

A Syrian Centrifuge Plant? A New Proliferation Challenge

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Brief Analysis

The discovery that Syria may have tried to build a centrifuge plant is reawakening concerns about the extent of the regime's nuclear ambitions and the proliferation of crucial technology by Pakistan.

Earlier today, the Associated Press reported that Syria at one point was building a centrifuge plant likely intended to manufacture nuclear weapons, reawakening concerns about the extent of the regime's nuclear ambitions and the proliferation of crucial technology by Pakistan. Previously, Syria's nascent nuclear weapons program was believed to be confined to a plutonium-producing reactor that was under construction with North Korean help before an Israeli air raid destroyed it in 2007. A centrifuge plant could have produced highly enriched uranium, an entirely different route to an atomic bomb.

The suspect building, now a textile plant, is in the northeastern Syrian town of Hasaka, about 100 miles from the site of the destroyed plutonium reactor. The layout of some of the buildings on the site matches almost exactly Libya's onetime plans for a centrifuge plant. Technology for that plant was supplied by Pakistani scientist A. Q. Khan in what Islamabad says was a rogue operation -- although Khan says he had government approval. The Qadhafi regime gave up its nuclear ambitions in 2003 in return for U.S. and other international recognition.

Khan, who retired in 2001 and has been under house arrest or restricted in his movements since 2004, has admitted to sharing centrifuge technology with China, Iran, Libya, and North Korea, all with official sanction. After initial reports that Khan might have transferred technology to Syria, he acknowledged -- in correspondence with the author in 2007 (writing in the third person) -- that he had visited the country twice: "The first time was in the late eighties, when he and his colleagues were changing flights in Damascus and unanimously decided to break their journey for two days to see Syria's historical mosques, tombs and sites. The second time was on an official visit with a delegation to attend a Science Conference. The Pakistani Ambassador, Dr. Afzal Akbar Khan [who was the envoy there in the late 1990s], accompanied the delegation during its four-day visit. They visited the Universities of Damascus and

Homs and the Research Center in Damascus." But Khan denied any nuclear deals.

Pakistan has traditionally had friendly relations with Syria. During the aftermath of the 1973 October War, Pakistani air force pilots flew missions in Syrian jets against Israel aircraft. Murtaza Bhutto, the late brother of assassinated former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, lived in exile in Damascus while opposing the military regime that overthrew their father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. And Benazir made official visits to Damascus in 1990 and 1996.

The new revelations should be used to break through Syrian obstructionism regarding full International Atomic Energy Agency inspection of its facilities. In particular, the thickness of the concrete floor in the Hasaka "textile factory" could be a crucial indicator of whether it was originally intended for centrifuge operation. Washington should also pressure Pakistan to make Khan available for interview, as well as other senior officials and former military officers who might have knowledge of the issue. Although the Syrian nuclear episode now seems over, information about the roles of Pakistan, Iran (which already has an operational centrifuge plant and is Syria's main strategic partner), and North Korea (another key centrifuge user) could be crucial for blunting nuclear ambitions in both Tehran and Pyongyang.

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ♦

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