



Untold stories from the last days of the monarchy in Iran

Azadi Interview with His Excellency Ardeshir Zahedi

The interview you read here took place a few months ago, and weeks after the publication of the Persian version of the third volume of Mr. Zahedi's memoirs. On the eve of the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, this interview is a unique document about the roots of the regime change, especially the last days and weeks of the imperial period in Iran and His Majesty Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's end of life.

Azadi: Mr. Zahedi, publishing the Persian version of the third volume of your memoirs has raised discussions and debates in the foreign and domestic media about the role you played in the last weeks of the previous regime. Some analysts have published interesting materials about the possibility of your appointment as the head of the government as the last chance out of the crisis. At the same time, important foreign newspapers wrote about you as the last ACE of the Shah. There have been lengthy references to this topic in several books related to that period. Can we hear this from you?

Zahedi: I hope God allows me to finish the fourth volume of my memoirs. I have commissioned three friends to do this based on the notes and materials I have recorded. To the people of Iran and to the memory of my father, this is our duty ...

Azadi: Yes. the people of Iran are eager to find out about the reason and the events that led to the departure of the late Shah from Iran. At least let me ask you some questions about the details that piqued my curiosity.

Zahedi: Please

Azadi: The first thing in some books and articles we see, say that you came to Iran in the first days of unrest and early in the late Sharif Emami's cabinet. Did you request this trip or did His Majesty summon you?

Zahedi: During Sharif Emami's government, and if I am not mistaken, this was during the time when Chinese President Hua Guofeng came to





Iran for an official trip and was in Tehran. So the exact date is the first week of September 1978, (Sharivar 1357). I had taken the Crown Prince to San Francisco for an almost official visit, and we were there. I was informed that His Majesty wants to talk to me from Teh-ran. I immediately separated from my companions and went to the phone. His Majesty was on the phone. Either because of his fatigue or because of the poor communication line, the sound was very weak. His Majesty told me to come to Tehran immediately. I felt that it was a special concern because I was constantly receiving reports on the situa- tion in Iran, even while traveling out- side of Washington DC.



Mohammad Reza Shah

I immediately handed over the crown Prince to Dr. Gholamhossein Kazemian *, my trusted colleague who was with us, to take care of the rest of the visit, and I flew to New York on a private plane to catch a flight on the Iranian National Airlines to Tehran. I was waiting for the plane at the airport with a few minutes delay and from there I went directly to Tehran.

Azadi: What happened at the airport that caused a lot of discussions in the media ?

Zahedi: I think it was a little before ten o'clock at night- when the plane landed at Mehrabad International Airport. Usually my travels were done without formalities and almost without noise. Either His Majesty summoned me or I had to present him some important subject in person.

I would come and stay for a while and go back. Especially upon arrival, only a handful of State Department and close friends were welcomed. It had a private and friendly aspect. This time, when I stepped into the government pavilion in Mehrabad, I was very surprised, because I met a large crowd of greeters, which was really unexpected.

Azadi: Do you remember who they were?

Zahedi: More than forty-two years have passed from that event, I do not remember all of them, I did not



Last days in Sa'd abad palace





H.E. Ardeshir Zahedi

even know some of them exactly. Foreign Minister Amir Khosrow Afshar, who was a friend and colleague of mine, was present with a group of Foreign Ministry officials. The military individuals were surprising. General Azhahari, the Chief of General Staff, who was soon appointed to head the government, General Oveysi, Commander of the Land Forces, General Khademi, General Manager of the National Aviation of Iran, General Moghaddam, Chief of SAVAK, General Toofanian, and of course my dear friend General Manouchehr Khosrodad, may his soul rest in peace. There were also a number of senators, members of parliament, and a few newspaper reporters. The group was not the same, but everyone was worried about the situation. Some people said, “Okay, come on, the situation needs you, and stuff like that.” I shook hands with all those present and the necessary introductions were exchanged, and from there I went directly to the royal palace.

Azadi: Where did you visit His Majesty?

Zahedi: In Saad Abad. When I arrived at the palace, both The Shah and the Queen were awake. The Queen hurried to visit me alone outside the hall and said: The Shah is not in good spirits and I am afraid he might commit suicide. When I entered the room, after paying my respects, I saw that the Shah was holding a medicine box containing a pill. I took it from him. But it was one of his common medicines. I said, “I have come according to your orders. But you are tired. I will be honored tomorrow morning to speak with you.” His Majesty said no, stay. It was about eleven o’clock. Two of us sat down. The Queen left us alone.

His Majesty ordered to bring tea. Despite his extreme fatigue, our talks lasted until two in the morning.

Azadi: Can you mention the subject of these discussions? What was the cause of His Majesty’s concern? Was the issue of your post as a Prime Minister raised in this conversation?

Zahedi: First I want to answer the third part of the question.





Your answer is no. No such issue was raised. Talks revolved around the domestic situation and American politics. His Majesty was upset by what was happening. Keep in mind that in the previous few weeks the situation was not favorable. The tragedy of the Abadan Rex Cinema fire caused by terrorists, and the continuation of demonstrations here and there, eventually led to the resignation or removal of the Jamshid Amuzgar's government, because he did not react to any of those events. In this first negotiation, His Majesty asked about Washington's reaction, about Sharif-Emami's appointment. I said that of course there was no official reaction, but someone, privately mentioned Sharif-Emami as a Mr. 5% in their speeches, which I told them I have not and did not see any proof for the claims. From then on, I went to see His Majesty almost every day and sometimes twice a day. I tried to be useful in resolving the growing crisis. And help strengthen the Shah's morale.

Haj Mokhber-ol-Saltaneh Hedayat had written about my father's way of working that he solved everything by "forcefulness and friendship". He was referring to the end of the unrest in Gilan after the First World War, then to the story of Fars and the story of Sheikh Khazal. I told His Majesty that at the time of the fall of Fars, the late Ghavam al-Saltanah had ousted my father with the full authority of a state and an army to resolve this issue, and that my father was a complete success and not a drop of blood was shed. I told His Majesty that in the face of the wave of discontent for which we were responsible, and that our foreign enemies were taking advantage of it, we must act from a position of power. Both immediate political reforms and changes are necessary, as well as demonstrating the strength of the government and the military and their personal perseverance.

His Majesty remained silent and did not answer.

Of course, nothing was done. In those circumstances, weakness was a sign of surrender and retreat.

Azadi: It was not unreasonable that the British embassy in an official report, interpreted your appointment as head of state would be a declaration of allegiance to Her Majesty the Queen's government.

Zahedi: Yes, there is a report which is available and will be published in the fourth volume of my memoirs. I was and am a defender of the interests of my country, and do not speak or do anything to please any foreign government or country. When it comes to national interests, there is no point in joking, doubting and being in any other ways.

A few weeks later, just before the end of the operation, Robert Ernest Huyser, was sent to Iran to neutralize the army and expedite His Majesty's leaving Iran. His Majesty was very upset and heartbroken. It is written everywhere and it is no longer a secret to say, that I asked his majesty to order General Huyser to be detained because he came to Iran without permission. Or, at least be expelled from the country immediately. We are not joking with anyone and we should not. Unfortunately, weakness was shown again. General Haig, Huyser's direct boss, resigned in protest of his mission, and shortly afterwards, George W.





Bush officially announced in an interview that the mission was a big mistake. We forget all these today.

Azadi: Unfortunately, that's true. Let me return to my previous question, that is, your stay in Iran in those critical days and the very strong rumor of your appointment as head of the government to resolve the crisis.

Zahedi: During my political life, I never sought a position or a job, and my goal was to serve Iran and the Iranian people, and the Shah himself and the monarchy.

I regarded Mohammad Reza Shah as my friend, my brother, my grandfather of my only child and above all, he was my king.

The country was in danger and something had to be done.

From the first hours of my arrival in Iran, many people came to me and asked me to do something. Army commanders and many army officers from various ranks of the armed forces openly demanded that I take over the job. Many intellectuals and academics came to me and said the same thing. A delegation of bazaaris and guilds of Tehran (not the guild chamber) came to me with the representative of Grand Ayatollah Khansari and even said that the day you are appointed as prime minister, it will be lit in the bazaar and we will hold patriotic demonstrations.

Azadi: You cited the Grand Ayatollah HajAgha Ahmad Khansari. Your position on the clergy community was controversial and is still being debated.

Zahedi: Do not forget that on August 19th, 1953 (28 Mor- dad), the decisive stance of Grand Ayatollah Boroujerdi, who was truly a great and patriotic man, closed the Tehran bazaar, threw tens of thousands into the streets and turned the page of history. This is written and document- ed in all the unbiased research on that day.

The crisis we faced was no less than that of August 1953. They wanted to use the leverage of the clergy to overthrow the government and destabilize Iran. We should have responded to this activity with the same tool. I was in constant contact with the Grand Ayatollah Shariatmadari, who was also an honorable, patriotic man and aware of the situation. He encouraged me. I know that he would not hesitate to take a public stance to save Iran when necessary. He sent several messages to His Majesty, but His Majesty did not pay attention to them. At that time, I was in constant contact with Grand Ayatollah Khomeini, who lived in Najaf, and was considered the first person in the Shiite hierarchy and was the first source of imitation Reference (Marja Tagh- lid). This contact was made possible by the help of two individuals, one of whom was my dear colleague, Mr. Sebt who was one of the few Arab scholars and Islamologists in the government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Khomeini had a negative judgment on Khomeini, and Khomeini was held accountable. Grand Ayatollah Khomeini encouraged me to do something. He sent me his agate ring as a token of gratitude, which I presented to His Majesty. Grand Ayatollah





Khoei said that whenever it is expedient (and I consider it expedient), he would cross the border on foot and go to Qom to establish the unity of Muslims. Can you imagine the effect of this action in those circumstances, turning the situation over and overshadowing everything? Unfortunately, this idea was not welcomed either.

In order to strengthen His Majesty's spirit so that they know that the clergy community is not one voice against him, and perhaps even the majority of the clergy support His Majesty, I took fifteen clergymen to the Shah in complete secrecy. They told him what to say. Some of them were the most important mullahs. Another appointment was made, which the Queen said would be use- less, and we canceled it. Yes, Khoei, Shariatmadari, and Khwansari and others could have done the same thing that Boroujerdi did on 28 Mordad. But there was no one behind them. The army was powerful and influential. The armed forces were ready. The clergy were ready. A large part of public opinion was ready, but internal and external provocations around His Majesty prevented things from happening. The issue of me or anyone else being the prime minister was a secondary issue. A big step had to be taken that was not taken, and unfortunately what should not have been done was done. **The revolution did not win, we lost.**

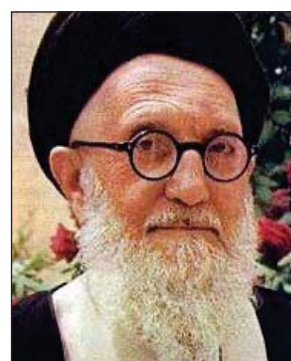
Azadi: Was your trip to Mash- had and Rey for this purpose?

Zahedi: Of course. I wanted to see and feel the reaction of public opinion - real people - without intermediaries and directly. The tomb of Hazrat Abdolazim was near Tehran and a place of pilgrimage for the people. Without prior notice, I went there with complete simplicity with the late Dr. Mohammad Ali Hedayati, former Minister of Justice and former representative of the parliament and some friends. The attitude of the people was really warm and loving. Some people told me, Mr. Zahedi, do something to get rid of this situation. People are tired.

They were right. People were tired of not knowing what to do, of sudden strikes, of daily problems, of shortage of oil and gasoline. My answer was nothing but saying, God



Ayatollah Khoei



Ayatollah Shariatmadari





willing, or that: I will do whatever I can, I am in the service of my homeland, and it could not be anything else.

Azadi: *What happened in Mashhad?*

Zahedi: The situation was similar but on a larger scale. By military plane, together with some army leaders and of course some friends, we went to visit the holy shrine of Hazrat Reza. No security precautions were taken. I told them to leave the people alone. The treatment of the people there was really exciting. They knew. They would gather around me and the same things would happen again. They expected action to restore order, return to normalcy, and resolve problems. And repeating the same sentence “Do something, people are waiting for you, we are tired.” I knew what people’s expectations were. I knew there were many possibilities for reform from a position of power. I knew people were tired.



Mozzaffar Baqaei

Azadi: *Did you meet with any clergyman?*

Zahedi: Yes. I tried to give hope to a few of them who were very worried about the situation. I said, God willing, things will work out soon. The presence of the officers next to me had a meaning that could not be hidden from them. The army was the main lever to save the country, everyone knew that.

Azadi: *It was rumored in Tehran and later written in numerous articles and books that you welcomed and encouraged the appointment of various people to the post of Prime Minister. Among them was Dr. Muzaffar Baqaei, who was in fact one of the opponents, but everyone knew him as a patriotic man.*

Zahedi: He was really patriotic. In the months after the 28th of Mordad, I had some misunderstandings with Dr. Baqaei that were resolved. I have never lost contact with him since then. He would come to *Hesarak* from time to time and we would negotiate together. Even when I was ambassador to Washington and I made short trips to Tehran, I sometimes saw him. He had open criticism of the state of the country, and I listened to them and occasionally reflected them to His Majesty. It was my job, even though in some cases it was not to his liking.





I negotiated in the difficult days of the riots. He had a completely negative judgment about Khomeini. He also believed that order and security should be established first, and then, with truly free elections, the fate of the country should be left to the elected representatives within the framework of the constitution, the constitutional monarchy.

My father always said that the king is the symbol of national unity, he should be a constitutional King and the government should be in charge and rule the country. Baquaei's point of view was the same. I did not see him as a man of demagoguery and barbarism in any direction and words. One night at the house of Dr. Dariush Shirvani, a member of parliament, we had a meeting with him and General Rabi'i, the commander of the Imperial Iranian Air Force. He explained his plan. I felt that after two long meetings with the Shah, His Majesty also agreed with his views. At the end of the meeting, in Shirvani's place, it seems that Baquaei had support of military figures and his appointment as prime Minister was inevitable. The next day, the appointment of Shapur Bakhtiar was made public. Unfortunately, Bakhtiar was not the man to solve the problem. You will read about this in details in the fourth volume of my memoirs. The famous message "I heard the voice of your revolution" was His Majesty's admission for non-observance of the Constitution, and the appointment of Bakhtiar was another big mistake, both of which contributed to the fall of the monarchy. They forced the king to say so.

Azadi: There is a lot to say. we know we have to wait for the fourth volume of your memoirs and we can not say everything in an interview. My point in this conversation was the specific issue of your prime ministership in the last few weeks before the revolution, which many saw as the only way to save the regime. At the same time, the famous and authoritative "Sunday Times" in a large five-column article that covered half of a large page of the newspaper said about you: "The only man who can save the Shah." Since then, many historians and researchers, both in the United States and Britain, and among Iranians, have expressed the same opinion. For us and the history of Iran, the question arises why this was not done? Did His Majesty ever discuss this with you? Was it proposed and you rejected it or was it just ignored?

Zahedi: At that time, His Majesty never asked me to take over responsibility to manage the situation.

Azadi: And you did not think that you can do it directly without the Shah's order? It seems that many army leaders made this offer to you to do so!

Zahedi: I am not the man of the coup against His Majesty or someone to do something in spite of His Majesty. After the 28th of Mordad, as you know, many old and experienced men, including Seyyed Hassan Taghizadeh, Adl-ol-Molk Dadgar, Nasr-ol-Molk Hedayat, advised my father not to rush to invite His Majesty to return to Iran. Arrange things first and then do the invitation. My father, who was a little upset at the time, did not agree. He





said that my duty was to save the country and the monarchy. I entrust this deposit to His Majesty. Foreigners also officially approached him and demanded the same, which he rigorously denied. All these are official documents and have been written and do not need to be discussed in detail here.

My position and belief was no other than this. I think maybe I could have succeeded in those circumstances. I had prepared myself. My friends were ready. The army was ready, but it was impossible for me to do anything against the Shah's wishes. It must be said that my opponents were not few. But I was never afraid of fighting. And now, at this age and in spite of illness, I do not hesitate to work for my homeland and defend the interests of my beloved country. Many in the court and those around the king and queen were afraid of me. Some of them said that the National Front is against me. Others cited London is opposed to me. I heard Mr. Hasanain Heikal who was Nasser's close friend, wrote somewhere: "If Zahedi takes power he will not act like his father and he will keep the power for himself" ... but those poor courtiers and Mr. Heikal did not know me, I was not the man of the coup against the Shah. But if I were officially in charge, I would do my best to save the country, and maybe I would succeed.

Azadi: Some people wrote at the time and they still say and write that you would have succeeded.

Zahedi: I do not know.

Azadi: And this issue has never been discussed again with you?

Zahedi: Yes. In Morocco in the presence of two people His Majesty told me that if we had appointed you as prime minister, you would have been killed. Even if you had been the head of the royal council, you would have been an excuse to the enemies. I told him: Maybe I would have been killed, but I would have fought and been killed. His Majesty said I was thinking about the life and future of the children and my mother and family. I wanted you to be alive and take care of them.

I did this task until the last minute. I did what I could during his ordeal. In the last days in Cairo, I prevented some deviations. I was with him till he took his last breath. And I closed his eyes and with president Anwar Sadat, that great man, I participated in washing the body and bathing it. I will not refer to other events till later. I have a clear conscience about my relationship with Mohammad Reza Shah and I consider God to be witnessing what I did for my King.

Azadi: Mr. Zahedi Thank you very much. What you said is like the proverb and is true in terms of the contemporary history of Iran, and we are looking forward to the next volumes of your memoirs.

Zahedi: God willing. □

