

CHAPTER 7

IRAN, SAUDI ARABIA, PAKISTAN AND THE
'ISLAMIC BOMB'

Pervez Hoodbhoy

The concept of the Islamic Bomb was first introduced in 1977 by the prime minister of Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Bhutto, the architect of Pakistan's nuclear program, had just been deposed and convicted of murdering a political opponent. Addressing posterity from his death cell in Rawalpindi Jail he wrote: 'We know that Israel and South Africa have full nuclear capability. The Christian, Jewish, and Hindu civilizations have this capability. The communist powers also possess it. Only the Islamic civilization was without it, but that position was about to change.'¹ Although appending 'Islamic' to 'bomb'—and thus associating destruction with a religion—did cause some Muslims to take umbrage, most welcomed the bomb as a sign of Muslim prowess and power.

Fifteen years later, another Muslim leader stressed the need for a bomb belonging collectively to Islam, meaning one that could be used for protecting all Muslims rather than be limited to serving just one country. Addressing an Islamic conference in Teheran in 1992, the Iranian vice-president, Sayed Ayatollah Mohajerani said, 'Since Israel continues to possess nuclear weapons, we, the Muslims, must cooperate to produce an atomic bomb, regardless of U.N. efforts to prevent proliferation.'²

In the celebrations following the 1998 nuclear tests, Pakistan's Jamaat-i-Islami paraded bomb and missile replicas through city streets. It saw in the bomb a sure sign of a reversal of fortunes and a panacea for the ills that have plagued Muslims since the end of the Golden Age of Islam. In 2000, I captured on video the statements of several leaders of religious and jihadist political parties in

Pakistan—Maulana Khalil-ur-Rahman and Maulana Sami-ul-Haq—who also demanded a bomb for Islam.³

A staunch supporter of Al Qaeda and the Taliban, Pakistan's General Hameed Gul—an influential Islamist leader and former head of ISI, the country's powerful intelligence agency—made clear his feelings. In a widely watched nationally televised debate with me, General Hameed Gul snarled: 'Your masters (that is, the Americans) will bomb us Muslims just as they bombed Hiroshima; people like you want to denuclearize and disarm us in the face of a savage beast set to devour the world.'

Still more recently Hafiz Saeed, head of the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and alleged mastermind of the Mumbai attack in November 2008, has demanded that Pakistan should use its nuclear capability to 'secure the Holy Cities "Harmain" (Makkah and Madina) against any possible threat especially after exposed USZ design to carry out destruction of Kaaba and Masjid-e-Nabvi (s.a.w.w.), the most sacred places for Muslims around the world.'⁴

The Islamic Bomb is indeed a popular concept in Pakistan, and for different reasons in other Muslim countries. It is seen as a means of defense against invasions from the West. The blind support given by the U.S. for the Israeli occupation of Arab lands has certainly contributed to the idea of a permanent Islam-West divide. This was reinforced after the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. After the devastation of Gaza in 2008 by Israeli attacks, many newspapers in Muslim countries, including Pakistan contained letters from their readers wishing that Muslims too had nuclear weapons.

But the mythical 'Islamic Bomb' does not exist and may never will. Bhutto's claim was, in fact, deeply misleading. It was intended to elicit Arab support to save his life and restore him to power. Indeed, nothing in the history of Pakistan shows substantial commitment to any pan-Islamic cause; its bomb was motivated solely with India in mind. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of Pakistan—or any other Muslim state—providing a nuclear umbrella for defending the *ummah* against the United States or Israel (but it is worth recalling that this kind of 'extended

deterrence', as it was called, had been practiced aggressively by both superpowers in the Cold War, including during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Looking at the deep fragmentation in Muslim world today, as well as in the past, should put to rest the notion that a bomb made in one Muslim country could be used for defending Muslims belonging to another country. In spite of the Prophet of Islam's teachings, rivalries between Arab tribes could never be overcome and a fierce battle for succession immediately followed his death. Although the subsequent 'Golden Age of Islam', extending from about AD 750 till the sack of Baghdad in AD 1258, saw brilliant Muslim scientific and intellectual achievements; it also witnessed extreme brutalities in the wars between the Umayyads and Abbasid—the majority of caliphs during this five hundred year period were murdered by other Muslims. The only situation where Muslims have behaved as an *ummah* is when facing an external enemy, but this unity has been fragile.

No Muslim state would put itself at nuclear risk. Still, individual engineers and scientists may well be responsive to a 'higher calling'. For example, it is widely known that two highly placed nuclear engineers, Syed Bashiruddin Mahmood and Chaudhry Majid, both well known to espouse radical Islamic views, had journeyed several times into Afghanistan in 2000 and had met with Osama bin Laden. Some months earlier, Mahmood had resigned from his position as director of the Khushab reactor in angry protest at the government's apparent willingness to sign the CTBT. While Osama bin Laden did discuss with Mahmood and Majid the possibility of making nuclear weapons, no further steps appear to have been taken.

IRAN AND THE BOMB

If the 'Islamic Bomb' had been a real concept and Bhutto's claims were actually correct, Pakistan would have been fully supportive of other Muslim countries getting the bomb. But Pakistan's enthusiasm for Iran's bomb, if any, is certainly subdued. Pakistan's local media has been remarkably lacking in sympathy as the U.S. and Israel

threaten Iran for attempting to make the bomb. In a country that is today even more anti-American than Iran, one might have expected the exact opposite.

It is fairly clear that Iran does seek the bomb even though the goal is not the “Islamic” one in the sense described above. Iran has, in fact, stood at the threshold to making the bomb at least since 2010, when it had more than enough Low Enriched Uranium (LEU), some 2152 kilograms, to make its first bomb’s worth of weapons-grade uranium. Enhancement to the required quality could have been done in a few months if this LEU had been fed into the 4186 centrifuges that it was then operating.⁵ Thousands of other centrifuges are also known to be operating at the Natanz nuclear facility. Quite probably, Iran now awaits only a political decision to weaponize; it almost certainly has the capacity. But Iran furiously rejects allegations that it seeks the bomb, and cites *fatwas* (religious edicts) given against it by Ayatollah’s Khomeini and Khomeini. It says the LEU is only for generating nuclear electricity.⁶

Iran’s nuclear program was initiated by Reza Shah Pahlavi with American help in 1959.⁷ Initial plans called for producing 23,000 MW of nuclear electricity; these would create the spent fuel from which bomb-grade materials could be extracted. The U.S., which firmly backed the Shah and considered Iran an outpost representing American interests in the Gulf, was pleased with the benefits this would bring to its corporations such as Bechtel and Westinghouse.

Why would Iran, a major exporter of gas and oil—but with very limited natural uranium resources—be investing in nuclear electricity given that it had no expertise in this complex technology? There was then, as now, only one plausible answer—nuclear weapons. But the U.S. was quite indifferent to the Shah’s undeclared but obvious pursuit of the bomb. The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) became the most heavily funded program in the country, sending large numbers of students to the U.S. and Europe for nuclear studies. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) received a \$20 million endowment from the Shah and softened entrance requirements for Iranian students into the nuclear engineering

department.⁸ The U.S. State Department not only favoured the sale of reactors to Iran but even encouraged the Bechtel Corporation to convince the Shah to invest up to \$300 million in a jointly owned uranium enrichment facility in the United States. According to Defense and Energy department memos from the time, the United States was aware that, 'the annual plutonium production from the planned 23,000 MW Iranian nuclear power program will be equivalent to 600–700 warheads.'⁹

The Iranian revolution of 1979 replaced friends with foes. Ayatollah Khomeini ordered Iran's nuclear program to be stopped but it was resumed after Saddam Hussain invaded Iran and started the 'war of cities'. Seared into Iran's consciousness is the Iran–Iraq war, in which an estimated 200,000 Iranians were killed. 'If we had possessed nuclear weapons then, Saddam would not have dared to attack us,' wrote Amir Mohabian, editor of the influential conservative Iranian daily *Reselaat*.¹⁰

Iran immediately expressed pleasure at Pakistan's successful nuclear tests. Just five days later, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi arrived in Islamabad to congratulate Pakistan on its achievement. 'From all over the world, Muslims are happy that Pakistan has this capability,' he said.¹¹ Iran had clearly hoped at that time to benefit from Pakistan's expertise.

There was good reason for expecting nuclear help. Iran was once Pakistan's close ally—probably its closest one—although a generation of Pakistanis is unaware of this fact because Iran–Pakistan relations have been on the rocks for so long. In 1947, Iran was the first to recognize the newly independent Pakistan. In the 1965 war with India, Pakistani fighter jets flew to Iranian bases in Zahidan and Mehrabad for protection and refueling. Both countries were members of the U.S.-led SEATO and CENTO defense pacts, Iran had opened wide its universities to Pakistani students. Although it is 80 per cent Sunni with only a 15–20 per cent Shi'a minority, Pakistan nevertheless considered Iran as a brother Muslim country and the Shah of Iran was considered Pakistan's great friend and

benefactor. Sometime around 1960, thousands of flag-waving school children lined the streets of Karachi to greet him. I was one of them.

But Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic revolution in 1979, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the same year, set major realignments into motion. As Iran exited the U.S. orbit, Pakistan moved close to the Americans to fight the Soviets. With financial assistance from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the U.S. created and armed the mujahideen. The CIA placed advertisements in journals and newspapers across the world, inviting the most hardened of Islamic fighters to participate in holy war against communist infidels. With full backing from the U.S. General Zia-ul-Haq proceeded to create a hyper-religious fighting force and to drive Pakistani society down the road of Islamization. Although this worked brilliantly and eventually drove the Soviets out of Afghanistan, the dynamics that eventually led to 9/11 had been put in place.

Iran too supported the mujahideen. But it supported the Tajik Northern Alliance while Pakistan supported the Pashtun Taliban. As religion assumed centrality in matters of state in both Pakistan and Iran, rifts appeared and then steadily widened. In the wake of the Soviet pullout from Afghanistan, the Taliban took over Kabul in 1996. An initial selective killing of Shi'as was followed by a massacre of more than 5000 in Bamiyan province. Iran soon amassed 300,000 troops at the Afghan border and threatened to attack the Pakistan-supported Taliban government. Today Iran accuses Pakistan of harbouring terrorist anti-Iran groups such as the Jundullah on its soil and of freely allowing the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and its associates to ravage Pakistan's Shi'a minority. Farsi is no longer taught in Pakistani schools. As religion assumed centrality in matters of state in both Pakistan and Iran, doctrinal rifts widened.

AN UNCOMFORTABLE RELATIONSHIP

When the Iranian nuclear program eventually revived after the Iran-Iraq war, help was sought from its neighbour, Pakistan. At that time, relations were reasonably good—the Taliban had yet to take

over Afghanistan. Clandestine nuclear cooperation with Iran, initiated by Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan and his network, began sometime in the late 1980s and lasted until the mid-1990s. This was followed by similar sales to Libya that continued till 2003 and the exposure of the network, leading to a public confession by A.Q. Khan in January 2004. On 31 August 2009, Dr Khan—who had earlier admitted to supplying centrifuges to Iran—told a television interviewer in Karachi that, at the time, the thinking had been that if Iran succeeds in 'acquiring nuclear technology, we will be a strong bloc in the region to counter international pressure. Iran's nuclear capability will neutralize Israel's power.'¹² According to *The Washington Post*, Khan's assistance, 'allowed Iran to leapfrog over several major technological hurdles to make its own enriched uranium.'¹³

But making money, not promoting ideological goals, lay behind Dr Khan's help to Iran. As a nuclear entrepreneur, who has launched his own political party and now aspires towards becoming the president of Pakistan, he was not inclined towards needless discrimination. Those who could pay got his wares. [In 2011, Khan made available documents that he says support his claim that he personally transferred more than \$3 million in payments by North Korea to senior officers in the Pakistani military who, he says, subsequently approved his sharing of technical know-how and equipment with Pyongyang.¹⁴ If the released letter is genuine, then this episode demonstrates a remarkable instance of corruption rather than ideological resonance with godless North Korea.]

The official position taken by Pakistan on the matter is that it defends Iran's right to nuclear technology as a 'responsible' nation and therefore 'doesn't expect Iran to pursue nuclear-weapons capability.'¹⁵ The secret help provided by the A.Q. Khan network appears to be a matter of the past. But, even at that time, subterranean voices within the Pakistani establishment were speaking against giving nuclear support to Iran. Pressure from the United States was certainly partly the reason. The discomfort of dealing with a Shi'ite state, however, was intense.

These suspicions were confirmed by confidential American cables revealed by Wikileaks and highlighted by the Pakistani English daily *Dawn*.¹⁶ The cables detail Pakistan's efforts to dissuade Iran from pursuing its weapons program. Gen. Pervez Musharraf, Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz and Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri held at least seven meetings, whether face-to-face or by telephone, with the Iranians. There were eleven meetings with the Americans in 2006 alone. Pakistani officials also served as interlocutors between Iran and the United States.

In a May 2006 cable about Gen. Musharraf's meeting with Iranian First Vice President Parviz Davoodi it is reported that, 'according to Kasuri, Musharraf told the visitors that Iran should stop all efforts to enrich uranium now, adding that Tehran was making life difficult for its neighbour, Pakistan'.¹⁷ Later that year, Kasuri would tell the Americans that over the past three years he had 'made it his mission to persuade Tehran not to provoke a conflict over Iran's nuclear program thus endangering regional—and Pakistan's domestic security.' In an April 2006 meeting with U.S. Senator Chuck Hagel, Kasuri provided a list of other reasons why Pakistan was so keen to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. 'We are the only Muslim country [with such weapons],' he said, 'and don't want anyone else to get it.'

Later that month, when the U.S. announced its willingness to join the EU-3 (France, Germany, United Kingdom) in talks with Iran, the American ambassador informed Kasuri that 'the U.S. expects Pakistan to vigorously support the U.S. action. Kasuri agreed, saying that he would ensure that the MFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) issued a statement of support immediately. 'By 11pm that night a statement had been issued, and Kasuri followed this up with a call to the Iranian foreign minister urging Iran 'to announce an immediate suspension of its enrichment program in order to give dialogue a chance.' This phone call was, again, promptly reported to the American ambassador, who commented that, 'Kasuri may be wildly worried that he has gone out on a limb by endorsing the Secretary [of State's] statement so vigorously.'

To conclude, while revolutionary Iran supported the notion of an Islamic bomb, it did not benefit much from the concept. Even if Iran had not received a Chinese-origin bomb design from A.Q. Khan, the six-decade-old physics of implosion devices would be no mystery to Tehran's sophisticated nuclear scientists who are superior in skill and knowledge relative to their Pakistani counterparts. The transfer of centrifuges from Pakistan was strictly on a cash basis, and limited to the older P-1 types. The main sectarian division within Islam—between Sunni and Shi'a—had proved too big a hurdle for effective nuclear cooperation.

IRAN-SAUDI RIVALRY

Pakistan's thinking on the Iranian bomb issue is primarily influenced by Saudi concerns rather than American desires. It knows that if Iran chooses to cross the nuclear threshold, the Saudis would seek to follow suit. Pakistan would then have to choose sides between a Shi'a neighbour and a Sunni state that has been its benefactor.

From the other side of the Persian Gulf, several countries had watched Iran's nuclear progress with trepidation and hostility. Israel and Saudi Arabia are among them. Sunni Saudi Arabia sees Shi'a Iran as its primary enemy. Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, both the Saudis and the Iranians have vied for influence in the Muslim world. Saudi Arabia has the world's largest petroleum reserves; Iran the second largest. Saudi Arabia is the biggest buyer of advanced U.S. weapons and is run by expatriates. It is America's golden goose, protected by U.S. military might. But fiercely nationalist Iran expelled Western oil companies in 1951 and built up its own scientific base.

As theocracies, Saudi Arabia and Iran are protectors and promoters of their respective theologies, and locked in an irresolvable conflict that began with the death of the Prophet of Islam some fifteen centuries ago. Saudi Arabia is Custodian of the two most sacred holy sites, the Haram Sharif in Makkah, the birth place of the Prophet of Islam, and where the Holy Kaaba is located—and the Masjid-e-Nabvi in Madina. It is the leader of the Sunni world,

culturally conservative, and Arab. On the other hand, after the Khomeini revolution, Iran asserted itself as a Persian, Shi'a-majority state that sought to be the leader of all Muslim revolutionaries, both Shi'a and Sunni, who aspired to confront the West. Saudi Arabia has a long way to go before it can shed tribal customs, but Iran possesses a large segment of educated and forward-looking young people who enjoy more cultural freedom than most Arab countries allow. It is run, however, by a backward-looking Guardian Council of clerics who, in spite of having lost their initial revolutionary ardour, still seek to project Iranian power in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine.

Thanks to Wikileaks, it is now well known that that King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia had repeatedly urged the U.S. to destroy Iran's nuclear program and 'cut off the head of the snake' by launching military strikes.¹⁸ More recently, on 8 June 2011, the influential former head of Saudi intelligence and ambassador in London and Washington, Prince Turki bin Faisal, spoke to an audience from the British and American military and security community at Molesworth Air Force base in England. It was a long speech that covered all aspects of Saudi security doctrine. Only a part of his speech was reported in the international press. Some other parts are worth a careful listen.¹⁹

Faisal begins by reminding his audience of why the Kingdom feels so confident today:

She is the cradle of Islam, a religion that has today an estimated 1.2 billion adherents. Saudi Arabia represents over 20% of the combined GDP of the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region . . . the stock market represents about 50% of the entire stock market capitalization of the MENA region. . . . Saudi Aramco, the Kingdom's national oil company, is the world's largest producer and exporter of petroleum and has by far the world's largest sustained production capacity infrastructure at about 12.5 million barrels-per-day, and also has the world's largest spare capacity currently estimated at over 4 million barrels-per-day or about 70% of global unused capacity.

Describing 'Iran as a paper tiger with steel claws,' Faisal accuses Iran of using these claws for its 'meddling and destabilizing efforts in countries with Shi'ite majorities.' After saying that, 'In a certain sense, Saudi Arabia and Iran are uniquely positioned to be at odds,' Faisal then goes on to express his country's position on nuclear weapons:

First, it is in our interest that Iran does not develop a nuclear weapon, for their doing so would compel Saudi Arabia, whose foreign relations are now so fully measured and well assessed, to pursue policies that could lead to untold and possibly dramatic consequences. This is why, through various initiatives, we are sending messages to Iran that it is their right, as it is any nation's right, and as we ourselves are doing, to develop a civilian nuclear program, but that trying to parlay that program into nuclear weapons is a dead end.

The Saudi opposition to Israeli nuclear weapons at this meeting was characteristically mild and ritualistic:

A Zone Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction is the best means to get Iran and Israel to give up nuclear weapons. Such a Zone must be accompanied by a rewards regime that provides economic and technical support for countries that join; plus a nuclear security umbrella guaranteed by the permanent members of the Security Council.²⁰

WHAT IF IRAN GOES NUCLEAR?

Iran may someday choose to cross the threshold. Among other likely consequences, an Iranian bomb would be a powerful stimulus pushing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to follow and seek its own bomb. But for all its wealth, the Kingdom does not have the technical and scientific base to create a nuclear infrastructure. Too weak to defend itself and too rich to be left alone, the country has always been surrounded by those who eye its wealth. It has many universities staffed by highly paid expatriates. Tens of thousands of Saudi students have been sent to universities overseas. However, an ideological attitude unsuited to the acquisition of modern scientific

skills means that there has been little success in producing a significant number of accomplished Saudi engineers and scientists.

Perforce, Saudi Arabia shall turn to Pakistan where its footprint has grown steadily since the early 1970s. Pakistan has received more aid from Saudi Arabia than any country outside the Arab world since the 1960s. A large scale migration of Pakistani workers to newly rich Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia, brought them into contact with a conservative brand of Islam that was different from the one they knew back home. Many came back transformed. Some became vigorous proselytizers, aided by generous grants for creating madrassas (religious seminaries).

Former Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki bin Sultan was on the mark when, speaking about Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, he said: 'It's probably one of the closest relationships in the world between any two countries.' Both countries are Sunni and conservative; both have ruling oligarchies (though one is dynastic and the other military). They were the first to recognize and support the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Their relationship to the U.S. had a strong similarity: their populations strongly resented what they saw as a master-client relationship.

Major funding for Pakistan's nuclear program came from Saudi Arabia; it is said that suitcases of cash were brought into Pakistan from Saudi Arabia (as well as Libya). In gratitude, Bhutto renamed the city of Lyallpur as Faisalabad (after King Faisal of Saudi Arabia). The Pak-Saudi-U.S. jihad in Afghanistan was to further cement Pak-Saudi relations. Madrassas belonging to the Wahabi-Salafi school of thought exploded in numbers and enrolment. After India had tested its bomb in May 1998 and Pakistan was mulling over the appropriate response, the Kingdom's grant of 50,000 barrels of free oil a day helped Pakistan decide in favour of a tit-for-tat response and cushioned the impact of sanctions subsequently imposed by the U.S. and Europe.²¹ The Saudi Defense Minister, Prince Sultan, was a VIP guest at Kahuta, where he toured its nuclear and missile facilities just before the tests. Years earlier Benazir Bhutto, the then serving prime minister, had been denied entry. Pakistani leaders,

political and military, frequently travel to the Kingdom to pay homage.

The quid pro quo for the Kingdom's oil largesse has been soldiers, airmen, and military expertise. Saudi officers are trained at Pakistan's national defense colleges and the Pakistan Air Force, with its high degree of professional training, helped create the Royal Saudi Air Force. Pakistani pilots flew combat missions using Saudi jets against South Yemen in the 1970s. Saudi Arabia is said to have purchased ballistic missiles produced in Pakistan.

Should Iran actually make the bomb, Saudi Arabia, which has received missile help from Pakistan, could turn to it again for nuclear help. This does not mean outright transfer of nuclear weapons by Pakistan to Saudi Arabia. One cannot put credence on rumours that Saudis have purchased nuclear warheads stocked at Kamra Air Force Base, to be flown out at the opportune time. Surely this would certainly lead to extreme reaction from the U.S. and Europe, with no support offered by China or Russia. Moreover, even if a few weapons were smuggled out, Saudi Arabia could not claim to have these weapons. Thus their value as a nuclear deterrent would be uncertain.

Instead, the Kingdom's route to nuclear weapons is likely to be circuitous, beginning with the acquisition of nuclear reactors for electricity generation. The spent fuel from reactors reprocessed for plutonium and uranium enrichment can be pursued under cover of making fuel. Like Iran, it will have to find creative ways by which to skirt around the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—which forbids reprocessing spent fuel for military purposes. But it doubtless takes heart from the fact that the U.S. forgave India for its nuclear testing in 1998, removed sanctions, and eventually ended rewarding it with a nuclear deal. Saudi Arabia had unwillingly signed on to the NPT in 1988. Its position then was that it would be happy to sign up but only if Israel did the same. That, of course, never happened. But Saudi Arabia had no option but to follow the U.S. diktat.

The Kingdom's first steps on this path are being contemplated. In June 2011, Saudi Arabia said that sixteen nuclear reactors were

to be built over the next twenty years at a cost of more than \$300 billion, each reactor costing around \$7 billion.²² Arrangements are being made to offer the project for international bidding and the winning company should 'satisfy the Kingdom's needs for modern technology.' To create, run and maintain the resulting nuclear infrastructure will require importing large numbers of technical workers. Some will be brought over from western countries, as well as Russia and former Soviet Union countries. But Saudi Arabia will likely find engineering and scientific skills from Pakistan particularly desirable. As Sunni Muslims, Pakistanis would presumably be sympathetic with the kingdom's larger goals. Having been in the business of producing nuclear weapons for nearly thirty years under difficult circumstances, they would also be familiar with supplier chains for hard-to-get items needed in a weapons program. And because salaries in Saudi Arabia far exceed those in Pakistan, many qualified people could well ask for leave from their parent institutions within Pakistan's nuclear complex—PAEC, KRL, and NDC.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT NUCLEAR IRAN?

As nuclear weapons become easier to make, pre-existing conflicts are also finding a nuclear expression more easily. Iran and Saudi Arabia's present direction suggests that the historical clash between Sunni and Shi'a brands of Islam could move into the nuclear arena. Can anything be done to prevent this?

In a more reasonable world, Iran could be dissuaded from its path by using the force of argument alone. However, the world's pre-eminent power, the United States, lacks the moral authority to act effectively in the domain of nuclear proliferation. Whereas it harshly threatens Iran for trying to develop nuclear weapons it has rewarded, to various degrees, other countries—Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea—that have developed such weapons surreptitiously. Also not readily forgotten is the fact that initial nuclear capability was provided to Iran by the U.S. during the Shah's rule.

It is well known that the U.S. gave the green light to Israel's campaign of secret assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists, injection of the Stuxnet virus, and periodically threatens to bomb Iran. While Iran has not attacked any other country in centuries, the United States overthrew Iran's democracy in 1953 and installed a dictator who ensured that American corporations would have a near monopoly over Iranian oil. It supplied weapons to Saddam Hussain in his war against Iran, put Iran on the 'axis of evil', falsely blamed it for 9/11, flies drones over Iran, imposed sanctions, and provocatively sends its aircraft carriers up and down the Persian Gulf. In 2012 President Obama announced new financial and commercial sanctions on companies dealing with Iran. The EU also decided to cooperate with the U.S. and ban Iran's oil exports. But nuclear nationalism and Persian pride could still override the pain of sanctions.

Irans' quest for the bomb does it—and the world—no service. The world certainly needs fewer nuclear weapons, not more. So then what are the alternatives?

One is that of war. An Israeli attack—whether aided or not by the U.S.—could certainly stop Iran's nuclear efforts for a few years, or perhaps a decade or two. But it would have catastrophic consequences and transform the Middle East into a war-zone for the foreseeable future. Dynamics would be unleashed over which the U.S. and Israel will have little control. Sunni–Shi'a divisions would be temporarily pushed aside (Muslims tend to unite against a common enemy). While the third Gulf War would surely devastate Iran, today it is in a position to inflict much greater damage on the U.S. than were Iraq or Libya. The U.S. could plunge into an economic crisis the likes of which it has not seen before. The last bits of its post-withdrawal strategy from Afghanistan would be shredded to pieces.

A second alternative is to vigorously pursue nuclear negotiations. The U.S. has tried threats and coercion with Iran, but never the power of humility. Had American leaders acknowledged having wronged Iran in 1953 by engineering the coup that brought back

the Shah, Iranian nuclear nationalism might have been significantly weakened. It remains to be seen whether diplomacy can now succeed.

On the pessimistic side, the Iranian regime could become obstinate and defiant, and become totally insensitive to sanctions or any other kind of punishment. In that case Iran could become the world's 10th nuclear state in a few years. Unwelcome as having yet another set of nuclear issues would be, it would not necessarily be catastrophic. In all likelihood nuclear Iran would moderate its dangerous rhetoric and, like other existing global nuclear rivalries, this one too could be managed. One observes that Iranians have steadily become more pragmatic and less revolutionary since 1997. Quite possibly, in time their nuclear weapons will become like everybody else's.

However unwelcome Iran's bomb (and the Sunni bomb that could someday follow), it is far better to live with potential dangers than to knowingly create a holocaust through military action. Tel Aviv and Washington must never even contemplate an attack; to do so would set the world on fire.

REFERENCES

1. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, *If I Am Assassinated*, 1979.
2. Brassey's Defense Yearbook 1995, p. 276, Centre for Defense Studies, London.
3. 'Pakistan and India under the Nuclear Shadow', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EeBRVFXe5oQ>
4. 'Pakistani Nuclear Shield for Makkah & Madina: Hafiz Saeed', Pak Defense Unit, 28 May 2012.
5. 'Bombshell—Obama has run out of time to negotiate with Iran', New Republic, Henry Sokolski and Greg Jones, 7 Dec. 2010.
6. 'An Iran option the U.S. prefers to ignore'. *Asia Times Online*, 17 March 2006.
7. 'The Shah's Atomic Dreams', Abbas Milani, *Foreign Policy*, 29 December 2010.
8. This generated a major controversy at MIT c.1975 and eventually a faculty referendum was held which vetoed the MIT administration insistence on this point.
9. Milani, op. cit.
10. Quoted in 'Sanctions Won't Stop Iran', by Selig Harrison, *The Washington Post*, 2 October 2007.
11. 'Pakistan Claims It Has New Missile', *The Washington Post*, 2 June 1998.

12. 'A.Q. Khan boasts of helping Iran's nuclear program', *The Telegraph*, 10 September 2009.
13. 'Nuclear Program in Iran Tied To Pakistan—Complex Network Acquired Technology and Blueprints', *The Washington Post*, 21 December 2003.
14. 'Pakistan's nuclear-bomb maker says North Korea paid bribes for know-how', R. Jeffrey Smith, *The Washington Post*, 6 July 2011.
15. 'Iran Sanctions: Why Pakistan Won't Help', *Time*, 14 September 2009.
16. 'Musharraf govt pushed Iran to abandon N-weapons program', Madiha Sattar, *Dawn*, 9 July 2011.
17. All quotes in this section refer to Wikileaks documents: *Dawn*, 9 July 2011.
18. 'Saudi king urged U.S. to attack Iran', WikiLeaks, Arshad Mohammed and Ross Colvin, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/11/29/us-wikileaks-usa-idUSTRE6AP06Z20101129>
19. 'A Saudi National Security Doctrine for the Next Decade', speech by Prince Turki Al-Faisal, Royal Air Force Base, Molesworth, UK. Date: 8 June 2011. Obtained through private circulation.
20. Ibid
21. 'Saudi Arabia: Nervously Watching Pakistan', Brookings Report, 28 January 2008. This was confirmed to me in private conversation with Sartaj Aziz, finance minister of Pakistan in 1988 at the time of the nuclear tests.
22. '16 Saudi nuclear reactors to cost \$300 billion', *Arab News*, 1 June 2011.