

Ardeshir Zahedi

TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF A FASCINATING LIFE

Since the 1979 Revolution, no more than a dozen published memoirs by Iranian exiles have aroused curiosity and debate over the epoch under the late Shah of Iran. The recently published first of three volumes of Zahedi Zahedi's memoirs in Persian, to be translated into English and possibly other languages later, will undoubtedly usher a new period of examining the past, and hopefully prompt other key Iranian figures who played major roles before and after the revolution to put their memories on paper.

The new Iranian generations are thirsty for the truth and less inclined to be drawn by gossip and innuendo, and Zahedi's memoirs will no doubt provide a great deal of interesting reading to them as well as their elders.

Chronicling many important events in 20th century Iran's turbulent past, Zahedi's memoirs also offers rare insight into the last 25 years of Pahlavi rule. During this period post-war Iran emerged from an underdeveloped country dependent on U.S. financial and political assistance to a regional superpower led by a dynamic monarch and a dedicated technocratic elite.

By the mid-1970s, Iran had become an economic giant in the Middle East and its influence was not only geopolitical but financial as well. On the eve of the revolution, Britain, France, Germany and Italy had received large investments from the Shah's regime including low interest loans totalling 21 billion US dollars to bail out the economies of Europe's leading industrial powers.

Now living in Switzerland, Ardeshir Zahedi has had a long time to reflect on the past and his own role in placing Iran as an economic and political power on the world map.

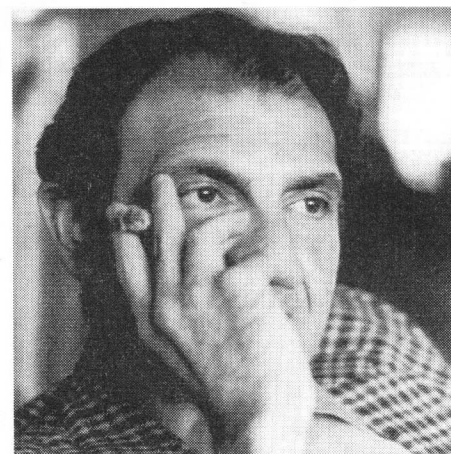
Zahedi entered the Iranian political scene in the early fifties and became

prominent when his father, General Fazlollah Zahedi, was appointed prime minister by the Shah in 1953, in the aftermath of the events that led to the downfall of Dr. Mohammad Mosaddegh. This was one of the most controversial political events in Iran's contemporary history - an episode that, five decades later, still divides Iranians into two camps of pro and anti Mosaddegh.

One side is uncompromising in its belief that the CIA and British Secret Intelligence collaborated to design, stage and execute a military coup d'etat to bring down the architect of the nationalisation of Iran's oil industry. The other camp, to which Zahedi clearly belongs, is adamant that the events in August 1953 amounted to a national uprising by the Iranian people who had become impatient with Mosaddegh's hotchpotch of policies that had driven the Iranian economy into chaos and towards bankruptcy.

In his introduction to the book, Zahedi humbly confesses to his inability to write memoirs and informs the reader that he has relied on numerous interviews he had given to journalists following the 1979 revolution and during his forced retirement and exile in Switzerland. To add support to his story he has also filled his book with 200 pages of declassified files relating to British and American accounts of their involvement in Iran. Nonetheless, Zahedi's story reads like a thriller.

Inevitably, Zahedi's memoirs may evoke among Iranian readers comparisons to the five volume diaries of Assadollah Alam, the late Shah's powerful court minister and confidant. Published in recent years, the Alam diaries provide a vivid and enlightening account of the characteristics of the occupier of the Peacock Throne in the last ten years of his rule, and the



modus operandi of the late Shah's regime. But unlike, and in contrast to, Alam's personal daily account of events, Zahedi's recollections contain no settling of political scores- even with those who had stabbed his father in the back- nor a belittling of the contribution that many patriots made to the Iranian Renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s, and Iran's role as an influential and respected member of the international community.

On many subtle and delicate occasions, Zahedi feels compelled out of a sense of decency and loyalty to the late Shah's memory to hint at certain matters by referring to the documents at the end of each chapter allowing them to come to his assistance in edifying the truth. In fact, among the characteristic features of Zahedi and his father, one can easily detect their touching honesty, dignity and faithfulness towards the Shah under all circumstances. This is evident in the stories told despite having to deal with the Shah's changing attitudes, occasional doubts, mistrust, intrigues and sometimes hidden spitefulness towards both father and son.

One of the riddles in Ardeshir Zahedi's life, which he does not provide an answer to in this book, is his unshakable status at court even after the removal of his father from the office. On the contrary, Ardeshir became closer to the Shah and even more trusted, to the extent that he was encouraged to marry Princess Shahnaz, the Shah's eldest daughter from Queen Fawzieh (sister of King Farouk of Egypt). The marriage lasted only a decade and the couple separated soon after Zahedi was moved from the Washington embassy to the Court of St James in London in the early six-

ties. One could expect that by divorcing the Shah's daughter, Ardeshir's career would also end. On the contrary, in 1967, Zahedi only 40 years was recalled to Tehran to become foreign minister, a portfolio which throughout Iran's contemporary history of international relations had traditionally been occupied by the most senior diplomats of the realm not younger than 60.

In Zahedi's memoirs, we read that despite his key and triumphant role along his father in the ,the national uprising of August 1953, he refused to accept any position, including the important portfolio of the interior ministry in his father's administration. Only a year later and indeed upon the Shah's insistence he was made a civil adjutant to the Shah and accompanied the monarch and his beautiful Queen Soraya on their state visit to the US at the invitation of President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

The U.S. trip was extended with stopover in London for talks with Sir Winston Churchill and Sir Anthony Eden, and ended a week before the Iranian New Year in March 1955. Four weeks later, on the 6th of April 1955, Zahedi witnessed the termination of his father's administration, and the General's 'golden exile' to Switzerland.

'We returned to Tehran from the US trip a week before Nowrooz,' Zahedi writes, adding, 'my father had planned to leave for a holiday resort in the Caspian region immediately after the official Persian New Years' royal audience ceremony at the Golestan Palace. I was asked by my father to join him. But during the audience with the Shah at the Golestan Palace, His Majesty told me that I would be among his entourage during his upcoming trip to the south of the country'.

Miles away in the Caspian region where General Zahedi was spending his holiday without his son, Assadollah Alam, the Shah's emissary arrived to convey politely 'that His Majesty had accepted your resignation.' Zahedi writes: 'On our return from the south to Tehran on board the royal train, His Majesty was handed a note written by Alam, which he read before tearing it into small pieces and burning it in the fire.' Zahedi says he was playing backgammon with the Shah who sud-

denly said there had been a coup d'etat in Tehran. 'His Majesty was in a jolly mood, and ordered for the royal train to come to a halt so that he could spread the joke and wait for the reaction among his entourage to a further fictitious report that the coup instigators had arrested among others Mr. Ala, the Court Minister (the Shah's candidate to replace Gen. Zahedi as prime minister)'.

Obviously, behind what Zahedi describes as a passing joke, lies the Shah's real fear of the possibility of Gen. Zahedi's attempt to stage a coup in reaction to the Shah's periodic efforts to remove him from office. By adding a pinch of salt to his revelations, Zahedi wittingly demonstrates his decency but with an obvious effort not to deprive his audience of the true atmosphere of mistrust that had existed between the Shah and his father in those turbulent days.

What Zahedi wishes to say, and there is no proof to the contrary, is the fact that the idea of removing the Shah from the Iranian scene had never appealed to his father. The General, a close ally of the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, had fought alongside Reza Shah in many internal wars to defeat the tribal khans and unite Iran under a centralized authority.

In support of his father's resolute belief in monarchy, Zahedi reveals that following Mosaddegh's refusal to accept the Shah's constitutional decree and the Shah's brief exile in Baghdad and Rome, and then his father's assumption of power in Tehran, several distinguished Iranian statesmen, such as Hassan Taghizadeh, had suggested to his father not to hasten the Shah's return. According to Zahedi, despite this advice, the General expressed his outrage by stating that he had been holding a trust that 'must be returned to its true owner forthwith'.

Among documents reproduced in this book, especially the confidential reports of Loy Henderson, the US ambassador in Tehran and the British diplomats who were in contact with their American colleagues during the 1953 events, we read that the Shah, on pretence of his displeasure with the composition of Gen. Zahedi's administration, 'that has been formed without his consultation', demonstrates his thinly veiled desire to be the key play-

er on the Iranian political scene.

One document quotes Jamal Emami, a prominent politician of the forties and fifties, describing a meeting with the Shah, during which the Shah expresses his dissatisfaction with the situation by telling him he wished to take up the wheel himself. 'I said to the Shah', Emami recalls, 'God forbid, if Your Majesty lost control of the wheel what would become of the monarchy?'. The Shah replied, 'Rest assured, I shall not lose control of the wheel'. Emami says he felt no point in taking the issue any further, but on his next meeting with the PM he advised the general that the time had come for him to go.

The Shah, no doubt believed that his mere departure from Iran during the August 1953 events had led to the people's uprising and thus General Zahedi's relentless efforts and initiatives in taking up the assignment bestowed upon him, although critical, was not necessarily the main factor in the ultimate restoration of his crown. The Shah perhaps had his own reason for such a strong belief. Two years earlier under almost identical circumstances, the Shah, exasperated by Mosaddegh's policies, had decided to pack his suitcases and leave. At the eleventh hour, the Shah had changed his mind when huge crowds mostly ordinary citizens and religious groups surrounded his palace and prevented him from leaving. Zahedi amusingly recalls his own role that day as he climbed a pole despite suffering from vertigo and shouted his support for the Shah until he lost his voice.

Yet during the tumultuous August days in 1953, we read in the American documents the story of the Shah's meeting with US ambassador in Baghdad, before his departure for Rome, during which the Shah speaks of the possibility of his return to Iran with obvious scepticism and worries as to how he would manage the rest of his life 'without any financial savings and resources'.

Of course, for obvious reasons, and especially during General Haj-Ali Razmara's administration in 1950, the Shah never denied his aversion to seeing a military figure at the head of the government. Was Razmara plotting against the Shah before he himself became the victim of bullets fired by an Islamic fanatic? No concrete

proof exists. But no doubt the Shah who had escaped a similar attempt on his life couple of years earlier, did not deeply mourn the demise of his ambitious premier. Razmara was the only military figure to head the government prior to General Zahedi.

Furthermore, in addition to his desire to keep a distance between the army and the government, thus depriving the generals from any adventure for power, as witnessed later in Egypt and Iraq, the Shah wanted to offer the world a picture of power structure in Iran, different to that emerging in the rest of the region.

In Zahedi's memoirs, we also learn that the core of differences which had existed between the Shah and Mosaddegh over the army persisted during Gen. Zahedi's administration. In his numerous reports to Washington, Henderson notes that there was a wall of mistrust between the Shah and his PM and that the two men were not frank with each other.

In a number of documents covering topics of discussions between the US ambassador and the Shah, we learn of the Shah's dissatisfaction with Gen. Zahedi on the pretext of the composition of the government and Zahedi's decisions to promote 'incompetent and dishonest' figures as well as bringing back into active service a number of retired 'corrupt and inept' officers. Remarkably, Zahedi confesses to his father's weakness to be excessively kind to his close friends and acquaintances.

The Shah's attitude at the time is also documented in the account of another meeting reported by British diplomats in Tehran. 'The Shah insists that he must be commander-in-chief of the Persian armed forces in effect as well as in name', one document says, adding 'if he did not retain effective control of the armed forces, he would sink into insignificance and eventually be forced to abdicate'.

'The Shah spoke with such vehemence that Mr. Henderson asked him whether there were differences between him and Gen. Zahedi on this matter, stressing the vital importance of complete understanding and confidence between the two of them'.

According to the document, the Shah replied: 'that Gen. Zahedi can be sure of his support provided he did not inter-

fere in the control of the armed forces, and rooted out corruption'.

While the Shah's discontent with Gen. Zahedi topped the agenda of discussions during almost all meetings between the Shah and the US envoy during 1953 crisis, we come across no sign of Zahedi's disquiet or alarm over the Shah's negative attitudes towards the PM's course of actions.

The important issues constantly discussed between General Zahedi and US envoys, according to the documents, are focused on Zahedi's desire in securing immediate and larger US economic assistance for salvaging Iran's bankrupt treasury, or even an imaginary debt of several million pounds sterling owed to Iran by the former Anglo-Iranian Oil Co., as well as his reluctance for the settlement of the oil dispute, between Tehran and London, due to the lack of suitable public opinion atmosphere.

General Zahedi's earlier indifference to give priority in solving Mosaddegh's legacy, at the time had created the doubt among certain British and American politicians that the General may have contemplated adopting his predecessor's oil policies. The root of such uncertainty of course was the widely known secret that prior to the August 1953 episode in opposing Mosaddegh, the future premier, representing many influential Iranian circles, including the clergies had been more concerned with the growing influence of the Tudeh (communist) elements hiding behind his administration, rather than Mosaddegh's uncompromising oil policies.

In view of Zahedi's memoirs, one might conclude that Zahedi, contrary to Washington's pressure and advice and possibly the Shah's desire, saw the prevailing circumstances in the first year of his administration not appropriate for either the resumption of diplomatic ties with London, or the immediate settlement of the Anglo-Iranian dispute over the oil industry's nationalisation. These were the days that despite a general sigh of relief over the economic situation in Iran, the furnace of anti-British emotions was still scorching among the Iranians. This was especially so when Mosaddegh's trial on the initiative of the Shah started in a military tribunal rather than a civil court which, accord-

ing to a widespread belief, Zahedi preferred.

Zahedi's memoirs documents the period when his father finally agreed to Tehran's resumption of ties with London after resorting to the threat of resignation which secured the support of his opponents for the government's initiative to make peace with Britain.

Yet the fire of differences between the Shah and Zahedi started to flame again with the arrival of Denis Wright, as the British Charge d'affaires, in late December 1953.

On the first day of Wright's arrival in Tehran, two of the Shah's men, Bahram Shahruckh and the 'sinister secretary' Ernest Perron appeared at the envoy's doorstep introducing themselves as the Shah's emissaries and informing him of the Shah's desire for the direct settlement of all important issues between the two nations, including the oil dispute without going through the government channel.

The surprised dinner guests made a few more visits to the British envoy but finally received a cold shoulder from London to the Shah's desire for going behind the government's back. According to one document, Wright told the Shah's emissaries that while he welcomed the Shah's willingness to help, he was not in a position to be negotiating secretly with the Shah without the knowledge of his PM or minister for foreign affairs.

From the content of certain documents, there is also a conclusion that since the Shah considered General Zahedi as Washington's pick, he assumed he could utilize the occasion of renewed ties with London to dig into the bottom of the feeling of the Conservative government of Sir Winston Churchill towards Zahedi, and exploring the potential of creating a division between the United States and Britain over Iran.

In one of his reports on the meeting with the Shah's emissaries, Wright records that Shahruckh had whispered to him that the Shah was thinking of dismissing (Hossein) Ala (the court minister) but would not to do so since that might be seen in London as an anti-British move.

Wright reported to London 'I said, neither I, nor the members of my staff had any intention of interfering in Persian domestic affairs and that it was for the

Shah and his prime minister to decide what actions were for the good of the country'.

Taking note of what Shahrukh had said as the early warning of the Shah's intentions to replace General Zahedi, Wright says in his report that he had in fact stressed his government's admiration for Zahedi's achievements by referring to Eden's expression of sympathy for his efforts in the House of Commons on December 17, 1953.

Ardeshir Zahedi's memoirs also remind us of the his father's affectionate note to Winston Churchill in which he assures his British counterpart of his friendship in spite of having been taken prisoner by the occupying British forces during the Second World War, and exiled to Palestine when he was the military governor of Isfahan.

From Ardeshir Zahedi's account of events, we can conclude that General Zahedi's disagreement and antagonism with Iran's participation in the west-inspired Baghdad Pact, later renamed CENTO, after Iraq pulled out in 1958, secured the last nail in the coffin of his administration as well as his four decades of military and political career.

According to Zahedi, Baghdad was the Shah's last stop on his two months trip to US and Europe. 'After dinner with King Faisal and Iraq's Premier Nuri Al Sa'id, our ambassador in Baghdad escorted Queen Soraya to the embassy, and we moved to another room to discuss the prospects of the proposed Baghdad pact', Zahedi recalls. 'The same issue widened the gap between the Shah and my father as the latter was against Iran joining the pact on principle and the belief that such military pacts, would offer no deterrent and would not guarantee Iran's security and integrity'.

Zahedi goes on to say that, 'my father was of the opinion that by joining the pact, we would upset our northern neighbour, the Soviet Union, with whom we had no scores to settle'.

Elaborating further on the growing differences between the Shah and General Zahedi, Ardeshir Zahedi says that his father was of opinion that the Shah should have honoured his role as a constitutional monarch and let the government assume responsibilities. 'On several occasions while Queen Soraya was also present, I witnessed



the same argument between the two men, with my father supporting the notion that it was the role of the government, not the Shah, to deal with foreign powers'.

Following Zahedi's dismissal, the Shah, freshly back from his Washington and London trips, during which he must have secured US and British support, appointed his Court Minister Hossein Ala to form the new government. Ala obliged, and on the eve of his departure for Iraq to sign the Baghdad pact on behalf of Iran, he escaped an assassination attempt by a member of an Islamic extremist group, but was still able to go to Baghdad with a bandaged head.

In describing the eventful career of his father and himself, Zahedi uses the opportunity of recounting numerous stories to reveal humorous and entertaining moments not previously heard. He recalls the dinner that Churchill hosted in honour of the Shah at No. 10 Downing Street in 1953 from which the Shah and Queen Soarya returned to the embassy, still famished. 'For security reason, the kitchen in the embassy had been locked and I jumped into the car still wearing my dinner jacket and medals and went to the Dorchester, woke up the chef and by putting a note in his hand secured only a few cheese sandwiches for the starving occupier of the Peacock Throne and his queen'. The first volume of Zahedi's memoir covers in details many events relating to his father's military and political life, a career that began with fighting along

the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, Reza Shah, to unite Iran under a central government. It included the arrest of the British appointed ruler of Iran's oil rich province of Khuzestan, the occupation of Iran in World War II, during which Gen Zahedi was captured by the British and sent into exile to Palestine, Zahedi's release and return to Iran after the war, and his entering the Iranian political scene when, during the late forties, he paved the way for the election of Mossadegh's followers and National Front members to the Majlis (parliament), and then becoming an important member of Mosaddegh's cabinet by assuming the interior ministry portfolio.

A day after his dismissal by the Shah in January 1954, General Zahedi left his beloved homeland for Switzerland, where he stayed until his death in Montreux, in 1963. He returned to Iran only once to attend the marriage ceremony of Zahedi to Princess Shahnaz. The next two volumes of Ardeshir Zahedi's memoirs shall cover the periods of his ambassadorial assignments to Washington and London, foreign ministry portfolio and finally his controversial resignation in early seventies and his appointment once more to Washington as the Shah's last ambassador till February 1979 Islamic revolution.

All in all this is a good beginning for what forms to be the narrative on an interesting life in an interesting period of Iran's history.