



## INTERVIEW WITH DR TRITA PARSI

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### IS IRAN SUICIDAL?

Emiliano Alessandri

***The Talent** – Nuclear proliferation is one of the most sensitive and debated issues at the moment. Apart from the US bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during WWII, however, no state has ever resorted to nuclear warfare. In fact, many analysts point out that the “long peace” we enjoyed during the Cold War was based on nuclear deterrence. The very concept of deterrence is now said to be challenged by the presence of non-state actors, such as terrorist groups, against which retaliation might not work. Why should this concern apply to a regime like Iran which is a state in a traditional sense and whose leadership is aware that the use of nuclear weapons, say, against Israel, would be immediately followed by the obliteration of the country by US bombings?*

**Dr Trita Parsi** – There is no doubt that the regime in Iran can be deterred, in spite of its deliberate attempts to come across as somewhat irrational and in spite of the “mad mullah” argument. A regime such as the Iranian one, with so few international friends and so much domestic discontent, would not have been able to survive in the Middle East for 26 years and reach this position of power if it was suicidal. Furthermore, it is very unlikely that the Iranians would share technology or weaponry with any of its non-state proxies for the following reasons: first, Iran already possesses chemical and biological weapons, yet it has not shared any such weapons with any of its proxies to date. In fact, an Israeli general told me that many of the rockets shot from southern Lebanon against Israel contained explosives that the Israelis themselves sold to the Iranians in the 1970s, indicating that Iran shared with its proxies the most obsolete weaponry in its arsenal. Second, Iran would be blamed if any state attacked Israel with WMDs, and retaliation would be taken against it. Israel has a second-strike capability and can strike Iran from non-Israeli territory even after it suffers a nuclear attack. The Iranians are well aware of this. Last and most importantly, if Iran were to share nuclear technology with any of its proxies, these organizations would cease to be proxies. The nature of their relationship would fundamentally change in favour of the non-state actors and the Iranians are too Machiavellian to commit such a mistake. Nevertheless, nuclear proliferation must be taken seriously. Even if mutual assured destruction could work, that is not an optimal situation for any states to be in.

***The Talent** – Don’t you think that the real concern behind Iran going nuclear is that the nuclear status introduces an element of rigidity in the picture? In other words, regime change by foreign military*

*intervention would be ruled out in case of an Iran gone nuclear, and this would put obvious constraints on Bush's "transformational" strategy in the Middle East.*

**Dr Trita Parsi** – If Iran gains a nuclear weapons capability, it will be a clear indication of Iran's rise in power, with all of its geo-political repercussions. The West has thus far refused to grant Iran a regional role commensurate with its geo-political weight, and such a refusal will be less sustainable if Iran's nuclear program proceeds. Regarding regime security, certainly regime change from the outside will be made much more difficult if Iran possesses a nuclear weapons capability. Tehran will gain a greater degree of immunity from outside pressure, particularly from the US. However, we should not forget that over the last two decades we have witnessed regimes of major nuclear weapons states collapse, e.g. the Soviet Union and South Africa. Nuclear weapons cannot be used against one's own people. So while the technology may grant Tehran some protection from Washington, it does little if anything to grant it protection from the demands of the Iranian people.

**The Talent** – *The US has recently expressed its willingness to explore some form of diplomatic dialogue with Tehran. This seems to contradict the widely-held view that since the September 11 attacks, the administration has been generally insensitive to the environment in which it operates and has carried on with its strategy not only unilaterally, but also rather stubbornly without recognizing, let alone giving dignity, to its adversaries and enemies. Are we witnessing a radical change in US foreign policy, or has US strategy been more responsive to events that are commonly recognized by all – the readjustment of the war aims in Iraq and the changed attitude towards Libya being just two instances?*

**Dr Trita Parsi** – It is too early to determine whether the US's decision to try diplomacy is a serious strategic shift or a more tactical manoeuvre aimed at forcing the EU, Russia and China to agree on sanctions. Much depends on what is actually included in the package. Even if the shift is not aimed at being strategic, the mere involvement of the US in the talks may entangle Washington and force it to give diplomacy a serious chance. However, the condition set for talks – a suspension of Iranian enrichment – has done little to convince the world that Washington's offer has strategic aims. Instead, it has fuelled suspicion that the US wants Iran to reject the offer.

**The Talent** – *The so-called EU-3 diplomacy towards Iran has been a failure until now both because the EU had little to offer and because the US was pursuing a separate strategy. With the US now ready to negotiate are the chances of a diplomatic solution of the Iranian crisis higher? What will be the division of roles, if any, between the US and the EU?*

**Dr Trita Parsi** – If the US fully partakes in the diplomacy, then chances of a peaceful settlement exist. If the talks never start – whether it be due to the preconditions or due to Iranian stubbornness – then, unfortunately, risks of a military conflict is considerable.

**The Talent** – *Large sections of the Italian political elites are resentful because Rome was excluded from the EU-3, even though Italy is Tehran's largest European trading partner and has traditionally placed a great emphasis on good relations with its Middle-Eastern and Mediterranean neighbours. Do you see any role for Italy in future negotiations? Can the administration use the invitation of Italy to a future negotiating table as a means to build a relation of trust with the newly elected Italian government which is very critical of Bush's foreign policy, and which will soon withdraw its troops from Iraq?*

**Dr Trita Parsi** – It is regrettable that Italy has not played a role in the negotiations thus far. Italy has strong relations with Iran and is obviously a trusted ally of the United States as well. Furthermore, Italy's inclusion in the talks would have given a voice in the EU not only to the EU countries with strong trade ties to Iran, but also to the smaller EU states whose concerns differ somewhat from that of the UK and France. The last three years of failed negotiations show that enlargement of the negotiations are necessary - not only to include the US and Asian powers, but also to include other European states.

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