

OPEN LETTER TO FARAH DIBA (1967)

How do you do, Mrs. Pahlavi,

The idea that we might write you a letter came to us as we read the *Neue Revue*¹ of May 7 and 14 where you describe your life as Empress. We got the impression that you are not fully informed about Persia. Which is why you also provide incorrect information to German magazines.

You say for example that “Summer in Iran is very hot, and like most Persians I traveled to the Persian Riviera on the Caspian Sea with my family.”

“Like most Persians”—isn’t that a bit of an exaggeration? In Baluchestan and Mehran, for instance, “most Persians”—80 percent of them—suffer from hereditary syphilis. And most Persians are peasants with an annual income of less than one hundred dollars. And most Persian women see every second child die—fifty of every one hundred children—from starvation, poverty, and disease. And do the children who spend fourteen-hour days knotting carpets, do they also, most of them, travel to the Persian Riviera on the Caspian Sea in the summer?

When you returned from Paris in the summer of 1959 and went to the Caspian Sea, you were really “starving for Persian rice and especially for our naturally sweet fruits, our desserts, and all the things that make up a real Persian meal, which you can only get in Iran.”

You see, most Persians are not starving for sweets; they need

bread. For the peasants in Mehdiabad, for instance, a “Persian meal” consists of straw soaked in water, and only 150 kilometers from Tehran peasants are trying to stop grasshoppers from being exterminated because grasshoppers are their main source of sustenance. You can survive on the roots of plants, or on date kernels, not for long, not very well, but starving Persian peasants try to do so, and die when they’re thirty. That is a Persian’s average life expectancy. But you’re still young, just twenty-eight—so you have two more lovely years ahead of you, “that you can only get in Iran.”

You also found that the city of Tehran had changed: “Buildings had shot out of the ground like mushrooms; the streets were wider and more spacious. My girlfriends had changed too, become more beautiful, real young ladies.”

You carefully overlooked the hovels of the “lesser millions,” the 200,000 people in southern Tehran “who live in underground caves and crowded mud huts that resemble rabbit hutches,” as the *New York Times* puts it. The Shah’s police make sure that you don’t see that kind of thing. When almost a thousand people recently took shelter in an excavation on a construction site near the better neighborhoods, hundreds of policemen beat them out of there so that the aesthetic sensibilities of those who travel to the Caspian Sea in the summer should not suffer. The Shah finds it quite acceptable that his subjects live in these conditions; what he doesn’t find acceptable is the sight of them—for you or for him. Yet the people in the cities are supposedly quite well off. A traveler’s account from southern Iran says, “I know children who roll in the dirt like worms for years and feed on weeds and rotting fish.” Even though these may not be your children, for which you are right to be grateful, they are still children.

You write, "In regard to the arts and sciences, Germany as well as France, England, Italy, and the other great cultures play leading roles. This will not change in the future."

Long live the Shah! As far as the Federal Republic is concerned, you would be wise to leave such predictions to the politicians who deal with culture; they know more. But why not come right out and say that 85 percent of the Persian population is illiterate, as are 96 percent of those living in the rural areas. Of the fifteen million peasants in Persia, only 514,480 know how to read. But the two billion dollars of development aid that Persia received after the coup against Mossadegh in 1953 have disappeared "into thin air" as the American investigative committees remarked.² The schools and hospitals that were supposed to be built with the money do not exist. But the Shah is now sending conscripts to the villages to teach the poor: an "army of knowledge," as they are revealingly being called. The people will be happy to find some distraction from hunger, thirst, disease, and death. They know about the Shah's statement that Hubert Humphrey tactlessly repeated: "Thanks to US aid the army is in good shape, and ready to deal with the civilian population."³ The army is not getting ready to fight the Russians; it is getting ready to fight the Iranian people."

You say the Shah is a "simple, outstanding and conscientious personality, just like a normal citizen."

That sounds rather euphemistic when you think that his monopoly of opium plantations alone provides millions in annual profits, that he is the major source of the narcotics smuggled into the US, and that as late as 1953 heroin was unknown in Persia. In the meantime, through the Shah's initiative, 20 percent of all Persians have become heroin addicts. In this country, people engaged in such busi-

ness are not usually described as conscientious; they are considered criminals and are locked up, unlike "normal citizens."

You write, "The only difference is that my husband is not just anybody, but that he has to bear greater and heavier responsibilities than other men."

What do you mean "he has to?" The Persian people didn't beg him to become the Shah of Persia. The American secret service set him up—you know, the CIA—and it wasn't cheap. The CIA apparently spent nineteen million dollars to overthrow Mossadegh. We can only speculate about where the development aid money may have gone, because the bits of jewelry he has given you—a diadem worth 1.2 million marks, a brooch for 1.1 million marks, diamond earrings for 210,000 marks, a diamond bracelet, a golden handbag—hardly add up to two billion. But don't you worry, the West will not be so petty as to compromise the Shah for embezzling a few billion, trafficking in opium, bribing businessmen, relatives, secret security folk, or for the bit of jewelry he bought you. He is the guarantee that Persian oil will never be nationalized again, as it was under Mossadegh, not before the wells run dry, around the end of the century, when the contracts signed by the Shah have elapsed. He is the guarantee that not one penny will flow into Persian schools to teach the Persian people how to take their fate into their own hands, use their oil to build up their own industry, spend hard currency on agricultural machinery to irrigate the land, and master the hunger in the land. He is the guarantee that rebellious students and schoolchildren are regularly shot dead and parliamentarians who are concerned with the country's welfare are arrested, tortured, and murdered. He is the guarantee that an army of 200,000 men as well as 60,000 secret service men and 33,000

policemen, well-armed and well-fed thanks to US funding and led by 12,000 US army advisors, are holding the country for ransom. All this is to prevent the one thing that could save the country: the nationalization of Iran's oil, as happened under Mossadegh on May 1, 1951. Like a pig at the trough . . . the millions that the Shah blows in St. Moritz or transfers to Swiss banks are hardly important when measured against the billions that his oil makes for the likes of British Petroleum Oil Comp (BP), Standard Oil, Caltex, Royal Dutch, Shell, and other English, American, and French companies. God knows, the responsibility he bears for the profits of the West is indeed "greater and heavier" than other men's.

But maybe you weren't even thinking about something as tiresome as money, maybe you were just thinking about land reform. The Shah spends six million dollars to have public relations offices promote his benevolence. And it is true that before the land reform the big landowners held 85 percent of all agricultural land while now they hold 75 percent. One quarter of the land now belongs to the peasants, and they are paying it off over fifteen years at 10 percent interest. Now the Persian peasant is "free"; he no longer gets only one-fifth of his harvest. He now gets two-fifths; the other three-fifths go to the landowner who sold him only the land—not the irrigation systems, the seed, or the draft animals. That's how they have managed to make the peasants even poorer, more indebted, more dependent, more helpless, more submissive. Truly, an "intelligent spiritual man," the Shah, as you so rightly point out.

You write about the Shah's worries about an heir, "On this point the Iranian Constitution is very strict. The Shah of Persia must have a son who can one day ascend the throne, and into whose

hands the Shah can later place the fate of Iran . . . On this point the Constitution is strict and rigid.”⁴

Strange that the Shah should not give a damn about the rest of the Constitution, that he should be the one to determine who becomes member of Parliament, contrary to the Constitution, and make all parliamentarians sign an undated resignation form before they have even been admitted, that not a sentence can be published in Iran without having been censored, that it is illegal for more than three students to gather in a group on the campus of the University of Tehran, that Mossadegh’s Minister of Justice had his eyes ripped out of his head, that the public is barred from court cases, that torture is part of daily life in the Persian justice system. Is the Constitution less strict and rigid about these things? Just to give you an idea, here is an example of torture in Persia:

“At midnight on December 19, 1963 the investigative judge began his questioning. At first he asked me questions and wrote down my answers. Then he began to ask about things that I was not concerned with or didn’t know about. I could only answer that I didn’t know anything. The investigative judge struck me in the face and then on my right hand and my left hand with a rubber truncheon. He injured both hands. With every question he beat me. Then he forced me to sit naked on a hot electric burner. Finally he took the burner in his hand and held it to my body until I became unconscious. When I was revived, he asked the questions again. He got a bottle of acid from another room, tipped the contents into a measuring cup, and dipped the truncheon into the container . . .”

Are you surprised that the president of the Federal Republic invited you and your husband to this country in spite of all this horror? We are not surprised. Why don’t you ask him what he

knows about planning and constructing concentration camps? That is his area of expertise.

You'd like to know more about Persia? A book just came out in Hamburg, written by one of your compatriots who is interested in German science and culture like you are, and like you has read Kant, Hegel, the Brothers Grimm, and the Mann brothers: Bahman Nirumand's *Persia, Model of a Developing Country or Dictatorship of the Free World*, with an afterword by Hans Magnus Enzensberger. It is the source of the facts and citations that we have used to inform you. I don't know if there are people who can sleep well at night and are not ashamed after reading that book.

We had no intention of insulting you. But we don't want the German public to be insulted either by articles like yours in the *Neue Revue*.

Yours sincerely,

Ulrike Marie Meinhof

NOTES

1. *Neue Revue* was a weekly society paper published since 1946, now called *Revue*.
2. The Persian Prime Minister Mossadegh succeeded in getting the Shah to leave the country in 1953. A military coup d'état however allowed the Shah to return. Mossadegh was arrested and put on trial.
3. Hubert Humphrey (a Democrat) was the Vice-President of the United States under Johnson. In 1962 he lost the presidential race to Richard Nixon by a small margin.
4. The Shah's marriage to Soraya officially ended in divorce because she did not produce a son.