

# A Second Fateful Triangle

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## **Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.**

BY TRITA PARSI

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**T**he betrayal of Israel was nothing less than “what Chamberlain did with Hitler in abandoning Czechoslovakia”.

The speaker was not Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, who in 2001 compared post-9/11 American and European efforts to forge an anti-terror coalition that did not include Israel to “the dreadful mistake of 1938, when enlightened European democracies decided to sacrifice Czechoslovakia for a convenient temporary solution”.<sup>1</sup> Nor was he Benjamin Netanyahu, the Likud Party opposition leader who used Neville Chamberlain’s ceding of the Czech Sudetenland to Adolf Hitler in 1938 as an analogy to depict the pressure on Israel to withdraw from the West Bank in the wake of the Oslo Accords.<sup>2</sup>

No, this particular act of treachery against Israel occurred when Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Shah of Iran, negotiated and signed the Algiers agreement with his next-door neighbour, Saddam Hussein, on 6 March 1975. The accord, brokered by President Houari Boumedienne of Algeria, set the disputed Iran–Iraq boundary in the waterway leading to the Persian Gulf, the Shatt al-Arab/Arvand Rud, through its median point, the *thalweg*. In exchange, the Shah gave Iraq a sector of oil-rich territory in Iranian Khuzestan, and agreed to cut off his support for Kurdish separatists in northern Iraq. As “bitterly” recounted by Eliezer Tsafir, who headed Mossad operations in Kurdistan and Iran in the 1970s, it was the Israelis, rather than the Kurds, who were betrayed (p. 57).

In the decade between 1965 and 1975, Savak (Persian acronym for “Organisation of Information and State Security”) and Mossad (Hebrew acronym for “Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations”) had conducted joint operations in Iraqi Kurdistan, funding, training and supporting the restive Iraqi Kurds against the Iraqi government, with American knowledge and approval. In signing the Algiers agreement with Iraq, the Shah abruptly terminated Iranian involvement, without consulting either the Israelis or the Americans. To make matters worse, the Israelis discovered that the United States had learned of Iran’s decision to end its role in the Kurdish operation a few days in advance, but had not mentioned this to the Israelis.

This incident, from Trita Parsi’s book *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.*, reveals a great deal about the triangular Israeli–American–Iranian relationship, but also about the book itself. While geopolitical realists may cite the maxim (variously ascribed to Talleyrand, Disraeli, de Gaulle, Kissinger, and others) that nations “have no friends, only interests”, *Treacherous Alliance* is replete with metaphors of abandonment, betrayal and treachery that one might associate more with the sour aftertaste of curdled camaraderie, or the acrid ashes of a burned-out love affair, than with the vicissitudes and vagaries of shifting political alliances in the realist mode. “We had very deep relations with Iran, cutting deep into the fabric of the two peoples,” David Kimche, head of Israel’s Foreign Ministry at the

time of the Islamic Revolution, lamented to Parsi. “It was very difficult for people to accept the fact that all this intimacy was thrown out the window” (p. 91).

“Intimacy” may seem like an odd word to describe the two decades of co-operation between Savak and Mossad. In 1957, Israel and Iran entered into what Parsi calls “a not so secret marriage of convenience” (p. 25), although the intercourse between Israeli personnel and their Iranian counterparts remained unofficial, and Israel’s status in the alliance was more like that of a clandestine mistress than of a wedded wife. The intimacy consisted largely of “sensitive” dealings, of whose details, Parsi says, even the Shah’s own Foreign Ministry was told little or nothing:

Iranian military and secret police operatives were secretly trained by Israeli intelligence officers in both Iran and Israel. Israel also trained four hundred Iranian pilots, paratroopers, and artillery men and sold Iran high-tech military equipment. According to one former Iranian ambassador, the Mossad also trained the Savak in torture and investigative techniques as well. (P. 26)

Much of this is familiar to anyone who has studied the Israeli–Iranian relationship during the era of the Shah. What is unique is the way that Parsi strives to raise the epistemological status of such assertions above the level of rumour and innuendo by interviewing diplomats and decision-makers from all sides. The result is a lively, readable and meticulously documented account of more than five decades of diplomatic decision-making, based on 130 personal interviews Parsi conducted with Iranian, Israeli and American analysts. Parsi’s source for Mossad’s training Savak in torture is an unidentified former Iranian ambassador under the Shah, whom he interviewed in April 2004, and whose claim is categorically denied by Mossad’s Tsafir in a Tel Aviv interview six months later.

Parsi ably demonstrates that long before the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the Israeli–Iranian relationship was far from idyllic. What Sohrab Sobhani calls a “pragmatic entente”<sup>3</sup> and Parsi “a marriage of convenience” was, from the Shah’s point of view, merely a furtive temporary marriage, valid only until he could court the Arab states, above all Egypt, and gain their support for his hegemonic aspirations. Parsi notes that during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the Shah saw Iranian interests as best served if neither Israel nor its Arab foes emerged from the war with an unqualified victory that could block Iran’s steady path towards regional primacy. Iran continued to sell oil to Israel during the war and provided the Israeli Defence Forces with arms, but the Shah also sold oil to Egypt and assisted the Soviet Union in supplying Iraq with weapons through Iranian airspace. This created a basis for vastly improving post-war relations between Iran and Egypt, which was viewed by Israelis as a betrayal of the “natural” Israeli–Iranian alliance against Arab states.

Iran played an active role in the negotiations between Israel and Egypt in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War. The Shah supported Egypt’s demand that Israel return all occupied territories to their pre-1967 status, and criticised “the Israeli strategy of seeking security through the conquest of territory” (p. 51). In 1974, Iran and Egypt introduced the United Nations resolution that called for a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East, a move clearly directed at Israel’s clandestine nuclear programme. The following year, just months after the Shah had signed the Algiers accord with Iraq, Iran, after some apparent vacillation over which position best served Iranian interests, voted in favour of the “Zionism equals racism” resolution at the United Nations.

Meanwhile, Uri Lubrani, appointed to head the Israeli “trade mission” in Tehran in 1973, was unsuccessfully attempting to present his diplomatic credentials to the Shah, a move that would both have elevated him to ambassador-type status and signified Iran’s de jure recognition of Israel, long sought by the latter. (Iran had accorded Israel de facto recognition in 1951.) Not only did the Shah refuse to enhance Lubrani’s diplomatic status, but he refused even to meet him for over three years. In the waning years of the Shah’s regime, the Israelis attempted to thwart the Shah’s efforts to achieve rapprochement with Arab states by publicly flaunting Israeli–Iranian co-operation in ways that could only embarrass the Shah in Arab eyes.

The unintended consequence of the Algiers agreement was that it allowed Iraq to focus on expanding its offensive capabilities, which it would direct against Iran a mere five years later. After the extent of Iraqi rearmament became evident to the Shah, there was another brief interlude of Israeli–Iranian co-operation with “Project Flower” in late 1977, which saw the two countries collaborate in an attempt to reproduce an American-designed missile with Israeli-made parts that could be fitted with nuclear warheads. The missile incorporated American navigation and guidance equipment that Israel was not permitted to share with other

countries. Israelis and Iranians alike kept the nature and extent of their co-operation secret from the United States.

Slightly more than a third of the twenty chapters of *Treacherous Alliance* deal with Israeli–Iranian relations prior to 1979. This section of the book is particularly significant because present-day advocates of achieving regime change in Iran by means of foreign intervention, with the aim of restoring the status quo that existed prior to the Islamic Revolution, tend to oversimplify, and even romanticise, the extent of the amity and co-operation between the United States and Iran, and/or Israel and Iran, during the era of the Shah. Parsi makes clear that the Shah’s foreign policy was driven both by his desire to extend Iranian influence in the Persian Gulf region and by his “megalomania”, not by affection for Israel or the United States. Parsi’s account is a cautionary tale that should give serious pause to policymakers and legislators who believe the goal of US policy towards Iran ought to be the installation of a regime which will reincarnate and restore the policies of the Shah.

Israelis have an even more pronounced tendency to wax nostalgic about the Pahlavi era. Israeli foreign policy towards Iran derives much of its impetus and direction from the fantasy that harsh economic sanctions or an Israeli military strike will not only end the alleged existential “Iranian threat” to Israel’s survival, but revivify the Israeli–Iranian partnership. *Treacherous Alliance* is a sobering reminder that regime change, whenever and however it occurs in Iran, will not necessarily or unambiguously benefit the interests of either the United States or Israel.

In his discussion of the interrelationship of the Islamic Revolution with the Palestinian cause, Parsi challenges the conventional understanding that, since 1979, Iran has been both responsible for Palestinian intransigence in the peace process and the chief state sponsor of Palestinian terror. On the contrary, Parsi points out that it was the Palestinians who had actively supported and trained numerous Iranian revolutionaries, expecting payback in kind if the Iranian Revolution succeeded. When Yasser Arafat and fifty-eight officials of the Palestine Liberation Organisation unexpectedly showed up in Iran within a week of the proclamation of the Islamic Republic on 11 February 1979, the Iranians were caught completely off guard. During their stay, what had been the Israeli trade mission was turned over to the PLO in a formal ceremony and designated the Embassy of Palestine. The street it was on was renamed Palestine Avenue.

Nevertheless, tensions arose almost immediately between the PLO and the Iranian revolutionaries. During a two-hour meeting with Arafat on the day he arrived in Tehran, Iran’s revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, bluntly criticised the PLO’s leftist secular nationalism. He recommended that the Palestinians become more Islamic in orientation and adopt the strategy of non-violence that had culminated in the Islamic Revolution. The visiting Palestinians soon realised that Khomeini’s Islamic Republic would offer them nothing but rhetorical support, while their Iranian hosts were repelled by the un-Islamic ideology and behaviour of their uninvited Palestinian guests.

During his stay, Arafat set up PLO offices in several Iranian cities, including Ahvaz in Khuzestan, which has a significant Arab population. Within months, the Iranians had accused the PLO of fomenting conflict between Arabs and Persians in Ahvaz, and shut down its offices in Iran. The Palestinian embassy in Tehran was placed under surveillance. While Khomeini proclaimed the last Friday of Ramadan as *Quds* (Jerusalem) Day, and called upon the Muslims of the world to demonstrate their support for the Palestinians, Parsi points out that in reality, “the celebrations of *Quds* Day demonstrated only Iran’s unwillingness to deliver concrete support to the Palestinians” (p. 85).

Even as the Islamic Republic repeatedly called for Israel to be expelled from the United Nations, proposed the creation of an Islamic army that would eject Israel from Arab lands, pledged to send Iraqi prisoners of war to fight against the Israelis in Lebanon, and sponsored a children’s writing and drawing contest on the theme “Israel Must Be Erased from the Earth”, Khomeini refused to allow Iran to become directly involved in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Iran’s “venomous rhetoric against Israel was just that—words”, Parsi emphasises (pp. 101–2). Despite the expulsion of Israeli diplomats from Tehran, Israel and Iran remained in contact throughout the 1980s. Parsi cites no fewer than three sources which assert that Israeli officials consulted Iran prior to “Operation Opera”, the 1981 bombing raid on the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak. Iran not only permitted the use of an Iranian air field in case of an emergency, but provided details of its own failed attempt to attack the site, as well as Iranian photographs and maps of the Iraqi nuclear installation. Israel, as was later revealed during the Iran–Contra scandal, sold weapons to Iran. Despite his fulminations against Zionism and calls for “death to America”, Khomeini allowed Iranian Jews who wanted to leave the country to depart for Israel or the United States.

While Iran vehemently denied any and all contacts with Israel, their common interests prevailed, says Parsi. The US hostage crisis had isolated the Iranian ideologues, and there were few options besides

purchasing from Israel badly needed arms for the Iraq War, while denying that they were doing so. “Saddam’s assault and Iran’s isolation intensified the shift in Iranian foreign policy—in its conduct though not in its rhetoric—away from ideology and toward practicality and expediency” (p. 99). When Iranian leftists demanded an investigation into reports that Iran was buying weapons from Israel, Khomeini personally intervened and halted the inquiry.

This brings up yet another contribution, perhaps the most significant, that *Treacherous Alliance* makes to existing literature concerning Iranian foreign policy and the current debates about what to “do” about Iran. Although it may appear to be driven by ideology, Iranian foreign policy, argues Parsi, is actually pragmatic in practice and based upon the rational analysis of strategic considerations that serve Iran’s national interests. Ideology permeates Iranian discourse, but pragmatism—be it in the form of buying weapons from Israel or refusing to send Iranian troops into Lebanon—shapes Iranian policy. Contrary to the stereotype of Iranian political leaders as “mad mullahs” driven by fanatical hatred of the tiny Jewish state, with whom it is impossible to reason and pointless to negotiate, Parsi contends that strategic concerns trump ideological considerations in Iranian foreign-policy decision-making.

While Parsi does a masterly job of revealing the strategic rationality behind Iran’s ideological bluster, he seems less aware of the extent to which the vocabulary of strategic rationality serves as a mask for the ideological underpinnings of Israeli foreign policy. This is not surprising, since Israel’s hard-line, hard-core realists—current and past government officials, retired generals and intelligence agents, and diplomats interviewed by Parsi—are far more sophisticated in marketing their ideological predilections in strategic terms than their Iranian counterparts. Even stalwart Israeli secularists take for granted the geographical and historical continuity of the modern state of Israel with the biblical polity. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, a senior lecturer in Jewish history at Ben Gurion University, summarises the position of Israeli secular nationalists, most of whom reject Jewish theology and praxis (*halakha*), as “God does not exist, but he promised the land to us”.

That Parsi comprehends Israeli strategic thinking far better than its constitutive ideological infrastructure is especially clear in his chapter on the consequences of the election of Menachem Begin as Israeli prime minister in May 1977. Begin was a stalwart of the *Herut* (Freedom) party, which had joined with other right-wing parties to form the Likud (Unity) bloc in 1973. Parsi writes that Begin and his fellow neo-Revisionists (followers of a form of radical right-wing Zionism) “believed that an inevitable blood feud existed between Arabs and Jews”. They also “had an ideological attachment to ‘Eretz Israel’ (Greater Israel), which [*Herut*] defined as not only all of British Mandate Palestine, but also territory east of the Jordan River, in what would later become the country of Jordan” (pp. 68–9).

However, the term *Eretz Israel* is not in and of itself an ideology; it is the late biblical and rabbinic Hebrew designation for the “land of Israel”. (The *halakhic* boundaries of *Eretz Israel* where the agricultural laws concerning the sabbatical year apply are actually quite limited.) What Parsi is in fact alluding to is the ideology known as “the Complete Land of Israel” (*Eretz Israel Hashleima*, often translated as “Greater Israel”). Unsatisfied with the barely contiguous and highly vulnerable boundaries granted to the Jewish state by the United Nations through the partition of Palestine, as well as the “green line” borders that emerged from the 1948 war, adherents of the Complete Land/Greater Israel ideology argued that Israel’s “natural”, historical and legitimate territorial limits extended in all directions. These borders stretched not only across the Jordan River but into Syria, north to the Litani River in southern Lebanon, and west across the Sinai peninsula, whose return to Egypt in 1977 is still regarded by many Israelis as having been a mistake. Strategic thinking has been justified historically and biblically, while religious ideology was, and is, reinforced by the propounded imperatives of strategic doctrine.

Although few Israelis openly subscribe to its most maximalist aspirations, the “Complete Land of Israel” ideology remains a formidable barrier to Israel’s relinquishing any more of the territory captured in the Six Day War. “Revisionists only demand now that Israel not give up any part of *Eretz Yisrael* already under its control,” according to the American Middle East commentator, Daniel Pipes.<sup>4</sup> Moshe Feiglin, who ran second to Benjamin Netanyahu in the August 2007 election of the Likud Party chairman, is co-founder and leader of the right-wing religious-nationalist *Manhigut Yehudit* (Jewish Leadership) movement, which calls for legislation “the main essence of which will be that all land that is conquered, acquired or held by Jews within the Biblical boundaries of the Land of Israel shall immediately become an indivisible part of the State of Israel”.<sup>5</sup>

Nor does Parsi discuss the messianic fervour aroused by Israel’s territorial conquests, particularly of East Jerusalem, in 1967. He makes not even a passing mention of the *Gush Emunim* (Bloc of the Faithful) movement, whose ideological zeal provided the momentum and the manpower for the construction of the

Jewish settlements in the West Bank after the war, with tacit approval and quiet infrastructural support from Israel's Labour government, even as its leaders were proclaiming their readiness to trade "land for peace".

Begin, like many Israelis, believed that the conflict between Israel and its neighbours was not simply between Jews and Arabs, but between Jews and the rest of the world. As Ilan Peleg notes,

The return to anti-Semitic themes among Neo-Revisionists is almost neurotic. It is in many ways the very core of the Neo-Revisionist belief system. In some ways it seems as if the Neo-Revisionists cherish the sense of persecution, ostracism, and eternal conflict between the Jew and the Gentile world.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, neo-Revisionists did not, and do not, believe that there is a "blood feud" between Jews and Arabs. Rather, Arabs represent the current reincarnation of the biblical "Amalek", the archetypal enemy of the Jews, and the most recent manifestation of the eternal phenomenon of anti-Semitism. Parsi regards the Israeli emphasis on worst-case scenarios largely as a result of "the overcompensation by the intelligence apparatus" for Israel's overestimation of its military superiority and underestimation of Arab capability during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. This reviewer would argue that it is much more than that. It is a product of the pessimistic "the whole world is against us" ideology of neo-Revisionism in league with the frustrated messianism that has repeatedly witnessed the postponement of redemption during the course of the last forty years.

Parsi offers a detailed and cogent analysis of the Israeli construction of the "Iranian threat" from the 1990s to the present, and of the trepidation with which Israel has viewed the possibility of US rapprochement with Iran. The "Iranian threat" emerged after the 1992 elections in both Israel and the United States. In Israel, the Labour Party prevailed over the right-wing Likud bloc, and in the United States the Democrats ousted a Republican from the presidency for the first time in twelve years. Labour's leadership—Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres—saw the post-Soviet strategic environment, in which Israel's primary enemy, Iraq, had been cut down to size by the United States in the 1991 Gulf War, as ripe for the creation of an altered balance of power that would transform Israel into the political and economic hub of what Peres called the "New Middle East". This would require peace with the Palestinians. Yasser Arafat, in 1993 at the lowest point of his career, having lost the financial backing of the now-dissolved Soviet Union and of the wealthy Arab states after he seemingly approved Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, had no alternative but to cut a deal with the Israelis, and thus became a "partner for peace".

The New Middle East also required a regional threat against whom Israel and its Arab neighbours could ally with US support. Reversing Israel's traditional (and Parsi argues, ideological) commitment to the "strategy of the periphery"—the seeking of alliances with non-Arab states in the region—Peres called for the marginalisation and isolation of Iran, Israel's only serious competitor as a regional hegemon. As for Iran, Parsi makes the case that its exclusion from the "New Middle East" forced it into the role of spoiler and antagonist of the Oslo peace process during the 1990s. Moreover, Iran was betrayed when, in return for its co-operation during the US-led war against Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11, it found itself subsequently branded as part of an "axis of evil".

Because of his conviction that ideology is a mask for strategic conflict, rather than an integral factor shaping threat-perception of both Israelis and Iranians, Parsi's conclusion, in which he argues for "regional integration", is technocratic:

Iran must accept the two-state solution [to the Israel–Palestine conflict] and reduce its regional ambitions by settling for a role that doesn't outstrip its resources . . . Israel, on the other hand, must amend its military outlook because its belief that it must dominate the region militarily will likely put it on a collision course with Tehran regardless of Iran's ideology, political structure or policies. (P. 283)

Parsi explains why a military solution to the United States' and Israel's difficulties with Iran is "non-existent", and recommends regional integration and collective security through dialogue and engagement, a policy which has never been seriously pursued.

*Treacherous Alliance* is an invaluable contribution to the ongoing Western debate over Iran, as well as to the hitherto limited and largely outdated literature on Israeli–Iranian relations. While there has been a plethora of new books on the US relationship with Iran, most minimise or ignore entirely the Israeli factor in this relationship, a lacuna Parsi has remedied. *Treacherous Alliance* ought to be required reading for all

analysts, diplomats and policymakers dealing with the United States' relations with Israel, as well as its non-relations with Iran. It is highly recommended to anyone seeking a deeper understanding of the dynamics behind what may be the next Middle East war, if matters are not understood and addressed from both Iranian and Israeli perspectives.

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3. Sohrab Sobhani, *The Pragmatic Entente: Israeli–Iranian Relations, 1948–1988* (New York: Praeger, 1989).
4. Daniel Pipes, "Imperial Israel: The Nile-to-Euphrates Calumny", *Middle East Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (March 1994).
5. *Manhigut Yehudit*, "The Jewish State: Guidelines"  
[[http://www.jewishisrael.org/jewish\\_state/overview.htm#A](http://www.jewishisrael.org/jewish_state/overview.htm#A)].
6. Ilan Peleg, *Begin's Foreign Policy, 1977–1983: Israel's Move to the Right* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), p. 62.