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## Book Review

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# How Obama Sabotaged Earlier Iran Talks

by Nancy Spannaus

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### **A Single Roll of the Dice, Obama's Diplomacy with Iran**

by Trita Parsi

New Haven and London: Yale University Press,  
2012 284 pages, hardcover, \$27.50

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There are few people more qualified to tell the story of the record of the Obama Administration's dealings with Iran than the author of this book, noted Middle East foreign policy expert and president of the National Iranian-American Council (NIAC), Trita Parsi. From his involvement in confidential negotiations between American foreign policy officials and Iranian government representatives, in The Hague during the Spring of 2008, to his organizing of an ad by a group of retired U.S. military-intelligence officers opposing military action against Iran, to the current intensive maneuvering toward a possible deal on nuclear development, Parsi has been intensively involved in the policy fight against war in and around the Administration.

In addition, as he says in his book, he conducted more than 70 interviews, many with principals in the discussions, in preparation for his story.

The result is, in some ways, ironic. For while Parsi states outright that he believes Obama personally was "genuine" in his desire for a deal with Iran, and that Iran bears equal, if not more, responsibility for the failure to reach one, his chronology is actually a profound indictment of the Obama Administration's step-by-step sabotage of the process. Parsi himself, to this day, says he's hopeful Obama will not support war. But a careful reading of this book, which I highly recommend, strongly suggests otherwise.

Surely, Parsi is correct in his statement that diplomacy with Iran has not *failed*; it was never seriously tried. As he pointed out at a forum on Capitol Hill Feb. 16, and as he ultimately mentions in the book, serious diplomacy, especially between parties who have had long-term serious conflicts, such as the U.S. and Vietnam, the West and Libya, and Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, takes years to succeed. Yet, in the case of Iran, as a senior State Department official told Parsi, "Our Iran diplomacy was a gamble on a single roll of the dice."

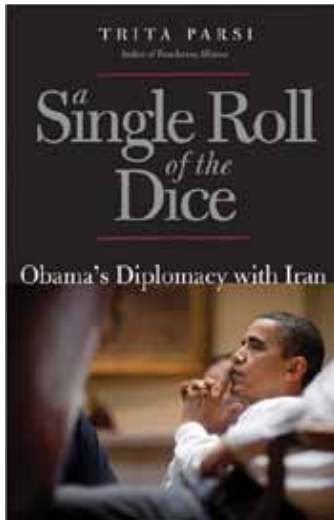
Hence the title of the book, and the danger that, in the more supercharged period of crisis of today, Obama will soon abandon diplomacy, and follow his British masters to a disastrous global war.

### **Sanctions vs. Diplomacy**

To judge from appearances, one would conclude that President Obama, in sharp contrast with George W. Bush, was determined to show respect to the Iranian regime, and move toward a diplomatic solution to the so-called issue of nuclear materials. While the record shows that the Administration shifted emphasis between the two tactics, the fact is that the Obama Administration always combined the two—thus feeding mistrust, and ultimately making a peaceful resolution impossible. Sanctions are a tool of war, and incompatible with diplomacy.

While the U.S. tone had changed with Obama, the new administration maintained sufficient continuity with the previous Bush Administration to lend credence to the Iranian view that Washington was headed to the same objective. One of those points of continuity was the appointment of Dennis Ross, a pro-Israel hawk, as one of the two officials in charge of the review of policy toward Iran. While declaring that he was for engagement with Iran without preconditions, Ross demanded that sanctions be part of the mix, allegedly to "concentrate the minds of Iranian leaders on what they stand to lose without humiliating them."

Another point of continuity was the fact that Stuart Levey, previously the Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence at Treasury, was kept on at the Treasury Department (until March 2011). Levey was known as a fanatic on killer sanctions against Iran. Thus it was little surprise that when the incoming Administra-



tion met with the Iranians at a conference on Afghanistan on March 31, 2009, its letter inviting further talks made reference to the alternative of “crippling sanctions.”

But what was the guidepost for the Iranians to avoid such sanctions? Parsi concludes it was unclear, especially on the question of Iran’s rights to enriching uranium, something the Iranians claimed was guaranteed by international treaty, and which a host of its enemies adamantly opposed. Officially, the Obama Administration dropped the demand that Iran suspend enrichment, in April of 2009. In fact, the case was never that clear. In his Capitol Hill briefing Feb. 16, Parsi declared that Great Britain, France, Israel, and Saudi Arabia were the chief parties insisting on an unworkable “zero enrichment” policy, while he considered the U.S. more flexible. Which certainly raises the question of the relationship of the role of Great Britain, as well as Israel, in Obama’s policymaking.

Parsi concludes there was always “ambiguity” on the enrichment question on the part of the Obama Administration.

As he chronicles the process, however, Parsi identifies the June 2009 Iranian elections, which involved a huge, bloody crackdown on the opposition, as a major factor in promoting the punitive sanctions approach. Indeed, while officially, the Administration was reviewing Iran policy with an eye to reopening negotiations, and certain leading Democratic Senators, including John Kerry, were opposing tougher sanctions in order to facilitate upcoming talks, the President and his Administration refused to either encourage or support the talks.

Eventually, the situation would get a lot worse.

## The Enrichment Deal

The fact is that it was the Iranians who first put a potential deal for beginning to resolve the matter of uranium enrichment on the table. In June of 2009, prior to the Iranian elections, Tehran’s ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, wrote an appeal to the IAEA, in light of Iran’s anticipated shortage of medical radioactive isotopes, which were needed for the Tehran Research Reactor (supplied by the U.S. in the 1950s). Hundreds of thousands of Iranians depended upon this supply for medical treatment, he said, and Iran was prepared to ship out 1,200 tons of low-enriched uranium (LEU), in return for the IAEA returning uranium enriched to 19.75%—the level required for its life-saving function.

According to Parsi’s report, Iran saw the proposal as

a way of getting implicit recognition of its right to enrich. Apparently, France and Israel did also, as they vehemently opposed it. (Parsi doesn’t mention Britain.) But talks did proceed, and a deadline for coming to some agreement was set by the Obama Administration, for November-December of that year.

But while preparations for an official meeting of the P5+1 (UN Security Council Permanent Five plus Germany) on Oct. 1 in Geneva proceeded, the political situation became more problematic in both Iran and the West, feeding increasing distrust. Among those elements was Iran’s revelation on Sept. 23 of its plans to build the Fordu plant—an announcement which Parsi says took Russia by surprise, although not the United States. Another complication was the political turmoil in Iran—although at no point did the Green Opposition support Western demands for sanctions. Tehran was quite suspicious of the insistence on *one year’s* delay between handing over its LEU, and getting the enriched uranium—especially as France was still holding yellow-cake uranium belonging to Iran.

And, Parsi reports, in the midst of all this, the White House came out for multilateral financial sanctions against Iran!

Ultimately, in late October, the U.S. gave Iran a take-or-leave-it demand, to meet the ridiculously short November-December 2009 deadline to agree to the terms of the trade. The Iranian government, which had asked for more time, not surprisingly turned it down.

At that point, Parsi reports, “sanctions became the only track” for the Obama Administration, and sanctions bills began to move full-speed ahead—a shift reflected in the fact that Obama’s January 2010 State of the Union address said *nothing* about diplomacy, and only called for punishing Iran.

## Doubletalk and Lies

Early 2010 was dominated by negotiations on sanctions, with the Administration seeking to have the UN go first, before more U.S. unilateral measures, specifically sanctions against refining equipment and imports of gasoline which were passed by the House and Senate in December 2009-January 2010, were signed into law by the President.

As in 2009, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was also demanding tougher action—but in a way, that’s irrelevant. The process of “crippling sanctions” was already underway. In fact, according to Parsi, in a private meeting with Brazil’s President Lula da Silva

and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, during the April 12-13, 2010 Nuclear Summit in Washington, President Obama was dismissive of any prospects for a deal, and asserted that Iran was no longer a priority for him. Publicly, Obama said Iran had a chance for a deal, but privately he contradicted himself.

However, on April 20, Obama went ahead and send a letter to Lula and Erdogan laying out the terms for a deal on the enriched uranium, along the same lines as discussed in the Summer of 2009! We quote: “For us, Iran’s agreement to transfer 1,200 kg of Iran’s low enriched uranium out of the country would build confidence and reduce regional tensions by substantially reducing Iran’s LEU stockpile. I want to underscore that this element is of fundamental importance for the United States.”

Obama went on to specifically reference the IAEA offer to “escrow” Iran’s LEU in Turkey, while the nuclear fuel was being processed.

With this letter in hand, and the prospect of sanctions being imposed by the UN Security Council looming (UN Ambassador Susan Rice was furiously pushing for them), Brazil and Turkey went frantically to work. They negotiated an agreement with the Ahmadinejad government of a mere one and a half pages, which outlined the rights of Iran under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), including the right to enrichment, and contained a refined proposal for the swap of Iran’s LEU for uranium enriched outside the country. On May 15, the Tehran Declaration was released to the world.

Not surprisingly, one of the key points Brazil and Turkey used to convince Iran to agree was the letter they had received from President Obama. Thus, what an ugly surprise it was to them, when the State Department and White House *immediately* responded to the announcement by denouncing it as making (in Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s words) “the world more dangerous.”

The excuses the Administration mustered for its double-cross were numerous, and even irrelevant. Washington said it no longer trusted Tehran; that the deal didn’t prevent Iran enrichment; and, that at this stage, punishment for Iran (which had now produced much more LEU) was necessary. But, the Administration never expressed these reservations to Brazil and Turkey—which, when they found out about them, were incensed.

In fact, as Parsi implies, what the Administration was doing was showing that *sanctions* were its key policy, not complementary, but antithetical to a deal on enrichment. By the time of the Lula-Erdogan-Ahmadinejad announcement, the Obama Administration had

succeeded in bullying and deceiving Russia, in particular, into signing onto a sanctions deal at the UN. One of its lies, according to Parsi, was that Obama would *scrap missile defense in Europe!* While Brazil and Turkey voted against the sanctions (and Lebanon abstained), they went sailing through.

## Where Will It Go?


In his Epilogue, Dr. Parsi indicates that he does realize the consequences of continuing the “paradigm of enmity.” The continuation of current policy of “crippling sanctions” makes the Iran-U.S. relationship vulnerable to sparking a “larger conflict,” he says. In fact, such a conflict would portend the epic conflict of a thermonuclear war.

The key lies in the story *behind* the pattern of sabotage by the Obama Administration, in the controls which determine the President’s behavior. Those controls lie in the British Financial Empire, and, after understanding the implications of this book, the patriotic citizen has only one choice: Join the war to destroy that empire, before it destroys us by thermonuclear war, or other means.

# THE EURASIAN LAND-BRIDGE

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