

Can The Islamic Bomb Become Reality?

by
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One Muslim country tested its nuclear weapons more than a decade ago. Another – Iran – may reach the threshold soon. Does possession of these weapons mean that the “Islamic Bomb” is a reality, or will soon become one?

Many Muslims react angrily at the mention of “Islamic Bomb”, saying that this term is a fabrication designed by the West to malign Islam. But this is factually incorrect: the notion of an Islamic bomb was first coined by a Muslim leader over thirty years ago. Addressing posterity from his death cell in a Rawalpindi jail, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the architect of Pakistan's nuclear program, wrote in 1977: “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.”

Another Muslim leader stressed the need for a bomb belonging collectively to Islam. 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.”

In the celebrations following the 1998 nuclear tests, the Jamaat-e-Islami paraded bomb and missile replicas through the streets of Pakistani cities. 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 jihadist, right-wing political parties in Pakistan — and those of Maulana Khalil-ur-Rahman and Maulana Sami-ul-Haq in particular — who openly demanded a bomb for Islam.

One important bin Laden supporter, Pakistan’s General Hameed Gul — an influential Islamist leader and former head of ISI, the country’s powerful intelligence agency — has made clear how he feels. In a widely watched nationally televised debate some years ago, General Hameed Gul snarled at me: “Your masters (that is, the Americans) will nuke us Muslims just as they nuked Hiroshima; people like you want to denuclearize and disarm us in the face of a savage beast set to devour the world”.

While General Gul is an extremist and does not mind being called one, it is true that the unequivocal U.S. military, economic and political support for Israeli occupation of Arab lands has made the Islamic bomb a popular concept. After the devastation of Gaza in 2008, many newspapers in Muslim countries contained letters from their readers expressing the wish for nuclear weapons. Thus, the desire for an atomic weapon to seek vengeance – utterly immoral, foolish and suicidal though it is – is not limited to extremists.

So can the “Islamic Bomb” become reality? In spite of all the arguments adduced above that seem to indicate that one already exists, I would contend that – barring extreme circumstances – the answer is negative.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of any Muslim state declaring that it has an Islamic bomb that would be used for defense of the “ummah” against the United States or Israel (but it is worth recalling that this kind of “extended deterrence”, as it was called, was practiced aggressively by both superpowers in the Cold War, including during the Cuban Missile Crisis). Nothing in the history of Pakistan has shown a substantial commitment to any pan-Islamic cause, although from time to time there has been empty speculation that Pakistan would provide a “nuclear umbrella” for Arab countries in a crisis.

The fact is that Pakistan – so far the only established Muslim nuclear state – is extremely unlikely to risk devastating retaliation from Israel or the United States if it did attempt to provide nuclear weapons for use in the Middle East. Its earlier clandestine nuclear cooperation with Iran — officially attributed to Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan and his network — came to an end a decade ago. 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 early 2004. On 31 August 2009, Dr. Khan – who had earlier admitted to supplying centrifuges to Iran – told a television interviewer in Karachi 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." However, Khan had independently made nuclear deals with North Korea. Pakistan’s relations with Iran have been poor since the mid-1990’s. Money and missiles, not God, was the motive behind the proliferation.

One cannot discount a future conflict that would involve nuclear weapons from Muslim countries in some capacity. But it would almost certainly originate from radicalized individuals within these states, rather than the states themselves. This danger is not one to be ignored. A possible hint comes from Pakistan after its famous post-September 11 U-turn. The military government insisted that there was no danger of any of its nuclear weapons being taken for a ride by some radical Islamic group, but it didn’t take any chances. Several weapons were reportedly airlifted to various safer, isolated, locations within the country, including the northern mountainous area of Gilgit. This nervousness was not unjustified — two strongly Islamist generals of the Pakistan Army, close associates of General Musharraf, had just been removed. Dissatisfaction within the army on Pakistan’s betrayal of the Taliban was deep; almost overnight, under intense American pressure, the Pakistan government had disowned its progeny and agreed to wage a war of annihilation against it.

Fears about Pakistan’s nukes were subsequently compounded by revelations that two highly placed nuclear engineers, Syed Bashiruddin Mahmood and Chaudhry Majid, well known to espouse radical Islamic views, had journeyed several times into Afghanistan in

2000 and met with Osama bin Laden and discussed the possibilities of making nuclear weapons.

Today, the United States rightly lives in fear of the bomb it first brought into the world and tried to use to establish its dominance. The decision to use it — if and when it becomes available — may already have been made. Shadowy groups, propelled by fanatical hatreds, are believed to scour the globe for fissile materials. They are not in a hurry; time is on their side. They are doubtless confident about breaching fortress America one day.

The possibilities for nuclear attack are not limited to the so-called suitcase bomb stolen from the arsenal of a nuclear state. The making of atomic weapons — especially crude ones — has become vastly simpler than it was at the time of the Manhattan Project. Basic information on nuclear weapons is now freely available in technical libraries throughout the world and simply surfing the internet can bring to anyone a staggering amount of detail. Advanced textbooks and monographs contain details that can enable reasonably competent scientists and engineers to come up with “quick and dirty” designs for nuclear explosives. The physics of nuclear explosions can be readily taught to graduate students.

The material for making nuclear weapons is also more easily available than ever before. To build a simple bomb or two, it is no longer necessary to go through the complex processes for uranium enrichment or plutonium reprocessing. These fissile materials are already present in the thousands of ex-Soviet bombs marked for disassembly, and in research reactors and storage sites the world over.

It is easy to imagine an improvised nuclear device fabricated from highly enriched uranium, constructed in the very place where it will eventually be detonated. Even simpler may be an attack on a lightly guarded nuclear reactor or spent fuel storage site, releasing large amounts of radioactivity.

Some nuclear weapon experts privately believe that it is not a question of if but when. This may be too pessimistic, but obviously tight policing and reduction of nuclear weapons and fissile material stockpiles are urgent, important steps. The stalled talks on a fissile material cutoff treaty must therefore be urgently pursued. But even this is insufficient in the long run if nuclear weapon states insist on keeping their bombs and missiles as legitimate instruments of either deterrence or war. Reliance on nuclear energy will inevitably add to fissile materials piling up.

If we accept that religious fanatics are planning nuclear attacks and that they may eventually succeed, then several questions arise. Who will the U.S. retaliate against? Will the U.S. nuke Mecca? This has been suggested already by some, as they seek to identify those things of value to Muslims that the United States can threaten. Or, will the U.S. attack the capitals of Muslim states? How will it decide where to strike? What will the U.S. and its allies do as their people fear more attacks? Will they expel Muslims from the U.S. and Europe or like the Japanese Americans in World War II, herd them into internment camps? Any of these would further inflame the jihad. In the subsequent horror

and madness that would follow a nuclear attack, the world would plunge headlong into a bottomless abyss of reaction and counter reaction.

While nothing can justify the possession of nuclear weapons by religious extremists, one can see that US policies and actions have set precedents which make insane behavior comprehensible. Let us recall that in George W. Bush's America, nuclear weapons were actually viewed as weapons to fight wars with, not as a last resort. The U.S. "Nuclear Posture Review 2002" recommended continued reliance for the indefinite future on nuclear weapons "to achieve strategic and political objectives". It mandated new facilities for the manufacture of nuclear bombs, research into new kinds of nuclear weapons, new delivery systems, and much more. It laid out a new strategy, in which nuclear weapons were to be used to "dissuade adversaries from undertaking military programs or operations that could threaten U.S. interests or those of allies". It named as possible targets, Russia, China, North Korea, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Libya, and opened the door to the use of nuclear weapons to respond to "sudden and unpredicted security challenges."

The world watched in wonder and disgust as the U.S. hungered for better and more useable nuclear weapons. It often appeared to be goading other nations towards also craving nukes. By announcing that it could, if need be, also target even non-nuclear adversaries it showed incredible imperial hubris, runaway militarism, and the arrogance of power. These were threats that carried awful meaning because the U.S. had already used its nuclear weapons twice, and brandished them many times more. During the Korean War, in which more than three million North Koreans, a million South Koreans, and a million Chinese died, the United States repeatedly threatened the use of nuclear weapons. These threats led China to seek its own nuclear weapons. The end of the fighting did not end the war – the U.S. technically is still at war with North Korea. North Korea, facing a nuclear-armed U.S. army based in South Korea, eventually made its own bomb.

That was the past. Now there are grounds for optimism. President Obama's personal sincerity to undo his predecessor's nuclear legacy is genuine. It is no doubt also driven by the realization that nuclear weapons are useless for fighting the insurgencies which consume most of America's current war energies. Thus, there is finally some realization – as articulated by Henry Kissinger and his colleagues – that zero nukes might be good for the US, purely as a matter of its strategic self-interest. Of course, there is a very long road to travel. Even if the US does go to zero, this does not mean that the rest of the world, where regional conflicts matter more than global ones, will necessarily follow suit.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki signaled a failure of humankind, not just that of America. The growth of technology has far outstripped the capacities of the social institutions that govern our societies. Humanity's best chance of survival lies in creating taboos against nuclear weapons, much as already exist for chemical and biological weapons, and to work rapidly toward their elimination.

The Islamic Bomb may never exist but nuclear weapons are likely to be possessed by more and more Muslim countries – as well as by others – as time rolls on. How to stop

this? The only possible answer is going to global zero – and this very much includes uncovering Israel's hidden nukes and getting rid of them too.