

**In the Service of the Peacock Throne**

*The Diaries of the Shah's Last  
Ambassador to London*

**PARVIZ C. RADJI**



HAMISH HAMILTON: LONDON

*To Farhad, My Brother*

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Encouraged and emboldened by the exchange so far, I say our friends in the West are full of admiration for the remarkable flexibility HIM has shown in permitting a freer climate of political activity. I cite the Shcheransky and Ginsberg [Soviet dissidents] trials in an attempt to illustrate the greater degree of forbearance that characterises the current climate of opinion in the world, and foolishly add that 'we can't, of course, swim against the current'.

'I am not swimming against the current,' says HIM

'I know you're not, Sir, which is what makes your initiative so admirable.' I go on to say that a society which, thanks to HIM's enlightened policies, has reached the degree of economic prosperity and social awareness of Iran today, 'must distance itself from the harsh discipline of the past'.

He interrupts to say that he has held that belief for a long time, and has himself said so on numerous occasions: 'If the institution of monarchy is to continue after us – and, for the sake of the country, it must – then change is necessary.'

'The tolerance shown towards the opposition by Your Majesty has the support of the Iranian middle classes,' I say.

'Tolerance, yes, but to what degree?' he asks rhetorically.

I go on to say that what in my judgment we ought now to be thinking of is how to sow seeds of division in the ranks of the clergy by lending support to a religiously acceptable and popularly respected figure. Someone untainted by the brush of Bahaiism or Westernisation, a good public speaker, well versed in the Koran, who could come forward to engage Khomeini in debate, albeit indirectly and through the international media, and in doing so demonstrate that Khomeini's interpretation of Islam is incompatible with human dignity and unsuited to the conduct of the affairs of a country like Iran, which needs industrialisation.

Finding HIM, as AAH had predicted, 'in a listening mood', I continue, and say whoever the person is that fits the role of intellectual standard-bearer for progressive, enlightened Islam – 'and it could be someone like Shariatmadari' – all the machinery of the state, from unlimited funds to the massive propaganda apparatus, should be made available for the dissemination of his arguments. We would have to bear in mind that such a person must be considered 'a dispensable figure', as there would be a considerable likelihood of an attempt on his life. At the same time, accommodation should be sought with the more moderate political and religious elements.

'On all this,' HIM asserts, 'people are now working', particularly on finding some degree of accommodation with the more moderate clergy.

My audience lasts for just under an hour, at the end of which I am offered the raised hand, which I kiss, and, bowing, take my leave.

I see Her Majesty for a brief moment as I come out, seated amongst some of the royal children on the terrace of the pier, kiss her hand and proceed to the airport. Any anxieties I may have had about the rising turmoil in the country, or HIM's genuine concern at the turn events have taken, are momentarily submerged by the elation I feel at my own performance. But I soon begin to chide myself for not having seized this unique opportunity, with HIM in so receptive a mood, to have said more, and to have put forward the scenario whereby HIM would voluntarily withdraw from all but the military and foreign policy aspects of government, or to have pleaded for a less belligerent and exaggerated tone in his public utterances. Yet, as I go over in my mind the various exchanges during the audience, looking out from the oval window of the Falcon as it soars above the cloud-covered Alborz mountains, I am, I judge, quite chuffed.

### *Thursday, August 10*

The morning at the Foreign Ministry in Hossein Eshraghi's office, where I go over the cables received from and sent to London during my absence, and a delightful evening at Haideh Hakimi's enchanting country home at Pounak. As the lights of Mehrabad Airport shimmered in the distance I sank into an armchair to take a first sip of my ice-chilled Soltanieh vodka, as well as to take in the loveliness of my surroundings. My thoughts turned to Harold Nicolson's description of a similar evening in Gholhak fifty years earlier: 'The owls, that moon-soaked night, answered each other from tree to tree: the crickets shrieked an undertone, continuous bleaching, as if an emanation of the dry and crackling sun of noon. Between the trees, the mountains glimmered, as if lit by the headlights of some vast motor. A pond, under the oleanders, gurgled sullenly.'

Where else in the world, I wondered, would one find the same delicate, almost fragile, cool breeze as in the summer nights of Tehran?

### *Friday, August 11*

The first item of news on the World Service of the BBC is a statement by HIM that 'only armed insurrection can prevent the

workers, the peasants, and the guilds – and the sympathy of all three is overwhelmingly with the system.’

I say I was surprised that HIM had wondered whether ‘our Western friends’ had a hand in the current disturbances. He says that while he doesn’t think the British Government has a hand, and has no shred of evidence that any other British-connected group has, ‘one must remember the historic connection between them and the mullahs, and a man like Shariatmadari can very easily be influenced by what the BBC says, so that the picture isn’t quite as black and white as all that’.

I mention that, of all Iranian Ministers of Information I have known, Dariush Homayoun is the only one who, in my view, has had any real understanding of the issues involved. Surprised, he says he wished I had said that to His Majesty, because HIM is constantly referring to ‘that wretched Ministry of Information’. I reply that my idea of effective propaganda is closer to Homayoun’s than to HIM’s.

### *Tuesday, August 15*

The Khansalar restaurant, reported to be Bahai-owned, has been blown up by a bomb, and the commander of the Khorassan garrison has been shot dead by a soldier who had apparently gone berserk and shouted ‘Allah, Allah, Allah ...’ as he fired his gun.

### *Wednesday, August 16*

I lunch at Hushang Ansari’s enormous, and really quite hideously furnished, mansion, close to my own house in Niavaran.

He is in a subdued, dejected mood and lets me do all the talking. I say that, as far as I can judge, the situation is deteriorating day by day, and that the increase in sporadic violence, the rising spate of bombings and the closure of the bazaar are all strengthening the hands of the extremists, neutralising the more moderate ayatollahs, and, most damaging of all, sapping the morale of the régime’s supporters. Khomeini’s tapes calling for the violent overthrow of the Shah are selling quite openly like hot cakes, and leaders of the National Front now concede privately that things are moving out of their control. With the universities starting up in October, and the month of religious mourning [Moharram] beginning in December,

we can expect events to take a distinct turn for the worse. For the moment, HIM should keep his cool and allow the drift to continue, giving as much publicity as possible to acts of mindless violence, perpetrated by the opposition, in an effort to shock the middle classes out of their complacent torpor and into a rude realisation of the danger of mob rule. Then, when he judges that everybody’s nerves have been sufficiently frayed, he should seize upon one particularly violent act of death or destruction by the mob, and make a dramatic and confident gesture, bringing in the army for a complete crackdown, with as much ruthlessness as may be necessary. But this is only the first thing he ought to do. Simultaneously with the crackdown, he should exile all but his immediate family in an effort to disarm his more vociferous critics and gain a breathing space. Lastly, he should call in someone like Ali Amini, acceptable to the mullahs, to the National Front and to the general public, and ask him to form a government of national reconciliation. Only then will he be able to count on the absolute loyalty of the army, which would of course remain under his control.

Hushang says that, knowing HIM, he might do the first thing I suggest, would never do the second, and only do the third if it was imposed on him. I reply that to resort to force without at the same time making what, after all, is an overdue concession, or fail to seek political accommodation, would be a sure recipe for disaster.

As he walks me to the door, I try to bolster his sagging morale – an ironic reversal of roles compared with our conversation on the steps of the Embassy in London nearly two years ago. You must remember, I say to him, that the opposition is cast from the same mould as ourselves and can be relied on to be as incompetent as us, if not more so. So, while we must view the future with uncertainty, and even anxiety, there is no need for panic.

### *Friday, August 18*

An article in the *Guardian* quotes the story of one of HIM’s confidants telling him: ‘No one ever dared to tell a lie to your father; no one has ever dared to tell you the truth.’

HIM has given another press interview, and his nervousness comes across. He admits he is surprised at the extent and persistence of the disturbances his liberalisation has unleashed. The Islamic Marxists are to blame for everything.

With little respect for my long and well-known association with AAH, he says that, of all the Shah's advisers, 'Hoveyda is the most intelligent, the most able and the most insidious', being mainly responsible for the Shah's love of flattery and for his detachment from reality. 'The only person in all that lot for whom I feel genuinely sorry,' he says, 'is poor Farah'.

'You', he tells me, with genuine solicitude, 'are too closely associated with the Shah's régime to be liked by those who will soon succeed him – whoever they may be. Lighten your commitments in Tehran, sell your possessions, and prepare to live outside Iran. You know I am motivated solely by concern for your well-being when I say this'.

To end our conversation on a lighter note Mostafa, now seventy-five but never one to forgo an opportunity to boast of his sexual powers, offers a word of fatherly advice. 'The secret of long life', he asserts authoritatively, 'lies in sleeping with as many women as often as one can. Remember that,' he observes emphatically, 'and remember that everything else doesn't matter.'

#### *Thursday, August 24*

Hats off to the mullahs! They have succeeded quite brilliantly in shifting on to the government blame for the Abadan fire. Ten thousand people have demonstrated against the Shah in the city, and Amouzegar hasn't even sent a minister to conduct an investigation, let alone gone there himself. What craven conduct! No wonder Liz Thurgood's *Guardian* article predicts 'Abadan fire could topple the Shah' in a huge banner headline.

#### *Friday, August 25*

Two articles, in the *New Statesman* and the *Economist*, replete with flak, plus an anonymous telephone call that a bomb has been planted at the Embassy, keep me edgy. I lock myself for an hour in my room, pace up and down the magnificent Kerman carpet adorning the floor of the huge office, and lecture myself on the sterling qualities of steadfastness and courage, on the need to suppress my mounting anxieties, on the need to pull myself together and not set a bad example to those I am meant to inspire. My morale *must* not sag; my psyche *must* not crack.

Whatever the shortcomings of HIM's rule, and despite the vitriolic propaganda directed by the liberal press against him, he must not go. Ghoreishi is surely right when he says that with HIM removed, 'we would become worse than Iraq'. Am I stupid and credulous enough to believe, as the liberal opposition predicts, that the hidebound theocracy of the mullahs will never be acceptable to the majority of Iranians, and that sanity and moderation will ultimately prevail, once Khomeini and his gang come into power? No; HIM should stay, if he can, but be politically emasculated, and his family and circle of cronies should be permanently banished.

#### *Sunday, August 27*

[On a four-day holiday in Ireland] I learn from Radio Dublin that Amouzegar has resigned, i.e. been told to go, and that Sharif-Emami has been appointed to succeed him. Amir Khosro Afshar is the new Foreign Minister.

#### *Monday, August 28*

Before setting off from Cork I buy the *Daily Telegraph* and see that the Imperial calendar has been abandoned in favour of the Islamic one, and that consequently we have reverted overnight from the year 2537 to 1357. HIM has declared that respect for the tenets of Islam is to be the cornerstone of the new government's policies; there will be a fresh campaign against inflation, and all the political parties will be legalised and allowed to take part in the next general elections.

#### *Wednesday, August 30*

Of the mass of messages awaiting me on my return to London, one freezes me in my tracks. 'Mrs Mostafa Fateh rang to speak to you. Her husband passed away last night and she needs your help urgently.' At the particular moment in his life when he would have enjoyed seeing his old foe engulfed in the most serious challenge to his reign, Mostafa's recipe for longevity has failed him.

Thursday, August 31

I ring Tehran and speak to Hossein Eshraghi. He knows about Mostafa's death, so I am not the bearer of ill tidings. Afshar is overjoyed at being the new Foreign Minister, he says. They are coming to London on September 21 for a few days before going to New York for the General Assembly. We agree I should ask Afshar to 'stay at his old home' while in London, an offer Afshar will most probably refuse. Hossein says AAH is under pressure from the mullahs to resign, on account principally of his allegedly Bahai father. Perhaps to reassure me, Hossein adds that 'no changes are foreseen in our diplomatic posts abroad'.

From the office I speak to Farhad in Tehran. The law and order situation has deteriorated, he says, and only yesterday he had seen a group of demonstrators carrying a placard proclaiming 'Long Live the King; Khomeini is our King'. Hoveyda's position is precarious, 'and so is yours', he says, according to the gossip making the rounds. Saipa is now in Paris and has apparently been told to stay there. Farhad is coming to London on September 10.

I lunch alone, and in the early afternoon ring Saipa in Paris. She sounds deeply dejected and pessimistic. The slide towards the precipice will not be arrested by Sharif-Emami's appointment, she says, adding that 'for us - and by us I mean the Pahlavis - it is virtually over', it being only a matter of time before a republic based on Islamic principles is proclaimed. 'His Majesty will never agree to be King in a country where Khomeini or Shariatmadari exercise the ultimate power. He will never have anything to do with the mullahs.' She is bitter about the Iranian people 'who are incapable of gratitude after all that my father and brother did for them', and blames it all on Hoveyda 'who lied to my brother for fourteen years and did nothing to arrest the thieves'. She keeps asking how the present situation came about. Why did we let things reach their present state? Then she curses Carter. When I say I don't think she should go back to Tehran now, she says she wants to be with her brother in his hour of difficulty.

Later in the afternoon I call on Mostafa's widow. Pari, his daughter, his son and some other relatives, all dressed in black and red-eyed, are assembled. Apparently Mostafa suffered a massive coronary stroke while in a dentist's waiting-room, never regained consciousness and died shortly afterwards. Mrs Fateh says she had rebuked Mostafa for having spoken to me about the Shah in the way he did during our lunch together, adding, 'He had no right to be so impertinent'. Despite the solemnity of the occasion anxieties about current developments in Tehran quickly take over the

conversation. *Le Monde*, I am told, has ridiculed Sharif-Emami for closing, as Prime Minister, the casinos he was operating until yesterday as head of the Pahlavi Foundation.

As Ronald drives me back to the office I begin seriously to think that the reign of the Pahlavis may well be drawing to an inglorious end. I find my own thoughts and sentiments confused and divided, yet within me I feel the sort of calm that can only come from a sense of resignation.

Friday, September 1

The Tehran press is notable for two new and important developments: for the first time huge pictures of Khomeini are splashed across the front pages, and he is referred to as 'his reverence the Grand Ayatollah'; and already there is speculation that Sharif-Emami's government, having failed to stop the bloodshed, may not last. Some 50,000 people have demonstrated in Mashad, 40,000 in Qom, and three have been killed.

Tuesday, September 5

Varying accounts of huge (up to 250,000) demonstrations in Tehran yesterday, to mark Eid-e-Fetr, in all the papers. The demonstrators have pelted the soldiers with flowers, crying, 'Brother doesn't kill brother.' This evokes, in my mind at least, images of the anti-war demonstrations during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968, and I wonder whether the introduction of effective new forms of propaganda, such as roses in gun barrels, isn't just a little above the ingenuity of the mullahs!

The Tehran papers carry pictures of yesterday's demonstrations. The police are shown in force, but otherwise a sea of turban-covered heads.

Thursday, September 7

Dariush Oskoui and General Jam come to lunch, but it remains a generally uninspired occasion, with Jam expressing concern in subdued terms over the responsibility of 'foreign elements' for the