



## Afghanistan-Pakistan-Iran Radical Islam, Nuclear Weapons and Regional Security

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Islamic fundamentalism or radical Islam can be defined to mean a return to basic Islamic beliefs as enumerated in the Quran and Sunnah (what was heard by scholars from utterances of the Holy Prophet), as also 'ijtihad'- a corpus of transmitted theological and legal learning from Islamic beliefs outlined in the teachings of eminent theologians like Sayyid Qutb, Ruhullah Khomeini and Abul Ala Maududi. Some of these tenets can be seen to be intolerant and exclusivist, breeding political activism, extremism, fanaticism believing in corrupting influences of Western civilisation and espousing a virulent anti-Americanism. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 led by Ayatollah Khomeini is seen to represent the political success of Islamic fundamentalism.

In South Asia, Islamic radicalism received a fillip due to the export of Salafi-Wahabi ideological tenets from the mid-'70s. Fuelled by a spurt in wealth after the '73 oil crisis, Islamic proselytising organisations like the Rabitat al Alam e Islami and the World Islamic Council generously funded spawning of religious institutions of learning at the grass roots level – madrassas, which provided access to education to children of poorer rural families living at bare sustenance levels.

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The role of Super Powers and regional countries in countering the impact of the 1979 Iranian revolution, which brought temporal power within grasp of ecclesiastics and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan also contributed- the United States backed the use of radical Islam as a bulwark against expansion of Communism and militant Islamic outfits in Afghanistan were massively funded, provided safe haven in refugee camps of Peshawar and Quetta in Pakistan.

Conventional root causes of unemployment, poverty, growing disenchantment with feudal structures and a disappearing writ of effective State governance leading to abysmal failure of grievance redressal mechanisms coupled with emergence of rough and ready methods of local justice through Islamic shariat courts were also seen as causes.

A changing perception of Islamic history, growing attractiveness of the Pan-Islamic idea – of the oneness of the Ummah contributed gradually to develop a more intolerant interpretation of traditional Islamic tenets and values. Islamic scholars like Maudoodi gave comparatively moderate views on the concept of 'jihad'. In Arabic 'jihad' or 'jahd' means i) fighting against unbelievers and ii) striving to advance divine causes- this would justify violence only in self defence, to be used either individually or collectively, but war was justified only if authorised by the ruler, it could be used only against external enemies. Islamophobes on the other hand veered to 'jihad' as a purely military concept. They seek to justify violence- "bellum justum"- injustice can be dealt with, using violence even against civilians. They also sanctify the lead role of Islamic clerics or 'ulema' in issuing edicts or moral codes of right and wrong. This is combined with a visceral hatred

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of the West, more specifically of the United States and Israel. The concept of `takfir' or hatred of the non-believer or `kafir' is also propagated.

## I QUEST FOR NUCLEAR WEAPONS

### Pakistan

Pakistan's quest for nuclear weapons was India specific and State led. It received impetus after breakup of the country in 1971, seeking to address the growing asymmetry in conventional military strength. Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan worked in Netherlands from where he clandestinely acquired designs of uranium enrichment centrifuges from a Dutch-British-German consortium- Urenco- these were installed first at an experimental site at Nellore, near Islamabad (Pakistan Institute of Nuclear Technology-PINSTECH) and later shifted to a secret and heavily guarded site at Kahuta. German, Swiss and even South African companies were contacted at various stages of development of the Pakistani programme - for supplies of tritium, managing steel (Voest Alpine of Austria) and other mechanical components.

While the first stage of this clandestine process was acquisitive, the second phase was export-oriented. AQ Khan had tasted success, experienced widespread nationalist adulation and in later years at the helm of Pakistan's nuclear machinery, reached a position brooking little dissent or questioning of his actions- this engendered corruption and he amassed huge wealth through setting up of a commercial company with branches in Abu Dhabi and Malaysia, business affairs of which were entrusted to an adopted `god-son' Syed Abu Taher Bokhari. Using a network of Pakistani origin middlemen in western countries and some old business associates who had helped him in the first acquisition phase, AQ Khan indicated readiness to supply nuclear technology on project designs basis to interested international customers- including Iran, Iraq, Libya and notably, the only non-Islamic country - North Korea, with whom a

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quid pro quo arrangement to exchange missile technology know-how was explored and set up in the mid-'90s.

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### Iran

After the Tenet revelations, Iran acknowledged having received P-1 centrifuges from Pakistan, which were shown to visiting IAEA inspectors in Tehran. Iran however, claimed and continues to aver that its nuclear programme is designed for peaceful use of energy. It has since acquired more sophisticated know-how and modern centrifuges of the P-3 or even next generation (aluminum rotors) category. The number of centrifuges available at the heavily safeguarded facility at Natanz has been assessed to be between 5,000-10,000 centrifuges with generally accepted 19-20% level of enriched uranium stockpiles- more specifically, 2945 lbs or 1339 kgs- almost 2 tons worth- which would be enough for use in at least two warheads. Iranian scientists have been observed working on re-designing of the inner core of the Shahab-3 missile, a variant of the Chinese silkworm missile of ICBM capability.

No access has been given to IAEA inspectors by Iran to these facilities at Natanz or even to the nuclear research reactor believed to be located at the Kalaye Electric Company premises in Tehran- this company is also engaged in the forefront of other Iranian precision engineering initiatives. These include the so-called "green salt" project- involving conversion of uranium dioxide to nuclear fuel- which could have military applications.

Other facilities connected to Iran's nuclear development programme include the Heavy Water plant at Arak, the Uranium mining project at Gachin-Saghan, about 200 kms from Yazd, the Yellow Cake dumps at Ardekan, the nuclear

waste storage site at Esfahan and the recently commissioned, Russian aided nuclear power plant at Bushehr. Two other research reactors were earlier reported to be located at Bonab and Ramsar in north-western Iran. Recent media disclosures in the West have acknowledged detection by US drones of a new suspected Iranian nuclear plant near Qom. Mystery surrounds activities of several Iranian State controlled/State aided public sector industries/ companies which were suspected to be engaged in clandestine acquisition of nuclear related technology or components to take the Iranian nuclear quest forward- these included the Shahid Shahabadi Industrial Complex, the Ya Mahdi Industrial Complex(YMA), the Aviation Industries Organisation(AIO- formerly known as Iran Aircraft Manufacturing Industries-IAMI), the Dio Marine Industries Group( formerly MIO) and the Shahid Darvishi Marine Industries.

## II

### ISLAMIC RADICALS & NUCLEAR WEAPONS

While not overtly averring their desire to acquire or gain access to nuclear weapons as an essential step to eventual State power, fundamentalist and 'jehadi' organisations/ actors/ groups – in Pakistani and elsewhere in the region- have been strong supporters of acquiring a military nuclear capability so that the Ummah can counter Israel's alleged nuclear capability. In this context, Pakistan's nuclear arsenal emerges not merely as a national asset giving deterrent capability against a conventionally superior India but also as an Islamic bomb, whose use should be available to the entire Ummah. Islamists support sharing of Pakistan's nuclear assets with other muslim countries. In their eyes, Dr AQ Khan committed no offence by sharing nuclear technology with Iran and Libya, or even with North Korea, to get missile technology know-how in exchange.

There have been two known incidents, one – in August,2001 of overt contact between islamic fundamentalists and two disgruntled Pakistani nuclear scientists- Sultan Bashiruddin Mehmood and Chaudhry Abdul Majid and the other- in July,2009 of an abortive attempt by terrorists to target a bus carrying Pakistani nuclear facility personnel from Kahuta returning home in Rawalpindi. In the first case, the scientists in question were arrested, temporarily ferreted away to Myanmar to keep them away from prying American investigators. They were later released, in Oct 2001 after they claimed their effort to contact Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Jawahiri was connected to activities of and need for funding of an Islamic philanthropic organisation- the Taamir e Nau. In the latter case, a suicide

*Though the military leadership's collusion with the first phase of Dr.A.Q.Khan's nuclear acquisition quest was generally well-known and its complicity/awareness with the second, export phase was widely suspected, after the Tenet disclosures, the Establishment went to considerable pains to convince Western interlocutors that it had since put in place regulatory mechanisms to prevent such mishaps in future.*

bomber on a motor cycle who killed himself and injured 30 passengers of the bus. Investigations in this case were hushed up by the Pakistani military and the bus was later described as belonging to the non-nuclear Heavy Machineries Complex.

After 2006, Pakistan has introduced, with aid and advice from FBI- a Personnel Reliability Programme (PRP) for vetting of Pakistani scientists working in sensitive nuclear projects – this involves several tier physical security vetting- at plant sites, scrutiny at recruitment stage, periodic checks of family/social habits, screening of foreign visits. Usually, only functionally essential visits to China are allowed. These occur under strict state control conditions at both ends.

Missiles have been deployed under its Strategic Forces command but possibly with demated warheads. There have been threats of deployment of tactical battlefield weapons to counter the threat of the Indian Cold Start doctrine, despite denials from Indian sources about the veracity or existence of such a doctrine or tactics. However, fear of infiltration / penetration of Islamic mind set/ sympathies/ contacts among vetted personnel persists, especially after incidents of terror attacks in 2009-10 in high security areas like Rawalpindi cantonment parade grounds mosque or the Mehran Naval Base attack in May, 2011 which would have involved insider complicity and assistance.

### Recent Trends

Recent trends of population growth, urbanisation and social, cultural traits of youth in Pakistan indicate somewhat discordant phenomenon- they remain quite conservative in outlook, treating their religious and national identities as closely interlinked. Yet they continue to be acutely aware of their sectarian and ethnic affiliations. Conservatism or views on role of religion do not, however, automatically brand them as extremist

or fundamentalist. While there is bitterness about lack of effective governance by State mechanisms, alternate options advocated by groups like the Tehrik e Taliban (TTP) do not find popular support.

Similar perceptions can be found in Iran. The orthodox Islamic clergy is already dealing with trappings of political power but the youth regard the controls in society with mixed feelings. In Afghanistan too, the earlier moral codes (layha) introduced by the Taliban in rural areas under their control have been amended to bring in conditional or partial acceptance of ideas relating to access to education for Afghan women or relevance of music or other societal mores in daily life or conduct.

### III IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL SECURITY

#### Pakistan

On the nuclear disarmament front, Pakistan has consistently not agreed to adhere to the no first use doctrine. It has blocked progress on limiting of fissile materials or on accepting any form of controls on grounds of superior Indian capacities. It has sought parity of treatment on civilian nuclear aid. On the other hand, a recent (2011) report published in the Bulletin of Atomic Scientist, authored by Hans M Kristensen & Robert S Norris, holds that Pakistan has the world's fastest growing nuclear arsenal – which includes enriched uranium stockpiles emerging from Kahuta as also Plutonium being produced at the Khushab Reactors I & II. A stockpile of 110-130 warheads has been estimated to exist.

In the Pakistan military's mind, there may be two new, non-India specific factors favouring continuing nuclear acquisition- the increasing anti-Americanism in its ranks- officers and men- forcing it to see America as the enemy number one even in respect of its nuclear capacities. Secondly, accelerated nuclear development capacity can be regarded as insurance in case of things going wrong, either on the deteriorating economic front or in terms of being treated as a pariah in political isolation.

#### Iran

If Iran continues on its present path, despite official protestations, estimates of Western powers- notably USA, UK & Israel- are likely to prove correct and Iran may acquire nuclear status. It would then be the world's tenth nuclear State.

If Iran becomes nuclear, can Saudi Arabia afford

to be left behind?

The Iranian nuclear programme has been deeply troubling for Saudi Arabia. This has been openly admitted, repeatedly in recent times, by its former Intelligence chief, Prince Turki bin Feisal, now heading a prestigious Think Tank. Though the Saudis may aspire, the general perception of nuclear experts and academics is that there is no technical or military infrastructure available there for such a pursuit of nuclear technical capability. The prevailing ideological mindset of its ruling class has been conservative and slow to adapt to modern innovative skill acquisition. In the interim, the pursuit of nuclear quest may well be indirect- through setting up first of some nuclear reactors (16 to be built- as per recent media reports). These could provide spent fuel for Plutonium processing later.

Though Saudi oil largesse has been available to Pakistan in the past, which help has possibly been reciprocated by a Pakistani military footprint- both in terms of physical presence on demand, inside Saudi Arabia as well by way of assistance in training of Saudi military officers, especially pilots in Pakistani Training institutes, Pakistan's enthusiasm for such help or even for the Iranian bomb may well be subdued. Officially, Pakistan supports Iran's right to acquire nuclear technology but all voices within Pakistan's establishment do not necessarily extend unqualified support. Recent Wikileaks exposures bear out such efforts in Gen Musharraf's time to dissuade Iran from pursuing its nuclear programme. If Iran becomes nuclear and Saudis follow suit, Pakistan's dilemma would be to choose between a politically powerful Shia neighbour and a financially succulent, previously benevolent Sunni State.

#### Afghanistan

Non-nuclear factors will prevail in making the future as unpredictable in Afghanistan. How the protracted peace negotiations between the Taliban and Americans unfold, what will be the formulas of power sharing which will be suitable and inclusive enough to bring ethnic players other than Pashtuns on board remain quite uncertain at present. How regional powers like Iran, Russia and India adapt to any arrangements acceptable to Americans and Pakistanis remains to be seen. Whether there will be changes in the Afghan constitution, as a pre-condition to such power sharing also remains an imponderable factor which shall definitely play a role in shaping the future.