

Versão em inglês

Farah Diba Pahlavi: The United States attempted to hand over the Shah to Khomeini in the Azores

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The last Empress of Persia is now 70 years old and has spent the last 30 in exile. In this interview, by e-mail, she tells of her anguish at Lajes Air Base one night in March 1980. Four months later, Reza Pahlavi died in Cairo. Today she hopes that Tehran's Islamic regime has its days numbered.

Farah Diba Pahlavi has spent almost thirty years in exile but she cannot forget the night of 23rd March 1980 when an Evergreen Airlines DC9 in which she was travelling stopped over in the Azores. Officially it was a refuelling stop but the aircraft was held up for several hours on the tarmac without permission to take off. 'It was an anxious moment,' the last Empress of Persia tells Pública during a rare interview by e-mail.

We have to go back in time to understand what actually happened at Lajes Air Force Base, and which could have changed the course of history. Farah Diba and her husband, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, had been forced to leave Panama and they should have gone on to Cairo where President Anwar Sadat had renewed his offer of refuge. They had been fleeing for over a year. Several doors had been closed to them after Ayatollah Khomeini had overthrown the monarchy.

Egypt had been the first stop in their exile on 16th January 1979 when the imperial couple arrived in Aswan. But on the 22nd, Farah Diba and the "king of kings", who was suffering from terminal lymphoma, "a well-guarded secret since 1974," were already on their way to Morocco at the invitation of King Hassan II. It was whilst they were staying at a luxury villa in Marrakech that on 11th February Radio Tehran broadcast the news most dreaded by the Shah: that "the Revolution had won and the bastion of the dictatorship had capitulated."

In her Memoirs the Shahbanu (empress) confesses: "For a few moments I thought we had won. In my view we were the good ones whilst they were the bastions of horror. Unfortunately it was they who had won and who had overthrown the last government (of Chapour Bakhtiar) nominated by my husband." the Shah, who had refused the requests of the officers of his personal staff to shoot down the plane carrying Khomeini from Paris to the future Islamic Republic, "remained silent for some time." Their stay in Morocco, where their children who had joined them from the United States, became threatened when the Iranian masses began to demand the return of the Emperor to be tried, and perhaps to be summarily executed. This had already happened to hundreds of Army officers of the previous regime. On 14th February, the U.S. Embassy in Tehran was temporarily occupied by Revolutionary Guards. A French secret service emissary arrived at King Hassan's Palace in Rabat to warn that Khomeini had ordered the kidnapping of members of the Moroccan royal family in exchange for his guests.

Although King Hassan maintained his solidarity, Farah Diba understood the seriousness of the situation. "It was urgent to find another place of exile," she states in her autobiography, but "everybody turned their backs on us". France had refused,

stating that it could not guarantee the safety of the emperors who had fallen on hard times. The same happened with Switzerland and Monaco. Mexico and Canada didn't reply. The US said, "later, perhaps." Margaret Thatcher, who had promised support if she won the elections, changed her mind when she became prime minister because, "it would be bad for British interests."

From Bahamas to Mexico

King Hassan II put his private plane at the Pahlavi's disposal. It was in this aircraft that the Shah, the Shahbanu and the children (Reza, Fahrenaz, Ali-Reza and Leila) as well as a paediatrician, a governess, several colonels and the Emperor's "personal man-servant" left on 30th March 1979 for Nassau, capital of the Bahamas. The archipelago did not have diplomatic relations with Iran but the offer of asylum, obtained thanks to Henry Kissinger, David Rockefeller and Jimmy Carter, had a time limit: three months. Three weeks before the visas expired, the Bahamian authorities said they would not renew the visas. But at the request of Henry Kissinger, Mexico, under José Lopez Portillo, agreed to accept the unwanted family. On 10th June 1979, Farah Diba, Mohammed Reza and the accompanying party settled into Cuernavaca in the south, in a house with a tropical garden and boasting scorpions on the walls. This was the fourth site of exile in less than six months. The Emperor's health was worsening and since Mexico did not possess modern medical facilities for cancer treatment and haematology, his doctors decided that he should go into hospital in the United States. The Shahbanu was saddened: "There was something rather vexing about being allowed into the United States after it had refused us hospitality." She also feared hostile demonstrations but Mohammed Reza's family and particularly his twin sister, Ashraf, decided that he should be moved to New York where she lived. They arrived there on 23rd October 1979 but before they landed, President Carter called a meeting on the 19th of his inner cabinet. Those present were: Walter Mondale, Cyrus Vance, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Harold Brown and Hamilton Jordan. The unanimous opinion was to allow H.M. the Shah to enter, as it was a case of "medical urgency." Carter was convinced but he did leave a question: "What will they advise us to do when they (the Iranians) occupy our Embassy and turn our staff into hostages?"

This fear, or presentiment, was justified. On 4th November 1979 Islamic students attacked and occupied what they called the U.S. "nest of spies" in Teheran and held 60 Embassy staff hostage during 144 days. The Iranian Republic refused to believe that the Shah was really ill. They suspected that Washington was preparing to help him back into power as it had done in 1953 when the CIA overthrew Mohammed Mossadegh's government and put Mohammed Reza back on the Peacock Throne.

Mossadegh's fall was due to the fact that he had dared to nationalise the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and this action had greatly annoyed Churchill. Today many political analysts, including the CIA, agree that because British and Americans feared he might become an ally of the U.S.S.R., this situation later opened the path for the rise of Khomeini.

From New York to Panama

On the day following his arrival in New York, on 24th October 1979, H.M. Mohammed Reza Pahlavi underwent surgery that did not work out well. The news of his internment spread quickly. He was able to hear through the window of the hospital, where he was fighting for his life, the shouts of the demonstrators crying, "Death to

the Shah!" On 20th November, after some of the hostages had been released, (only the Afro-Americans) from the US Embassy in Tehran, Carter threatened to intervene militarily. On 28th he stated he would not give in to blackmail to those who demanded the extradition of the Emperor. He would only leave the U.S. when he had recovered.

When the doctors decided the patient was ready to leave hospital, the return trip to Cuernavaca was booked for 2nd December. On the 30th November, however, President Portillo refused him asylum. According to Farah Diba the price for this turnaround was Fidel Castro's promise that Cuba would vote in favour of Mexico's entry onto the UN Security Council if it did not allow the Shah to enter the country.

The Carter Administration had no other solution than to discreetly send the Persian Royal Family to Lackland Air Force Base in Texas. It was a temporary stay that the State Department had no desire in prolonging. Even South Africa, where apartheid still governed, refused asylum. 'We felt we were outcasts,' complained Farah Diba.

On 12th December 1979, General Omar Torrijos, "Supreme Commander of the Government" agreed to allow the Pahlavis into Panama. He installed them in a four-room villa on the island of Contadora. Three months later, Torrijos it appears, was persuaded by Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, "that he conspired to be Iranian President" and that his house arrest would be sufficient for the Iranian students to release the US hostages.

On being informed of the situation, the Empress gathered up courage and phoned Jehane, Anwar Sadat's wife to ask for help. "Come", said her friend, "We are waiting for you in Egypt."

Carter became concerned when he knew of this and tried to change Farah Diba's mind: "Your presence in Cairo threatens to undermine the already weak position of President Sadat and threatens the peace efforts with Israel in the Middle East." On 22nd March, Carter phoned Sadat to try to persuade him not to receive the Pahlavis. Sadat reacted angrily: "Jimmy, I want H.M. the Shah here and alive!"

From the Azores to Cairo

H.M. the Shah and H.M. the Shahbanu left for Cairo at 2 p.m. local time on Sunday, 23rd March. That night the Evergreen Air Lines charter company DC9 made a fuel stop at Lajes in the Azores. After waiting for one hour Farah Diba began to fear the worst: "Was it an attempt to stop us reaching Cairo? We were at an American airbase in an American plane, therefore everything was possible." On asking what the problem was, the reply came back that the plane "required authorization to fly over certain territories".

'I asked the authorities to be allowed to use a phone to contact a friend in Paris,' recalls Farah Diba in the interview to the Púbrica. 'I informed this person of our situation: that His Majesty was suffering from a very high fever, that it was very cold inside the aircraft, of my concern over the uncertainty of the situation and that everyone should be notified of the situation should there be no further contact from us.

'Many years later, sometime in the 1990's, I met the Portuguese Foreign Minister, Mr

André Gonçalves Pereira. He told me that the U.S. Embassy [in Lisbon] had been questioned about our detention on the tarmac for over four hours and that the reply had been that 'we cannot give you any reason' [later the former minister would give his own version]. On the following day [24th March 1980], the Portuguese Ambassador in Washington asked the State Department the same question and, once again, the answer was "we cannot give you any reason", Later, Farah Diba found the reason for the interminable delay. When one of the lawyers sent by Tehran to Panama was preparing to deliver an extradition request he asked the U.S. to intercept the Imperial couple's aircraft as Saedegh Ghtbzadeh said he was convinced he could manage to free the American hostages once the announcement had been made of the detention of the royal couple.

The decision to hold the aircraft at Lajes was made by Hamilton Jordan, chief of staff at the White House and a Carter confidant, although Carter himself had not been advised of it. As no encouraging news had arrived from Tehran, the aircraft was authorised to take off after a 4 hour holdup. On 24th March, when the extradition request was delivered, the Pahlavis arrived in Cairo.

Farah Diba was convinced that Torrijos "would not have hesitated to place the Shah under house surveillance." But would that have satisfied the Iranians? Whatever the case, H.M. Mohammed Reza Pahlavi did not live for very much longer as he died on 27th July. Sadat, who had installed him in the Kubbeh Palace, gave him an imposing State funeral. The body lies in the El Rifai Mosque where Farah Diba goes every year to pay tribute.

Meeting in the Algarve

'Yes, it was me' confirmed André Gonçalves Pereira to Pública. 'I became curious as to what had taken place in 1980 and, the following year, as minister, I sought to find out what had happened at Lajes. The aircraft had arrived at midnight and left at 8.00 a.m. [as stated by Farah Diba]. This was strange. The stopover should have only taken half an hour. The crew alleged a technical fault.' On being asked officially, the American officials merely replied, "they didn't know." They couldn't have replied to a sovereign state 'we cannot give you any justification' added Gonçalves Pereira, as stated by the Empress in the interview.

The former head of the Foreign Ministry checked his diaries and found the moment when he had explained to the Shahbanu of his interest in the Azores episode. 'She came to dinner at my house in the Algarve in July 1996 and it was then that we spoke about this matter.' The information that he had was that the Americans were negotiating with the Iranians, through Algiers, the handover of the Shah to the mullahs in exchange for the release of the hostages in Tehran. Supposedly, the Islamic Republic's demand was that the aircraft carrying the Shah should deliver him to the Iranian capital. The U.S. only agreed to leave him in Algiers. So the negotiations failed".

Farah Diba's version in her Memoirs states it was Panama and not Algeria. The former minister states: 'In matters of ultra-secret diplomacy we can never be sure,' except that 'there weren't any technical reasons, rather political ones' for the aircraft to be held back and that Washington "really was negotiating the Shah's extradition."

'Farah Diba later wrote a letter to thank me. She is a very intelligent woman and well

informed. She has a regal bearing. We still keep in touch occasionally. I remember a dinner in Paris when I asked the Portuguese Ambassador to invite her.' Over what had taken place at Lajes, Gonçalves Pereira highlights "the contrast" in the treatment given to the Shah by the U.S. and that by Egypt.

'The Carter Administration that was relatively straight forward and honest, was ready to hand over the Shah, a fundamental ally of the U.S. in the Middle East, whilst President Sadat, in an almost quixotic attitude, agreed to receive him despite being threatened by Islamic fundamentalism, that eventually assassinated him the following year. He was a notable man.'

Revisiting Tehran

Today, almost 30 years after a trip that she had hoped would have been "a temporary departure from the country," Farah Diba is a harsh woman, in sharp contrast with the meaning of her maiden name in Farsi that means "silk". She continues to defend the Shah's actions and attributes his overthrow to a conspiracy. She venerates him as a visionary leader, but many however, including some of his staff, describe as being weak and indecisive. One of them is the Iranian sociologist, Ehsan Naraghi who was a critic (Savak, the secret police, forced him to leave the country in 1969) and later a court adviser. In the book *Des Palais du Chah aux Prisons de la Révolution*, Naraghi recalls one of the last audiences he had with Mohammed Reza on 23rd September 1978 where the emperor who had succeeded the Qajar Dynasty, asked him: "What is the source of this rebellion? Who has instigated it? Who started this religious movement?" The reply was: "But it was you, Your Majesty" The king of kings replied: "Why me?"

"15 years ago in 1962", explained Naraghi, "when you visited the Qom Sanctuary [where Khomeini was a theologian], you openly attacked the religious leaders and, in Parliament, you said that their criticisms to land reform and to the emancipation of women were reactionary. You were so violent, even insulting, that the person responsible for the television broadcast had to censure your words. (...) From then onwards, the religious leaders were forced, in order to reject the accusation of being conservative, to take action and to prove that they weren't attached to an archaic social order. Supported by the vast Shiite resources, they wished to show that they could be even more revolutionary than Your Majesty with the White Revolution."

Farah Diba plays this down: 'I can't confirm if the conversation [with Naraghi] and the Shah took place since I wasn't present. In relation to all the work he did, a French phrase comes to mind: 'Il faut en prendre et en laisser'. During the days of the Roman Empire it was said that if a battle is won everyone participated but if a battle is lost, there is only one to blame,' she complains. 'Iran occupies, in geo-strategic terms, a very important position. It was becoming too powerful. Some foreign interests began to feel threatened and they started a programme of defamation against the monarchy in the media. They also courted and encouraged the opposition within the country.'

'I read an interview by Ibrahim Yazdi [Opponent of the monarchy and minister in the first year of the Islamic Revolution] where he speaks of his relationship with the U.S. State Department and of how he passed on the message that Ayatollah Khomeini valued human rights and the emancipation of women. Lord Owen, who was Foreign Minister at the time [of the Islamic Revolution] stated: "If we had known that the

Shah was ill, this would not have happened.” What does this mean? William H. Sullivan, who was ambassador in Iran from 1977 to 1979, wrote about his meetings and contacts with the Iranian opposition.’

“Let us not forget that it was the Cold War era and that the Soviet Union who had a strong desire to reach the warm waters of the Persian Gulf, was also a sponsor to and played a role in the Iranian Communist Party, the Tudeh. There were still other organised groups, such as the People’s Fedayeen (Maoists) and the People’s Mujahedeen (Islamic Marxists), many of who were trained in Cuban and Palestinian guerrilla camps. Members of these groups who helped take Khomeini to power were later killed by the thousands.”

Does Farah Diba Pahlavi regret anything? She replies at length: ‘If we had been better organised politically; if the political participation had opened up before 1977; if the American Administration had been different; if the British prime minister and French president had also been different; if the Soviet Union had been Russia, if Khomeini had not been allowed to come to Paris [from Iraq where the Shah had exiled him]; if some Iranian intellectuals had not seen Khomeini’s face on the moon; if people had listened to the Shah who said there we will remedy the shortcomings and dissatisfactions; if the Western media had not maliciously attacked the Shah and compared Khomeini to a spiritual saviour, this tragedy would not have happened.’

Persopolis and Shiraz

Naraghi, the sociologist, said that he had tried, on several occasions, to explain to the technocrats surrounding the Shah that “the great civilization” desired by the Shah would lead to “a chaotic uprising”. The emperor’s policy “divided a nation, a progressive minority on the one hand and a traditionalist majority on the other – which undermined the feelings of national solidarity and exposed [the Iranians] to a completely new cultural conflict”.

Farah Diba acknowledges that some of those responsible hid the people’s discontent from the Shah, but she denies the existence of the division. This would mean, she justifies, ‘that the majority of the Iranians is now happy which, as everyone knows, is not true.’ She does not believe that lies, material and moral corruption, flogging, stoning and dismemberment of people are part of the valuable Iranian traditions. The majority of Iranians very much wanted what ‘modern life’ offered such as schools, universities, hospitals, stadiums, libraries, cultural centres, industries, communications and their participation in the development of the nation”.

The explanation found by the Shahbanu for the revolt of the Iranians against the Shah is different:

‘In Iran, after 1973, the increase in the price of oil did not please foreign interests. There was a boom in development and the government could not meet the people’s expectations. This created dissatisfaction and fertile ground for the opposition, since it was well organised, unlike us. Ayatollah Khomeini and his disciples promised paradise, free vehicles, free transport, free utilities, free gasoline and other free goods. Many believed in this but they opened the doors to hell. Today, many regret having taken part in the street demonstrations. The younger generation blame their parents for the current situation in Iran.’

The White Revolution's land reform and emancipation of women were not, in Mohammed Reza's widow's opinion, litigious: 'The majority of the population supported them,' she states. 'Obviously big landowners and some religious fanatics didn't agree with them. The good result out of all this is that today's Iran does not have a feudal system, despite the pressures of the extremists, and the Islamic Republic did not manage to change the rights of women to vote and to be elected.' As for the statement by some Iranians that the Shah "made a mistake in trying to change from the bicycle stage to the jet plane without passing through the stage of the motor car", she is vehement:

'I don't believe it. How can you tell people to wait 20 years [for progress]: when you have all the natural resources and human wealth available? When I travelled through the country people asked for more and better schools, roads, clinics, water, electricity, etc.'

But this isn't the progress that many refer to, but rather the ostentation and the provocation shown, for example, at the Shiraz Arts Festival, Farah Diba's personal project, inaugurated in 1967 and during the celebrations of the 2,500 years of Persepolis in 1971. In Shiraz the biggest scandal took place in 1978 when a Brazilian dance group performed explicit sexual dances.

'90 per cent of the Shiraz Festival programme consisted of traditional music, dances and theatre and perhaps some 10 per cent of avant-garde, which doesn't mean it was immoral,' said the Shahbanu to *Pública*. In Persepolis, the first royal city of the Achaemenid Empire where vestiges of the palace of Darius I, successor of Cyrus the Great, still survive, only the rich and powerful were invited. The people were excluded. The costs were calculated at between 200 and 300 million dollars. Elizabeth Arden created a new line of cosmetics and named it Farah. Lanvin designed the servant's attire, Maxim's of Paris supplied the chefs and the catering. Except for the Iranian caviar, all the food was supplied from France. The Empress complained of "the exaggeration of the journalists"; she pointed out that the infrastructures would last and justified the expense as "a magnificent exercise in public relations" which helped many people to "situate Iran on the map".

Washington, New York and Paris

The only daughter of Colonel Sohrab Diba and Farideh Ghotbi, a plebeian whom the Shah chose to guarantee his succession after two failed marriages, she presently lives between Washington, New York and Paris. Despite having opened a window of opportunity for Khomeini to launch his revolution and closed the door to Mohammed Reza when he sought asylum, France is still a country where Farah Diba Pahlavi feels comfortable.

'I became familiar with European culture due to my studies [architecture] in a French school,' the Empress tells us. 'My life story has been followed by many in France and the French have been very kind wherever I go.'

Paris was also the city where, in 1959, Farah Diba personally met her future husband, twice divorced, in 1946 and in 1958. First from Fawsia bint Fuad, sister of King Farouk of Egypt whom he married in 1939 when he was still heir to the throne and who bore him a daughter, Shahnaz, and then from Soraya Esfandiari-Bakhtiari, "the princess with the sad eyes", whom he met in 1948 and married in 1951. She suffered

from infertility, but refused the Shah permission to have a second wife as permitted by Islam so the union was annulled.

Mohammed Reza was 39 years old when he was introduced to Farah Diba, 20, at a reception in the Iranian Embassy after a meeting with Charles de Gaulle. She caused a good impression and this was enough for the Emperor's son-in-law, Ardehir Zahedi, Shahnaz's husband to go ahead and deal with the details for Farah Diba to become the fiancée the Shah was seeking. An attempt to marry the king to the Catholic princess, Maria Gabriela of Savoy, was found to be ill advised by the Vatican as "a serious threat".

Farah Diba accepted the Shah's marriage proposal on the day she celebrated her 21st birthday on 14th October. The betrothal was officially announced on 21st November. The marriage that included two ceremonies, took place on 21st December. Yves Saint-Laurent, of the House of Dior designed the wedding dress, embroidered with silver threads. The Carita sisters created a hairstyle that featured a parting in the middle and with the temples covered. This style became fashionable the world over. The diadem was a Crown jewel. It was designed in the 50's by the American, Harry Winston and weighed two kilos.

Death in London

As Shahbanu, a title she received on her wedding day and which the mullahs abolished, Farah Diba Pahlavi led a dream life until the advent of Khomeini's revolution. Not that she faces financial problems (although she suffered a situation of embezzlement of several million dollars). But following the death of her husband she had to face the suicide of her daughter Leila who had become a Valentino model. Suffering from a "chronic depression, low self-esteem, nervous anorexia and bulimia", she took a fatal dose of "barbiturates and cocaine", according to the autopsy. She was found dead in her London apartment in June 2001. She was 31 years old.

'The loss of a child is always an open wound in the heart of a parent,' Farah Diba laments. 'Leila was a very intelligent girl, with good ideas, but profoundly traumatised by the dramatic events in our lives. She was very sociable and loved the company of those closest to her. When she was depressed, she would open up: 'I can help all my friends, but I'm unable to help myself''.'

Deprived of Leila, the Shah's widow continued to dedicate herself to the rest of the family, particularly to the oldest son, Reza, who proclaimed himself emperor after his father's death in Cairo. 'Over the last 29 years the heir to the throne has been very active in his contacts with many of his compatriots of different ideologies both inside and outside Iran,' says Farah Diba.

'He fights for a free, democratic and secular regime. And he believes that, once free, the people will be able to choose the best form of government. Traditionally, the king was always a factor for unification amongst the different ethnic groups and religious minorities, because he is above the political parties.' She is also "blessed by the affection of many Americans", guarantees: 'I have kept in touch with my people, whether by correspondence, e-mail, telephone calls or interviews. I try to help as much as I can.'

Somewhat bitterly she adds: 'The consequences [of the Shah's fall from power] were

dramatic for Iran and for the region in general. Many should do some soul-searching about their actions. Iran was setting up nuclear power stations, and nations around the world were beating a path to its door to sell it equipment. The world had confidence in the Shah's wisdom so much so that Iran was a 10 per cent shareholder of Eurodif [company] in France.'

She continues: 'The regime survives by creating crises and seeking foreign enemies, to revive sentiments of nationalism. This regime must not be allowed to obtain nuclear weapons,' She makes no appeal, however for military intervention to stop the suspected Iranian uranium enrichment programme.

'The present regime is historically condemned to disappear,' she, who was once considered to be the most powerful woman in the Middle East, concludes: 'I hope that the world will help those who value freedom. I'm confident that the light will overcome darkness and that Iran, like the Phoenix, will soon rise from her ashes.'

Translation: Clive Gilbert