BOOK REVIEW

Trita Parsi, A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran

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*Gülriz ŞEN**

Trita Parsi, in *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran* covers the complexities and difficulties of American diplomacy toward Iran during President Barack Obama's first term in the White House. Published in 2012, the book offers one of the latest and well-written contributions to analysis of Iran-US relations which according to the author represents an "institutionalized enmity" rather than mere antagonism with its more than three-decade of estrangement (p.5). As a close spectator of Washington politics, Iran-American affairs and the current head of the National Iranian American Council, a non-profit organization founded to advance the interests of the Iranian American community, Parsi delves into the politics of nuclear diplomacy and maps out multi-actor, multi-causal and multi-level nature of US foreign policy toward Iran. He builds up a triumvirate perspective that tackles not only Iran-US affairs *per se*, but quite conveniently US-Israeli relations which bear significant impact on the shaping of American foreign policy with regard to Iran. Therefore, the book adds up a brand new chapter to the author's previous piece entitled *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the United States (2007) w*hich examines the complex strategic interplay between Iran, America and Israel since the Islamic Revolution in Iran. This complexity has further grown as the nuclear crisis involves major international actors, regional states and international organizations.

The book is organized into twelve chapters which follow more or less a chronological order and analyze simultaneous processes in different chapters when necessary. The book starts its analysis by drawing the context for contemporary Iran-US relations and focuses on the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq which for Parsi and growing number of officials in the US could have ushered a breakthrough only if Iran's offer for a grand bargain in 2003 was not rebuffed by the Bush administration (p.4). In the first chapter of the book, "A peace of necessity", Parsi writes about the –partially- changing political mood inside the US with greater recognition of increasing costs of political estrangement be-

* ***Ph.D. candidate at Department of International Relations, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey.***

tween Iran and the US, at a time they have issues of common concern that require collaboration. According to the author, Obama's decision to make a shift by "opening US hand" with the hope that Iran would "unclench its fist", was a historic opportunity after deterioration of relations during the Bush administration. However, as Parsi effectively portrays throughout the book, President Obama's vision for diplomacy proved quite hard to materialize in the face of domestic opposition by Congress and strong lobby activism of the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), besides reservation and outright opposition by US allies in Europe and the Middle East to a favorable move toward Iran.

On the Iranian side, he observes oscillation of views between hope and pessimism given both Iran's recognition of Obama's "more rational and flexible approach" and persistent mistrust of the United States. Parsi demonstrates Iran's dilemmas in trusting Obama to bring real change. On the one hand, the persona of Barack Obama made it difficult for the Iranian leadership to dismiss or vilify; for his exposure to Muslim and Christian cultures, experience of having grown up in a Third World country, even his middle name Hussein hardly fit in what Parsi dubs "the Iranian stereotype of American, imperialist leaders characterized as arrogant, ignorant and incapable of empathizing with the grievances of the Third World states against Western powers" (p.8). Yet, on the other hand particularly the hard-liners in the regime remained skeptical of Obama's real intensions arguing that his moves were merely a change of tactics ultimately aiming to isolate Iran. As Ali Larijani, the speaker of the Iranian *Majles* claimed the strategic nature of the conflict between Iran and America could only be resolved through a change in strategy, not tactics (p. 39). So long as Obama's goals were unclear, they ruled out, any conciliatory move by Iran would be detrimental to the national interests of the Islamic Republic. Indeed, this has been a bitter legacy of the Bush administration which made Iran wary of US intensions because of the fear and suspicion that US might only be pursuing "Hadley rules"-named after the US Deputy National Security Advisor- by cooperating "rogue" states like Iran which would not be allowed to translate into a change in the strategic nature of relations (p. 41). Thus past experience was a crucial factor which diminished Iran's willingness to give Obama the benefit of doubt (p. 42).

The book then examines the new US administration's efforts to review previous policies toward Iran and come up with a balanced and con-

structive guideline that would operationalize Obama's vision of diplomacy against the backdrop of lack of strong support from the allies. Parsi mentions those who feared possible adverse consequences of Obama's diplomatic choice over US determination to prevent nuclear proliferation and how these fears were alleviated by appointment of "nonproliferation hawks" in bureaucracy such as Hillary Clinton, Dennis Ross and Gary Samore to Obama's new team (p. 45). As to the content of the review process, he cites considerations over establishing a low-level presence in Iran and a direct communication channel with the Supreme Leader, recognizing and providing aid for limited civilian nuclear capability, and lifting prohibition on direct contact between Iranian-American diplomats (p. 46). However, eventually what came out was the "hybrid option", also known as "dual-track diplomacy" based on the congruence of diplomacy with sanctions; that is offering Tehran negotiations without any preconditions, while ratcheting up sanctions in case Tehran did not yield to American demands (p. 54). The sanctions track would target Tehran's banking sector and European companies doing business with Iran and to pursue it would require the US to form a multilateral front against Iran by taking Russia and China onboard (p. 47). As to the enrichment issue, by lifting suspension of enrichment as a precondition for talks, the US strategy would allow Tehran to enrich uranium during negotiations in return for heightened inspections and verification of its nuclear sites; yet as Parsi notes at some point Iran had to suspend enrichment, which was not clearly specified not to obstruct diplomatic momentum (p. 55). The envisioned diplomacy would only be based on the nuclear file, leaving out any linkage with various strategic issues that called for Iran-US collaboration and understanding. By doing so, the administration sought to prevent Iran's gaining of concessions and leverage through other issues, even though this separation was a source of discontent within the State Department especially for diplomats who worked on the Afghanistan file (p. 57).

After reviewing the "review" process, Parsi addresses US-Israeli relations during Obama's presidency underlining the fact that Israel and Israeli lobby in Washington via its strong impact on the Congress constitute an indispensible component of any US move toward Iran. He sheds light on the clash between Obama and Netanyahu administrations over Obama's vision for diplomacy with Iran, the administration's opposition to Israeli settlement policy and American intension to repair its international image and credibility in the Muslim world. He under-

lines Israeli fear of abandonment by the United States and perils of a possible breakthrough between Iran and America for Israel's strategic significance and security. As to the nuclear crisis, Parsi argues what Israel fears most is the regional and strategic consequences of nuclear parity in the Middle East which poses a threat to Israel's image of invincibility as the only nuclear-armed state in the Middle East and is likely to lead to recognition of Iran's regional power status by America (p. 26). Therefore, for Israel zero enrichment has been a redline which persistently claimed that Iran's enrichment was a "point of no return" and shall not be tolerated in any respect (p. 27). The author argues that Israel's opposition to engagement has been one of the hardest hurdles for Obama's diplomacy with its pressure to give diplomatic efforts a strict deadline until the end of 2009, which meant three to four months to resolve decades of estrangement, and then proceed with sanctions and if possible with the military option to stop Iran. Obama's reaction was to resist Israeli-imposed arbitrary deadline, while acknowledging the necessity of working with a timeline to prevent the talks from proceeding indefinitely (p. 76). However, Parsi referring to Wikileaks argues that Obama's disagreement with Israel was rather in form than substance, as he reportedly told his counterparts that the success of nuclear diplomacy would be clear by the end of 2009 and military option still remained on the table. Obama refrained from declaring this publicly not to jeopardize chances for a diplomatic solution. According to Parsi, Iran was to make greater damage to diplomacy than Israel and why this has been so is analyzed in his analysis of political dynamics in the aftermath of 2009 presidential elections and their impact on Iran's foreign policy (p. 78).

Apparently, one of the factors that had profound influence on Obama's diplomatic overhaul was June 2009 Presidential elections in Iran which was followed by massive demonstrations protesting alleged fraud and regime's brutal crackdown of peaceful demonstrations. The post-2009 Iran has witnessed the severest discord in state-society relations since 1979 which has also put Iran's elites at war among themselves and bore significant repercussions on nuclear diplomacy. Parsi argues that this unprecedented crisis caught Obama administration off guard. US diplomats perceived the turmoil as an end to Iran's expanding sphere of influence arguing that Iran would not feel such strong anymore after what has unfolded in 2009 (p. 94). On the other hand, Obama thence had to walk a tightrope not to get embroiled in Iran's domestic tensions, not to risk future nuclear talks and not to seem on the side of

the regime and against pro-democracy protestors in Iran (pp.99-100). Over time, domestic pressure from the Republicans for the US to stand with the protestors and take a hard-line approach against the Iranian regime mounted.

The author balances his account reflecting on what senior advisers and leaders of the opposition and people in Iran thought with regard to Obama's stance in post-2009 environment. His account is based on firsthand information derived from interviews with important political personalities within the opposition. Accordingly the leaders of the Green Movement preferred Obama to keep his distance, for any verbal support could risk de-legitimization of the opposition by providing the regime the pretext to argue that Mousavi and his supporters were indeed working for the enemy. An important point that was raised in these interviews revealed Washington's rather minimal influence over developments in Iran with no trade, no diplomatic relations and no embassy on the ground (p. 96). The protestors meanwhile were disillusioned by Obama's lack of strong condemnation of human rights abuses in Iran, a criticism that was afterwards also admitted by a top-level Obama official speaking to Parsi, when he told that "speaking out stronger against the human rights abuses would have been better" (p. 101). Nevertheless, at the height of the turmoil and time pressure to prevent Iran reaching break-out capability, the Obama administration chose to engage with Iran, given the political capital it has invested in the process. Parsi does not go into very much detail as to regime's perception of social and political unrest which accused United States alongside Britain and other Western states, despite US caution not to get associated with the turmoil. The regime portrayed the protestors as "seditionists" collaborating with the enemy to instigate a velvet revolution in Iran.

The following chapters focus on the impact of unrest in Iran over the political strategies of US Congress, the AIPAC, and the administration, and Parsi sheds light on the changes in dual track diplomacy with a marked shift to sanctioning Iran. In chapter seven, the author notes the increasing pressure by the AIPAC and US Congress for imposing sanctions on gasoline and oil sector of Iran, a move that departs from previous US sanctions based on divestment. In this regard, he mentions strong influence of the Israeli lobby over Congress to draft "crippling" sanctions which would further weaken the regime's hand at a time it struggled to put its house in order and restore stability.

Taking the reader to corridors of power in Washington, Parsi writes about tensions between Congress and the administration over imposing "crippling" or "targeted" sanctions and either imposing sanctions unilaterally or multilaterally via UN. According to Parsi, the debates and tensions confirmed the contracting space for diplomacy, as pressure from the Congress and deterioration of political conditions in Iran made it more difficult for the administration to reject sanctions (p. 110). Within the administration, there was also a palpable shift toward sanctions which were seen as a positive tool to bring Iran to negotiation table (p.109). However, the view from Tehran, particularly from the opposition leaders was fiercely opposed to sanctions which would hit the middle class that has made up the backbone of the reform movement and only serve to strengthen the regime (p.112).

Parsi's analysis demonstrates how the dual-track strategy was put in use through simultaneous processes that sought sanctioning Iran, while negotiating with it. Even though hard-liners in Washington have been assertive for further sanctions, President Obama aimed at starting diplomacy without losing time. The immediate goal of the administration was to find a way to get the stockpile of enriched uranium out of which if Iran accepted would give the administration time for further negotiations without significant pressure (p.108). If Iran rebuffed, however, then Washington's hand would be weakened and pressure for sanctions and even for military attack would mount (p. 115). An opportunity for diplomacy came out with Iran's notification of the IAEA of its intention to buy nuclear fuel for Tehran Research Reactor which provided medical isotopes for cancer treatment. The US plan was to offer Tehran shipping out of 1200 kg of Iranian LEU (low enriched uranium), preferably to Russia, where it would be processed up to 19.75 percent and subsequently turned into fuel pads and sent back to Iran. This constituted the basis of upcoming negotiations scheduled for October 1, 2009 in Geneva which would be the very first face-to-face meeting between Obama administration and Iran with the presence of other permanent members of the Security Council and Germany. Obama administration hoped Iran to accept the swap deal for it implicitly recognized Iran's enrichment activities, while this recognition, albeit not a permanent feature of a final solution was viewed as a too big of a concession for lifting the red-line from zero-enrichment (p.117). The limited time and space allowed for diplomacy by US domestic context was not sufficient to work out the offer and bring the political

breakthrough that would prevent further sanctions. As many scholars of Iran-US relations argue, Parsi also identifies mistrust at the heart of the stalemate. Accordingly, Iran had reservations about the deal and its diplomatic counterparts. It calculated that shipping out its LEU would deprive it of its most strategic deterrence asset and make it vulnerable to military attacks (p. 137). Tehran questioned why it had to pay for the fuel pads with its own LEU, when it could purchase them from international market (p. 135). Furthermore it felt uneasy for taking much of the risk by allowing out its uranium and entrusting it to France and Russia that it had no leverage over but a history of mistrust concerning the nuclear issue, as Parsi details out in the book. Iran's offer for technical talks that would work out assurances and guarantees was rejected by the United States which only searched for political talks and outcome. US position was "take it or leave it" and in Hillary Clinton's words, America urged Iran to accept agreement as proposed and they would not alter it, they would not wait forever (pp. 141-142). Nevertheless, as Parsi aptly observes, by late 2009, Iran was facing an "existential crisis" which placed "self-preservation" over all other issues and made it unlikely for Iranian leaders "to talk with one voice in the international community" as a reformist politician told Parsi (p. 147). While Mahmood Ahmadinejad was more favorable to the deal; his political opponents from traditional right and reformists rejected any deal that failed to obtain necessary assurances. It was arguably this combination of pressure from both conservatives and reformists alike that prompted Supreme Leader to withdraw his initial support for the proposal as a former Iranian diplomat told Parsi. Political infighting showed that Tehran was simply not ready for negotiations and the swap deal was a victim to domestic politics (p. 150). As Geneva meeting and following technical talks in Vienna in 2009 failed to bring a political agreement, the diplomatic track was stuck and sanctions track gained preeminence.

The author argues that even in the relative success of the Geneva talks- before they crushed into domestic divisions inside Iran- both Congress and the White House started preparing for a new round of sanctions (p. 134). However, it was only after unsuccessful technical talks in Vienna that President Obama consented to sanctions track and once the sanctions track was activated, says Parsi, it became the only track (p. 152). The mood for diplomacy and engagement was shifting, as Obama dropped any reference to engaging Iran in his 2010 State of

the Union speech and instead focused on isolating and punishing Iran. Yet back at home, Obama was on the verge of another struggle with Congress, Israeli lobby and the Netanyahu government that sought heavier and swifter sanctions and ruled out the UN option arguing that a coalition of the willing would suffice. Iran's post-election crackdown and rebuff of the swap deal meanwhile have already alienated many European states previously rejecting sanctions, except for France and Britain that have been ardent supporters of punitive measures from the beginning (p.156). Parsi notes fruitless efforts by China and Russia to convince Iran to respond positively to the deal before it is too late for sanctions as well as parallel efforts by the Obama administration to assure Russia and China of strategic and economic gains elsewhere in compensation for possible losses from sanctions in the process leading up to UN Security Council Resolution 1929.

Notwithstanding emerging momentum for sanctions and retreat from diplomacy, Brazil and Turkey, for reasons related to their power status, prestige and concerns over perils of an imminent armed confrontation, struggled to convince Iran to comply with the swap deal and ship out its amassed enriched uranium in return for fuel pads to be used in Tehran research reactor. In the chapter entitled "Taking yes for an answer", Parsi explains this complex and multi-actor diplomatic process and how a possible diplomatic breakthrough was sacrificed because of American preference for sanctions track. Turkey and Brazil's efforts aimed to provide a solid ground for forthcoming negotiations by ensuring convergence on the swap deal as a confidence building measure. Contrary to expectations of failure, their ability to broker a diplomatic deal with Tehran which was endorsed by all political factions in the country and which agreed to ship out Iran's LEU to Turkey complicated Obama's efforts to maintain international support for multilateral sanctions. By disregarding the new deal for technical and political reasons, America did not accept "yes for an answer" and took the sanctions track. Parsi argues that the question of "what if Iran agrees" was silenced and dismissed and therefore US had no preparations for this scenario (p.194). Even though US told Turkey and Brazil that sanctions were as important as its diplomacy, it still made it clear that 2009 swap deal was on the table, if Iranians were willing to accept it, according to Gary Samore, the special assistant to the president on nonproliferation (p. 185). Yet it was both UN sanctions and two weeks later Congress sanctions which framed US policy toward Iran without bringing much change to previous pattern of relations.

Parsi for the rest of the book makes a broader analysis of Obama's diplomacy after having reflected on major events and processes that bear upon Iran-US relations. According to him, the failure of diplomacy with preference for sanctions was mainly because it was abandoned at the first hurdle (p. 222). He argues that President Obama's genuine intensions for diplomacy were rather short-lived, as he did not choose to fight at home to gain broader political space and pursue the politically costly option in the face of strong pressure from the Congress. The main problem of Obama's diplomacy was that it had to succeed immediately or not at all; in the words of a senior State Department official, it was "a gamble on a single roll of the dice", a phrase that Parsi picked as the title of his book (p.224). Indeed, in a quite short span of time it was sanctions that became the "organizing principle" for American diplomacy toward Iran, since imposing sanctions became the common ground for alliance management within the P5+1 as well as a mutual concern for the US and its allies in the region (p. 208).

US foreign policy once again adhered to containment in the absence of political will to take up perilous and politically costly alternatives. But the ambivalence of the end-game added up to persistent mistrust between parties whereas sanctions boosted Iran's resolve for resistance. Obama had to operate within a tense political environment structurally that is institutionally and ideologically opposed to diplomacy with Iran, a situation that was exacerbated by political developments in Iran. Obama's resolve was weakened with Iran's rejection of the fuel swap offer besides growing pressure at home criticizing him for his insensitivity to pro-democracy forces by seeking engagement with the Iranian regime (p. 213). On the other hand, Iranian leaders, barely in peace and concord with each other, feared losing their independence and bid for regional leadership just like Cairo did in Camp David, if it was to make a deal with the US (p. 216). From the outset, they doubted Obama's real intensions as well as his capability to bring real change against entrenched power structures in the US political system. Even more important in diplomatic terms has been the lack of clarity on America's desired end game (p. 214). Iran sought to make sure whether this has been a "strategic" or "tactical" shift and whether US accepts enrichment on Iran's soil or still pushes for zero enrichment via a different tactic (p. 214). Deciding over Obama proved tough for Iran, since he was a more sophisticated and complex adversary than President Bush which deepened Iran's mistrust.

Parsi aptly asserts that for both Iran and the United States, relations with one another are not "foreign" policy *per se* and entail domestic politics so much so that inside Iran, hard-liners oppose the idea of another faction securing an agreement with the US more than the idea of reconciling with the US itself, whereas in the US, Congress and strong lobbies with advocacy for punitive measures against Iran leaves the administration hard pressed to comply with the political atmosphere (p.224).

The author does not elaborate much on the impact of the "Arab Spring" for American diplomacy with Iran and Iran's foreign policy other than mentioning briefly its possible adverse repercussions on Iran's outreach. He also slightly focuses on changing means of interaction with Iran through cyber attacks and sabotage efforts, when he warns the US of the likely escalatory results of these actions that may lead to new fronts of confrontation (p. 211). Albeit not stated in the book, the killing of Iranian nuclear scientists since 2010 in bomb attacks, for which the regime accuses United States and Israel, and increasing incidents of US drones all work against hopes for a diplomatic solution. Parsi concludes with a note on the future arguing that as long as the "paradigm of enmity" stays intact, Barack Obama's possible second term in office- not yet clear at the time the book was published- may face greater difficulties, one of which pertains to the possibility of a re-elected Obama administration's "out-hawking" of Republicans who would be delighted to criticize him on Iran (p.228).

All in all, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran* is an eloquently written book, rich in detail and deep in analysis. The author is able to navigate through complex web of relations with his expertise and access to diplomatic and policy circles in America, Iran and Europe which provides him essential insight and first-hand information through interviews with American, Iranian, European and regional diplomats (Israeli, Arab and Turkish) and academicians. He offers a balanced view by reflecting concerns of both Iran and the United States and provides the readers with a concise overview of Obama's diplomacy toward Iran. The book's scope is mainly limited to Obama's "nuclear" diplomacy which is understandable as for the last decade it has been Iran's nuclear programme which has become the Gordian Knot of Iran-US relations and because US diplomacy has so far refrained from linking nuclear negotiations to other issues such as Iraq and Afghanistan which are of common strategic concern for Iran

and America. Readers looking for more on the implications of other regional developments on Obama's Iran diplomacy may not find much on these issues, even though Parsi briefly touches upon them when necessary. Indeed these issues need further elaboration perhaps as subject-matters of forthcoming books. To conclude, Trita Parsi's contribution stands as a timely and elaborate work on contemporary Iran-US relations and offers valuable insight to scholars and students of the Middle East politics, American and Iranian Foreign Policy as much as to politicians, journalists, intellectuals and anyone who seeks to attain a solid and clear picture of contentious issues that continue to dominate international and regional politics with a praiseworthy advocacy for diplomacy against perilous warmongering.