



TRITA PARSI

Treacherous Alliance

**THE SECRET DEALINGS OF
ISRAEL, IRAN, AND THE U.S.**



TREACHEROUS ALLIANCE

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**the secret dealings of
israel, iran, and the
united states**

trita parsi

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To Amina
For your love, for your laughter
and for standing firm when weaker hearts succumb

And to Darius, my eternal love
I hope to be as good of a parent to you as my parents were to me

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PREFACE

Israeli-Iranian relations remain a mystery to most analysts in spite of the profound impact that these countries' tensions have had on the Middle East and on U.S. national security. The political sensitivity of the issue has prompted most U.S. experts to refrain from studying the subject in detail. Instead, the poor state of relations between these two former allies has been treated either as an inexplicable phenomenon or as purely the result of deep-seated ideological antagonism. All the while, its impact on U.S. foreign policy has been conveniently ignored at a great cost to U.S. national interests. While it is widely believed that the key to peace in the Middle East is the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, little attention has been given to the key geopolitical rivalry between Israel and Iran, which has had a decisive influence on this and other regional conflicts.

In examining the ups and downs in Israeli-Iranian relations and the triangular relationship between the United States, Israel, and Iran, I have focused on geopolitical forces and developments rather than on ideology, fleeting political justifications, or simplistic Manichean perspectives. I argue that the major transformations of Israeli-Iranian relations are results of geopolitical—rather than ideological—shifts and that a negotiated resolution of their strategic rivalry will significantly facilitate the resolution of other regional problems rather than the other way around.

The current enmity between the two states has more to do with the shift in the balance of power in the Middle East after the end of the Cold War and the defeat of Iraq in the first Persian Gulf War than it does with the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Though the Iranian revolution was a major setback for Israel, it didn't stop the Jewish State from supporting Iran and seeking to improve its relations with the Khomeini government as a counter to Israel's Arab enemies. Ironically, when Iranian leaders called for Israel's destruction in the 1980s, Israel and the pro-Israel lobby in Washington lobbied the United States *not* to pay attention to Iranian rhetoric. Today, even though Iran's revolutionary Islamist zeal is far from what it was in the 1980s, things have changed quite a bit. The Iranian government, in turn, has pursued a double policy throughout this period: In the 1980s, Iran made itself the

most vocal regional supporter of the Palestinian cause. Yet its rhetoric was seldom followed up with action, since Tehran's strategic interest—reducing tensions with Israel and using the Jewish State to reestablish relations with the United States—contradicted Iran's ideological imperatives. After 1991 and the efforts by the United States and Israel to create a new Middle East order based on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and on Iran's prolonged isolation, however, Iran's ideological and strategic interests overlapped, and Tehran decided for the first time to become a front-line opponent of the Jewish State. At this stage, both Israel and Iran used their influence to undermine U.S. foreign policy initiatives that they deemed beneficial to the other. Iran worked against the peace process, fearing that it would be left isolated in the region, and Israel sought to prevent a U.S.-Iran dialogue because it feared that Washington would betray Israeli security interests if Iran and the United States were to communicate directly. To this day, that logic prevails in both capitals, and it is fueling the tensions in the region.

This is a book about foreign policy. My focus is on the relations between these states and not on internal developments that—while important—have little or no impact on their respective foreign policies. Nor do I seek to provide a deeper explanation of the ideologies espoused by the leaders of these states. Instead, these ideas and worldviews are considered relevant only to the extent that they influence Iran's and Israel's foreign policy. This approach does not mean, though, that these ideologies are wholly irrelevant or that the belief in them is put under question. On the contrary, both Israeli and Iranian leaders have strongly held ideologies and worldviews, which they take most seriously. Whether these ideologies are the chief determining factor in Israeli-Iranian relations, however, is a different question altogether.

Precisely because of the sensitivity of this issue, very little has been written about Israeli-Iranian relations or their impact on U.S. foreign policy. It has been almost two decades since a book on Israeli-Iranian relations was published in English, and many of the analyses about Iran produced in the United States in this period have suffered from Western analysts' lack of access to Iran and Iranian officials. This has particularly affected the study of convoluted issues such as the relations between the United States, Iran, and Israel. To avoid these pitfalls, the bulk of this book is based on 130 in-depth interviews I've conducted with Iranian, Israeli, and American officials and analysts.

Through these face-to-face interviews with the decision-makers themselves, I have been able to map out firsthand accounts of events and the

thinking that underlie strategic decisions, while at the same time going beyond the talking points and public justifications Iran and Israel have developed to conceal the true nature of their tensions. Many of these accounts and rationales have never been made available to the public before. The interviews with Iranian officials in particular have been very revealing and have penetrated areas that thus far have rarely—if ever—been discussed openly in Iran, mindful of the censorship that print media there face regarding sensitive issues such as Israel. The same is true to a certain extent in Israel, where the problem may not have been government censorship, but rather that reporting has focused almost exclusively on the perceived military threat from Iran and has neglected the underlying strategic calculations of Israeli and Iranian decision-makers.

To ensure the reliability of the interviewees and their accounts, an extraordinarily large number of people have been interviewed, and their accounts have been cross-checked. No argument in the book is dependent on one or two quotes alone. The cross-referencing and the large pool of interviewees have also ensured that the accounts presented in the book reflect the essence of the exchanges, even though exact recollections are difficult to reproduce after twenty years.

The interviewees have been selected based on their direct involvement in the formulation of Iranian, Israeli, or American foreign policy, or on their knowledge of that process. Quotes have been attributed to these officials or analysts in all but a few cases. Though they are too numerous to name them all here, a few are worth mentioning because of their access to highly valuable and previously undisclosed inside information.

In regards to Iran's policy on Israel under the Shah, Iran's UN Ambassador in the late 1970s, Fereydoun Hoveyda; and Iran's Minister of Economics, Alinaghi Alikhani (a close associate of the Shah's Court Marshall, Assadollah Alam); have all provided invaluable insights into the Shah's strategic thinking. For the postrevolutionary era, Iran's UN Ambassador and Deputy Foreign Minister Dr. Javad Zarif, former Deputy Foreign Ministers Dr. Abbas Maleki, Dr. Mahmoud Vaezi, and Dr. Hadi Nejad-Hosseinian, as well as former Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee in the Iranian Parliament Mohsen Mirdamadi; former advisor to President Mohammad Khatami, Mohammad Reza Tajik; the political editor of *Resalat*, a conservative daily newspaper in Iran, Amir Mohebian; and Ali Reza Alavi Tabar, editor of several reformist newspapers; have all provided priceless insights into the Islamic Republic's calculations.

In Israel, invaluable information has been offered by former head of the Mossad Efraim Halevi; former Foreign Minister Dr. Shlomo Ben-Ami; former Defense Minister Moshe Arens; Deputy Defense Minister Dr. Efraim Sneh; Director of Military Intelligence Maj. Amos Gilad; former UN Ambassador Dr. Dore Gold; former Head of the Foreign Ministry David Kimche; former representative to Iran Uri Lubrani; former Defense Attaché to Iran Yitzhak Segev; former head of the Israeli Committee on Iran David Ivry; former Advisor to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin Yossi Alpher; former UN Ambassador Itamar Rabinovich, and financier of the Iran-Contra dealings, Yaacov Nimrodi. Also, as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's point person on Iran, Keith Weissman has shared his insight into the strategizing of the pro-Israel lobby. (My interview and discussions with Keith took place before he was charged with espionage and left the organization.)

Finally, inside accounts of Washington's calculations have been provided by National Security Advisors Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Lt. Col. Robert McFarlane, Gen. Brent Scowcroft, and Dr. Anthony Lake, as well as Assistant Secretaries of State Robert Pelletreau and Martin Indyk; Secretary of State Colin Powell's Chief of Staff Larry Wilkerson; the current Bush administration's first Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Ambassador James Dobbins; Ambassador Dennis Ross; and Dr. Gary Sick, who served as principal White House aide for Persian Gulf affairs from 1976 to 1981.

These interviewees have been intricately involved in Iran's, Israel's, and the United States' foreign policy decision-making and as a result present a unique and largely unknown picture of the three countries' approach to each other. The Iranian perspective, in particular, has largely been unknown to Western audiences, which as a result has significantly impaired the analysis of Iran in the West. A key reason why the analysis of this book differs greatly from the conventional wisdom regarding the U.S.-Israel-Iran triangle is because it is based on the perspectives and accounts of high-level decision-makers from *all three countries*. In addition, for the latter chapters of the book, I myself, in my capacity as an advisor to a U.S. Congressman, have had access to some of the hidden dealings between the three countries. This position has provided me with a firsthand account of some of the developments spelled out in this book, which I have sought to recount as accurately as possible.

The book addresses the state of Israeli-Iranian relations from the creation of the Jewish State in 1948 to the present. This is done in three separate parts. First, I address the historic context of the U.S.-Israel-Iran triangle

during the Cold War. Both the Israeli-Iranian entente under the Shah, as well as their secret ties under the Islamic Republic, are discussed in this section. I examine the formation of the Israeli-Iranian entente and the Shah's betrayal of Israel through the 1975 Algiers Accord, as well as Israel's extensive efforts to patch up U.S.-Iran relations in the 1980s and Iran's double policy versus Israel—denying its right to exist on the one hand while accepting its support and paying lip service to the Palestinian cause on the other. The second part of the book shows how the geopolitical earthquake following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the defeat of Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War dramatically altered the way Iran, Israel, and the United States related to one another. In the new Middle East emerging after this geopolitical rupture, Israel and Iran viewed each other no longer as potential security partners, but as rivals for defining the balance of the Middle East. Here I discuss Iran's transition to being an active opponent of Israel and Tel Aviv's 180-degree shift toward opposing rather than supporting a U.S.-Iran rapprochement, as well as both Iran and Israel's efforts to undermine U.S. policies in the region that they deemed beneficial to the other. In the final section of the book I discuss the options Washington currently is considering, as well as the one policy the Bush administration seems loath to pursue but that has the highest chance of taming the Israeli-Iranian rivalry and reducing the risk for a disastrous war that can engulf the Middle East—and America—for decades to come.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There is not enough room here to thank everyone who deserves credit for this book, and I cannot thank enough the ones I do mention. First and foremost, I am forever indebted to Francis Fukuyama, my advisor at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), where I wrote the PhD dissertation on which this book is based. His guidance, criticism, and assistance have been crucial, and they go beyond the particular advice he's given regarding my dissertation and this book. He is one of our era's most prominent political thinkers, and I have been fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to be influenced by his wisdom. Likewise, neither this book nor the analysis behind it would have been possible absent the help I received from Charles Doran at SAIS. Doran's power cycle theory constitutes the book's analytical bedrock. Through this theory, the interplay between the cyclical nature of states' power and role ambitions is taken into account. In the case of Israeli-Iranian relations, Iranian role ambitions are pivotal to understanding Iran's behavior toward Israel—both before and after the revolution. Furthermore, the advice and thoughtful criticism of Zbigniew Brzezinski and Jakub Grygiel have been immensely helpful. And of course, I am forever indebted to Ruhi Ramazani, the dean of Iranian foreign policy studies. I have been extremely fortunate and honored in receiving his advice and assistance, and I hope to be able to continue my study of international relations and Iranian foreign policy in his tradition and to uphold the standard he has set.

Roane Carey provided endless insights and suggestions for the book, for which I am immensely thankful. My agent, Deborah Grosvenor, helped clean up my book proposal and made it sellable. And thanks to Clayton Swisher for his support and for helping me make the connections. I am also indebted to Professor David Menashri, Col. Shmuel Limone of the Israeli Ministry of Defense, and Professor Elliot Cohen for their help in setting up interviews in Israel. This book is built on the groundbreaking work Professor Menashri has done on Israeli-Iranian relations in the past few decades. I am equally grateful to Ambassador Javad Zarif, Dr. Mustafa Zahrani, and Afshin Molavi for their help in arranging interviews in Iran. Also, I owe

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Above all, I must thank my family: my wife, Amina, without whose love, friendship, and endless patience I couldn't do without; my son Darius, the pride of my life; my brother Rouzbeh, whose dispassionate search for truth has inspired me; and, last but not least, my parents, without whom nothing would have been possible. I am to them eternally grateful.

TREACHEROUS ALLIANCE

introduction: an eight-hundred-pound gorilla

The Iranian president is a Persian version of Hitler.

—Israel Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres,
referring to Iran President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

[Israel and the U.S. need to establish] a broader strategic
relationship with Iran.

—Prime Minister Shimon Peres to President
Ronald Reagan, September 1986

“This regime that is occupying Qods [Jerusalem] must be eliminated from the pages of history.”¹ With these words, spoken at an obscure conference in the Iranian capital of Tehran in October 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the hard-line Iranian president, brought to the boiling point a rivalry between Iran and Israel that has been simmering for more than fifteen years. Always treated as a peripheral conflict, Israeli-Iranian tensions were often avoided by decision-makers in Washington, who focused on the Israeli-Palestinian dispute or on Iraq President Saddam Hussein’s impulse for conquest. In doing so they failed to recognize that the geopolitical rivalry between Israel and Iran has—since the end of the Cold War—been the underlying conflict that defined the context of almost all other matters in the region. Sooner or later, even the most nearsighted politicians would see this eight-hundred-pound gorilla in the room. By pulling Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s poisonous anti-Israel rhetoric from the dustbin of history, Ahmadinejad made sure it was sooner rather than later.

Still, even though the world has turned its attention to the Israeli-Ira-

nian standoff, the nature of the conflict remains largely misunderstood. Ahmadinejad's questioning of the Holocaust, and Israel's demonization of Iran as a modern-day Nazi Germany, reflect a fundamental clash of ideologies, most Americans believe. On one side there's Israel, portrayed by its defenders as a democracy in a region beset by authoritarianism and an eastern outpost of Enlightenment rationalism. On the other side there's the Islamic Republic of Iran, depicted by its enemies as a hidebound clerical regime whose rejection of the West and whose aspiration to speak for all Muslims everywhere are symbolized by its refusal to grant Israel a right to exist. These ideologues have rejoined a battle in which there can be no parley or negotiated truce—only the victory of one vision and one value system over the other. Or so it would seem. Blinded by the condemnatory rhetoric, most observers have failed to notice a critical common interest shared by these two non-Arab powerhouses in the Middle East: the need to portray their fundamentally strategic conflict as an ideological clash.

After the end of the Cold War and the defeat of Iraq in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the strategic considerations that had put Iran and Israel on the same geopolitical side in the latter part of the twentieth century evaporated. Soon enough, absent any common foes, Israel and Iran found themselves in a rivalry to redefine the regional order after the decimation of Iraq's military. Fearing that Israel's strategic weight would suffer if Iran emerged as the undisputed power in the Middle East, Israeli politicians began painting the regime in Tehran as fanatical and irrational. Clearly, they maintained, finding an accommodation with such "mad mullahs" was a nonstarter. Instead, they called on the United States to classify Iran, along with Saddam Hussein's Iraq, as a rogue state that needed to be "contained." Israel's change of heart on Iran was initially met with skepticism in Washington, though the Israelis advanced the same argument they do today, namely that Iran's nuclear program would soon afford the black-turbaned clerics access to the bomb. "Why the Israelis waited until fairly recently to sound a strong alarm about Iran is a perplexity," Clyde Haberman of the *New York Times* wrote in November 1992. Haberman went on to note: "For years, Israel remained willing to do business with Iran, even though the mullahs in Teheran were screaming for an end to the 'Zionist entity.'"²

But for Israel, rallying Western states to its side was best achieved by bringing attention to the alleged suicidal tendencies of the clergy and to Iran's apparent infatuation with the idea of destroying Israel. If the Iranian leadership was viewed as irrational, conventional tactics such as deterrence would be impossible, leaving the international community with no option

but to have zero tolerance for Iranian military capabilities. How could a country like Iran be trusted with missile technology, the argument went, if its leadership was immune to dissuasion by the larger and more numerous missiles of the West? The Israeli strategy was to convince the world—particularly Washington—that the Israeli-Iranian conflict wasn't one between two rivals for military preeminence in a fundamentally disordered region that lacked a clear pecking order. Rather, Israel framed the clash as one between the sole democracy in the Middle East and a totalitarian theocracy that hated everything the West stood for. In casting the situation in those terms, Israel argued that the allegiance of Western states to Israel was no longer a matter of choice or mere political interest, but rather of survival, or at the very least of a struggle of good against evil.

Eventually the “mad mullah” argument stuck. After all, the Iranians themselves were the greatest help in selling that argument to Washington, because they too preferred an ideological framing of the conflict. When revolution swept Iran in 1979, the new Islamic leadership forsook the Persian nationalist identity of the regime of the overthrown Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, but not its yen for Iranian great-power status. Whereas the Shah sought suzerainty in the Persian Gulf and parts of the Indian Ocean regions, while hoping to make Iran the Japan of western Asia, the Khomeini government sought leadership in the entire Islamic world. The Shah's means for achieving his goal were a strong army and strategic ties to the United States. The Ayatollah, on the other hand, relied on his brand of political Islam and ideological zeal to overcome the Arab-Persian divide and to undermine the Arab governments that opposed Iran's ambitions. But whenever Iran's ideological and strategic goals were at odds, Tehran's strategic imperatives prevailed. So in the 1980s, when Iran was involved in a bloody war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the Iranians were careful not to follow up its diatribes against Israel with any concrete actions. Though ideology played a critical role in the revolution's early years, Iran's policy on Israel was to bark a lot, but never bite. The revolutionary regime's ideology and lurid rhetoric successfully veiled a fairly consistent pursuit of *realpolitik*.

After the Cold War, this double policy became all the more important because Israel was transformed from a partner that Iran needed to keep at arm's length to an aggressive competitor that had penetrated Iran's growing sphere of influence. But it was not possible to rally the Arab Muslim masses to Iran's side for the sake of Iran's power ambitions. So Iran turned to ideology once more to conceal its true motives, while utilizing the plight of the Palestinian people to undermine the Arab governments that supported the

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