

Statement of Purpose

Trita Parsi

My motivations for pursuing a Ph.D. in Political Science at Harvard are as follows. My primary interests lie in the fields of International Relations and Economics. In International Relations, I wish to focus on the future nature of the system of states. With the dawn of the New World Order, a thorough discussion on the nature of the current system of states is well in order. Whereas scholars such as Samuel Huntington advocate the paradigm of “Clashes of Civilizations”, and define the political reality from a perception of the world in cultural terms, others believe that the New World Order not only opens up opportunities for, but also necessitates a dialogues among civilizations.

At the same time, fundamental rules of the international order seem to be questioned. In 1999, several developments pointed towards a new attitude vis-à-vis sovereignty, intervention and human rights. NATO’s intervention in Kosovo and the UN intervention in East Timor, stand as evidence for the increased priority of this issue.

This indicates that the traditional interpretation of Articles 2.4 and 2.7 of the UN Charter seem to be under reconsideration while normative thinking within International Relations has gained ground. How does this development fit in the debate regarding clash between, or dialogue among, civilizations?

The notion of dialogue among civilizations seems to presuppose both the existence and importance of norms in International Relations. And although self interest, power and other dominating variables have not been set aside, more and more scholars seem to agree that norms in International Relations do matter. I wrote my thesis on this subject, and in light of the aforementioned developments I believe that more research is needed.

Another area I wish to focus on lies in the field of Political Economy. It is a subject that I have both professional and academic experience of: economic sanctions. Throughout this century, sanctions have become an increasingly conspicuous feature of international affairs. At the same time, with the increased focus on human rights, many voices have been raised against economic sanctions as a foreign policy tool on humanitarian grounds. An increasing number of scholars argue that economic sanctions are themselves gross violators of human rights and immoral to use.

With the inception of the Humanitarian Intervention Doctrine, the question of economic sanctions and human rights has become even more pressing. The central problem leading to the inception of this doctrine has been how to handle situations in which gross violations of human rights are taking place within a nation, i.e. when is it justified to violate a nation's sovereignty in order to protect the population against violations of human rights. But is it then justified to violate human rights, according to this norm, through economic sanctions to prevent a war? These issues pertain to the compatibility of human rights and economic sanctions as a foreign policy tool. As with the future nature of the system of states, this is an issue that I believe will grow in importance.

Most of my work experience has been in the field of politics and diplomacy, experiences that in a natural way have prompted my research ambitions. In 1997, I worked as policy advisor on MidEastern issues to Congressman Robert Ney of Ohio. My job was to reformulate Ney's position vis-à-vis Iran. At the time, Ney was a supporter of the Clinton Administration's isolation policy of Iran. By identifying the long-term strategic necessity of befriending Iran and showing how such a policy should be pursued, I was successful in convincing Ney to alter his position. In

1997, he became one of the first Congressmen to propagate dialogue with Tehran. Ever since, I have continued to act as his advisor and in early September 2000, I was invited to accompany him at the Conference on Dialogue Among Civilizations held at the UN.

I believe that part of the reason why the U.S.'s Iran policy lacks balance, long-term vision and endurance, is due to the absence of organized interest pursuing an alternative approach to Dual Containment. One group who would benefit from a less confrontational policy is the Iranian-American community. Thus, in 1997, I founded "Iranians for International Co-operation" (www.iic.org), a U.S.-based, not-for-profit organization striving for a resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Earlier this year, my activities at IIC prompted the American-Iranian Council (AIC), headed by former Assistant Secretary of State Bob Pelletreau, to offer me the position as Director of development at the Council. AIC's mission is very similar to that of IIC.

In 1998, I served with the Swedish UN Mission in New York where I worked both in the Security Council and in the Third Committee of the General Assembly. Just as in Congress, my work in the UN gave me the opportunity to experience international relations in practical terms. In the General Assembly, I participated in the drafting of several EU-sponsored resolutions. In the Security Council, I assisted in the handling of the disputes in Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Iraq. One of my most rewarding experiences was when the Swedish Mission succeeded in preventing a war between Iran and the Taliban in September/October 1998. This conflict climaxed during Sweden's Presidency of the Council, and by acting swiftly and resolutely, we succeeded in persuading Tehran to show restraint. To me, this was a great moment, not only because thousands of lives were saved, but also because it gave me hope about the role that the UN can and arguably must play in international affairs.

I wish to study at Harvard because it offers a Ph.D. program in Political Science that has strong elements of Economics in its curriculum. I prefer to study at a school in which the field between politics and economics is keenly investigated, and Harvard offers me this opportunity.

Regarding my career objectives, working as a scholar at a university or a think-tank has always been a very tempting career choice, as has a career within the UN or in government. In the long run, I am aiming at a political career.