

Nuclear Spinning: The Iran-Pakistan Link

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Forget, for the moment, Saddam's weapons of mass destruction -- or lack thereof. Consider instead the other WMD conundrum: Iran. Events in Pakistan, where two nuclear scientists were arrested last week, suggest the whole issue is about to blow. (Figuratively, that is.)

Last month, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the United Nations nuclear watchdog, declared, implausibly, that there was no evidence of Iran's trying to build an atomic bomb. Washington was gob-smacked. As with the proverbial duck, Iran's efforts looked like a nuclear-weapons program and sounded like a nuclear-weapons program. The trouble was the lack of proof sufficient to convince the pedants of the IAEA (which, incidentally, has never by itself discovered a clandestine nuclear-weapons program).

The Pakistani link is crucial to showing Iran's true motives. Pakistan, which tested two nuclear bombs in 1998, used centrifuges to make "highly" enriched (i.e., bomb-grade) uranium. Iran also has centrifuges. The IAEA discovered traces of highly enriched uranium on some of them. Tehran's reported explanation? "They came like that." From where? "We bought the equipment from a middleman."

The gossip is that Pakistan sold, directly or indirectly, the centrifuge equipment to Iran. The technology involves aluminum tubes -- confusingly, the same technology that Saddam Hussein was reported to be interested in, although, to the glee of the war doubters, aluminum tubes found in Iraq so far have proved to be nothing more dangerous than casings for battlefield rockets. Aluminum tubes for centrifuges are decidedly "old-tech" but, in the absence of an alternative, can do the job, given enough time.

Officially, Pakistan denies it transferred centrifuge technology to Iran. But that still leaves open the possibility that Pakistani scientists did a private deal with Tehran, for money or mischief. The suspect in the frame? Dr. Abdul Qader Khan, who retired nearly three years ago as head of the eponymous Khan Research Laboratory (KRL). But despite Khan's background, there is evidence that he is being set up and is, on this issue, innocent.

The current state of the friendship between the U.S. and Pakistan is complicated at best, as American soldiers being shot at from Pakistani positions along the border with Afghanistan will testify. Osama bin Laden was reportedly

sighted in the remote north-Pakistani town of Chitral recently. A more likely lair is somewhere in the vast, sprawling townships that make up Karachi, Pakistan's largest city on the Arabian Sea coast. President Musharraf, who retains the army uniform he was wearing when a 1999 coup brought him to power, juggles these tensions with Washington. Last month he was reported in the Los Angeles Times as saying that a trip by Khan to Iran had been about short-range missiles rather than nuclear issues. And, earlier this year, the Los Angeles Times quoted former Iranian diplomats as saying that Khan made several trips to Iran, beginning in 1987, and was given a villa on the Caspian Sea coast in return for his assistance.

This last report caught my eye as I once asked Khan whether he had ever been to Iran. I can remember his reply clearly: "Never." I have spoken with Khan or exchanged letters with him frequently over the years. He is often evasive but I think I can tell when he is telling a diplomatic lie. For the rest of the time, I think he is straightforward with me. I understand he stands by his claim of never having visited Iran.

The two nuclear scientists arrested last week were departmental directors at KRL. Dr. Mohammed Farooq and Dr. Yassin Chowhan were picked up at 10 P.M. on the night of December 1. They were taken away by Pakistani intelligence agents, accompanied, it is alleged, by English-speaking men, apparently CIA officers. Their homes in Rawalpindi, the city which merges into the capital, Islamabad, are reportedly under surveillance.

Dr. Farooq was in charge of the section at KRL that dealt with ties to foreign suppliers and customers for KRL products. KRL also makes a range of battlefield products for the Pakistani army, such as a version of a Chinese handheld antiaircraft missile. (It also makes the Pakistani version of the North Korean nuclear-capable Nodong missile.) Dr. Chowhan ran one of the assembly lines at KRL.

The assumption is that the two men will be held until they confess to assisting Dr. Khan in supplying centrifuges to Iran. Dr. Khan, now retired, is nominally an adviser to President Musharraf, but there is little evidence to show that his advice is sought very often. In the bitchy world of Pakistani politics, there is resentment that Dr. Khan is popularly considered "the father of the Islamic bomb."

So if Dr. Khan or some other Pakistani scientist did not supply centrifuge technology to Iran, who did? Suspicion falls on a Sri Lankan merchant formally based in Dubai, a member of his country's Muslim minority who has now returned home. The businessman acted as a conduit for Pakistan's orders of components and manufacturing equipment. Using that knowledge, he put in for extra orders of equipment and arranged a side deal with Iran. This scenario dates the start of Iran's centrifuge project to 1979, eight years earlier than the IAEA's assessment. Iran has refused to tell the IAEA the identity of this middleman.

But what about the traces of highly enriched uranium the IAEA found on the equipment in Iran? KRL apparently still uses some of its aluminum centrifuges alongside the later and more efficient ones made out of special steel. Others have been "scrapped and crushed." None has been exported. Perhaps Iran has been more successful at enrichment than it wants to admit.

Washington's motives are reasonably clear, even if not fully explained in public. Relations with Pakistan are very important. Iran's nuclear ambitions must be curtailed. Presumably if Dr. Khan is blamed, President Musharraf is forced, through embarrassment, into more cooperation with the U.S. But Iran's nuclear progress might be understated, and activities of an unscrupulous middleman might escape closer inspection. As with centrifuges themselves, there is a lot of spin.

Simon Henderson is an energy consultant and a London-based associate of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, which recently published his *The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and U.S. Strategy*. He wrote this commentary for the National Review. ❖

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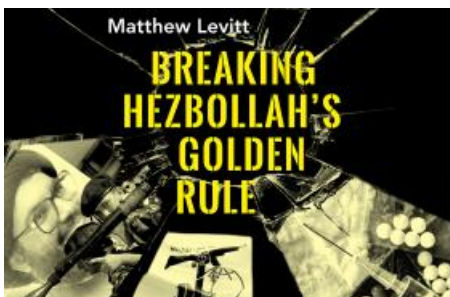
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