'Losing an Enemy' Doesn't Tell the Full JCPOA Story

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Articles & Testimony

Trita Parsi's formidable persuasive effort would be stronger if he took the counterarguments more seriously and explained why the nuclear negotiations turned out the way they did.

The following was originally published as part of an ISSF roundtable discussion on Trita Parsi's new book Losing an Enemy: Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of Diplomacy *. Read the other contributions and Parsi's response* ***on the ISSF website (https://issforum.org/roundtables/10-7-iran)*** *.*

Few foreign policy issues in recent years have commanded as much political, public, and media attention as Iran's nuclear program. When the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was being debated in the summer of 2015, it dominated headlines. Two years later, amid a sea of foreign policy troubles elsewhere, President Donald J. Trump's utterances on the deal continue to captivate.

Yet the focus on the JCPOA can mask the deeper dynamic that produced it. International agreements tend to reflect reality more than they shape it. By 2015, the Obama Administration sought to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, but worried just as much about a U.S.-Iran war. The vaunted 'military option,' though usually regarded as a source of U.S. leverage, actually acted as leverage against the United States.

Iran, for its part, appears not to have been in a rush to actually acquire a nuclear weapon. Indeed, even as its nuclear infrastructure expanded and its 'breakout' time diminished, the obstacles to weaponizing remained fraught with risk, primarily of devastating military attack. Perhaps as a result, Iran seems to have aimed instead to preserve the option to produce nuclear weapons in the future—retaining its fuel enrichment, R&D, and missile capabilities—while shedding the burden of sanctions.

Reading the JCPOA in the context of the long arc of crisis over its nuclear program, beginning in the early 2000s, one could easily get the impression that Iran prevailed. Once-clandestine nuclear facilities remain open; efforts to halt

enrichment on Iranian soil or dismantle Iranian nuclear infrastructure were largely abandoned. The JCPOA bears a close resemblance to Iran's own proposals from 2005, before the escalatory cycle of sanctions and nuclear expansion began.

Yet President Barack Obama and his partners in the P5+1—the UK, France, Germany, Russia, and China—got what they sought, as well, even if it is not spelled out in the text of the deal. They got a reprieve from more war in the Middle East, with which the U.S. and Europe in particular were mightily fatigued. Whether Obama was right to focus on this goal, or whether he gave away too much for it, was and remains contentious. What seems clear, however, is that the trend has continued—despite tough talk, President Trump seems to share Obama's desire to reduce rather than add to American military commitments.

In *Losing an Enemy*, Trita Parsi relates the events leading up to the conclusion of the nuclear agreement. Yet the book is not truly a work of history or analysis, but rather an effort to persuade. Parsi wishes to convince the reader first and foremost of the merits of the JCPOA; second, of the futility of sanctions against Iran specifically and as a tool of foreign policy broadly.

Parsi is not writing as an impassive observer, but as a participant in the events he describes, and one with a clear point of view. He was a leading advocate for U.S. diplomacy with Iran, and for the JCPOA itself. To his credit, he states this explicitly, and—in one of the book's most useful contributions to the historical record—sheds light on the composition and workings of the coalition of organizations and individuals involved in that advocacy, who scored an impressive victory in the summer of 2015 by shepherding the nuclear deal through Congressional review. (In the spirit of full disclosure, I was also a participant in the events covered by the book, working on Iran policy during the George W. Bush administration, and as a public commentator critical of the JCPOA during the Obama administration.)

The book is at its strongest in relating, blow by blow, the fevered diplomacy of 2012-2015 that produced the nuclear accord. Parsi clearly had excellent access to the U.S. and Iranian teams. He uses that access to construct an engaging narrative of the diplomatic endgame that both supporters and critics of the JCPOA will find illuminating. He offers up details that will interest those who follow Iran, nuclear nonproliferation, or international negotiations—see, for example, his discussion of how the Iranian approach to negotiating sanctions relief surprised and wrong-footed the American team (pg. 299). Until the participants in the talks themselves inevitably publish their own accounts, Parsi's will stand as the most complete accounting of this stage of the diplomacy.

In making its case, however, *Losing an Enemy* suffers from many of the flaws common to polemics. In marshalling his arguments, Parsi often omits context or elides complex chapters of history. Parsi gives short shrift to the nuclear diplomacy that preceded President Obama, as well as to the lengthy history of U.S.-Iran engagement, which makes Obama's policies seem like a starker break from precedent than was actually the case. The book also provides little detail on Iran's non-nuclear foreign policy. This missing context is vital for understanding the worries of Iran's adversaries about Iranian nuclear activity, which Parsi dismisses as "alarmist" (25). He offers instead that by 2015 Iran's policy was becoming "markedly more moderate" (322) despite the fact that this was a period in which Iran was expanding its involvement in conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan—none of which is meaningfully addressed in the book.

In other cases, the facts Parsi presents seem to contradict rather than support his case. Parsi explains that Iran in 1993 "would have been willing to go along with an Israeli-Palestinian accord"—rather than call Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman a "traitor to the Palestinian people" and ramping up funding for Palestinian rejectionists—"if the United States had been willing to accept a leading Iranian role in the region" (a phrase that is not explained, 30). While Parsi presents this as an example of Iran's unjustified marginalization by the United States, policymakers in Washington are more likely to see it as evidence of Iran's willingness to destabilize the region and

act as a spoiler for the sake of self-aggrandizement.

Likewise, Parsi asserts that Bush's 'axis of evil' speech in January 2002 ended any chance of U.S.-Iran dialogue, but a few pages later indicates that in late spring 2002 a U.S.-Iran channel was reopened, resulting in Iran playing a helpful role in Iraq (47). The reader cannot help but conclude that either Iran's helpfulness in Iraq, or the impact of the 'axis of evil' label, is exaggerated. Nor is it easy to square Parsi's suggestion that Obama was pressured into supporting sanctions with the claim he relays that sanctions were the "top issue" in the President's bilateral meetings in 2011 (120); the juxtaposition leaves the impression either that Obama was extraordinarily malleable, or —far more likely—that he sincerely felt that sanctions were an important element of his policy.

Finally, Parsi takes a black-and-white view of the participants in the events he describes. In this narrative, there are good guys and bad guys. The good guys, while fallible, tend to be enlightened and sincere. In the 1990s, for example, Parsi suggests that Iran supported terrorist groups because Washington's refusal to "grant Iran its legitimate role in the region" left Tehran with "no choice" (21).

Even when the good guys misstep, Parsi is quick to absolve them. For example, he takes Obama gently to task for failing to support human rights in Iran during the 2009 Green Revolution. Yet he implicitly credits Obama with inspiring that uprising in the first place by speculating that "If the Bush Administration were still in power and continuing to provoke confrontation with Iran, Mousavi would probably not have disputed the voter fraud and called for street protests" (85-86). This unconvincingly turns domestic Iranian affairs into a function of U.S. policy.

The bad guys, on the other hand—Republicans, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the French—are portrayed as unfailingly cynical, never arriving honestly at their views. Israel, for example, is accused of inventing the Iranian threat in the early 1990s to deflect domestic criticism of peace overtures to the PLO. Yet little attention is given to the Iranian policies that might have caused Israel concern. Critics of the JCPOA also receive Parsi's scorn. To them, he says, the "details of the nuclear deal [were] irrelevant" (317) as they were in reality motivated by the fear of "losing an enemy" (374) or "Iran's political rehabilitation" (322).

The bad guys are not just wrong, but unpleasant. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu "growl[s]" (248) and is "angry and bitter" (225). Israeli minister Moshe Yaalon is "hysterical" (321). American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) staffers are "screaming loonies" (340) and French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius is accused in bold print of throwing a "temper tantrum" (235). As for the benighted JCPOA critics, they are the "same group of usual suspects" (351) offering "second-rate arguments" (346).

Yet the reader has to take Parsi's word for all of this because—despite the number of pages he devotes to them—Parsi does not cite any of those he criticizes, despite his impressive list of interviews with the nuclear deal's supporters. This is in keeping with his failure to take the concerns of Iran's adversaries seriously, which may serve the effort to persuade but also limits the book's analytical contribution. Allowing the possibility that these parties arrived at their concerns honestly might have forced a deeper examination of Iran's policies, in which Parsi is well-positioned to engage.

Indeed, what is most disappointing about *Losing an Enemy* are not the shortcuts taken in the effort to persuade, but the opportunities it misses to probe more deeply Iran's internal dynamics. Parsi notes that during the negotiations Iran ultimately gave up its longstanding insistence that its "right" to enrich uranium be recognized, but he does not explain why this shift occurred (239). Likewise, he describes how Iran on at least two occasions insisted that any agreement also cover regional issues (146-147), yet later indicates that Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei demanded that the talks address only the nuclear issue (168). Again, no explanation for these shifts is given. In this case the omission is particularly unfortunate, since one of the main criticisms of the JCPOA by U.S. regional allies is that it ignored regional issues, and the Obama administration's frequent rebuttal was that regional

issues were never part of the negotiations. Parsi's narrative seems to suggest that the Iranians were ready to discuss those issues, at least for a time.

Another Iranian official is quoted lamenting Iran's declining "soft power" in the Middle East (136); elsewhere the reader learns that following 2009 Khamenei was increasingly dependent on hardline constituencies for his power (186). In each instance, additional examination of how Iran arrived at its decisions, and how regional and domestic factors influenced its nuclear policy, would be welcome additions that would enhance readers'—and policymakers'—understanding of Iran.

In making the case against sanctions, Parsi only half succeeds. He persuasively details how key concessions by the Obama administration were instrumental in securing a deal—foremost among them the U.S. retreat on uranium enrichment, which he rightly terms "The Concession" with a capital "C" (174). But his effort to argue that sanctions were irrelevant to the outcome relies almost exclusively on the testimony of Iranian officials, who have a clear interest in promoting that view.

Parsi fails to buttress his argument by citing the actual impact of sanctions on Iran's economy, or engaging with the arguments of sanctions experts (including both supporters and critics of the JCPOA) who cite empirical data to argue that sanctions against Iran were effective. As a result, he does not adequately address the possibility that U.S. concessions and sanctions were both important to the final result, much less make the broader case against sanctions as a foreign policy instrument. Indeed, Parsi's narrative more clearly supports than rebuts the idea that diplomacy backed by sanctions was an effective approach.

Ultimately, supporters of the JCPOA will cheer Parsi's work and opponents will be riled by it. He is a formidable debater, and his work describes the final round of nuclear talks in greater detail and more competently than any other thus far. Yet Parsi has a clear point of view, and his persuasive effort would have been strengthened had he taken seriously the counterarguments. And when the book seeks to go deeper—to explain not just what happened but why—it falls short. That is a story which remains to be written.

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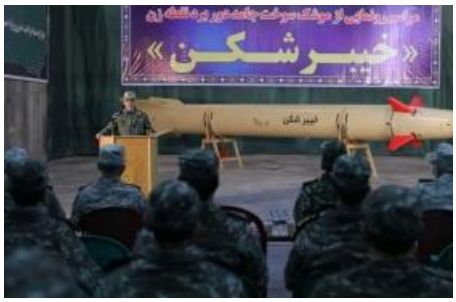

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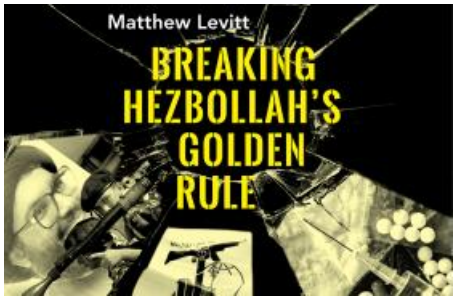

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