

Warning to America: 'A False Sense of Security Will Destroy You'

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Exclusive Interview With The Shah of Iran

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Photo: "The Shah of Iran: The Emperor of Oil"; Time cover page, 1974

[Shah Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi of Iran:] "...let me ask you a question. Could the United States afford to see Iran lost? Could the whole world afford it? You can't just live in your dreamland - your "fortress America" - and let all the countries of the world eventually disappear. A false sense of security will destroy you - like nothing. If you pursue that policy, Iran is one country that, if it goes, you are going to feel it badly. If we disappear, don't think that the rest of the region will stay as it is. If we go, the inexorable fate of the region will be that the present source of energy to Europe and Japan, and to some degree to the U.S., will not only be in jeopardy but will probably be cut off... If you remain our friends, obviously you will enjoy all the power and prestige of my country. But if you try to take an unfriendly attitude toward my country, we can hurt you as badly if not more so than you can hurt us. Not just through oil - we can create trouble for you in the region. If you force us to change our friendly attitude, the repercussions will be immeasurable... I am afraid that today America's credibility is not too high. You look rather like a crippled giant. Angola has contributed substantially to that. This kind of policy will only lead you into more Vietnams in the future. Many things happen before an election, but after the election the world will be the same place and you will have to tackle the same problems. I only hope that after the election you can take decisions and move ahead..."

Question: Do you plan to buy nuclear power plants, even a nuclear-fuel reprocessing plant, from the U.S.?

Shah Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi of Iran: I intend certainly to buy nuclear plants from the U.S. if they are competitive...On reprocessing [plants], not yet, because it is only economical if you process large amounts. Maybe one day we shall have so many atomic plants that we will have to do that in our own country. But don't forget that we signed the nonproliferation treaty, and when we sign something we feel obligated to it...]

HIGHLIGHT:

A key Middle East ruler counts on the U.S. for weapons, modern industry, and technology. Americans view Iran as a stable supplier of oil. Yet the once-warm relationship shows signs of fraying. The Shah explains why.

BODY:

Q. Your Majesty, we hear Iran is running into serious money problems despite its oil wealth.

Are you going to have to cut back your ambitious development plans?

A. We have a budget deficit of over 2 billion dollars, and our income has dropped by about 4 billion, if not more. We are going to try to save as much money as possible, inside the country. We have started a very serious and meaningful drive against corruption. In many cases we see that our internal corruption is due to the relation of some of these people with foreigners. And, my God, these foreigners are very, very corrupt people! I am not going to speak about cases, but they are awful.

The foreigners would not hesitate to make a dirty deal or any kind of bribery they can. We are going to weed this out, and probably this will save money.

We are not going to scrap any of the programs. Maybe some will be delayed by a few months, but that is all. I think we will be capable of carrying out the plan with some little delay.

Q. You are spending billions on defenses. Do Iran's security needs justify the build-up of an armed force of such size?

A. Obviously, because of what is going on around us and the amount and type of weapons that we see around us. Just envisage the next 20 years in the general region of the Indian Ocean. And, by "the Indian Ocean," I mean all the countries riparian to that ocean. The East African coast is far from being completely stable and immune to eventual developments which might be harmful to stability in the region. Berbear [site of a Soviet-built naval base in the Somali Republic] is not the only case; there are other sore points.

The Persian Gulf delivers about 70 per cent of Europe's energy needs and about 90 per cent of Japan's. If these lines of communication are not secure, then Japan and Europe will crack. So while we are doing this for ourselves, at the same time I think we are rendering a great service to the whole of Europe and Japan. I wish the responsibility could be shared by as many other countries as possible. But for the time being we are doing the job.

Q. The U.S. Congress has expressed concern about American involvement in Iran's military build-up. Is there a risk in having a great number of U.S. advisers here?

A. First of all, I don't know what the concern is about. We are paying for the arms and the experts. I also don't see what you mean by "involvement," because the contracts state that these people will not be involved in any war between my country and any other country. These are the terms of the contracts.

But let me ask you a question. Could the United States afford to see Iran lost? Could the whole world afford it? You can't just live in your dreamland - your "fortress America" - and let all the countries of the world eventually disappear. A false sense of security will destroy you - like nothing. If you pursue that policy, Iran is one country that, if it goes, you are going to feel it badly. If we disappear, don't think that the rest of the region will stay as it is. If we go, the inexorable fate of the region will be that the present source of energy to Europe and Japan, and to some degree to the U.S., will not only be in jeopardy but will probably be cut

off.

Q. What would you do if Congress embargoes arms sales in the Persian Gulf region?

A. That would be so irresponsible that I am not even thinking about it. But if it happens, do you think our hands are tied? We have 10 other markets to provide us with what we need. There are people just waiting for that moment.

If you remain our friends, obviously you will enjoy all the power and prestige of my country. But if you try to take an unfriendly attitude toward my country, we can hurt you as badly if not more so than you can hurt us. Not just through oil - we can create trouble for you in the region. If you force us to change our friendly attitude, the repercussions will be immeasurable.

Q. Are American weapons and technology too sophisticated for your people?

A. Well, so far we have been able to handle it, the ratings of units are almost the same as yours. If the rating is lower, it is because of lack of spare parts, and that is your fault. You are not providing the spare parts at the necessary rhythm demanded and required. All our people receive the exact same education that you give your people, and they graduate from your schools, so if they are not good it is a product of your schools.

Q. Will Iran continue to buy American arms even if the U.S. doesn't buy more of your oil?

A. Sure - if we have the money. We never planned to buy more F-14s than first ordered, but we have plans to buy hundreds and hundreds of other types of aircraft from the U.S. This includes F-16 aircraft and other things. I think the advantage to this country of the AWACS [airborne warning and control system] is without dimension.

"YOU LOOK LIKE A CRIPPLED GIANT"

Q. Does Iran consider the United States a responsible and credible ally?

A. Well, I am afraid that today America's credibility is not too high. You look rather like a crippled giant. Angola has contributed substantially to that. This kind of policy will only lead you into more Vietnams in the future. Many things happen before an election, but after the election the world will be the same place and you will have to tackle the same problems. I only hope that after the election you can take decisions and move ahead.

Q. Some U.S. officials - Treasury Secretary William E. Simon is one - say America should turn away from Iran, move closer to Saudi Arabia!

A. I think that relations between our two countries are based on such a high level of interest that they couldn't be influenced by the pleasure or taste of individuals with momentary careers. This is a lasting relationship, and even if people have opinions and influence they are not everlasting.

Q. Do you anticipate another Arab-Israeli war this year, or more fighting in Lebanon? If there is a war in the Middle East, what will Iran's policy be?

A. I can't say the situation is rosy. And, again, maybe the American election has something to do with that. I am sure that after the elections in the U.S., things will get moving. In the meantime we must try, all of us, to do whatever we can. I think the best thing to do is to reconvene the Geneva Conference and find a formula for the Palestinians to participate there.

The events in Lebanon were heartbreaking, and that poor country suffered terribly. For the moment it looks like a stalemate - a very dangerous one, too.

I see that the Israeli Prime Minister [Yitzhak Rabin] is saying that he expects a war in May. I have always expressed the opinion that [U.N. Security Council] resolutions 242 and 338 [basically calling for cease-fires, troop withdrawals, peace negotiations] must be implemented. We can't just accept fait accompli - the acquisition of land by force - because if you accept it one place, why should you oppose of someplace else?

Israel and the U.N. must seek real guarantees and formulas within secure boundaries for the future. You can't just risk war every time.

The PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] should be at Geneva in some form, because you cannot ignore the existence of so many Palestinians. We have got to accept this. Just as we accept the existence of Israel, we have to accept the existence of the Palestinians, too. It is a reality. In the event of war, I see no reason to change our attitude. But I hope war will not occur, as it can produce some very unpleasant surprises.

Q. Your Majesty, do you still believe that Iran will become a world power?

A. Yes, I think we can do a lot in 25 years' time. I probably won't be around myself, but the foundation will be laid.

In 12 to 13 years the main infrastructure in every field will be solidly laid down. And from there we will just pursue the same policies using momentum to generate new possibilities and power - economic, industrial and human power, which is so important.

Maybe the oil will be finished by that time, although I hope we can start the conservation of oil in 10 years. In the meantime we will go all out in atomic and solar energy. We shouldn't have ecological problems in dealing with progress. The country is large, we have barren land, and pollution should not be a severe problem. We shall pursue sources of energy and save oil for petrochemical purposes. We also have fantastic reserves of gas. We will educate the people in various fields needed to make this country a sophisticated one.

Q. Do you plan to buy nuclear power plants, even a nuclear-fuel reprocessing plant, from the U.S.?

A. I intend certainly to buy nuclear plants from the U.S. if they are competitive with those offered by France and Germany.

On reprocessing [plants], not yet, because it is only economical if you process large amounts. Maybe one day we shall have so many atomic plants that we will have to do that in our own country. But don't forget that we signed the nonproliferation treaty, and when we sign something we feel obligated to it.

GRAFT IN IRAN: "HEADS WILL ROLL"

Q. You talked earlier about anticorruption, antiprofitteering campaigns. What new measures do you have in mind?

A. The fight against profiteering has resulted in a zero inflation rate this year - hopefully zero.

On corruption, we are in a position in this country, through our internal stability, to fight corruption at all levels, not just petty white-collar crimes. If we find corruption at the highest level, heads will roll. And don't doubt that this will be pursued. Other countries may be willing to live with corruption as an existing fact, but not in our case.

Apart from that, we will need some time to establish correct commodity prices, both for local goods and imports. We have been cheated badly by foreigners - foreign companies and firms that were overpricing things. It will take a little time to know the real prices.

Q. Is Iran a "police state," as so many outsiders charge?

A. No. I don't think I am divulging any important state secret, but the whole number of people in our secret police or security organization is about 3,400. I have seen fantastic figures saying that there were millions of people in our secret police and that we have more than a hundred thousand political prisoners. That number is also about 3,200 or 3,300. It is fantastic how things are exaggerated.

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