

INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR PERVEZ HOODBHOY  
STEFANIA MAURIZI 18.06.2005

- 1) Professor Hoodbhoy, you are an eminent Pakistani physicist with great expertise in nuclear matters. We are often told about the so-called “Islamic Bomb”, that is a nuclear weapon which belongs collectively to the Islamic community. In your opinion, do Muslims really want an “Islamic bomb”? If so, why?

Anger in Muslim countries at the United States has never been higher than today: torture and prisoner abuse in Abu-Ghraib and Guantanamo by American interrogators, and instances of Quran desecration have added on to already existing resentments, most particularly the unequivocal US support for Israeli occupation of Arab lands. The desire for an atomic weapon to seek vengeance – utterly foolish and suicidal though it be – is not limited to extremists. The Islamic Bomb is a popular concept, even more after 9/11.

- 2) We know that there are a lot of divisions among the Muslims. Is there any real possibility for the Muslim community to acquire an Islamic bomb?

In my opinion, that danger comes not from Muslim states, but from radicalized individuals within a state. It is 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. From time to time, the media reports the speculation that Pakistan would provide a “nuclear umbrella” for Arab countries in a crisis. But nothing in the history of Pakistan has shown a substantial commitment to an Islamic cause. Pakistan, which is so far the only Muslim nuclear state, is 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 the antics of Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan and his network – came to an end a decade ago.

- 3) Pakistan is the first and only Islamic nuclear power. Are Pakistani people proud of this?

Yes, but much less so as time goes on and the hubris dissipates. 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 – Maulana Khalil-ur-Rahman and Maulana Sami-ul-Haq – who also demanded a bomb for Islam. But now May 28 – the anniversary date – comes and goes without attracting much attention.

- 4) Could you please explain to us the origins of the Pakistani nuclear programme?

Contrary to popular belief in the West, Islamic solidarity was not a motive. The motive was entirely Indo-centric and the reasoning goes something like this: India has never accepted the idea of Pakistan, India dismembered Pakistan in 1971, India exploded a nuclear device in 1974, India seeks to reduce all its neighbours to mere Bhutans, India is a military behemoth and a regional hegemon with a blue-water navy, India is now preparing its Prithvi and Agni missiles for an assault on Pakistan..... This passionate rhetoric has led to the creation of a virtually unchallenged belief that Pakistan’s security and survival lies in its preparing, as quickly as possible and as many as possible, the weapons of ultimate destruction.

- 5) Pakistani people have a very low income, roughly 70% of them are illiterate and their schools and universities are not up to an international standard. How was it possible for Pakistan to become a nuclear power?

Most countries which really want them can make them. The design of atomic weapons is vastly simpler than it was 60 years ago. Basic information is freely available in technical libraries throughout the world and simply surfing the internet can bring to anyone a staggering amount of detail. The physics of nuclear explosions can be readily taught to graduate students. Getting the fissile material – highly enriched uranium or weapons grade plutonium – is the difficult part.

- 6) We know a lot about American and Russian nuclear physicists who decided to work on nuclear weapons. We know, for example, their motivations: some of them worked on bombs as they thought it was their patriotic duty, others because they would have better salaries, and so on. What about Pakistani nuclear physicists?

All over the world, engineers and scientists normally don't think too much about rights and wrongs. That was the case in Pakistan too. Those who worked on various aspects of the bomb project probably thought they were doing the right thing for their country and being appropriately rewarded.

- 7) Thanks to scientists like Hussain-Al-Shahristani, we know that a lot of Iraqi scientists had no choice: they were forced to work on Saddam's weapons programmes and some of them were arrested, tortured, and so on. As far as you know, do Islamic countries force their nuclear physicists to work on military technologies?

If indeed it is true that Saddam forced his technical people to work on nuclear weapons, then it is not surprising that he failed so miserably in spite of spending billions of dollars. You need technical teams that are committed to achieving results, and forced scientific labour does not work out well. In Pakistan, those who made the bomb were not especially gifted people but they were certainly convinced that they were doing something good for their country and religion.

- 8) Apart from Pakistan, which, if any, Muslim countries are the most likely to become nuclear powers?

Iran is the obvious case, and perhaps the only one for now. Libya has completely reversed its earlier plans and has no nuclear ambitions left.

- 9) Currently, there is a lot of concern about the possibility that nuclear weapons could spread into Islamic countries. How do you judge this concern? I mean, globally, proliferation is a major headache for the international community, but should Islamic countries get special attention, in your opinion?

I think the possession of nuclear weapons by Israel is just as dangerous. It is an aggressive, paranoid, expansionist power which has the unremitting support of the United States. As we all know – thanks to Mordechai Vanunu – Israel has a secret arsenal of over 200 nukes. Global elimination of nuclear weapons should be the real goal.

- 10) How do Muslims perceive the U.S. effort to avoid the spreading of nuclear weapons into Muslim countries?

I think that anyone would see it as comedy, or a farce. The US, under George W. Bush, has a simple position: nukes are fine for friends, not for foes. Under Clinton there was at least an effort to persuade countries like India and Pakistan that nukes were bad for the health. But now there is only this simple criterion left: you are either with us or against us. If nuclear weapons continue to be accepted by nuclear weapon states as legitimate instruments of either deterrence or war, their global proliferation – whether by other states or non-state actors – can only be slowed down at best. If the US is insistent on retaining and improving its nuclear arsenal, by what moral argument can others be persuaded to give up, or not acquire, nuclear weapons?

- 11) The fear of Islamic fundamentalism is one of the reasons at the basis of the U.S. effort to limit nuclear proliferation. Two Pakistani nuclear scientists, Sultan Mahmood and Chaudiri Majeed, are of great concern, and indeed were arrested after 9/11. While reading about Mahmood, I noticed he is a sort of crackpot scientist, very fanatic as well. Isn't he?

Yes, I had a bitter public dispute with him over 15 years ago. You can read about it in the appendix to my book "Islam and Science – Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality". He was enraged at me for calling his Islamic theories on jinns and energy as crackpot nonsense. But it was, of course.

- 12) Is Mahmood an exception? I mean, how common is it in Islamic countries to meet such a sort of scientist, skilled, but at the same time, very fanatical?

Mahmood may be extreme, but there is bitter resentment against the US across the Muslim world. I often encounter skilled fanatics. They are, of course, able to argue their case cogently but their terms of reference are so very different from mine. Many of my physics students are unwilling to think outside the box as well. They conjure up all kinds of conspiracy theories against Islam to the point where it is totally senseless.

- 13) Scientists like Mahmood are highly educated and had the possibility of living and studying in Western countries. And so, they should have those cultural tools which permit people to refuse religious fanaticism. In your opinion, why do they sympathize with Al-Qaeda?

Terrorist groups will continue to recruit successfully as long as large numbers of Muslims feel that they are being unfairly targeted. Unless this changes, and there is a perception that there is some measure of justice in world affairs, this trend is likely to be irreversible. The Palestinian-Israeli issue, with daily televised images of Palestinian suffering, together with unstinting US support for Israel, evoke anger and bitterness in Muslim populations around the world. This is, by far, the single greatest element that rallies Muslims against the US. But let's not forget the genesis of Al-Qaeda. It came from the deliberate creation of an Islamic network to counter Soviet influence in the Central Asian Republics in the late 1970's. This was followed by the creation of a jihadist network aimed at freeing Afghanistan from Soviet occupation. This unleashed forces that eventually escaped the control of the sponsors – the US, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. The invasion of Iraq has unwittingly given further impetus to Islamic groups to engage the US in battle, one that uses asymmetric tactics and is popular because Muslims overwhelmingly believe that this war was about oil and supporting Israel.

- 14) Getting fissionable material (U235 or plutonium) is one of the biggest problems for countries and terrorists groups which want to acquire nuclear weapons. However, we know there is a lot of fissionable material in Russia and following the Soviet Union's collapse the security of that material is of great concern. Is the international community doing enough to address this problem, in your opinion?

The Nunn-Lugar efforts to buy highly enriched uranium from Russia are faltering for lack of funds while National Missile Defence continues to soak up billions. The US does not have its priorities right and does not adequately recognize where the real danger to it is coming from. In my opinion, the proper way to handle the situation is for a US-led global treaty for cutting off production of all fissile materials.

- 15) In your excellent article “Is it a war on Islam?”, you wrote: “Vietnam, to my mind, offers the only viable model of resistance... Ho Chi Minh did not call for hijacking airliners or blowing up buses... By inviting media celebrities like Jane Fonda and Joan Baez, Vietnam generated enormous goodwill. On the other hand, can you imagine the consequences of Vietnam's leadership being with Osama bin Laden rather than Ho Chi Minh? That country would surely have been a radioactive wasteland, rather than the unique victor against imperialism.” Do you think it is reasonable to believe that Islamic fundamentalists will acquire radiological or nuclear weapons and transform some country or part of it into a radioactive wasteland? I mean, terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda have a political agenda, and if you have a political agenda you could be self-deterred against using such destructive weapons.

If Al-Qaeda – or some other shadowy group – acquires nuclear weapons, then it would be only because they want to use it and not to just have another option. Their politics – like that of Bush – is absolutist. Some nuclear weapon experts (who I am not at liberty to name) privately believe that this is not a question of if but when a city is blown up. The possibilities for nuclear attack are not limited to the so-called suitcase bomb stolen from the arsenal of a nuclear state. In fact, this is far more difficult than the use of improvised nuclear devices fabricated from highly enriched uranium, constructed in the very place where they will eventually be detonated. Still more likely is an attack on a lightly guarded nuclear reactor or spent fuel repository. This may be too pessimistic, but obviously tight policing and monitoring of nuclear materials and knowledge must be the first step.

- 16) Finally, some people think that proliferation should be tackled even militarily, others think that as far as the United States is allowed to retain its nuclear arsenal, other countries have the right to the atomic bomb. And so Iran and other Muslim countries should build the bomb, if they want it. What do you think about this?

No country or group should have the bomb. Military means like PSI (Proliferation Security Initiative) are insufficient and discriminatory. They will not work well enough. We need a change of global consciousness. Nuclear weapons signal a failure of humankind. The growth of technology has far outstripped our ability to use it wisely. Like a quarrelling group of monkeys on a leaky boat, armed with sticks of dynamite, we are now embarked on an uncertain journey. 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 global elimination. The choice we have is between believing in a savage dog-eat-dog world, and between daring to imagine a future that is based on universal, compassionate, human, secular values. For this to happen, the civilized world will have to subdue the twin ogres of American imperialism and fanatical Islam.