

Musharraf's Mess

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

Thursday's front page of the New York Times has a breathless account of Pakistan's rogue nuclear network, and quotes British engineer Peter Griffin as saying he had been a supplier to Pakistan for two decades. To my knowledge, the last time Peter Griffin was quoted anywhere was on the front page of the Financial Times, in an article I wrote on August 22, 1979 (yes, 1979). Headlined "U.K. deals may aid Pakistan atom bid," it accompanied a longer inside investigative piece I had written: "Pakistan's nuclear shopping list: the British link."

Griffin was the director of a small trading company that had tried to buy pieces of electrical equipment, called inverters, and export them to Pakistan. Inverters are used in the spinning industry to give a reliable flow of electricity. With the right specifications, they are also needed to spin high-speed centrifuges for enriching uranium. The ones that Griffin had tried to buy were destined for what was Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan's then-nascent uranium enrichment plant at Kahuta, outside Islamabad.

I had traveled down to South Wales to interview Griffin and arrived unannounced on his doorstep. He invited me inside, though hardly welcoming me, and cautiously told me what business he was doing in Pakistan. "I am not helping Pakistan make a nuclear bomb, but why shouldn't Pakistan have a nuclear bomb anyway?" was, I recall, his line of argument. He told me that he had sold 800,000 pounds worth of equipment (several million in today's dollars) to the Special Works Organization in Pakistan (the cover organization building the Kahuta enrichment plant). The orders included machine tools as well as buses and ambulances. None of the exports, he claimed, breached regulations.

That implicit approval by the British authorities is the same pitch Griffin gave in today's New York Times. I don't think London was happy, but Griffin's trading probably gave them a glimpse of what Pakistan was up to. I am not aware that Griffin ever illegally exported anything, but I suspect he went fairly close to the line. I heard later that he had retired to France; perhaps he had made enough money. More likely, I suspect, he thought he might be pushing his luck. In March 1981, the director of a Swiss company supplying Pakistan with equipment to make uranium hexafluoride, the gaseous feedstock for centrifuges, had the fence surrounding his backyard neatly destroyed with explosive charges. It was presumed to be a subtle (if that's the right word) warning by the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency.

All this talk these days about the role Dubai also brings on a great sense of déjà vu. In the late 1970s, Pakistan tried to obscure its procurement efforts -- and perhaps safeguard them from the attentions of the Mossad -- by using the Persian Gulf sheikhdom as a cut-out. (Kuwait and Sharjah were also used.) I wrote another investigative piece for the Financial Times on December 22, 1980, revealing that inverters bought in Canada had been sent to Khalid Jassim General Trading, a Dubai company whose director was a then business partner of Griffin. I visited the company's offices and noticed a large package labeled "infrared thermometers," made by Mikron Instruments of New Jersey. Subsequent enquiries suggested to me that these thermometers would be ideal for measuring temperature without actually touching an object, for example, a centrifuge spinning at high speed (although they were supposedly destined for a Sharjah cement factory).

So, where were the British MI6 and the CIA when Dr. Khan started to export centrifuge equipment via Dubai to Iran, Libya, and North Korea? Some will say they were asleep. Wittier critics say they were looking for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, or fabricating the evidence. There is another possibility: I think there is much more to the emerging story than we are being told.

The official Pakistani explanation of Khan's nefarious deeds loads all the blame on him and says it was realized he was up to no good before his forced retirement in 2001. The explanation I am waiting for is why a May 2002 test-launch of a nuclear-capable Ghauri missile (technology swapped by North Korea in return for centrifuge secrets) was observed by delegations from North Korea and Libya, as solid sources report. (I am told there was also a Saudi prince there as well.) How does President Musharraf explain that one? After all, it was, as they say, on his watch.

Simon Henderson is a London-based associate of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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