Mideast dictator with a shopping-list for U.S.-made weapons and lucrative oil rents to pay for the merchandise. But he wasn’t the smartest political tactician.

The Shah’s appetite for status as the dominant power in the region led him to sign the Algiers Accord, an agreement between Iran and Iraq that would end hostilities and settle territorial disputes, notably the Shatt al-Arab waterway. At the time, Iraq was fighting a Kurdish rebellion launched by *peshmerga* guerrillas (who were supported by Iranian and Israeli intelligence agencies and financed by the United States).

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As Parsi writes, in the long term, the Shah's short-sighted agreement led to the unraveling of a tacit alliance with Israel, with whom it was conducting intelligence operations. Furthermore, the end of hostilities gave Iraq an opportunity to crush the Kurdish rebellion and rebuild its army. It would use it against Iran five years later.

The Islamic Revolution took the United States by surprise, but even the rigid ideological rhetoric of the mullahs could be manipulated if the political situation demanded. While the mullahs maintained a fierce public posture condemning Israel, they approached them for weapons during the Iran-Iraq war. As Parsi writes, "The more the Islamic Republic's foreign policy was presented as different from that of the Shah, the more it resembled it at its core. ... The ideology had shifted astonishingly. But the end goal remained remarkably similar."

The end goal was to build a stronger relationship with the United States, and if that meant theocratic Iran would have to go through Israel to build, it would. Successive U.S. administrations complicated the relationship further.

U.S. neoconservatives, who got their country involved in the Iran-Contra scandal at the height of Iran's war against Iraq, opposed contact with Iran 15 years later in spite of Tehran's repeated overtures. "There is a great deal of confusion as to how America got mixed up in an Israeli-Iranian rivalry that is neither about ideology nor religion," Parsi writes.

Currently, Iran is a country that finds itself increasingly isolated by the West, while the United States and Israel now represent a complete alignment of views on terrorism and how to deal with it. Parsi's book also analyzes

the extent to which the pro-Israeli lobby influenced policy and views on Iran. In the early 1990s, following the defeat of Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Army, Israeli politicians began describing Iran as the primary threat.

"The pro-Israeli community turned strongly against Iran, influencing U.S. policy on Iran in an almost emotional way," said former National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft.

As a result, Iran, Parsi argues convincingly, created a different equation, one in which Israeli actions against Palestinian "rejectionist groups" Hamas and Islamic Jihad, as well as Lebanon's Hezbollah, would be met with retaliatory terrorist attacks against Jews and Israelis abroad.

But even Iran's links to groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah could be negotiated, as evidenced by the 2003 overture by the Iranian regime, and approved by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to stop funding them in return for certain safety guarantees and a wider political opening with the United States. Congressman Bob Ney (R-OH) delivered the message to the White House, but Iran never received a reply.

Treacherous Alliance is a timely and important read for anybody who wants to push back the essentialist arguments that suggest an impending clash of ideologies. In Parsi's estimation, as long as the United States ignores the 800-pound gorilla in the room, it will not be able to resolve any of its problems in the Middle East.

Khody Akhavi writes for the Inter Press Service.

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