



Saudis Hedge Bets, Iran Risks Increasing Isolation - Trita Parsi

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Talia Baroncelli (TB): Hi, I'm Talia Baroncelli, and you're watching *theAnalysis.news*. I'll shortly be joined by Trita Parsi to speak about U.S. foreign policy in Saudi Arabia as well as the protests in Iran. If you enjoy this content, please go to our website, *theAnalysis.news*, and hit the donate button, that way, we can continue to make this sort of content. You can also subscribe to our newsletter as well as our YouTube channel. Back in a bit.

Joining me now is Trita Parsi, the executive vice president at the Quincy Institute. Thank you so much for joining me, Trita.

Trita Parsi (TP): Thank you so much for having me.

TB: So you've written a lot on Saudi Arabia and U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. I was wondering if we've missed an opportunity for the Biden administration to cut ties and cut its support for Saudi Arabia, given what's been going on with oil production and skyrocketing costs of oil in October.

TP: Yes, although I wouldn't necessarily advocate for there to be a cut. I think there definitely needs to be a rebalancing of this relationship because the Saudis have been able to get away with a tremendous amount of mischief. The war in Yemen is just the beginning or the end of it. The Biden administration came in blazing, promising to turn Saudi Arabia into the pariah that they are, and promised to end the war in Yemen.

Instead, two years into it, we have now seen that even after Biden said that the Saudis are going to pay the price for what they did to the Biden administration on the oil side, we have seen absolutely no consequences for the Saudis. The administration, in fact, is further trying to move closer to Saudi Arabia. I think this is extremely unfortunate because I think we're seeing a bad relationship getting worse, an imbalanced, unhealthy relationship getting worse, which will come back and bite the United States and the region in the behind, just as much as

it did when the United States, unfortunately, expressed its opinion and gave its green light to the war in Yemen.

It's been a complete disaster. I know many of the U.S. officials who were involved in it regret that decision. I think what has happened in the last two years is also something that the U.S. is going to regret because, as you pointed out, it is a missed opportunity.

TB: Right. There are some who say that if the U.S. were to sever ties, or at least reduce its support for Saudi Arabia, that would push the Saudis closer to China and to Russia. Is there any validity to that argument?

TP: Well, I think there is a likelihood that the Saudis would gravitate more toward Russia and to China under that circumstance. At the same time, the Saudis are doing that right now. They have significantly moved closer to the Chinese and the Russians. They are now saying openly that they're going to be doing trade in oil but not use the [U.S.] dollar. So they're part of the de-dollarization. We've seen their position on Russia.

The idea that if the United States actually were to play hardball with the Saudis, they would actually worsen the situation, I'm not convinced by. I think, on the contrary, the lack of a response from the Biden administration, the last of the cost of the Saudis after they have engaged in many, many problematic policies and decisions, is frankly motivating the Saudis that they can get away with it and they can do more of it.

Now, there's a part of this that I also think that we should take into account, which is from a Saudi perspective, they are, like many countries in the world, moving. They're adjusting their policies and acting as if the world is already multipolar. In my view, it is. So this is not a uniquely Saudi thing. They're hedging their bets, and the idea that the United States would cause them not to hedge their bets by being extra kind to them and turn an extra blind eye to their negative policies, I find completely unconvincing. There's a likelihood that the Saudis are going to do this anyway. The question is, what are we going to do on the American side in order to make sure that the policies that Saudi Arabia pursues are not problematic and not directly undermining stability in the region and the United States itself?

TB: Well, one of the most problematic policies that are pursued in the region is actual Saudi-led intervention and the war in Yemen. How far are we right now with the War Powers Act that Bernie Sanders decided to actually pull in December, saying that he wanted to renegotiate some of the terms with the Democrats? Is there any development there right now?

TP: So we're waiting to see what the outcome will be and whether Bernie will follow up on what he promised, which is that he will put this back on the floor unless there is a satisfactory compromise between him and the Biden administration. It was yet another example in which we saw that the Biden administration could have actually welcomed this. Instead, they came in tooth and nail and fought against it.

We also saw another thing, which is that Democrats in the Senate were quite content with voting in favor of this as long as Trump was the President. Once Biden was the President, they shifted their position. I think that was deeply disappointing to Bernie himself, who thought that he had the votes. Of course, now the Biden administration came in very hard and tried to do everything they could to take votes away from that issue. But I think this is going to have to be settled because if Bernie doesn't put it forward, I'm sure there's going to be a lot of pressure on him from his own base, upon his grassroots that strongly feel that this is a necessity, not just because of what the Saudis are doing in Yemen, but also because of reinstating the value of Congress playing the role that the American Constitution set up for it, which is that it is the body that decides whether the United States is engaged in war, not the executive branch.

TB: Is there any real substantive difference in policy between Trump's policy toward Saudi Arabia and Biden's policy toward Saudi Arabia? I mean, Biden calls MBS, or Saudi Arabia, a pariah and that the world should see the pariah that it is. Aside from that, once he backtracked a lot of those harsh words in the rhetoric, there doesn't seem to be much of a policy difference.

TP: I think on the broader scheme, there is, unfortunately, a much larger degree of continuity than there is of change. I think there are some changes, but when it comes to the broader issue, such as have we ended the war in Yemen? Such as what is going to be the relationship of the United States and Saudi Arabia when the Saudis are actively engaging in policies that undermine the United States? Those things we have not seen are the changes that we could and should have seen. I think, again, as you pointed out, it will be seen as a missed opportunity for the Biden administration having failed to act. I think it also tells us something that there is a bit of a gravitational force that, once in office, many candidates turn to offer policies that are far less breaking with the past than they promised that they would do.

In this specific case, I find the reasoning and the motivation behind the Biden administration's decision to be highly problematic, and that is that the Biden administration essentially believes that it is going to end up in some form of a broader strategic competition with the Chinese. We're already there [inaudible 00:08:10]. In that context, one of the strongest parts that the United States has is its alliance system. It believes that the competition with China will not take place just in the South China Sea, but it will take place in Africa, Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East.

So, as a result, two things come out of this. One, earlier plans that the administration had to actually withdraw military forces from the Middle East— I think there are about 19 bases there— have essentially been shelved, and the U.S. military presence in the region is pretty much the same as it was before. Secondly, if the American alliance system is such a significant part of this competition, then the United States needs to do all it can to keep its allies at its side and not let them gravitate towards China. The outcome of that, then, is exactly what we talked about earlier on. The belief is that in order to prevent Saudi Arabia to

move towards China, the United States, under Biden in many areas, is actually becoming more dismissive or more pliant in its relationship with Saudi Arabia, turning more of a blind eye to what the Saudis are doing than the United States even was before.

Again, going back to what we talked about earlier on, I don't believe that calculation is correct. I find the basis of it to be highly problematic. The outcome so far is pretty clear. The Saudis are not adjusting their policy in the direction that the Biden administration wants. The Biden administration is showering them with concessions and really getting nothing for it.

TB: Well, if the Biden administration decided to take the gloves off and get tough with Saudi Arabia tomorrow, what would that require from other players in the region, for example, the Emiratis? Would that at all impact the Abraham Accords with Israel? Normalization with Israel?

TP: Well, I think you put your finger on something very important, which is that there is also a very, very strong commitment in the Biden administration to build on and expand on the Abraham Accords. I find that also highly problematic because the Abraham Accords are just the latest variation of the very same idea that has guided American foreign policy in the Middle East for the last 20-30 years, which is to try to organize the region against Iran. The organizing principle of American foreign policy in the Middle East is to build as big of a coalition as possible to counter Iran. It has failed. It has destabilized the region. It has not brought about the type of benefits that were foreseen. It has turned the Iranian policy more aggressive because they're doing everything they can to undermine the American project. This is just the latest iteration of the same idea as before. This is the same thing that's motivated much of the Oslo Peace Accords, and we've seen where that has led.

Now the idea is that, well, if the Emiratis and the Saudis are willing to throw the Palestinians under the bus, and pretend as if everything is fine, then there can be an alliance between the Saudis and the Emiratis and the Israelis against Iraq.

Now, what is fascinating about this is that early on, when the Trump administration was doing this, they were using terms such as Arab-NATO. Officials from the Biden administration, of course, were not in office back then but were advisers to Biden, came out swinging against it. Tony Blinken, for instance, had an op-ed in 2017 saying that an anti-Iran coalition masquerading as some sort of a peace agreement is only going to further destabilize the region and deepen Shia/Sunni rifts in the region, which is not to the benefit of the region or to the United States. Yet under the rubric of the Abraham Accords, we are essentially pursuing the same policy but now with a tremendous amount of praise and gusto, thinking that it will bring about a different result than it has in the past.

This is yet another very important factor as to why the Biden administration has not taken the gloves off, have accepted all kinds of negative policies from the Saudis without any repercussions because of the fear that if they get tough with the Saudis, they will not be able to secure what is considered to be the prize within the Abraham Accords, which is to get the

Saudis to join that accord as well.

TB: Right. Why don't we talk about Israel because the new Israeli government, [Benjamin] Netanyahu's ultra-conservative government, clearly has it out for Iran, and I would imagine that they'd like to strengthen normalization and their relationship with other regional actors. So I wonder, how much do you think this new Israeli government will impact U.S. foreign policy, especially when it comes to the U.S. potentially going back into the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action]?

TP: Obviously, the JCPOA is right now in a state of a coma. It's not clear as to whether any return is possible in the first place. But even in the coma state, there is neither a deal nor a collapse of the deal. That status, which is the status that I think the Biden administration would like to retain as long as possible because, essentially, it means they're not paying the political cost of going back into the deal. Particularly now in this new context with the protest and the repression taking place in Iran, as well as Iran's support for Russia in the war in Ukraine. On the other hand, they're not dealing with the cost of the deal collapsing because the minute they say that the deal is absolutely dead, then they're going to have a crisis on their hands. But that state of no deal, no collapse, essentially, is only going to last as long as the Israelis are not putting massive pressure on the United States to make a decision. And for quite some time, Israel has not been in a clear or strong position to exert that pressure because of their own domestic turmoil.

Now you have a new government, and Netanyahu is back. There are a few things that he loves to do more than to talk about Iran and to pressure the United States on that issue. And he's also coming into a new context in which things are going to be much, much easier for him than were before because, of course, the repression in Iran, support for Russia, etc., have made many, many doors open to ideas that he in the past could not stop. But I think there may also be a likelihood that Netanyahu may have learned his lesson from 2014 and 2015. He came out swinging against the JCPOA. He was the main reason as to why the situation had escalated to the point in which there was either a question of whether there would be war or a nuclear Iran. What he miscalculated with that is that the more he made war likely, the more he motivated the Obama administration to try to avoid war by pursuing a diplomatic solution which was the worst outcome for Netanyahu.

So the question is, this time around, is he going to be pushing for war? Is he going to be pushing for very, very aggressive measures, knowing very well that it may actually lead to a scenario in which suddenly the Biden administration's calculation may end up being that a deal is better for them than the outcomes that Netanyahu is pushing for? Or will he actually take a softer approach in which he will try to take advantage of Iran's weakened position to really lock in massive isolation measures against Iran, not just from the United States, but also from Europe and potentially from Global South countries, and then see that as the victory, which ultimately is that Iran will be turned into some sort of a North Korea. Even if

Iran were to escalate its nuclear program, that would be okay because Iran would be completely isolated.

The bottom line is we don't know exactly what he will do. He will do something. He will exert pressure on the United States on this issue, but it may end up looking somewhat different from what it did in 2014 and 2015.

TB: Well, you said multiple times that Joe Biden, the President, should have just signed an executive order from the get-go to get the U.S. to rejoin the JCPOA. Given the current protests in Iran, wouldn't that be the ultimate sign of support for the Iranian people to actually sign the deal, to make it easier for them to potentially rise up against their own government?

TP: I think, first of all, if Biden had signed on through an executive order and joined the JCPOA back in January 2021, we would see a very different situation in Iran right now. With the economic situation becoming better, I think there's a high likelihood that [Ebrahim] Raisi would not have become President because the reformists and the centrist would have been able to show that they did deliver, which they could not, since not only did Trump exit the deal, but Biden did not rejoin. So it was deeply embarrassing for the reformists, and those who had argued strongly that some form of accommodation with the United States would be to the benefit of Iran, the Iranian people, and also the Iranian will.

I think at this point politically, it's going to be very difficult, obviously because of the protest. But also, I think it's important to recognize there seems to be a divergence between what people that are protesting in Iran are saying and what the protest outside of Iran by elements of the diaspora. In Iran, I did not see any protests saying anything about the JCPOA. They were not arguing against the JCPOA or for it. It simply was not a factor in their considerations or what they thought was worth mentioning in their slogans and in their protests.

On the outside, from a very early stage, positions that long had been held by the Israeli government, by the Iranian Mujahideen, were the ones that increasingly became adopted. No negotiations, no JCPOA, close the embassies, kick Iran out of the World Cup, things of that nature, which again seemed to be quite different from what was being heard from inside the country. Another thing I think is quite clear right now is you're hearing a lot of voices on Twitter, at least, they may not be the same decibel outside of social media, are arguing for lining up behind the former crowned prince of Iran. Whereas the slogans in Iran during the protests were neither a Supreme Leader nor a Shah. So I think we're clearly seeing a divergence between what is taking place inside the country, what they're speaking, what they're pushing for, and what's coming from the outside.

I've not seen evidence in the sense that this is a widely held position by protesters that the JCPOA would be bad for them, on the contrary. But I do think, however, that there is a deep degree of skepticism against the JCPOA, which has caused many people to think that, well,

why should there be a JCPOA? It doesn't benefit the people anyways because economic benefits don't come. And this is a function of how, unfortunately, the United States pulled out of the agreement. Europeans did not do anything to really, in a substantive way, make up for those economic losses. So there's a skepticism against the JCPOA in Iran that I think is coloring all of this. But I've not seen evidence that very high on the agenda of the protesters inside the country is the idea that there shouldn't be any negotiations or that there shouldn't be any agreement there. It may be that they're indifferent to it, but that's different from saying that they're against it.

TB: One very quick question before you have to leave. What sort of signal is Iran trying to send to the international community by executing this British-Iranian dual citizen, Alireza Akbari, who had really nothing to do with the protests whatsoever?

TP: No, he certainly had nothing to do with the protest. He's been in jail since 2019. The Iranians accuse him of spying. Obviously, there's no evidence that has been put forward to be able to enable independent sources to assess that accusation and the evidence for it, if evidence exists. But I think what we're seeing with that is that there's an escalation taking place between Europe and Iran already. There's going to be a response from the British side, and it's probably going to lead to even further measures by the Iranian side. This is very easily going to become an escalatory cycle, and ultimately we've not seen anything particularly good come out of those things. And I also do believe that if this escalates into a full-blown crisis and potential confrontation between the West and Iran, that is actually a huge detriment to the pro-democracy protest inside of the country. There's a sentiment and a belief in some quarters in the diaspora that these are the type of things that will bring down the regime. Experiences in just recent memory show us, from Iraq and Afghanistan to Syria and Libya, that the main elements that benefit from a militarization of conflict and the use of the military are actually the least democratic, the most repressive elements inside of society. So I have very little confidence that anything good will come out of that. And I'm quite worried that if that is the direction we go, that it will be a major, major blow to the protest movement inside of the country.

TB: Trita Parsi, the executive vice president of the Quincy Institute, thank you so much for joining us.

TP: Thank you so much for having me.

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