

# The Nuclear Network of Abdul Qadeer Khan

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Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins, *The Nuclear Jihadist: The True Story of the Man who Sold the World's Most Dangerous Secrets...and How We could have Stopped Him*, New York: Twelve, 2007, 432 pages

Adrian Levy and Catherine Scott-Clark, *Deception: Pakistan, the United States, and the Secret Trade in Nuclear Weapons*, New York: Walker & Company, 2007, 608 pages

David Armstrong and Joseph J. Trento, *America and the Islamic Bomb: The Deadly Compromise*, New Hampshire: Steerforth Press, 2007, 288 pages

**H**e is a hero to the Pakistanis – the man who is credited with producing the Muslim nuclear bomb with his own hands, Pakistan's answer to the nuclear capacity of its historic rival, India. For the Western world he symbolizes the epitome of a new and dangerous phenomenon – a network of private individuals who with the encouragement or ignorance of the authorities trade or sell technology for manufacturing nuclear weapons to anyone who is interested, including countries that are considered highly dangerous. A Western intelligence officer was once quoted as saying that the world would have done well to make Abdul Qadeer Khan "disappear."

Khan, a young and frustrated scientist who could not find work in Pakistan found himself at the heart of a sensitive plant in the Netherlands that produced centrifuges for the European nuclear energy industry. Khan's initial attempts at enlisting in Paki-

stan as a source of knowledge about sensitive technology needed to produce nuclear arms failed. However, he did not despair and ultimately succeeded in contributing his services to the Pakistani nuclear bomb venture. Capitalizing on serious security loopholes, Khan managed to copy most of the sensitive sketches and amass details of dozens of subcontractors who were involved in the production of centrifuges, and transfer them to Pakistan. Despite the suspicions of the authorities in Holland and other Western intelligence bodies, including the CIA, Khan succeeded with his private espionage operation and returned to Pakistan with valuable know how.

His charisma and impressive abilities to establish ties with political and military leaders helped Khan achieve a central role in Pakistan's developing nuclear industry. However, Khan was not only motivated by national interests. In establishing an alternate body

to Pakistan's official nuclear administration, Khan often focused more on his rivals in Pakistan than on the development of the bomb. Moreover, Khan managed to position himself in the eyes of the Pakistani public as "the father of the bomb," even though in practice his contribution was more limited, particularly with regard to the scientific side of the project.

It is likely that Khan's story would have been less intriguing had he stopped at this point. However, together with work on the Pakistani bomb and its launch devices, Khan began to trade in expertise and technology with other countries, including North Korea, Iran, and Libya. At the same time, people associated with him made contact with extremist Islamic elements, including the al-Qaeda organization.

Intelligence agencies around the world monitored Khan's network for several years, but due to a series of failures the network operated almost without interference. It was only at the beginning of the twenty-first century, following a number of intelligence successes and growing recognition of the danger of Khan's distribution network, that the Americans forced the Pakistani government to arrest Khan. Khan, a national hero in his homeland, received an almost immediate pardon but was placed under house arrest. Other activists in his network were arrested around the world, but most were quickly released. Despite an abundance of information gathered over time about the operation of Khan's network, even today there are numerous questions about its activity, including the extent of know how and equipment it distributed, the recipient countries, and the network's status following Khan's arrest.

In the last few years a large number of books and articles have been written about

Abdul Qadeer Khan and his nuclear technology distribution network. While most of the early books were of a journalistic sensational nature, recently several new books have been published, some of very high quality.

*The Nuclear Jihadist* is almost certainly one of the best and most extensive books written about the affair to date. Though recommended especially for people with little previous knowledge of the Khan affair, readers more familiar with the issue will also find it of great interest. Based on an impressive number of interviews with most of the main characters involved, including in Pakistan, journalists Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins pieced together a comprehensive picture and produced a highly readable book. It reveals previously unknown details concerning the way the intelligence and security authorities in the West managed to penetrate Khan's network and even recruited some of the network's members for collaboration.

Much of the book is devoted to the political and intelligence failures that allowed Khan's network to operate for so many years almost undisturbed. For example, over a long period, US intelligence officer Rich Barlow tried to caution the US against ignoring the issue of Pakistan and the nuclear bomb. However, instead of successfully sounding the alarm, he was reprimanded, sacked, and, though ultimately acquitted, even accused of committing a series of security breaches. While Barlow's story is of secondary importance to the affair, it provides a fascinating example of the possible fate that meets people who try to stand up to the system.

*Deception*, by British journalists Adrian Levy and Catherine Scott-Clark, examines the Khan story from a slightly different angle. As implied by its subtitle, *Pakistan, the United States, and the Secret Trade in Nuclear*

Weapons, the book looks at a wider issue – the Americans turning a blind eye to Pakistan's efforts to achieve a nuclear capability. Numbering almost 600 pages, the book describes in great detail – possibly in too much detail – the history of relations between the US and Pakistan, focusing on the nuclear dimension. Like *The Nuclear Jihadist*, this book describes the Khan network affair in depth, but depicts it as part of the wider story of several US administrations that preferred to allow Pakistan to obtain nuclear weapons in return for Pakistani cooperation on other issues, such as fighting against the Soviets in Afghanistan and later, combating terror.

The Israeli reader may find special interest in the parts of the book that address the Israeli response to the Pakistani nuclear program. The authors present a series of joint Israeli-Indian programs designed to thwart the Pakistani program, including the possibility of a joint military operation. In the absence of confirmation from Israeli sources, some of whom are quoted with regard to other issues in the book, it is difficult to authenticate these details, but the authors made a great effort to base them on reliable Indian sources. However, the major shortcoming of the book is its scope. The book is laden with details, some superfluous. In addition, the sections that touch on intelligence efforts to foil the Khan network are inferior to those that appear in *The Nuclear Jihadist*. Nonetheless, for anyone looking for a wider picture of the subject, as well as those interested in US-Pakistani relations, the book is worth perusal.

*America and the Islamic Bomb*, by American authors David Armstrong and Joseph Trento, is almost the complete antithesis of the two other books. The cover picture of the mushrooming nuclear explosion cloud on the cover and the subtitle – *The Deadly Compromise* – reveal much about the book's orientation.

The book, significantly shorter than the other two, seems an attempt to exploit public interest in the affair for commercial intent. While the other books are based on impressive research and contain references to a large number of first time interviews and documents, Armstrong and Trento compile little more than a summary of press reports about the affair, most of which were released in the Western media. The book adopts a highly dramatic tone, reminiscent of a populist newspaper article. Thus, those who are looking for a book on this subject, be they newcomers to the affair or somewhat knowledgeable about it, are likely to be disappointed with *America and the Islamic Bomb*.

Common to the three books, as well as other books written previously about the Khan affair, is the sense that despite Pakistan's attempts to describe the proliferation of nuclear technology as Khan's private initiative, in practice Pakistan has at the very least turned a blind eye to the network's activity. More likely, it was involved to a significant degree.

Also like previous works, these three books leave a considerable number of questions in the affair unanswered. For example, it is known that Khan visited a large number of Middle Eastern countries. What exactly



did he do in these countries? The books offer no definitive answers to this. In addition, when the Khan network broke up, at least in its original form, its members dispersed in all directions, as did some of the network's equipment. What happened to them surely interests intelligence organizations around the world, but this information is as yet unanswered.

All three books depict Khan as a Pakistani nationalist who wanted to help his country obtain the wished for nuclear capability. However, in time, Khan turned himself into

the real story. The pursuit of riches, the trappings of power, and principally honor were the most important objectives for Khan. Thus Pakistan's ultimate attainment of the bomb, though not only thanks to Khan, has become the secondary story. What has assumed center stage is Pakistan as a country that symbolizes the danger of nuclear proliferation to "irresponsible" countries. These books underscore the risks of turning a blind eye to suspected nuclear proliferation activity, particularly if we are looking to avoid repeating this in the future.