

[*Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.*, Trita Parsi, Yale University Press, 361 pages]

Machiavellians in the Mideast

By Leon Hadar

AT A TIME WHEN Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declares, “the regime occupying Qods [Jerusalem] must vanish from the pages of time,” describes the Holocaust as “a myth,” and is portrayed by Israeli leaders as a “new Hitler,” it’s difficult to imagine that not so long ago, Iran and Israel were close trade partners and covert military allies working together to contain the common threat of Arab nationalism.

And now that the U.S. has ousted Saddam, occupies Mesopotamia, and is being pressed by Israel and its supporters in Washington to take action against Iran, it’s interesting to recall that not so long ago, the United States considered Iran and Israel part of a pro-American bloc in the Middle East supposed to protect U.S. interests.

As Israel now relies on its partnership with Washington to help counterbalance the power of Iran, the irony is that the Iranians, under the leadership of both the secular Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the fundamentalist Ayatollah Seyyed Ruollah Khomeini, were hoping that Tehran’s ties with the Israelis would make it more likely that the Americans would assist the Persian-Shi’ites of Iran in their struggle against the Arab-Sunnis that controlled Iraq.

And guess who was arguing, following the 1979 Iranian Revolution and throughout the ensuing Iraq-Iran War that it was in America’s interest to establish ties with Tehran’s mullahs—only to contend 20 years later that the U.S. needs to use military power to oust these same mullahs? That would be renowned neoconservative strategic thinker Michael “Creative Destruc-

tion” Ledeen, who as Trita Parsi points out in *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the U.S.* has for decades advanced the notion that American and Israeli interests in the Middle East are inseparable. Hence, when it looked as if Saddam was going to emerge as a hegemon in the Persian Gulf and pose a threat to Israel, Ledeen promoted détente with Tehran and was even willing to work with shady Israeli and Iranian middlemen in what came to be known as the Iran-Contra Affair. (Later, when Iran seemed to be making gains in the war, other neocons like Daniel Pipes and Laurie Mylroie encouraged the United States to provide Saddam with upgraded weapons and intelligence ostensibly to counterbalance Iran’s successes.) When Saddam’s ouster—a move Ledeen advocated—provided Iran with an opportunity to emerge as a hegemon in the Persian Gulf and as a major threat to Israel, the American Enterprise Institute’s finest began beating the drums for war with Iran.

Parsi, a Washington-based Middle East expert who teaches at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, suggests in his original and provocative analysis that despite the dramatic changes in ideological orientations in Tehran (the Islamic Revolution) and Tel Aviv (the rise of the nationalist Likud Party), the Iranians and the Israelis have continued to co-operate on military and strategic fronts. The fact that the two powers sustained their romance while continuing to demonize and counterbalance one another should not come as a shock. There’s no paradox here. It’s the national interest, stupid!

Indeed, contrary to the Manichean narrative—the good guys vs. the bad-dies—that many policymakers and pundits use to explain international politics, Parsi’s *realpolitik* conceptual framework helps the reader understand why the Israelis and Iranians can be close partners and fierce adversaries at the same time. They’re the “rival twins” of the Middle East. Indeed, so much of what has occurred on the Iran-Israel

front and affected their relationship with Washington over the last 60 years reflects the kaleidoscopic nature of the Middle East, where interests are grounded in geostrategic and geoeconomic concerns, as well as tribal, ethnic, and religious commitments—not grand ideological designs.

While noting that bonds between Persians and Jews are more than 2,000 years old, dating back to the marriage of Persia’s Xerxes and Queen Esther in the 5th century BC, Parsi focuses on more recent history, from the Pahlavi dynasty and the Zionist founders of the state of Israel. A central component of the modern Israeli-Iranian relationship has been the so-called “periphery doctrine,” drawn up by Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, in the early 1950s. It called for Israel, as part of a strategy to contain threats from a hostile Arab world, to court all those in the broader Middle East who didn’t naturally fall in the Arab-Muslim fold. Israel thus nurtured ties not only with Iran, where the majority of the population is non-Arab and Shi’ite (most Arabs are Sunni), but also with Christian Ethiopia and non-Arab Turkey. In addition, Israel sought relations with a long belt of minorities, stretching from the non-Arab Berbers in North Africa and the Christian Copts in Egypt to the non-Arab Kurds in Iraq and the Druze in Syria. At the same time, the evolving relationship between Iran and the Jewish state helped the Iranians counterbalance potential threats from radical Arab regimes. It also opened doors for them in Washington as they sought access to U.S. military and economic aid.

Analysts are inclined to divide the history of the Iran-Israel relationship into two main chapters. From its establishment in 1948 up to the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Israel enjoyed cordial relations with Iran. The Shah’s regime did not formally recognize the Jewish state, but Israel had a permanent delegation in Tehran that served as an unofficial embassy. Israel purchased a significant portion of its oil from Iran and helped transfer oil from Iran to international markets through the Eilat-Ashkelon

pipeline. Both Tehran and Tel Aviv perceived Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser—whose pan-Arabist agenda, backed by Moscow, encouraged the toppling of pro-Western regimes in the Middle East, including Iraq—as a threat to their national interests. In keeping with its Cold War strategy, Washington encouraged growing military and trade ties between Iran and Israel, which in the early 1970s, were transformed into America’s “strategic assets” in the Persian Gulf (Iran) and Eastern Mediterranean (Israel).

But then—or so the conventional wisdom goes—everything changed. The Shah was ousted and the Ayatollah Khomeini and his band of radical mullahs replaced the Pahlavis and adopted a violent anti-American (“Great Satan”) and anti-Israeli (“Little Satan”) agenda. This supposedly explains why today we are facing the prospect of a full-blown military conflict between Iran and Israel and/or the United States.

Not so, argues Parsi, who proposes that when it comes to the Israel-Iran relationship, *plus ça change*—the Iran Revolution, the coming to power of Likud, the end of the Cold War—*plus c’est la même chose*. Mid-size regional military powers like Iran and Israel will come

and Muslim blocs. Similarly, after cooperating for several years with Israel and the United States to provide military assistance to the Kurds fighting for self-rule in Iraq, in 1975, the Shah cut off all military support to the Kurds after signing the Algiers Accords with Saddam. It seemed like a shocking betrayal of the Kurds—and of Israel and the United States. But in fact, the Shah operated all along according to his nation’s interests. He had earlier supported the Kurds as part of a grand Iranian strategy of forcing Iraq to make sovereignty concessions to Iran in the disputed Shatt al-Arab waterway. In 1975, after Saddam realized that the Iraqi Kurdish military campaign could not be defeated as long as it received backing from Iran (and through Iran, from Israel and the U.S.), he agreed to Iran’s demands for sovereignty over half of the disputed waterway, which had always been Tehran’s long-term goal.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the strategic calculations that drove the Israeli-Iranian partnership between 1948 and 1979, including Israel’s periphery doctrine, survived the Iranian Revolution, the end of the Cold War, and the first Gulf War. In the 1980s, fears that Saddam’s Iraq would defeat Iran led Israeli Defense Minister Shimon

for the tension that exists today between Washington and Tehran on the policies of Israel. In the 1990s, as Parsi sees it, Prime Minister Peres, hoping that the Oslo process and globalization would help Israel make peace and integrate itself into the Arab “interior,” turned the periphery doctrine on its head. He demonized the Islamic Republic as the leader of a global, radical Islamicist menace that supposedly threatened not only Israel but also America and its Arab allies. This strategy was evolving at the time when the Iranians under President Rafsanjani were trying to move toward détente with the United States. But according to Parsi, the Israelis and their supporters in Washington were successful in persuading the Clinton administration to isolate Iran, an approach that has remained in place ever since. They also tried to sabotage any attempt at rapprochement between Washington and Tehran that could elevate Iran to the position of a recognized regional power and threaten Israel’s status as America’s main ally in the Middle East.

Seen from this perspective, Israel and its supporters are basically attempting to tip the balance of power in the Middle East in their favor by isolating Iran. Parsi suggests that at the end of the day, such an approach runs contrary to America’s interests in stabilizing Iraq and the rest of the Persian Gulf, which could be accomplished by working with Tehran. Israel also needs to understand that its drive to maintain its dominant military position in the region and prevent Iran from asserting its own regional position is not viable in the long term.

Indeed, as Parsi argues, it’s in the national interest of both the United States and Israel to co-opt Iran as a pragmatic partner in the Middle East. But we seem to be heading in the opposite direction. ■

Leon Hadar is an Independent Institute research fellow in foreign-policy studies and author, most recently, of Sandstorm: Policy Failure in the Middle East.

ISRAEL IS ATTEMPTING TO TIP THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

together when they conclude that they share common interests and part ways when those interests diverge. Most of the time, they will operate in the gray strategic zone—where the line separating ally from rival is fuzzy—that seems to be the dominant reality of the Middle East.

As Parsi points out, even at the height of the partnership between Iran and Israel, the two governments recognized that they needed to maintain a diversified strategic portfolio that reflected their conflicting national interests. Hence, in 1975, the Shah instructed his diplomats to vote in favor of the UN General Assembly Resolution 3379, which equated Zionism with racism, as part of an effort to placate members of the Arab

Peres to press the Reagan administration to help Iran’s ayatollahs, who despite their hostility toward the Jewish state were encouraging Israel to provide them with military assistance against Iraq and lobbying Washington to weaken its support of Saddam. In fact, Parsi seems to believe that despite the harsh rhetoric coming out of Tehran against the Jewish state and from Tel Aviv against the Islamic Republic, common national interests could have overridden the ideological constraints that made it difficult to revive the pragmatic partnership that existed during the Cold War and before the Iranian Revolution.

Parsi places most of the responsibility

[*The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It*, David A. Bell, Houghton Mifflin, 432 pages]

Ideology Arms Itself

By William Anthony Hay

DURING A BUDGET DEBATE in February 1792, William Pitt the Younger informed the House of Commons that never had there been a time “when, from the situation of Europe, we might more reasonably expect fifteen years of peace.”

Within a year, war with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France had dashed such expectations, though few predicted the onset of general war. Seasoned European observers assumed that France's domestic troubles rendered it harmless. Only Edmund Burke, the great contrarian of British politics in the 1780s, viewed the French Revolution as an armed doctrine waging war on social order and anticipated the consequences.

In *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It*, David Bell provocatively argues that total war—the unconstrained drive to secure complete victory by any means necessary—emerged from the French Revolution and the 23 years of fighting that followed. Revolutionary ideologies gave Napoleon Bonaparte the means to seize power, and his bid to dominate Europe transformed warfare. The unprecedented mobilization of populations and resources, combined with the abandonment of restraints, set a new model that demanded absolute victory—no room existed for compromise. By presenting an existential challenge to Napoleon's new order, insurgents drove authorities to abandon limits and adopt measures little short of extermination. Such campaigns forged a concept of war that continues to shape modern understandings of conflicts large and small.

Although it seems paradoxical for total war to follow an enlightened age that aspired to universal peace, Bell draws the connection between the extremes. The hope that one final conflict might transform society tantalized those who thought only artificial institutions, and the monsters who sustained them, prevented humanity from achieving its natural harmony. Revolutionaries thus embraced war for the sake of peace; to flinch from whatever violence might be necessary would be a betrayal of their noble aspirations. Georges Danton's chilling reference in 1791 to “the exterminating angel of liberty” expressed a sense of war as an expiation of sin. It offered a decadent society a way forward to redemption. Thus the nightmare of total war became intertwined with the dream of universal peace.

By contrast, 18th-century Europeans had previously accepted war as part of life, treating it as a means for states to pursue specific objectives. Rulers weighed costs against benefits and imposed limits on violence. These attitudes reflected a backlash against the brutality of the wars that had followed the Reformation and the breakdown of medieval political institutions, but they also derived from other values. Bell sketches a culture built upon order, balance, and restraint in which public culture among the elite imposed demanding standards of self-control. Nobles performed roles according to set rules, the violation of which brought ostracism and ridicule. Army officers identified themselves as noblemen rather than military professionals, and they followed an aristocratic rather than a professional code. However artificial the old regime's conventions might have been, they protected noncombatants and limited the ferocity of war during an age in which the lethality of weapons had increased.

The cultural transition Bell describes in *The First Total War* amounts to what Scottish thinkers of the time called “a revolution in manners.” It came gradually at first. A memoirist later reflected, “We were walking on a carpet of flowers and did not notice the abyss beneath.”

Feeling displaced reason and self-control as the guiding social principle. Widely read philosophers attacked war as contrary to human nature and criticized the existing social order as an impediment to peace. International politics became increasingly competitive, and French writers came to view Rome's total destruction of Carthage as a parallel to their country's competition with Britain.

When the dam broke in 1789, ideological currents were released that had previously been mere abstractions. The desire to tear down society completely and rebuild it from scratch made any continuity with the past impossible. A May 1790 debate over the king's power to wage war severed chivalry from warfare and at the same time broke the bonds of service between crown and nobility. Instead of fighting for their king, Frenchmen took up arms to promote ideals. The outbreak of war with Austria and other powers aiming to suppress the revolution accelerated the dynamic. Violence offered a cleansing release, and the prospect of achieving the millennium through a final convulsive effort set the new tone. Ideological war demanded a total commitment that ruled out compromise or mercy.

The clash between revolution and counter-revolution in the Vendée between 1793 and 1796 presented the former with an existential challenge. The suppression of the insurgency by the new French government set a paradigm that lasted for decades. The people of the Vendée, a deeply conservative region in western France where the Catholic Church commanded great loyalty, had gained nothing from the revolution save higher taxes and conscription. Attempts to suppress Christianity detonated revolt in a rough country almost designed for resistance. Early successes produced a brief chance for the counterrevolutionaries to march on Paris. The French government responded with a notorious war of extermination that Bell calls “so gruesome that historians have never really stopped to consider just how fantastical it was in the first place.” The sheer