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Legend of a New Diplomacy

From dream to reality



Ambassador Ardeshir Zahedi, well-known to our readers and to the diplomatic community, has now completed Vol. III of his memoirs. This is a colossal work of some 900 pages and a supplement of more than 3000 pages of original documents covering the five crucial years (1967-1971) that he served at the head of the Iranian diplomacy.

Zahedi, 3 times Ambassador to the Court of Saint James and to USA and one of the architects of modern Iran had much contributed to the peace and security of the region. Washington counted on him and his assistance in ending the Vietnam War and in reconciliation with China.

In anticipation of the impending publication of his new book, we asked Dr Houchang Nahavandi, former Chancellor of Tehran and Pahlavi Universities, a Laureate of the French Academy, writer and critic to review the work for our readers. Graciously, he granted.

The new volume of Memoirs of Mr Zahedi is about the five years (1967 to 1971) that he served as the Iranian Foreign Minister. There is consensus amongst friends and foes that these five years were the most brilliant moments in the annals of the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. There are historians who have regarded the five years of Zahedi as the “Golden Era” of Iran’s foreign policy, a judgment to which I voluntarily subscribe.

Iran was respected everywhere. Iranians needed no visa to travel to almost any country. Iran was present and counted upon in crucial international negotiations; its arbitration and views were fervently solicited. Washington needed Iran and its diplomatic credibility in negotiations for ending the Vietnam War or mediating to establish relations with China and the countries of the far east.

Iranian diplomacy was at the very centre, playing a crucial role in restoring peace, security and stability in the Middle East. The Iranian military might and the vigour and vitality of its diplomacy went hand in hand and were judiciously employed as an ace in the sleeve. No one was speaking anymore about the artificially concocted conflicts between the Sunnites and Shiites. When Saudi Arabia, the country that today is boasting of rivalry with Iran, was facing internal problems, division and instability, it was Iran who responded to their call for help, saved the country and restored authority. It is regrettable that the Saudi authorities of **Riyadh** did not manifest the due gratitude and is opting for an attitude that is in all probability orchestrated from outside.

With the current situation in the Middle East, it is likely that the chapters devoted to the region may attract more of the reader’s attention. This should not distract him from the important sections that trace Iran’s relations with other countries of the world from the East to the West, from Asia to Africa

including the part known as the third or rather the developing world. In all these chapters, through the words of the writer and the wealth of attached documents, the entire decision-making process in the diplomatic machinery of the country becomes transparent; we can trace the process of application to the conclusion followed by analysis and evaluation of the harvest.

The writer's anecdotes and personal recollections mix with facts and figures to give a pleasant flavour to his work. They are all interesting, enriching and bear the mark of the writer's personality. Political life is full of contradictions, the sweet and sour, the minor details and major issues, the private and public all mix and mingle. They often escape our attention but in fact they play an important role in life. Reality is not always simple; paradoxes and perplexities are everywhere. Black is not only black and white is not as white as it seems. The shades are more sophisticated than they seem. Reading the Memoirs of Mr Zahedi will take us behind the curtain of clouds into the core of truth.

In centres of diplomatic training and schools of international studies, the study of the memoirs of the personalities who have been actively involved in shaping international diplomacy has become an essential part of the curriculum. The Memoirs of Ardeshir Zahedi once published will, I have no doubt, become a reference for historians and students of political sciences.

Two chapters of Volume III of Memoirs will probably invite more scrutiny and satisfy the curiosity of those who lived through the Shah's reign and have long been waiting for Zahedi to speak.

Hundreds if not thousands of articles and books have been published on the closing chapter and the final days of the last Shah of Iran. The few pages that Zahedi writes on the Shah are far from being biographical. He refuses to pass judgment admitting that his emotional and family ties may distance him from fairness and impartiality. But whatever he says is original, even to people like me that may claim to have known the Shah and who had worked with him for years.

The section on "***Minister of Foreign Affairs and his Internal Problems***" primarily deals with Mr Zahedi's relations with Amir Abbas Hoveyda, Princess Ashraf, SAVAK, a few other personalities or institutions. He also comments on the controversial celebrations of the 2500th. year of the Iranian monarchy.

Zahedi has never expressed any doubt about the importance of the event and the need for a universal homage to Cyrus the Great, the founder of the empire. However, he does not hesitate to express his all-out disapproval of the way the things were contrived and presented at Persepolis: the notorious luxury tents, the extravagant dinner reception with almost nothing Iranian in or about it, the abuses, the wastes - all smacking of lack of taste and responsibility. Ardeshir is right. The details he gives and some revelations he makes show that though the idea was noble, the way it was realised provoked a great deal of legitimate criticism and much public displeasure. It damaged rather than repair the image of our monarchy and the institutions at a time we craved for it.

The stories related to serious managerial differences, at times clashes, between late Prime Minister Hoveyda and Ardeshir Zahedi have for years been entertaining the imagination of gossip mongers, journalists and even our diplomatic representations. Of all these, Zahedi has spoken in detail and with great sincerity; I do not need to dwell on it longer now that Hoveyda is no more with us. Their discords or divisions had their roots in fundamental personality differences, often psychological but oftener related to the educational backgrounds of the two statesmen.

Hoveyda was not a man of direct confrontations; he had a fine taste for diplomacy, but also for gossips and rumours. Fortunately, the Shah did not always take him seriously but regrettably, as Zahedi confirms, he did not show any reactions either. It has been said in numerous records and Alam the Court Minister also confirms in his Memoirs -unless we doubt the authenticity- that Hoveyda did not appreciate ministers with strong, independent personalities and would not hesitate to do all he could to curb their ambitions or divide them to rule. The Shah knew this well enough and was conscious of Hoveyda's personal thirst for power.

In short term, the political games Hoveyda played and the attitude he adopted were effective and continued to enhance his power. He secured his influence on the high-ranking security and information authorities. He turned the Iran-E Novin Party into a true political machinery in his service to the point that the Shah began to be worried and hastily concocted the RASTAKHIZ (Resurrection Party). All this was contrary to the interests of the nation and he paid a heavy price for it with his head; a tragic destiny that he did not really deserve.

We read much about all this but little about the other side of the picture: Hoveyda's intellectual capacity, his knowledge of international affairs and his

command of several languages. He mastered French and Arabic better than Persian; he knew the history of Europe better than that of his own country. Yet he was not emissary of any foreign power and this was the quality that the Shah appreciated and perhaps his major reason to keep him for 13 years at the head of the government. Was it not a grievous error?

Unlike Hoveyda, Ardeshir Zahedi had no thirst for power. All he wanted was to serve his country. Far from being crafty or cunning, you can read his mind and see his heart in his face. He says exactly what he feels. His friendships are sincere and uncalculated. He does not meet people with prepared smiles. Ardeshir deplores lies and is allergic to hypocrisy. When he does not like something or wants to criticise someone, he does it face to face. Candour and transparency are easily visible in his personal as well as his diplomatic relations.

There were many occasions when foreign governments or their representatives asked the Shah if he could name someone else to represent him and his country and sit at the table of negotiations so they could feel at ease; he never gave in. Some of the documents in Volume II of his Memoirs are witness to this and commend the reputation of the man who served at the head of the Iranian diplomacy for five years.

From the moment the Shah stooped to pre-revolutionary pressures and unseated Hoveyda from the Ministry of the Court, to a few days before he was arrested (which I also consider as another political misconception) Zahedi did all he had in power to save the Former Prime Minister's life. He insisted that the Shah offer him an ambassadorship. Brussels, being one of the favourite places Hoveyda had spent a few years of his youth as a student was suggested. He refused. We can never know, but had he been proposed a more prestigious mission, he might have probably accepted. The next idea coming from Zahedi was to provide Hoveyda with sufficient financial support and have him discreetly leave the country on board one of the private planes that the court had at disposal. Hoveyda categorically declined.

Hoveyda believed strongly in his innocence, he also thought he could count on the help of at least some of the multitude of prominent Mullahs he had nourished from the almost unlimited secret funds he had at his disposition. He was wrong, an error of judgement that only one in his place could understand. The new leaders, turbaned or not, were on the front line asking for his head so that he might not have any chance to reveal their secrets and the dubious connections they used to have.

Revenons à nos moutons!

The life story of Ardeshir Zahedi is known to everyone, needless to repeat. There are, however, certain points about his character, some personal traits, that do not appear in the official biographies and I personally regret.

Dr Ferydoon Zandfard, a distinguished veteran diplomat, who had a prominent post in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, before and even after the revolution, has devoted a whole chapter of his work to Ardeshir Zahedi and his personality: (*Souvenirs of Years of Service at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Iran's New Diplomacy*).

Mr Zandfard was a close associate of Mr Zahedi's and I did not have this privilege. My first contacts with Mr Zahedi go back to the years I served as Minister of Housing and Development and began to enjoy his generous encouragements. Soon after I was sent to Shiraz as the Chancellor of the university and he was appointed as Iran's Ambassador to the Court of Saint James. Our initial formal contacts turned to real friendship when I became Chancellor of the University of Tehran and he was Minister of Foreign Affairs. This led to a lasting friendship, unbroken ties strengthened by our situation in exile far from the country we both so much love.

It is normal that I should have a different view of Ardeshir Zahedi. The first and foremost quality I see in Zahedi is his love for Iran garnished with impassioned devotion, a kind of worshipping. He truly loves all Iranians, wherever that they might be and of whatever creed, origin or faith. He feels proud and gets even excited when he hears about their achievements. In his judgements, he makes a distinction between an un-endurable regime that confiscated his and his family's properties and condemned him to death and the noble people of Iran.

The prosperity of the nation, the preservation of its heritage and interests of its noble people are more relevant to him than the kind of government they have or may have. We all witnessed the courage, determination and conviction with which he defended the rights of the nation, its desire for independence, its legitimate claims to use the nuclear energy for progress and peace. The echoes of his words and the force of his convictions were not negligible. Later, he adopted the same attitude regarding the conflicts with some neighbouring Arab nations or whenever the vital interests of the country were in question.

In international negotiations, Zahedi had his own method: direct and transparent with an approach entirely uncommon in diplomacy. We have so many examples of the moments he completely destabilised his counterparts and left them desperate or on the defensive.

Another distinct quality in Ardeshir is his genuine sense of gratitude to all who had helped him or his father in the difficult days. In friendship, he is unswerving and dependable. It is best not to provoke his anger or his enmity though he has never betrayed or behaved unmanly and has remained noble even with foes.

Ardeshir's respect for the predecessors is well known but his love and admiration for his late father, General Zahedi, is beyond description; Hamlet-like, almost legendary. He always feels that his father is present and has an eye on everything he does or says. Once I was returning, in the company of Mrs Vakili, wife of late Ambassador Vakili and a close relative of Ardeshir's, from Victoria Restaurant on the surrounding hilltops of Montreux. Ardeshir was driving and talking about something he had done the previous day, suddenly he slowed down, turned to us and asked: *"And what would my father have said in this case? How would he have reacted?"* This was not the only time he revealed his metaphysical affections.

General Zahedi for him was more than father, he was a model, a source of inspiration. He often blames himself why he cannot be like him. His mother, Mrs Pirnia and the maternal grandfather Motamen ol Molk have galvanised his personality and led him in his youth. Motamen ol Molk, a political icon of modern Iranian history, looked after Ardeshir; father-like, he accompanied him to school and protected the young boy while General Zahedi was taken prisoner by the British and kept in the Palestinian camps.

Ghavam ol Saltaneh, for his diplomatic talent and the major role he played in saving Azerbaijan, Mohamad Saed for his resistance against the Russian invaders; Taghi Zadeh, Hakim ol Molk, Nasrolmolk Hedyat, Adl ol Molk Dadgar; Haeri Zadeh, close associate of Modaress, Mossed and General Zahedi; Ali Asghar Hekmat are amongst other predecessors of whom Zahedi speaks with great respect and has many recollections from their time. The companions of his father, the great army commanders like General Morteza Yazdi Panah or General Shah Bakhti and General Esmaeel Shafaei have their special place in his heart.

I do not need to speak about a host of other personalities mentioned in the book to whom he feels beholden for the services they have done to his beloved country, nor of his colleagues and associates in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of whom he speaks with affection and gratitude throughout his work. Yet I may need to add that in all the years after the revolution Ardeshir has never hesitated to rush to the help and look after the ones in financial strain or health problem. I shall not give names or further details for he prefers discretion and would not like it.

He had affectionate relations with the Shah's first wife, Queen Fawzieh, the grandmother of his only daughter, Princess Mahanz. With the fall of Gamal Abdol Nasser, restrictions on travelling for Egyptian citizens relaxed and Queen Fawzieh regularly went to Montreux to see Ardeshir and her children, often staying in his house. He remained close and loyal to her to the last minute and has never abandoned the Queen's descendants. Despite certain unfounded rumours, Ardeshir had warm and friendly relations with Queen Soraya even after her divorce from the Shah. Soraya and the Shah were in love to the very end. They were both grateful to Ardeshir. On his relationship with Queen Farah much has already been written and said, no need for more.

These were some of the points I wanted to bring to the reader's attention while waiting for the publication of the new volume of Memoirs.

History will refer to the good years of the Shah and the five years of Ardeshir at the head of Iranian diplomacy as a glorious period, a legend.

It would be a pity not to add a few words about the relation of Ardeshir and the Shah in the last days of his life while waiting for him to speak in detail in Volume IV of his Memoirs.

In the last weeks preceding the 79 revolution, when the monarchy was trembling and the country was burning in chaos, in those moments of loss and indecision several leading statesmen, the commanders of the armed forces encouraged by some eminent religious leaders and intellectuals referred to Ardeshir Zahedi as their only remaining hope. In the early days of the government of Sharif Emami, the Shah asked Zahedi to return to Tehran and be by his side. He needed his experience and help in dealing with the Americans and their mounting pressure.

Zahedi was expected to arrive at Tehran airport in all discretion. When he landed at Mehrabad, he was surprised by the presence of a large group of diplomats, civil and military personalities and journalists who were waiting to welcome him back. They all believed that he was the man of the hour; the one who could probably lead the country out of the tumultuous state and the dangers it faced. Disappointment with Sharif Emami and his government was almost universal. He was doomed from the very start.

From the moment Ardeshir was back, Hesarark, his residence in the North of Tehran, became a gathering centre for all who wanted to see a strong government in control and something urgent done to save the country. I called him and he invited me to join him for breakfast the day following his return. I lived not far from his house. As I arrived at his door and parked my car, I was amazed by the size of the crowd gathering at the entrance. Most of them were the generals, politicians, members of parliament, university professors and journalists that I knew personally. When shaking hands and greeting them they all had one thing to say: *“When you see Ardeshir please tell him to step forward; it is time to move.”* My conversation with the host was around the same topic. He shared our views and admitted that there was little hope in Sharif Emami’s government in which I had an ephemeral presence under personal pressure from the Shah.

Ardeshir had a great ace in sleeves and that was the full support of the army commandment. He had warm relations with all of them. They believed in him and had all kept great memories of the days they had worked under the command of his father, General Zahedi. Members of the Imperial Guard admired him; the commander of the Royal Air Force was an intimate friend.

He had good contact with the Shiite hierarchy and personal relationship with leading Ayatollahs. The great Ayatollah Khoui, the most prominent religious figure who lived in Najaf wanted Ardeshir to react to the rise of Khomeini in whom he had little confidence. He sent his personal agate ring as a token of confidence to Ardeshir, but in a chivalric gesture he offered it to the Shah. In his message to Zahedi he said if there is a change and *“you accept to head the government, I would march through the frontiers and return to Iran.”* This would have been an unprecedented and symbolic move. He planned to stay in Ghom to unite the Muslims behind the new government. This would have entirely overshadowed the supporters of Khomeini and eclipsed their manifestations. The Grand Ayatollah Shariatmadari, the most influential figure

in Azerbaijan and very popular in the whole country and the Great Ayatollah Ahmad Khonsari did not hide their sentiments. They kept encouraging Ardeshir to assume responsibility.

He decided to test the reaction of people. Accompanied by some of the commanders of the armed forces, he went on pilgrimage to the holy Shrine of Abdolazim in Rey, South of Tehran. He talked to the pilgrims and visitors, to the people here and there. Their welcome was warm and sincere without any sign of hostility. Encouraged by the experience he left two days later with the same generals to the holy city of Mashhad and met with the leading Ayatollahs. He promised that in a short time everything would return to normal.

He then discreetly arranged for fifteen of the highly respected and well known religious figures to meet with the Shah and exchange their ideas. The meeting was successful and ended in a unanimous declaration of support of the regime by the participants. They condemned violence and terror that was perpetrated by the fanatics, meaning Khomeini's supports but without mentioning his name.

Everyone thought that this was a prelude to Zahedi's nomination at the head of the government. His supporters chose the Bagh-e-shah Barracks for the headquarters in the first days of the new government. Rumours had spread everywhere in and out of the country. *Michael A. Ledeen* and *William Lewis*, in their "***Debacle: The American Failure in Iran.***" December 1982, Vintage books, have extensively commented on the question and are of the opinion that "*Zahedi was the only man who might rescue the Shah.*" *The Sunday Times* also covered the story and shared the same opinion.

The Shah and the Queen showed no reaction to the public sentiments; they ignored the express demand of a good number of generals and religious leaders. They never offered the Premiership to Zahedi. The entourage of the Queen who were now meddling in all the affairs were openly hostile. They had their fears of Zahedi and his popularity and were brooding on other alternatives such an Islamic Monarchy or a version of the monarchy dubbed as "Social-Democratic." Some of them had their personal grudge against the Shah. The sick man had become too weak and no one feared him any longer. To satisfy their hidden desire, they were ready, and this was manifest, *to burn the house to frighten the mouse away!*

The principle fear of the opponents was that with the support of the army and the clergy, Zahedi would be in a powerful position to put an end to all abuses and the widespread corruption in the circle. They were raising arguments and spreading rumours that Zahedi was not popular amongst the followers of the National Front or that the British did not trust or like him.

It was in fact not far from the truth to say that some British policy makers were not good friends for either Zahedi the father or the son though on the personal level, Ardeshir had good relationship with most of the eminent personalities. The British had unlawfully arrested his father and kept him in solitary confinement for three years. In the late 1960's, the British Embassy in Tehran kept sending unfair and malevolent reports to London about Ardeshir. They considered him hostile, an angry man with perilous influence, a man on whom the British could not count. A few years later with the talk of the nomination of Ardeshir spreading, the Embassy wrote to the Foreign Office "*The appointment of Zahedi would be a declaration of war against Her Majesty's Government.*" The reader can refer to the documents in his Memoirs. There are numerous other examples.

The attitude of Washington was, as usual, paradoxical and unclear. The American Embassy in Tehran and the State Department in Washington D.C. had for long established contacts with the critics of the Shah, encouraging certain oppositions, consciously or unconsciously paving the way for the fall of the regime. On the other hand, Pentagon and some influential advisors to the White House like Zbigniew Brzezinski, had their serious doubts and did not hide their consternation of continuing such approach.

Everyone was waiting for the Shah to take his final decision. King Hossein of Jordan and King Hassan of Morocco were trying to convince him that if he stood firm against the oppositions and allowed the army to bring the situation back to normal -something which was within the reach- the Americans would change their mind and would have no other choice but to support him. Later on, when the Shah was convalescing in Cairo, he confessed to me that he had committed a mistake not having listened to his friends' advice. He then repeatedly and on numerous occasions admitted that he had miscalculated or at least misinterpreted the attitude of the Western powers.

In the end, the Shah did not offer Premiership to Zahedi. He was in a position and enjoyed such support that he could have taken the initiative by himself if he wanted. But Zahedi was not a man who would wage a coup or do something

against the Shah's will. When in Morocco in the company of the Shah, a trusted friend disclosed that he had heard the Shah telling Zahedi: "*But Ardeshir, if I had appointed you they would have killed you*" and Ardeshir had replied: "*At least I would have died like a man in the battle field.*"

I have always been hesitating to raise such painful questions with Ardeshir but I think the time has now come for him to speak. If the legitimate question of "*Would he have succeeded if he was trusted with the mission?*" be raised, my answer would be that at least his chances were much greater than anyone else. Alas, we cannot write the history twice.

I shall be brief and conclude this review. Many have written, are writing and will be writing about Ardeshir. They all admit that he is a man of an extraordinary courage, free-spoken, at times impatient and bold. I have witnessed his restiveness becoming visible and more frequent with the passage of time and growing of age.

I would say without the slightest reserve that he is a passionate patriot, an avid lover of Iran and Iranians; a man of faith; heroic in true sense; acclaimed and respected as the personification of the "***legend of Iranian New Diplomacy***" in the age of glories, fame and force.

H.N.