OF IRAN AND ITS LAST SHAH: A CONVERSATION WITH GHOLAM REZA AFKHAMI

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The last King of Iran, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, is commonly given a harsh verdict. But is this assessment fair, or even accurate? Through the kind and generous courtesy of Kayhan Life Magazine, we are so very pleased to present this interview with Gholam Reza Afkhami, who rectifies many of the assumptions about the late Shah. Mr. Afkhami is an academic, author and former Deputy Minister of Iran. He is currently a senior scholar and research director at the Foundation for Iranian Studies (FIS), a research institute in Washington, DC.

Mr. Afkhami served as Iran's deputy interior minister in the mid-1970s, and Secretary General of Iran's National Committee for World Literacy Program (1975–1979), a committee headed by Mohammad Reza Shah. After the Revolution in 1979, Mr. Afkhami moved to the U.S. and became a visiting scholar at the Hoover Institute, from 1980 to 1983. He is the author of several books, most recently, The Life and Times of the Shah. He is here interviewed by Cyrus Kadivar, the London-based author, journalist and consultant.

Cyrus Kadivar (CK): As an insider, you had a unique opportunity to observe the Pahlavi dynasty's daily workings. Eleven years ago, you published your epic biography of the Shah. How would you summarize the monarch's personality compared to his father Reza Shah?

Gholam Reza Afkhami (GRA): I have learned most of what I know of the life and times of Mohammad Reza Shah by studying the history of Iran under the two Pahlavi kings and by communicating with those closely involved with their personal and political lives. The young Mohammad Reza acquired many of his father's habits, though temperamentally he was his father's opposite. Reza Shah was naturally aggressive. Mohammad Reza was shy and withdrawn, even when at the apogee of power. The father slept on the floor in an unadorned room. The son also lived in relative simplicity, though the difference in the circumstances of their respective birth and childhood made his surroundings more opulent. The father dressed invariably in a plain soldier's uniform—no adornment, no medal, no pomp. The son was in full regalia when in military uniform. Normally, however, he wore civilian clothes. He was punctual, disciplined, and given to daily routines he almost religiously followed, even when on vacation. Like his father, he also walked around his office while receiving government officials and discussing state affairs.

CK: Mohammad Reza Shah married three times in his lifetime. Can you tell us about his relationships

with each one of his queens?

GRA: His first wife, Fawzieh, an Egyptian princess, was chosen for him. She was beautiful, and he grew to like her, but Fawzieh remained cold and distant. With Soraya, his second wife, he truly fell in love, allowing her to dominate him in family matters. Much to the Shah's chagrin, Soraya could not give him an heir, and refused to submit to an operation which might have enabled her to become pregnant. That refusal did not diminish the Shah's affection, though it led to divorce, because the imperative of [producing] an heir to the throne trumped the Shah's love.

The Shah's third wife, Farah Diba, later Shahbanu Farah, was 21 years old when she married, almost the same age as the king's other brides at the time of marriage. She was smarter, more energetic, more active, and considerably more interested in the affairs of the nation. More importantly, she bore the Shah a male heir in less than a year, which made her position secure, and the Shah's relationship with her unique.

CK: What were some of the King's personal hobbies?

GRA: The Shah was good at sports. He had learned skiing at Le Rosay [his Swiss boarding school] and, back in Tehran, never missed a chance to ski on the rare days that snow covered the rather primitive ski slopes of the Elahiyeh hills near Tehran and, in later years, of Shemshak and Gajereh on the slopes of the Alborz. He also skied in the Alps near his winter cottage in St. Moritz. He regularly played tennis, until it became difficult for him to continue because of his eyesight.

He was also an accomplished horseman, the kind who liked his horses sprightly and quick to the touch, requiring no encouragement to move. He enjoyed speed and courted danger beyond the boundaries of propriety for a king. His queens, though with him at different periods of his life, were equally afraid to be in the car when he drove, and they told him so. It was the same when he piloted a plane or a helicopter. He followed the rules, but also took risks, explaining that he was protected by the Almighty.

CK: Did the 1953 Crisis with Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh have an impact on the Shah's psychology and his mode of governing after his dramatic restoration to the throne?

GRA: The Shah never forgot the effect of the first decade of his [reign.] Never again, he might have

thought, as he flew back to Tehran from Rome. Never again would he be so poor and vulnerable as he was in Rome. Never again would he be the plaything of another man, as he had been of Mossadegh. Never again would he forget his father's advice: any man worth asking for help in the arduous work of making a nation will seek your place if allowed. This was in 1953.

Twenty years later, by 1974, his country and the world had changed. He had solved the oil issue, his country was on the verge of having more income than it needed, the Iranian military had become one of the most powerful in the Middle East, significant economic and technological relations had been established between Iran and the rest of the world, and the Shah was satisfied that his country was making palpable progress. His problem now was of a different genre: he knew he was ill and had to prepare the country and his son for a future of which he could not be sure.

CK: The Pahlavi regime has been described by some historians and critics as having been politically repressive and socially progressive. Do you agree with that assessment?

GRA: Politically, the White Revolution, by increasing the mobility of the population, facilitated the political atomization of society, rendering a greater number of people accessible to the authority and command of central government. By focusing political attention on the Shah, it gradually eroded the authority of other central sources of power, leading toward a concentration of power in his hands. This suggested political power but not necessarily political repression. The regime, however, was socially progressive.

CK: Mohammed Reza Shah began his rule as a constitutional monarch. By the Seventies he was the King of oil and the supreme autocrat ruling over 34 million Iranians. He abolished the two-party system in favor of a single party, Rastakhiz, began to liberalize the political system, and in August 1978, after protests in the streets, he promised free elections. Did the Shah ever believe in democracy?

GRA: The Shah was deep down a democrat. Democracy, however, is first and foremost an expression of culture. He began to understand this during the first years of his reign, especially his experience with Mossadegh. His 1976 liberalization policy was likely a plan to prepare the ground for the Crown Prince to ascend the throne when he no longer would be able to continue.

CK: How would you describe Iranian society in the 1970s?

GRA: Iran under the Shah was an open society. The economic boom had made it possible for people from different walks of life to travel abroad by the hundreds of thousands each year, while foreigners came in by comparable numbers. Women were gradually achieving equality with men and increasingly participated in the kinds of work that had been traditionally reserved for men. All of this irked the traditional populations and puritans, but it was hardly an example of repression.

In the mid-1970s, Iran's relations with the West were determined largely by Iran's relations with the United States. By 1975, Iran had become a showcase of development among Third World countries, boasting one of the highest rates of economic growth, a superior record of social services, and a critical mass for takeoff in science and technology — making steady progress in fields ranging from women's rights and environmental protection to intercultural and cross-cultural communication and literacy and life-long non-formal education. As a result of these and other changes, the country was a brain gainer in 1975, unprecedented for a Third World country at the time.

CK: And Jimmy Carter?

GRA: When in 1977 Jimmy Carter was inaugurated as the 39th president of the United States, the Shah was certain that he would survive him. Carter was ambivalent about the Shah, as reflected in his administration. When they first met on 15 November 1977 in Washington, the President found the Shah to be "a likable man—erect without being pompous, seemingly calm and self-assured, and surprisingly modest in demeanor."

Carter's Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan later observed that "of all the people we had seen during that period — [Egyptian President Anwar] Sadat, [German Chancellor Helmut] Schmidt, [British Prime Minister James] Callaghan, [French President Valery] Giscard [d'Estaing], and scores of others—the Shah was easily the most impressive." The Shah conducted "a tour d'horizon of the world," Jordan continued, "describing with great accuracy the problems facing the West, the strategic importance of Iran, and the critical nature of US-Iran relations. He spoke for almost an hour without notes. It was more than a presentation—it was a performance."

The Shah was pleasantly surprised to hear in mid-December that the President wished to spend New Year's Eve 1977 in Tehran, in between trips to Poland and India. The most surprising event of Carter's visit, however, was his toast at at the dinner the Shah gave in his honor at Sahebgharanieh Palace. Carter lavishly praised the Iranian monarch's leadership and called his country 'an Island of stability in

one of the most troubled regions of the world.'

A few months later, the Shah began to suspect that the West was planning to unhinge his rule.

CK: Why did the king hide his illness from his people and most of his inner circle? Did his cancer impact his decision making and morale during the final months of his rule?

GRA: What would have happened if the Shah had disclosed his illness is a moot point. Chances are that nothing significantly different would have occurred from within the regime, but the opposition would have become more empowered learning that the Shah was incapacitated. The Shah, however, was not incapacitated, at least not as a result of his illness. Those who knew him intimately saw nothing debilitating in his mental or physical agility. His twin sister Ashraf believed he was in complete control.

His government and those he consulted with never suspected that he was ill. His generals saw some indecisiveness at the end but attributed it mostly to the pressures of the time. The two ambassadors who met him several times a week saw in him mood alterations, but nothing that would suggest illness. His friends who were with him almost daily during his moments of rest never thought he was ill.

"He was active; he did his exercises, and his demeanor was not changed," said Professor Yahya Adl, an old friend going back to the times when he was still crown prince. Adl was a witness night after night to the Shah's orders to his generals not to be violent enforcing martial law. He was not surprised, nor did he attribute it to the shah's being ill or in any way not being himself. "He was always like this, since I have known him. He shunned violence, hoping some other way would be found to calm the situation."

CK: Liberals, followers of Mossadegh, and leftwing opponents who supported Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as the leader of the revolutionary movement later complained that their movement was 'hijacked' by Islamic fundamentalists. Do you agree with that view?

GRA: No. Neither of these groups was in a position to oppose Khomeini or successfully depose him after he had returned to Iran once the Shah had shown that he would not fight. Theirs was not a movement. It was at best a support for Khomeini's movement.

CK: What were the Shah's domestic challenges in the last years in power? Could he have done anything differently to save his throne?

GRA: In 1976 he opted for a new path. He experimented with decentralization of decision making, tried to rebuild the political structure through a movement called Rastakhiz that he hoped would evolve into a multi-party, democratic system. Had he had more time for civic organizing or been prepared to fight the far left and far right opposition, Iran and his son would have been the most precious legacy he would have left his people. He did not, and died a far better man, unwilling to succeed at the cost of his people's life. Iranians lost a promising future. Less than three years later, he died in Egypt.

CK: Do you still regard the Iranian revolution as Thanatos on a National Scale, the title of one of your books?

GRA: In Greek mythology, Thanatos represents death. In his psychoanalytic interpretation of human life process, Sigmund Freud speaks of "the death instinct," suggesting varieties of the urge toward self-destruction. In my representation of Thanatos, diverse groups of intelligent Iranians belonging to a spectrum of left to right, knowing little about Khomeini and what he stood for, abandoned reason and fact in favor of destroying a progressive system of government.

CK: Was the 1979 Iranian revolution inevitable? Could the Shah have done anything to forestall it? To what extent was he badly advised or contributed to his own downfall?

GRA: The Iranian revolution was not inevitable. It happened because it was made possible. It was made possible because the Shah's military could but did not stop it. The military did not stop it because the military obeyed the Shah and the Shah would not allow it. The Shah did not allow it because, as always, he would not accede to causing his people's death. And though he had a variety of advice, at the end, he himself became the cause of his own downfall.

CK: How would Iran have looked today if the Pahlavi monarchy had not fallen?

GRA: Clearly, Iran would be very different today had the Revolution not occurred. So would the rest of the Middle East. There would have been no Iran-Iraq war; Islamism would have been contained; untold number of Iranians, Iraqis and others would not have died, become maimed, or suffered displacement

and exile; untold amounts of wealth, property, or infrastructure would not have been destroyed; clashes of civilizations likely would not have been invented, or if invented, believed [in] or implemented; the United States would not have been involved in war in the Persian Gulf; and, perhaps, globalization would have taken a slightly kinder hue. These, of course, are mere speculations. What has been and what might have been, however, can alert us to our past mistakes, present options, and future possibilities.

The featured image shows the official 1973 portrait of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.