

## The Iran Crisis #14 : Trita Parsi on the prospects, dynamics, as ceasefire end approaches

*Transcript of the conversation Helena Cobban had with Trita Parsi on 4/21/2026. The audio is [here](#). Video, coming soon.*

**[Helena Cobban]**

Hi, everybody. It's Helena Cobban. I'm the president of Just World Educational.

This is number 14 in our ongoing video podcast series on the Iran crisis. And I am really delighted that today, which is April 21, we have with us Trita Parsi, who is the executive vice president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft here in Washington, DC, and also a very accomplished writer and analyst on Iran. He has many super books that I don't have time to list them all because we have like, very limited time to talk together.

Trita, great to have you with us.

**[Trita Parsi]**

Thank you so much for having me.

**[Helena Cobban]**

So, okay, here we are. It's as I said, April 21, it's around 9am as we're doing this recording here in Washington, DC. And of course, by the time this gets turned around and put onto YouTube in the next two hours, who knows what might happen?

But you know, that never stops people from talking. So, Trita, what is your quick assessment of the state of the possibility of the negotiations resuming before the deadline for the ceasefire expires in about 36 hours time?

**[Trita Parsi]**

I think there's still a chance that there will be a meeting, but I'm getting increasingly skeptical. Not that there isn't a pathway to a deal, not that the deal wouldn't be good for both sides. But I'm becoming increasingly skeptical that the Trump administration has the capacity to negotiate effectively, and that they have the capacity to convince the other side that they in turn have the capacity to implement the deal.

Everything we have seen just in the last couple of weeks gives the Iranians every reason to be extremely doubtful of Trump's intentions, his honesty, his follow-through, all of these things combined. And it leaves them in a position in which perhaps they will still make an attempt at a deal. But perhaps there will also be essentially a resignation to the fact that a deal may not be possible, but an avoidance of war may still be in the cards. So we'll see what happens.

But I want to emphasize, I do think that the administration has an interest in a deal. And I think they, in their own minds, are trying to pursue it.

But this message control, the lack of discipline when it comes to message control, the lack of discipline, when it comes to Trump, and his social media, in combination with the fact that they have already betrayed their word on quite a few occasions, including just in the last week or two, makes it very difficult to see that something big can come out of this.

**[Helena Cobban]**

So you talked about capacity. And I think that's a really important part of this, because you know, he doesn't have a polished diplomatic machine, to say the least. He has a kind of rotating cast of people of really no diplomatic capacity and nobody backing them up as far as I can see.

But there's also a question of willingness. Do you think he really *wants* to avoid this war and understands that to avoid the war, he needs-- Trump, that is-- he needs to engage seriously and speedily?

**[Trita Parsi]**

I think he does want to avoid the war. I think he has realized that this war was a disaster, that he got really lucky that he got the ceasefire. And as a result, I'm hoping that he realizes that it would be a huge mistake to go back into the war.

I think it was very clear that he was sold this war. The only reason he really did this war is because he was convinced by the Israelis that this was going to be a very easy affair. We have not seen Trump take huge geopolitical risks militarily, in cases that are complex.

It's one thing to do Venezuela. It's another thing to make threats about the Greenland. But to actually start a war against a major country-- We've not seen him do before, unless he thought that this was going to be easy and quick.

That's what it also ended up being back in June when he just did one strike, and essentially, it was quick. So a lot of these different old patterns, I think, have helped him convince himself that that's the case. The Israelis were very effective in further reinforcing that, and led him down this path.

By now, he should realize that that is not the case. And as a result, I do hope, and I am somewhat hopeful that he realizes that a return to war would be very disastrous for him. I do also think that he wants a deal.

He likes the idea of being a dealmaker. I think there is a deal on the table that could be had. But that deal is going to require a tremendous amount of sanctions relief.

And Trump himself, I don't think is opposed to sanctions relief. But that's where you're going to see the real resistance from the Israelis. It's bad enough for the Israelis that the war has ended.

It is a completely different thing if there's a deal and Trump lifts sanctions. That would be the most disastrous outcome for the Israelis, and they will do everything they can to fight that. I assume Trump understands that.

And as a result, the question is, is his willingness to get a deal stronger than his willingness to avoid a frontal confrontation with Israelis on this matter?

**[Helena Cobban]**

So you and I are both old enough to remember when the invasion of Iraq, 23 years ago, was sold to the American public as potentially a cakewalk, an easy thing. And we then had essentially 20 years. Still, the United States is not out of Iraq in any meaningful way, or a complete way.

So this is a similar case where, as you said, it was sold to Trump as a potential easy, easy win. And he's now mired in it. What do you see as the main reasons for him to now recognize that it's not an easy win?

I mean, is it the polling here at home, the prices of basic goods going up? Or is it more like his concern for geopolitical fallout?

**[Trita Parsi]**

I think it's all of those things. I think he understands that he doesn't have escalation dominance. If he did, he would have attacked Iran's oil facilities and electrical grids.

And by and large, the US avoided doing that, recognizing that the Iranians would retaliate against the GCC oil facilities. And then we would have a completely different type of an oil crisis, no longer just a chokehold and a bottleneck in the Persian Gulf, but a production problem. And by and large, we saw that he made threats, and he avoided it.

He talked about taking islands, but then avoided that as well, because realized that those soldiers would just be sitting ducks there. And he would have to deal with another crisis that he hasn't had to deal with, to a large extent, which is a large number of Americans coming home in caskets. He's made threats about taking the HEU, actually going in and grabbing this stuff.

The Iranian narrative is that that's exactly what he tried to do three weekends ago, when we had this ordeal with the missing pilots. And it was an utter failure. It was complete collapse.

The United States lost more airplanes in that weekend than it did since the Vietnam War. So I think he's kind of...

**[Helena Cobban]**

You mentioned HEU, let's spell out, that's the highly enriched uranium.

**[Trita Parsi]**

That's the 60% enriched uranium that the Iranians have, we believe, still under the mountains in Fordow after the US bombed it.

**[Helena Cobban]**

So you're saying that you think it's quite possible that that raid was a raid, the aborted, abortive raid, to try to get a hold of the uranium. I mean, we don't know really enough about what that raid, that air raid was all about. But you're saying it's quite likely it was to get hold of the HEU.

**[Trita Parsi]**

The Iranian narrative was that this was the beginning of an effort to essentially do an airborne invasion of the country, not for any other purpose but to get this stuff. And having conversations with folks on the US side, former government officials were involved in the planning of these things. They too seem to see that the pattern is compatible with what that type of an operation would be.

Is that conclusive evidence? Absolutely not. But there is a tremendous amount of question marks.

We still don't know the identity of the pilots, etc. There's a lot of question marks of what exactly happened that week. But bottom line, the larger point I'm trying to make is, I think Trump understands he doesn't have escalation dominance.

And if you don't have escalation dominance, then going back into that war is an extremely risky endeavor, not at all anything that could be described as a cakewalk. Now, he may try to do the blockade, thinking that that's some sort of a silver bullet, thinking that it will remain a blockade and not escalate into a war. And I think that's a different conversation we can have.

But the larger point being that I think he understands that he cannot go back into the war, it would be too foolish. But at the same time, striking a deal requires him to have a major confrontation with the Israelis. And I'm not so sure if he's ready for it.

We've seen him being able to say no to Israel before, but he's not been able to sustain a no to Israel. And what it requires here is swift sanctions relief. A lot of it he can do through executive orders.

But some of it has to go through some measures in Congress. And that's what we see how his follow through is very, very inconclusive. Now, in Syria, they did manage to do so.

And I think it's to a large extent because they had a person like Tom Barak that was really forcing it through and seeing it through. But on a lot of other things that Trump has done, particularly on Israel, Palestine, this just isn't any follow through. And the Israelis just wait a week or two, and then they're back to what they were doing before.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Well, we've certainly seen that in Gaza. I think there's another interesting obviously example here, which is Lebanon, where perhaps let's hope that Trump's forcefulness over Lebanon over saying "I prohibit the Israelis from bombing Lebanon anymore", publicly, that could be a good augur, a good like indication that that he might be prepared to do something like that have a serious public confrontation with the Israelis over Iran. What do you think?

**[Trita Parsi]**

Oh, absolutely. I think that's part of the reason why the Iranians demanded that Lebanon be included. It's precisely the primary reason I think, is because this was a test case to see, can Trump restrain the Israelis?

Can he hold them back? And if he cannot, or doesn't want to do so, and Israel is free to continue or start new wars, and the US will be dragged into those wars, then what's the point of a deal with Trump? If he's not the final decision maker, why make a deal with him?

So I think from the Iranian standpoint, the demand, the precondition that there had to be a ceasefire in Lebanon, as you remember, the US side first denied that Israel was included in the deal. And then they agreed that it was and then they denied it. And eventually it turned out that it was part of the deal.

And as you pointed out, that was the strongest tweet we have seen by Trump against Israel so far. And I think, again, it's because they wanted to see, can he deliver on this issue? Because if he cannot, what's the point of making a deal with him?

And then, of course, there's other reasons for the Iranians to include it. You know, there's a narrative in Lebanon, that Iran betrayed them in 2024, left them to their own faith. And I think the Iranians are very sensitive to that and want to see whatever they can do to reverse it, and at a minimum, not perpetuate it.

**[Helena Cobban]**

So you say, the question is whether Trump can restrain the Israelis. I mean, you and I sitting here in Washington, DC, we know that essentially he can if he chooses to. The question is, does he choose to?

And that brings us obviously to the domestic dynamic here in the United States. And in any of these issues, when you're looking at, you know, trying to figure out what Trump's policies will be, there is a real question about his cognitive capacities. You say, he understands this, or he understands that.

I still have a question in my own mind about, you know, his cognitive capabilities. But I think you're right, that there are serious people in the administration who understand that they have lost escalation dominance. And that's important.

And they are the people, people I imagine, like General Dan Caine, and perhaps Susie Wiles, or others who, you know, tell Trump, you have to restrain the Israelis in Lebanon, or you

have to understand, you can't just invade an island, or whatever, aKharg island, or one of the Abu Musa, or whatever. But they are still flowing a lot of military capabilities into the region, and the ceasefire ends tomorrow. So does it look as though they're planning something for the end of the ceasefire?

What are the possibilities about this ceasefire? I mean, there could be a short or longer extension of the ceasefire, that may or may not be accompanied by a resumption of talks. I'm still trying to think this through. Help me.

**[Trita Parsi]**

Yeah. So I see three main scenarios. One is that you actually have a deal.

I will put that at probably a 25%. Let's set that aside. The other two scenarios are that either the ceasefire ends, and there's a full resumption of military confrontation.

The Iranians are quite fearful that this is what Trump is planning to do, that the ceasefire was just a prelude to this, and that Trump is going to try to do something within the first 48 hours of that war, to do some sort of a knockout blow to the Iranians. That this is one of the theories that they have. And of course, on the Iranian side, they have to plan for every scenario, and as do the US, of course.

I would still be skeptical that that is the direction he will go. And as I mentioned, it's mainly because he's still, I don't think he has a silver bullet. I don't think he thinks he has a silver bullet.

He's made a lot of threats that he has not acted on precisely because other people in the administration walk him back and say, look, this is not going to work. This is just going to deepen this debacle. So I would say that the most likely scenario, and I would put it at 70% and return to confrontation at five, is that there will essentially be a new non-negotiated status quo that ends the war, in the sense that the US doesn't go back into the war.

It will make it very difficult for the Iranians to restart the war then or start targeting GCC facilities, etc. Because then Iran would look like the aggressor. Trump ends the war, does not open the straits.

I think the US side recognizes that the Iranians are going to control the straits, whether there is a deal or whether there isn't a deal. And as long as the Iranians let ships through, who of course would have to pay, at a minimum oil prices will start coming down because the oil will start to flow again. And the US itself has even made a proposal that the US should be part of this mechanism and get money out of it.

So, you know, the idea that they're really pushing back against it, I think, is betrayed by the American proposal to be receiving fees from this toll mechanism. And the Iranians at the same time would not get sanctions relief. There would be no war, but there would be no sanctions relief because there's no deal.

And as a result, there's no nuclear compromise either. It would not be a particularly stable situation. But it would be there for a couple of reasons.

One, because both sides have enough of an interest not to go back to war. And the two sides don't have enough political will to go all the way to a deal. And because the Israelis will do everything they can to prevent a deal.

They can live with this scenario. They don't like it, they would prefer war. But as long as there is no deal and there is no sanctions relief, the Israelis will still have enough of a chaotic situation so that they think that A, Iran's economy will continue to be degraded by the existence of the sanctions.

And B, there will be enough of an unstable status quo that it will provide the Israelis with opportunities to test whether they can restart the war. And they will themselves, of course, most likely continue a dirty war in the background, assassination, sabotage. They could potentially risk starting the war themselves, hoping that they will drag the US into it again.

But I think I would put that as a lower likelihood. Because if they fail, I think it's quite clear by now that they cannot sustain a war with Iran on their own. They need the United States actively involved.

And if they don't get the United States actively involved, then the Iranians will have succeeded in separating Israel from the United States. And that would be a very devastating situation for the Israelis. So I think, from their standpoint, they will be content as long as there is no deal and no sanctions relief, and enough of an unstable situation that it provides them with opportunities for escalation.

And from Trump's perspective, it means he doesn't have to have a big fight with Israelis about sanctions relief, but he still gets the key thing he wants, which is to get out of this war. Whereas the Iranians will be bereft of the key thing they will be looking for, which is actual sanctions relief, not just control of the straits.

**[Helena Cobban]**

So you raised so many interesting possibilities there. One question I have under your, let's call it the 70% scenario, the new non-negotiated status quo. What happens to the US blockade on the Iranian ports?

**[Trita Parsi]**

So that is one of the two wildcards in this scenario. Wildcard one is if the Israelis try to restart the war on their own and potentially drag the US into it. The other wildcard is that Trump, as some sort of a face-saving or something that will make him look as if he still is in charge, will continue the blockade.

Then the question is, how intense will the blockade be? If it's a blockade for demonstration and show, it will not disturb the status quo. It will probably sustain itself.

But if he starts taking a ship a week, then the Iranians will retaliate. And their retaliation could be striking at American ships. It could be doing a retaliatory effort in the Red Sea, which means that for every Iranian ship, there's another ship taken.

Or it could be full closure of the Red Sea because the US is trying to essentially say that the Persian Gulf is being closed. And then the question is, how stable is that escalatory game? Or will that thing deteriorate into a full scale war?

So it will not be peace, but it will be short of an outright open war, but with the risk of going towards war, but not necessarily any risk of going towards peace, because that would require deliberate efforts and negotiations.

**[Helena Cobban]**

So I know we have limited time here, but I have a couple more really important questions. In that scenario of the non-negotiated status quo continuing, what are the implications for Gaza and for Lebanon?

**[Trita Parsi]**

Well, if there isn't a deal, then yeah, I think you will see the expectation that the Israelis will strike at Lebanon again. And then the question is, whether the Iranians will start striking at Israel. I know that some of the arguments within the Iranian debate has been that if the Israelis strike at Lebanon, Iran might strike at the UAE proportionately, instead of striking at Israel, since that is more difficult for them.

But essentially, it would no longer absorb those type of hits, but would do something in return. And same thing with Gaza as well, although Lebanon is more important to the Iranians.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Interesting. So you mentioned the UAE and the possibility of, you know, some kind of second strike or whatever by the Iranians against facilities in the UAE. In my view, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are, in a sense, pivotal players in the global diplomacy around this.

I mean, we've seen the Pakistanis reaching out to the Saudis, along with the Turks and the Egyptians. And that helped to bolster Pakistan's role as the mediator in this war. And the Pakistanis and Chinese have been very patiently trying to win over all the GCC countries, not to the Iranian side, but to have them leave the US-Israel axis.

How do you see that effort going?

**[Trita Parsi]**

Well, I think no one has done more to get them to leave the US axis than Donald Trump has. You know, give credit where credit is due! They know very well now that the US security guarantee is really not worth much at all.

These bases were supposed to deter an attack, prevent a war, instead the US itself started the war.

**[Helena Cobban]**

And the presence of those bases actually invited counterattack.

**[Trita Parsi]**

Once the war started, instead of being a deterrent to attacks, it became the target of the attacks, it became a magnet for these type of attacks. Now, that doesn't mean that they think that their American weaponry has been a failure. On the contrary, they keep on pointing out how effective it has been in shooting down drones and things of that nature.

So I can see them going in the direction of buying more American weapons than they did before, but not invest in the bases in the same manner. And by the way, it's not as if the bases will be closed, it will largely be that the bases will not be rebuilt. Who's going to finance the rebuilding of these bases?

**[Helena Cobban]**

Well, it will be you and me as taxpayers.

**[Trita Parsi]**

I mean, we are actually, no, it wouldn't be the US. It's these countries that actually pay for these bases. I mean, the base in Qatar is essentially a five-star resort.

US doesn't build bases like that. That's what the Qataris build. So no, it would have to be them.

And they're going to have some financial challenges going forward, given how much money they have lost. And we're going to see that play out in Gaza, in Lebanon, in Syria, and all of these places in which the expectation has been that the GCC will fund the reconstruction. So I think there's going to be a diversification.

You know, they're going to make a deal with Pakistan. We saw that the Qataris announced one yesterday. They're going to make deals with Turkey.

There will be other efforts with the Iranians, not military deals, but they will probably invest in Iran, some of them, as part as a security strategy, hoping that economic integration will make it less likely for the Iranians to do something like this in the future. And it's one thing for them to buy American weaponry, it's a completely different thing for them to host bases very close to Iranian territory. So I think the entire equation for security architecture in the region is going to be reassessed.

It's not going to be an abandonment of the US, because that would also be foolish for them. But it's not going to be putting all of their eggs in the American basket and be as dependent on the US as they have been so far.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Yeah, I mean, one thing I've noticed is that, actually, since the Abraham Accords were concluded, military integration with the US for those GCC countries has also involved a degree of military integration with Israel, because Israel has now been included in CENTCOM, whereas previously, it was with the Europeans in EUCOM. So there are a lot of implications there in the region. I want us just to come back at the end, I know we only have a couple more minutes, to the dynamics here in the United States.

And you say that one of the major things, one of the major factors pushing Trump away from a new war is domestic politics. Can you unpack that a little bit and also look at the effects that Israel's actions over the past 30 months, as well as over the past seven weeks, have had on the political dynamic here in the United States.

**[Trita Parsi]**

So it's stunning to see how fast and how forcefully the Israelis are plummeting in almost every demographic in the United States. There used to be a narrative that said that the Democrats are split on Israel. Latest polls show that they're not split on Israel, that every demographic, older Democrats, more conservative Democrats, even they, a majority of them, view Israel negatively now.

And then of course, when you go further to the left or further down in the ages, the opposition to Israel is just overwhelming. And you're starting to see similar phenomenons on the Republican side. It's lagging behind with a couple of years.

But in the America First constituency within MAGA, Israel is perhaps more unpopular than it is even on the left amongst the Democrats. And we're going to see the repercussions of this in a couple of years. It's important to understand, though, that the public opinion shift there is going to take some time before it manifests itself.

It doesn't mean that in the elections, we won't see it already in the next two years, upcoming elections, both mid terms and 2028, we will see it. In fact, I think Israel is going to become a litmus test on both sides of the aisle in the in the midterm elections in several key races, and certainly by 2028. But there also is a need for a new cadre of foreign policy experts that would populate future administrations on the left and the right, that would bring that thinking willfully into the decision making rather than reluctantly.

And right now, I don't see that on the left or on the right. The foreign policy establishment within the Democratic Party is still where Joe Biden was. It's still where Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi are on these issues.

You know, some people like Jake Sullivan may be going back into the next administration. So there's going to be a need for a new generation of foreign policy experts and hands on the left and the right to really rise within this period, in order to make sure that these changes in the public opinion are not just manifested in the rhetoric during the elections, but also in the policies that follow. And right now, we're not quite there.

**[Helena Cobban]**

So that's actually something that your institute, the Quincy Institute, it has really been pursuing ever since you were founded some seven years ago or so. It's the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. And what you mean by responsible statecraft is restraint, as I understand it.

So that is, and that has, I mean, your appeal is bipartisan, that you want to have constituencies on the on the right, I mean, and the left and the Democrats and the Republicans.

**[Trita Parsi]**

We're trying to bring about a paradigmatic shift in US foreign policy thinking away from primacy and hegemony. And that cannot be achieved through one party alone. You need to have supporters of that approach, both in the Republican Party and in the Democratic Party.

And thankfully, we're seeing that right now. It's just not at the level that it needs to be.

**[Helena Cobban]**

Well, listen, I know you've got to run, but I'm delighted to hear you talking about, like, trying to counter the urge to primacy and hegemony, because that's something that we are working on a lot in Just World Educational. So let's continue the conversation later. And best of luck, Trita.

Thank you so much.

**[Trita Parsi]**

Thank you so much, Helena. Really appreciate it. Talk to you soon.