

## **NO BOMB FOR THE UMMAH, PLEASE**

by  
Pervez Hoodbhoy

After the proliferation bubble burst in late December last year, Pakistan could no longer routinely deny allegations of nuclear wrong-doings by its celebrated bomb-maker, Dr. A. Q. Khan. (He earned a Ph.D in metallurgy and not nuclear physics or nuclear engineering but is uniformly referred to as a “nuclear scientist” in almost all press reports). But notwithstanding his televised confession and apology, few people buy the argument that Dr. Khan could have acted alone. In the extreme security environment of Pakistani nuclear installations, foreign visits of important personnel and the physical transfer of equipment would have been impossible without the knowledge and complicity of the military, which was solely responsible for safety and security matters.

Dr. Khan’s activities had been hidden from successive Pakistani governments, says General Musharraf. But year after year (2003 included, when the proliferation controversy was already red-hot) Islamabad was festooned with colorful banners advertising workshops on “Vibrations In Rapidly Rotating Machinery” and “Advanced Materials”, sponsored by the Dr. A.Q. Khan Research Laboratories (also known as the Kahuta Research Laboratories). These had obvious and immediate utility for centrifuge technology, essential for producing bomb-grade uranium.

Many in Pakistan have rallied to defend the country’s bomb-makers even after abundant proof that they have freely spread nuclear weapons technology around the globe. Some leaders of Islamic parties vociferously argue that, by not having signed the NPT, the bomb-makers are blameless since they broke no law or treaty by sharing such technology with other parties. But this legalistic argument is weak, unconvincing, and insufficient to prevent serious damage to Pakistan.

For over 15 years Pakistan had repeatedly assured the world that it was a responsible nuclear power whose nuclear weapons were solely aimed at deterring nuclear India. It rejected accusations of having proliferated nuclear weapon technologies. These angry denials were over the same time period during which the transfers were now known to have occurred. The enormous credibility gap this creates will surely be a handicap for all leaders of Pakistan, present and future.

But the damage could be much greater. For years, Pakistan’s powerful Islamic parties have openly embraced the Bomb, chanted slogans in praise, and even paraded cardboard replicas through the streets. For them, it is more than just a means to defend Pakistan’s national frontiers – it belongs to the entire Muslim Ummah. In doing so, they borrowed from the prison notes of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the first person to have spoken of the need for an Islamic Bomb.

Although the notion of an Islamic Bomb in the post-911 world is both military folly and a political suicide, Pakistan’s Islamic parties and some of its bomb-makers seem incapable of realizing this. While it is inconceivable that any Muslim country will request nuclear

weapons from Pakistan, there is little doubt that some non-state actors are more enthusiastic. One recalls that two years ago highly placed members of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission wanted to play their role in the jihad against America. In a fit of Islamic solidarity they went to Afghanistan and met with Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. It is difficult to believe that they were the only ones so inclined.

For the moment the efforts of some Pakistani bomb-makers to peddle nuclear secrets appear to have been stymied. But merely by having tried to do so, and invoking solidarity with the Ummah, they have endangered Pakistan. Imagine, for example, the horrific situation arising from an atomic explosion in some American city. A superpower, blinded with grief and rage, would be sure to exact a terrible price. Mere suspicion might form the basis of action. It is quite possible that the Americans would bomb Pakistan first – perhaps with nuclear weapons – and look later for justifications. Iraq stands as a reminder of America’s furious desire to avenge 9/11 and hurt even those unconnected with the perpetrators. The subsequent non-discovery of weapons of mass destruction, or connections with Al-Qaida, have been shrugged off by George Bush and his neo-con cabal.

It is indeed an irony of history that two Muslim countries spilled the beans on their benefactor’s pan-Islamic nuclear largesse. On the other hand North Korea, with atheism as its state ideology, has angrily rejected Dr. Khan’s admission to have supplied it with centrifuge designs and parts. In his marathon press conference, wherein he announced his acceptance of Dr. Khan’s mercy petition, General Musharraf lashed out at Iran and Libya for caving in to international inspectors and docilely turning over documents on their nuclear programs. Indeed, the documents turned over by Libya to the IAEA, and subsequently to the US, have been the most damaging so far. These include a complete nuclear weapon design. But Musharraf showed no gratitude to Libya and Iran for having exposed an international crime ring. “Our Muslim brothers did not ask us before giving our names,” he said angrily.

It is time to give up the fantasy of a Bomb for the Ummah, and time to rein in Pakistan’s bomb-makers. Their illegitimate nuclear commerce has created a nightmare for the reputation, safety, and security of their own country. It is difficult to know what Dr. Khan meant when he said he had acted out of “good faith”. One wonders what kind of faith allows for putting instruments of mass murder on sale in the open market.

*The author is professor of nuclear and high-energy physics at Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad*