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**‘Nuclear Sword of the Moslem World’?: America, Britain, Pakistan, and the
‘Islamic bomb’, 1977-1980**

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Introduction

In advance of Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's March 2015 address to the US Congress, an editorial in the conservative *Washington Times* commented:

Mr Netanyahu has the opportunity to talk in plain speech with no equivocation about the threat that Iran, armed with the Islamic bomb, poses to the survival of the Jewish state and perhaps the United States as well. Perilous times call for strong measures, and these are perilous times.¹

In 2006-07, a slew of books was released with provocative titles such as *The Nuclear Jihadist* and *Allah's Bomb*. A few years earlier, journalists such as Jim Hoagland of the *Washington Post* asked if Pakistan would be able to 'say no to rich Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia and Libya when they offer to buy an Islamic bomb?'² However, it was in the late 1970s that revelations about an 'Islamic bomb' – a nuclear weapon originating in Pakistan but which would allegedly be proliferated to other Muslim states because of the bonds of faith – came to the fore. These became tied to stories about Pakistani metallurgist Abdul Qadeer Khan's role in appropriating nuclear technology from Europe, thus ensuring the religious and clandestine elements of Pakistani nuclear ambitions became the dominant, intertwined public narratives. These real and imagined revelations about Islamabad's atomic aspirations energised the media in a way that the more pedestrian details of non-proliferation diplomacy had not.

¹ 'The World in Peril', 2 March, 2015, *The Washington Times*, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/mar/2/editorial-benjamin-netanyahu-to-expose-obamas-iran> (accessed 3 March, 2015)

² 'Nuclear Deceit', 10 November, 2002, *W[ashington] P[ost]*, B7

Despite this, there has been little historiographical investigation into governmental responses to the issue.³ In order to fill this gap, this article investigates how the American and British governments – the two actors actively trying to prevent Pakistani acquisition of nuclear capability in the 1970s – responded to the meme between 1977 and 1980, arguing that while the concept generated considerable public heat, policymakers saw it as lacking in merit and much more of a propaganda issue than an imminent reality. In our post-9/11 world, infused with Islamophobia, the War on Terror’s legacy, and apprehension about Islamic nuclear terrorism, asserting that fear of pan-Muslim nuclear capability was insignificant seems counter-intuitive.⁴ Indeed, there is an impressive body of historical research that demonstrates the importance of cultural factors in the Cold War era and, more specifically, nuclear policies.⁵ However, an analysis of official archives from 1977-80 indicates the ‘Islamic bomb’ scare’s lack of meaningful influence on policy.

³ For journalistic investigations, see David Armstrong and Joseph Trento, *America and the Islamic Bomb: The Deadly Compromise* (Hanover: Steerforth Press, 2007), 89-91; Gordon Corera, *Shopping for Bombs: Nuclear Proliferation, Global Insecurity and the Rise and Fall of the A. Q. Khan Network* (London: Hurst & Co., 2006); Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins, *The Man From Pakistan: The True Story of the World’s Most Dangerous Nuclear Smuggler* (New York: Hachette, 2007); Adrian Levy and Catherine Scott-Clark, *Deception: Pakistan, the United States, and the Secret Trade in Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Walker & Co., 2007); Al Venter, *Allah’s Bomb: The Islamic Quest For Nuclear Weapons* (Guilford: Lyons Press, 2007); and Steve Weissman and Herbert Krosney, *The Islamic Bomb: The Nuclear Threat to Israel and the Middle East* (New York: Times Books, 1981). Academic studies addressing the issue include those by cultural anthropologist Hugh Gusterson in ‘Nuclear Weapons and the Other in the Western Imagination,’ *Cultural Anthropology*, 14:1 (February, 1999), 111-143, 125-26; physicist Pervez Hoodbhoy in ‘Myth Building: The “Islamic Bomb,”’ *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (June, 1993), 42-49; policy analyst Rodney W. Jones in *Nuclear Proliferation: Islam, the Bomb, and South Asia* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981); and political scientist Samina Yasmeen in ‘Is Pakistan’s Nuclear Bomb an Islamic Bomb?,’ *Asian Studies Review*, 25:2 (June, 2001), 201-215. The mainstay of analysis is over whether or not Pakistan’s nuclear programme was ‘Islamic’, and does not delve into Western responses.

⁴ See Graham Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2004) for a typical example of alarmist analysis of the atomic terror threat. For more reasoned analyses, see Charles Ferguson and William Potter, *The Four Faces of Nuclear Terrorism* (Monterey: Center for Nonproliferation Studies 2004) and Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, *Islam and the Bomb: Religious Justification for and Against Nuclear Weapons* (Cambridge: Belfer Center, 2011).

⁵ Matthew Jones, *After Hiroshima: The United States, Race, and Nuclear Weapons in Asia, 1945-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010); Shane J. Maddock, *Nuclear Apartheid: The Quest for American Atomic Supremacy from World War II to the Present* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); and George Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb: The Impact On Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). On religion, see Dianne Kirby (ed.), *Religion and the Cold War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003); Philip Muehlenbeck (ed.), *Religion and the Cold War: A Global Perspective* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012); Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012), 411-600.

To demonstrate this, this article assesses the ‘Islamic bomb’ scare and investigates how policymakers in Washington and London responded to it. By so doing, this article demonstrates that although the ‘Islamic bomb’ *was* present in official discussions of Pakistan’s nuclear programme, understandings were more nuanced than in public discourses. There were those in officialdom who emphasised the possibility of an ‘Islamic bomb’, but on the whole the American and British governments concluded that there was little – if any – evidence to back up these accusations. In the media, the ‘Islamic bomb’ threat became the reality, even if that reality was largely a manufactured one. Similar to the phrase ‘weapons of mass destruction’ in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the deployment of the words ‘Islamic bomb’ became ritualised within the media.⁶

The meme wove together religion, geography, and ideology at a time when Islam was becoming the dominant signifier of the vague territory that is the Middle East.⁷ What originated as a nuclear programme catalysed by India and Pakistan’s regional, South Asian conflict grew and metamorphosed into a construct encompassing a vast swathe of territory, including Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula, central Africa, and Libya. The common factor amongst this diverse set of territories was their perceived belonging to the imagined community of the ‘Islamic world’. The ‘Islamic bomb’ therefore took Pakistan’s nuclear programme and splashed it across a geographical arc from the mountains of South Asia to the deserts of North Africa, putting Islamabad’s atomic ambitions into a trans-continental context. The meme was also a vessel containing not just alleged Muslim nuclear unity, but Libya’s anti-Western ‘fanaticism’, Iraq’s socialist Ba’athism, Iran’s revolutionary ideology, Pakistan’s

⁶ See Ido Oren and Ty Solomon, ‘WMD, WMD, WMD: Securitisation through ritualized incantation of ambiguous phrases’, *Review of International Studies*, 41:2 (April, 2015), 313-336.

⁷ Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East Since 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 200.

military-Islamic thinking, and Middle Eastern terrorism. The ‘Islamic bomb’ implied a common identity that challenged Western interests, eliding nuanced understandings of the manifest differences between states, the ideological positions of their leaders, and their national desires.

During the Cold War, there were pro-American and pro-Soviet states, states representing various Islamic sects, and states – such as Libya and Pakistan – vying for leadership positions within the Muslim world. Pakistan used its nuclear programme to make itself unique, nuclear weapons forming part of a quest for regional leadership based on religious community.⁸ For Pakistani leaders Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Mohammad Zia ul-Haq the ‘Islamic bomb’ legitimised the nationalist reasoning behind the nuclear programme.⁹ National security and a political desire for nuclear power were the main driving forces, but the rhetoric allowed both leaders to present Western non-proliferation efforts as anti-Muslim, not just anti-Pakistani. This is not, however, to assert a hard division between the sacred and the secular. As Husain Haqqani notes, since its founding Pakistan has found itself in tension between ‘mosque and military.’¹⁰ Islam remains a fundamental component of Pakistani identity, often a means of differentiating itself from India.¹¹ Bhutto in particular aimed to remodel Pakistan’s image in foreign eyes, emphasising his socialist ideals and ties with the Muslim world.¹² Zia emphasised Islam’s role in political and civil society, striving to mould Pakistan to his vision of an Islamic state and appealing to the military, harder-line Islamic radicals,

⁸ Yasmeen, ‘Pakistan’s Nuclear Bomb’, 202.

⁹ Ibid, 202-203.

¹⁰ Husain Haqqani, *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005).

¹¹ Aparna Pande, ‘Foreign Policy of an Ideological State: Islam in Pakistan’s International Relations’ (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston, 2010), xi.

¹² Feroz Hassan Khan, *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 97-98.

and widespread anti-Indian sentiment.¹³ As Andrew Rotter observes, US policymakers viewed Pakistan's Muslims as fellow monotheists – contrasting with polytheist, 'depraved' Indian Hinduism – who were 'manly, energetic, and tough-minded in the face of the Communist threat.'¹⁴ Moreover – although the relationship was frequently rocky – Washington saw Islamabad as the more reliable partner into the 1970s.

Beyond the situation of Pakistan, two key contexts surround the outcry over the 'Islamic bomb'. Firstly, there were the American and British attempts to derail Pakistan's nuclear programme. After India's May 1974 nuclear test, Washington and London grew concerned about the threat of an atomic-armed Pakistan. Thus, the two governments campaigned to prevent Islamabad acquiring a plutonium producing nuclear fuel reprocessing plant from France, achieving success in 1978 when Paris publically announced the deal's cancellation. By this stage a more pressing concern had appeared. Beginning in late 1977, Britain had fed information to US president Jimmy Carter's administration about Pakistan's orchestration of a global purchasing campaign to procure the materials for uranium enrichment centrifuges. Although America – once Carter's subordinates had been convinced that the purchasing programme was a genuine threat – and Britain made efforts to prevent Pakistani acquisition of uranium enrichment capacity, the skilful Pakistani planning, the recalcitrance of key nuclear supplier states, and the difficulties inherent in enforcing vague international standards for nuclear trade hampered these efforts.¹⁵ Pakistan's covert procurement activities eventually – on May 28, 1998 – allowed it set off five nuclear explosions beneath the hills of Balochistan.

¹³ Ibid, 99.

¹⁴ Andrew J. Rotter, 'Christians, Muslims, and Hindus: Religion and U.S.-South Asian Relations, 1947-1954', *Diplomatic History*, 24:4 (Fall 2000), 593-613; Andrew J Rotter, 'Saidism Without Said: Orientalism and U.S. Diplomatic History,' *The American Historical Review*, 105:4 (October, 2000), 1214.

¹⁵ Malcolm Craig, 'The United States, the United Kingdom, and Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia: The Case of Pakistan, 1974-1980' (Ph.D. dissertation, Edinburgh, 2014).

The second major context was Iran's February 1979 Revolution and the rise of modern, political Islam. The Revolution (a popular uprising that caught the Carter administration completely off-guard and drove Shah Reza Pahlavi, America's staunchest regional ally, from power) dramatically brought a new form of political Islamic radicalism to Western public attention. The 'loss' of Iran dramatically altered America's strategic, regional position, while the later hostage crisis and violent misunderstandings rooted in misconceptions about US attitudes negatively influenced public perceptions of Islam.¹⁶ Armed radicals stormed the Al-Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, igniting pan-Islamic protests when rumours circulated that the United States and Israel were behind the defilement of Islam's holiest site. The most serious protest was the burning of the US Embassy in Islamabad, where a Marine Corps guard was killed. Occurring in the month American hostages were taken in Tehran, Carter's national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski feared that the situation was becoming one of America versus Islam.¹⁷ It was in this atmosphere – with Islam apparently growing in power – that the 'Islamic bomb' surfaced. Driven by Pakistani rhetoric, the media's ritualisation of the phrase, Israeli and Indian pressure, and increased Islamic militancy, 1979 saw the fear of Muslim nuclear weapons invigorate public debate about Pakistani atomic aspirations.

Public Reactions

Writing from prison after his 1977 ouster by the military, Bhutto claimed that Pakistan was near to a nuclear breakthrough, asserting, 'The Christian, Jewish, and Hindu

¹⁶ Douglas Little, 'The Cold War in the Middle East: Suez Crisis to Camp David Accords', in Odd Arne Westad and Melvyn P. Leffler, *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 325; Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 303; Fawaz Gerges, *America and Political Islam: Clash of Cultures or Clash of Interests?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 7-8.

¹⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1983), 484.

civilizations have this [nuclear] capability. The communist powers also possess it. Only the Islamic civilization was without it, but that position was about to change.’¹⁸ During 1978, Bhutto’s usurper Zia linked nuclear technology and Islamic faith, stating, ‘[T]he Jews have got it. Then why should Pakistan, which is considered part of the Muslim world, be deprived of this technology?’ and, ‘No Muslim country has any [nuclear weapons]. If Pakistan possesses such a weapon it would reinforce the power of the Muslim world.’¹⁹ The visit of Libyan representatives to Islamabad in mid-August prompted comment on a potential Pakistani-Libyan nuclear alliance and, if the French cancelled the reprocessing plant contract, cooperation in building such a facility.²⁰

Western media did not popularise the ‘Islamic bomb’ until the Iranian Revolution’s tumultuous aftermath. A pivotal moment was the West German ZDF television channel’s March exposure of Khan’s theft of centrifuge designs from the multinational Urenco plant in the Netherlands. ZDF proposed that ‘radical Arab countries,’ like Libya ‘whose hatred of Israel and all those who desire peace in the Middle East is well known’ financed Pakistan.²¹ From ZDF’s programme onwards, the ‘Islamic bomb’ became a media trope with the conspiracy theory emerging from the genuine conspiracy of Pakistan’s covert attempt to gain enrichment capability.

Drawing on the ZDF report, the US media repeatedly placed the Pakistani programme within a pan-Islamic context.²² CBS television painted an apocalyptic

¹⁸ Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, *If I Am Assassinated*, www.bhutto.org/books-english.php (accessed 1 May 2013), 151, originally published by Vikas Press, New Delhi, 1979. From 1972-77, Bhutto made no mention of any Islamic dimension to Pakistan’s nuclear programme. See Ashok Kapur, *Pakistan’s Nuclear Development* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1987), 181.

¹⁹ Burdett to Wilmshurst, ‘Pakistan: Reprocessing Plant,’ May 15, 1978, [Kew] T[he] N[ational] A[rchives of the United Kingdom] F[oreign and] C[ommonwealth] O[ffice Records] 96/822, 1; U[nited] S[tates] E[mbassy] Islamabad to S[tate] D[eartment], ‘Nuclear Reprocessing,’ 6 August 1978, The National Security Archive electronic briefing book T[he] U[nited] S[tates and] P[akistan’s] Q[uest for the] B[omb], Doc.11.

²⁰ Islamabad to FCO, ‘Further Visit of Libyan Vice-President to Pakistan: 15-17 August,’ 17 August 1978, TNA FCO96/823.

²¹ ‘Pakistan: Nuclear,’ 2 April 1979, TNA FCO96/950; Transcript of ZDF broadcast, appended to Carter to Granger, ‘Pakistan,’ 20 April 1979, TNA FCO37/2203, 2-3.

²² ‘Pakistan Denies it is developing Nuclear Arms,’ *WP*, 9 April 1979, front page; ‘Arms sales to Pakistan Urged to Stave Off A-Bomb There,’ *WP*, 6 April 1979, A7; ‘How Pakistan Ran the Nuke Round the End,’ *N[ew] Y[ork]*

picture of Middle Eastern nuclear warfare where ‘reliable’ informants proffered information that led reporter Bill McLaughlin to contend that, ‘Libya wants it [a Pakistani nuclear weapon] to be the nuclear sword of the Moslem world. And Pakistan not only has close relations with Libya, it is also deeply committed to the Palestine Liberation Organization.’²³ Observers in Washington and London concluded that McLaughlin’s informants were quite likely Israeli.²⁴

In Britain, the media and MPs speculated about Muslim nuclear proliferation. The liberal *Guardian* unquestioningly referenced an ‘Islamic bomb’ in multiple stories on the Pakistani programme and the Khan imbroglio.²⁵ The publicity prompted MPs to ask awkward questions in parliament. Leo Abse, Frank Allaun, Bob Cryer, Jim Marshall, David Stoddart, and Tam Dalyell – all from the Labour Party’s anti-nuclear grass roots – queried British involvement in the scandal and government approaches to the Pakistani problem.²⁶ Abse was most vocal initially, asking the new Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher if she was aware that the Khan Affair had brought the possibility of an ‘Islamic bomb’ that would subvert the Western position with Middle Eastern oil producers that much closer?²⁷ Thatcher remained silent regarding Islamic nuclear weapons posing a threat to the West’s status.

In Washington, Senators and members of Congress brought the meme into their debating chambers. William Edwards (D-CA) and Fortney Stark (D-CA) had news

T[imes], 29 April 1979, E5; ‘Arms Sales to Pakistan Urged to Stave Off A-Bomb There,’ *WP*, 6 August 1979, A7; ‘Pakistan: The Quest for Atomic Bomb [sic],’ *WP*, 27 August 1979, A1.

²³ Transcript of CBS Evening News, ‘Special Report on the Pakistani-Islamic Bomb, part 2,’ broadcast 12 June 1979, TNA FCO96/956, 2.

²⁴ Pakenham to Alston, ‘Nuclear Pakistan,’ June 25, 1979, TNA FCO37/2206.

²⁵ ‘Zia uninterested in N-weapons, says Desai,’ *T[he] Guardian*, 22 June 1979, 6; ‘Dutch step up inquiry after security slip which ‘gave hydrogen bomb to Pakistan,’’ *TG*, 22 June 1979, 6; ‘Security breach ‘cover-up’ at uranium plant,’ *TG*, June 29, 1979, 3.

²⁶ *TG*, 22 June 1979; *TG*, 29 June 1979.

²⁷ Leo Abse, House of Commons Debate, 3 July 1979, *Hansard Online* hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1979/jul/03/tokyo-summit-meeting#S5CV0969P0_19790703_HOC_223 (accessed May10, 2013).

items on the ‘Islamic bomb’ read into the record.²⁸ Lester Wolff (D-NY) – in an angry debate on the Libyan business connections of president Carter’s wayward brother Billy – argued that Libya was ‘bankrolling Pakistan’s nuclear development program with an eye to acquiring an “Islamic bomb”’.²⁹

Official Pakistani protests did little to curtail speculation. Having previously utilised ‘Islamic bomb’ language, senior figures in Islamabad recognised their rhetoric’s danger in the febrile atmosphere. Officials denied that the now implicitly admitted nuclear programme was anything other than an enterprise created by and for the Pakistani state. Zia cryptically commented to the BBC, ‘It does not mean that Pakistan one day will make a bomb and it will fly it off [sic] in an umbrella to its Arab friends and say here is the bomb, now throw it down the drain. How can that be done?’³⁰ The media reporting infuriated Pakistani minister of foreign affairs Agha Shahi, who repudiated connections between the Islamic world and the nuclear project, contending that the media commentary represented part of an anti-Pakistani campaign.³¹ An editorial followed in the semi-official *Pakistan Times* railing against the ‘Islamic bomb’ as a ‘Western created myth’ that was ‘part of the process of rallying the non-Islamic world against the Islamic people.’³² Zia, Shahi, and the Pakistani media were unwilling to recognise that the ‘Islamic bomb’ was born from their rhetoric.

Throughout the summer and autumn of 1979, the press continued to posit a pan-Islamic nuclear project centred on Pakistan. American journalist Don Oberdorfer buried administration statements on the lack of evidence for an ‘Islamic bomb’ at the foot of an

²⁸ William D. Edwards, ‘MCPL Nuclear Alert Series, IV,’ 12 July 1979, *Congressional Record*, 96th Session, 18414-18415; Fortney H. Stark, ‘MCPL Nuclear Alert Series V,’ 6 September 1979, *CR96*, 23432-23433; Fortney H. Stark, ‘Pakistan’s Nuclear Program,’ 23 October 1979, *CR96*, 29252-29253

²⁹ Lester L. Wolff, ‘Resolution of Inquiry into the Matter of Billy Carter,’ 10 September 1980, *CR96*, 24958.

³⁰ Michael Charlton, Interview with Mohammad Zia ul-Haq, Transcript, 21 June 1979, TNA FCO96/955, 1.

³¹ U[nited] K[ingdom] E[mbassy] Islamabad to FCO, ‘Pakistan Nuclear,’ 2 July 1979, TNA FCO96/956, 1.

³² UKE Islamabad to FCO, ‘Pakistan Nuclear: Agha Shahi’s Press Briefing,’ 2 July 1979, TNA FCO96/956, 2-3.

article on Congressional disquiet.³³ Sunanda Datta-Ray, reporting from Calcutta for the *Guardian*, referenced the ‘intense speculation about the imminence of the Libyan financed “Islamic bomb”’.³⁴ A subsequent article on British links to the clandestine Pakistani purchasing programme ignored official comment about the meme’s speculative nature and once more suggested Libyan financing for the project.³⁵ In India, D.K. Palit and P.K.S. Namboodiri published *Pakistan’s Islamic Bomb*, arguing Pakistan was engaging in a pan-Islamic nuclear project.³⁶ The book contributed nothing new to the debate, offering no proof of ‘Arab’ funding for Pakistan’s programme and leaving the project’s Islamic nature implicit.³⁷

On 9 December, *Observer* journalists Colin Smith and Shyam Bhatia contended that ‘Dr Khan Stole the Bomb For Islam’, following up on mid-year stories alleging British links to the Pakistani nuclear programme.³⁸ Smith and Bhatia amplified this a week later with another article considering the wider implications of pan-Islamic nuclear proliferation.³⁹ These articles inspired Tam Dalyell to raise the matter in parliament, delivering a philippic against the Pakistani nuclear programme and the prospect of atomic proliferation in the Islamic world.⁴⁰ After pointing towards a ‘potential world holocaust’ originating in the Arab world or Asia, he argued that:

‘This is a spine-chilling prospect – a dream of nightmare proportions ... an Islamic bomb is more spine-chilling than the whole nuclear armament in the hands of the men in the Kremlin and in Washington. Great governments, such as

³³ ‘Arms sales to Pakistan Urged to Stave Off A-Bomb There,’ *WP*, 6 April 1979, A7.

³⁴ ‘Pie in the nuclear sky may save Charan Singh,’ *TG*, 19 August 1979, 7.

³⁵ ‘Pakistan bomb link denied,’ *TG*, 23 August 1979, 3.

³⁶ D K Palit and P K S Namboodiri, *Pakistan’s Islamic Bomb* (New Delhi, 1979).

³⁷ UKE Islamabad to FCO, ‘Pakistan’s Islamic Bomb: An Indian Survey,’ 1 August 1979, TNA FCO37/2206.

³⁸ ‘How Dr Khan Stole the Bomb for Islam,’ *The Observer* (hereafter *TO*), 9 December 1979, 11.

³⁹ ‘Atoms for War,’ *TO*, 16 December 1979, 12.

⁴⁰ ‘MPs to debate atom bomb revelations,’ *TO*, 16 December 1979, 1; ‘MP Praises Observer,’ *TO*, 23 December 1979, 14.

those of the Soviet Union or the United States, can be counted upon to act with deliberation ... but the bad dream come true of a Gadaffi [sic] bomb or an ayatollah bomb is altogether different.⁴¹

Dalyell's apocalyptically orientalist speech symbolised how embedded the 'Islamic bomb' had become in discussions about the intersections between nuclear technology and the Islamic world. He personified the parliamentary pressure on the government, his barrage of questions covering the Khan Affair, covert purchasing, and the 'Islamic bomb'.⁴² On 17 January 1980, Thatcher responded to Dalyell's probing, assuring him of government action to prevent the Khan affair's repetition.⁴³ Shortly thereafter, Dalyell reiterated his 'nightmare' of an 'Islamic bomb', asserting that nations and not individuals were at fault:

If I have nightmares, they are about a Pakistani bomb or a Libyan bomb. We are now told that the Iraqis are doing [sic] nuclear weapons for some years, should also be about an Iraqi bomb [sic]. Those nations might use a nuclear bomb. It is for that reason that I go on and on, at Prime Minister's Question Time, about the Khan incident, the Urenco incident at Almelo.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Tam Dalyell, House of Commons Debate, 18 December 1979, *Hansard Online*, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1979/dec/18/joint-centrifuge-project-almelo#column_555 (accessed May 10, 2013).

⁴² The Liberal Lord Avebury, the Labour Lord Wynne-Jones, and the usual 'awkward squad' of anti-nuclear MPs such as Frank Allaun also asked questions.

⁴³ Tam Dalyell, 'Nuclear Security,' 17 January 1980, *Hansard Online*, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/written_answers/1980/jan/17/nuclear-security#S5CV0976P2_19800117_CWA_24 (accessed 30 October 2013).

⁴⁴ Tam Dalyell, 'Nuclear Weapons,' 22 January 1980, *Hansard Online*, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1980/jan/24/nuclear-weapons#column_726 (accessed 30 October 1980).

Dalyell put over forty questions to the government during January and February, continually alluding to the ‘development of a Pakistani or Islamic nuclear weapon.’⁴⁵ His question on ‘Arab links with Pakistan’s nuclear weapons programme’ received a response from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) that such associations were speculative, rendering official comment impossible. The FCO underscored such rumours’ persistence – especially in connection with Libya – while stressing the lack of conclusive evidence for such links.⁴⁶

Throughout 1980, the media continually imbued the Pakistani nuclear programme with transnational religious overtones. Just as in 1979 when the issue came to prominence, the media used the ‘Islamic bomb’ – often in a lazy or sensationalist manner – as shorthand for an expected proliferation cascade with dire consequences for the Middle East.

Since late 1979, stories had circulated about transfers of uranium ore from the Islamic African nation of Niger to Libya and Pakistan.⁴⁷ Rumours of violent uranium convoy hijackings and diversion to Libya and Pakistan precipitated hurried denials from Nigerien-French mining concerns SOMAIR and COMINAK.⁴⁸ Reporting on the matter again argued for a Libyan-funded, Pakistani-designed ‘Islamic bomb’.⁴⁹

The media continually framed stories about Pakistani nuclear aspirations within a pan-Islamic context. Discussion of Libya seemed to require a mention of alleged Libyan-Pakistani cooperation, regardless of whether or not Libya could be considered

⁴⁵ ‘Pakistanis rejected aid to protect nuclear programme,’ *TT*, 8 March 1980, 5; Tam Dalyell, ‘Nuclear Security,’ 31 January 1980, *Hansard Online*, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1980/jan/31/nuclear-security-1#S5CV0977P0_19800131_HOC_285 (accessed 30 October 2013).

⁴⁶ ‘Draft Supplementary PQ (Mr Dalyell),’ 25 January 1980, TNA FCO96/1103.

⁴⁷ ‘French Uranium for Libya,’ *The Sunday Times*, 2 December 1979, E28.

⁴⁸ ‘Translation of a Telex from Head of Public Relations of CEA to Mr Chadwick,’ 4 January 1980, TNA FCO96/1103.

⁴⁹ ‘French deny direct sale of uranium to Pakistan,’ *TG*, 5 January 1980, 5.

an 'Islamic' nation.⁵⁰ Journalists couched their commentary in the now familiar language of and Muslim proliferation cascade, merging Pakistanis, Arabs, 'fanaticism', and Islam into an undifferentiated mass. Syndicated political columnist Jack Anderson wrote:

When Pakistan does get its nuclear bomb, the world will enter a new and more dangerous era. A shaky dictatorship like Gen. Zia ul-Haq's, armed with a nuclear arsenal is frightening enough. What makes the situation far worse is that Pakistan will likely share its nuclear know-how with even less responsible Arab nations, like the fanatic Muammar Qaddafi's Libya, which is a protector of terrorists and an implacable foe of Israel.⁵¹

Echoing Dalyell's December 1979 address, Anderson's piece illustrates how entrenched the belief that Pakistan would share its nuclear technology with its co-religionists had become. As Rodney Jones argues, 'Islamic bomb' coverage implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) suggested 'worst-case scenarios about threats to the security and perhaps survival of Israel.'⁵²

On 16 June, the BBC aired 'Project 706: The Islamic Bomb', underscoring alleged Pakistani-Libyan connections, uranium from Niger, the complicity of British, German, Italian, and Swiss industry, and the threat of Islamic proliferation. Reporter Philip Tibenham opened by alarmingly informing viewers that:

⁵⁰ 'President's positions fall to rebel forces in Chad,' *TG*, 5 April 1980, 5.

⁵¹ 'Pakistan Near Entry Into Atomic Club,' *WP*, 11 April 1980, B9.

⁵² Rodney W. Jones, 44.

This convoy grinding across the empty Sahara is carrying what could be the raw material for the world's first nuclear war It's been mined in the Islamic state of Niger. It'll be flown on to Islamic Libya; then on to Islamic Pakistan. Tonight, *Panorama* reports exclusively on payments of millions of pounds by Libya's Colonel Gaddafi to finance Pakistan's efforts to build the 'Islamic bomb'.⁵³

The FCO's Joint Nuclear Unit (JNU) assessed the documentary as correct in general terms, but speculative and inaccurate in detail. Analysts contended that by far the most important allegation was the Libyan/'Islamic' bomb, but that there was *still* no substantive evidence that Libya had provided finance *or* that Pakistan had agreed to proliferate. Anonymous allegations in the documentary were 'sensational' but carried 'little conviction'.⁵⁴ For Thatcher's government, the most embarrassing element was the programme's transmission during a visit to London by Agha Shahi, provoking anger amongst the Pakistani delegation.⁵⁵ Crucially, British experts did not see the film as harmful to the government or detrimental to international anti-proliferation efforts.⁵⁶ In the face of media reporting on the documentary – particularly in the *Guardian* – the Thatcher government stressed Pakistani assurances and the lack of evidence for an Islamic connection.⁵⁷

As the media continued to draw attention to the Pakistani nuclear programme's supposed religious aspects, journalists drew other states into the fold. The *Daily Express* cited Ba'athist Iraq as the next nation likely to 'go nuclear' in a lurid story about murders, smugglers, and Parisian chambermaids, warning its readers that, 'Arab states

⁵³ 'Panorama Contents Monday 17th June 1980 5340/5525 2042-2100 BBC-1; Project 706: The Islamic Bomb,' BBC Written Archives Centre, File T67/13/1, Panorama-Project706-The Islamic Bomb, 1.

⁵⁴ Roberts to Acland, 'Panorama Documentary on Pakistan Nuclear Programme,' 17 June 1980, TNA FCO37/2370, 1.

⁵⁵ Lavers to Roberts, 'Pakistan Nuclear: Panorama Programme, 16 June,' 18 June 1980, TNA FCO37/2370.

⁵⁶ Fullerton to Manley, 'Panorama Programme on Pakistan Nuclear Bomb,' 18 June 1980, TNA FCO96/1105, 1-2.

⁵⁷ FCO to UKE Islamabad, Untitled, 18 June 1980, TNA FCO37/2371, 2.

have lost all hope of winning a conventional war against Israel. So a terrifying premium has been placed on the alternative – a nuclear bomb. Pakistan, funded by Libya’s Colonel Gaddafi, already has the know-how.’⁵⁸ The *Guardian*’s Eric Silver, reporting from Jerusalem, observed, ‘no one here doubts the danger from an Arab or Islamic bomb.’⁵⁹ In an editorial also criticising Israel’s nuclear stance, the normally sober *Times* asked if ‘fanatical Islamic revolutionaries?’ might possess nuclear weapons or could the Libyan-Pakistani ‘Islamic bomb’ have eventuated by 1985?⁶⁰ The latter question did not go unchallenged. Syed Aziz Pasha, General Secretary of the Union of Muslim Organisations of UK and Eire, castigated *The Times* for causing ‘anger and distress’ to all Muslims. Aziz contended that the ‘Islamic bomb’ did not exist, arguing that no other nuclear programme had ever been named for the originating state’s religious affiliations. The newspaper rather primly responded, ‘The phrase “Islamic bomb”, which has passed into common usage, did not originate with the *The Times*.’⁶¹

The protest by Aziz did not prevent the *The Times* publishing another piece on Pakistan explicitly connecting nuclear ambitions and Islam. Going back to Bhutto’s claims and couched in classically orientalist tropes of irrational ‘Islamic’ violence, the article concluded ‘Pakistan’s nuclear activity – and the implications of an Islamic bomb, if ever such a thing should exist – threaten to usher in a new age of uncertainty.’⁶² Veteran journalist James Cameron, even while satirising attitudes towards nuclear weapons, asserted that Islam was ‘the originator of spreading God’s word by the sword’ and that he would not ‘especially like to be sent into eternity by a General Zia finger on

⁵⁸ Jeffrey Richelson, *Spying on the Bomb: American Nuclear Intelligence from Nazi Germany to Iran and North Korea* (New York: W W Norton & Co., 2006), 321; ‘The chambermaid who stumbled on a secret A-war,’ *The Daily Express*, 8 July 1980, 9.

⁵⁹ ‘French nuclear sale angers Israel,’ *TG*, 18 July 1980, 6.

⁶⁰ ‘Is There An Islamic Bomb?,’ *TT*, 22 July 1980, 13.

⁶¹ ‘Nuclear bomb,’ *TT*, 29 July 1980, 13.

⁶² ‘National pride could push General Zia to Islamic bomb,’ *TT*, 13 August 1980, 6.

the button, let alone a Khomeini finger.’⁶³ Even in satire, Islam was portrayed as violent and the ‘Islamic bomb’ as leading to an almost inevitable Middle Eastern apocalypse.

The American press also weighed in, mixing the Khan Affair, Islam, and Tripoli’s anti-Americanism. Revelations surrounding Billy Carter’s Libyan business connections – then under investigation by the Justice Department – did not help.⁶⁴ In a *Washington Post* article that liberally referenced the *Panorama* documentary, an anonymous US official made a thinly veiled swipe at the Europeans, commenting, ‘Some countries were lax and bureaucratically inept ... but some others knew what was happening and allowed it to go ahead for political or commercial reasons.’⁶⁵ By the year’s end, the same newspaper reported alleged fissures in the ‘Islamic bomb’ project, Libya portrayed as frustrated by a lack of Pakistani progress.⁶⁶

In the media, the idea that a Pakistani nuclear bomb was *axiomatically* an Islamic bomb had – by 1980 – become so firmly embedded that it went almost totally unchallenged. The ‘Libyan connection’, Bhutto and Zia’s inflammatory rhetoric, and the perceived certainty of pan-Islamic proliferation were accepted as fact, rebuttals and repudiations going unheeded. Media comment on the ‘Islamic bomb’ tended towards the orientalist, alarmist, and unthinkingly ritualised. As the issue developed, Edward Said published the landmark *Orientalism*. Although scholars have debated Said’s thesis ever since, his thoughts on media images of Islam are apposite in this instance.⁶⁷ ‘Lurking behind all these images,’ he argues, ‘is the menace of *jihad*. Consequence: a fear that Muslims (or

⁶³ ‘Gods of war,’ *TG*, 19 August 1980, 8.

⁶⁴ Burton I. Kaufman and Scott Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter*, 2nd edition (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 228-230.

⁶⁵ ‘U.S. says evidence shows Pakistan planning A-bomb,’ *WP*, 21 September 1980, A20.

⁶⁶ ‘Deterring a Qaddafi Bomb,’ *WP*, 23 December 1980, A15.

⁶⁷ Rotter, ‘Saidism Without Said’, 1207-1210.

Arabs) will take over the world.’⁶⁸ Fear did lie behind public discussion of the Islamic bomb: fear of Middle Eastern nuclear war and more modest – but still significant – fears of changes in the balance of power between the Muslim world and the West. As sociologist Jonathan Lyons notes, there is a ‘single, persistent Western discursive formation of violence in Islam that remains largely immune to serious challenge on historical, linguistic, and theological bases.’⁶⁹ Moreover, non-proliferation and the ‘Islamic bomb’ fed into the belief that developed nations had a monopoly over the legitimate use and technologies of violence.⁷⁰ Cultural anthropologist Hugh Gusterson comments that for decades, creators of foreign policy and public opinion saw the spread of nuclear weapons to the Islamic world as particularly dangerous.⁷¹ In the case of Pakistan in the 1970s, both Gusterson and Lyons correctly assess public discourses, but as the documentary evidence will demonstrate, policymakers were far less influenced by fear of pan-Islamic proliferation.

Government Reactions

While the ‘Islamic bomb’ became embedded in the media coverage of Pakistan, nuclear weapons, and the Middle East, policymakers in Washington and London sought to cut through the speculation, despite the increased pressure that these issues put on non-proliferation policy. Those making non-proliferation policy placed little credence in the blustery rhetoric emanating from Islamabad.

Western foreign ministers discussed Zia’s 1978 comments at July’s G7 summit in Bonn, French foreign minister Louis de Guiringaud contending that such ‘disquieting’ statements ‘exposed the Pakistani position to the public,’ and made it easier for France

⁶⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), 287.

⁶⁹ Jonathan Lyons, *Islam Through Western Eyes: From the Crusades to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 124.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 112.

⁷¹ Gusterson, ‘Nuclear Weapons’, 112.

to justify delaying or cancelling the reprocessing plant. However, the US secretary of state Cyrus Vance saw Zia's pronouncements as a bluff and was quick to point out that the quite different Islamic states of Saudi Arabia and Iran had urged Pakistan not to build a nuclear weapon.⁷²

Vance's deputy, Warren Christopher – as part of the diplomatic campaign against the Franco-Pakistani reprocessing plant deal – alluded to Bhutto's jail cell pronouncements. 'We do not necessarily accept Mr. Bhutto's claims of imminent success in this [nuclear] field,' stated Christopher, 'but we do find this statement of intentions to be disquieting.'⁷³ Even though Christopher found Bhutto's remarks 'disquieting' and potentially having 'profound implications,' the implied Islamic dimension did not change basic assumptions about the Pakistani programme. Christopher and his colleagues 'were under no illusion that Pakistan's motivations or intentions have changed,' with Islamabad's nuclear ambitions still perceived as a 'national project.'⁷⁴ Thus, Bhutto and Zia's rhetoric failed to alter perceptions and policy regarding their intentions. For the Carter administration, while the 'Islamic bomb' idea might have proved 'disquieting,' it did not change the fundamental assumptions about the national quality of Pakistan's bomb project and the dual issues of regional stability and global non-proliferation policy.

Between the Iranian Revolution and the 'Islamic bomb' becoming a public issue, the idea preyed upon American and British officials. Visiting London, Jack Miklos (deputy assistant secretary of state for the Near East & South Asia) and Paul Kreisberg (of the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs) suggested that Pakistan had 'offered to be the supplier of nuclear weapons to the Arab world.' For them, this explained perceived

⁷² 'Record of Meeting of Foreign Ministers,' 17 July 1978, T[hatcher] MSS, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/111458 (accessed 10 December 2013), 5.

⁷³ SD to USE London et al, 'Pakistani Reprocessing Plant,' 1 November. [Atlanta] J[immy] C[arter] P[residential] L[ibrary], R[emote] A[rchives] C[apture system] NLC-16-114-1-9-8, 3.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 4.

Pakistani casualness about the risks of American economic sanctions.⁷⁵ US ambassador to Pakistan Arthur Hummel echoed these beliefs, suggesting that Zia might use future nuclear capability to win financial support from ‘Arab oil producers.’⁷⁶ Missives from the British Embassy in Islamabad mirrored this worry, arguing an American embargo’s impact on the Pakistani economy might be minimal ‘if accounts of Arab backing for Pakistan’s nuclear programme are correct.’ In such a case, the Symington Amendment’s invocation – a US law banning economic and military assistance to nations illegally engaging in uranium enrichment – would move Pakistan closer to the Islamic world, rather than achieving non-proliferation aims.⁷⁷ Although Pakistani moves towards closer alliances with the Islamic world were not signifiers of a desire to spread the ‘Islamic bomb,’ this created a paradoxical point in policymakers’ minds: by taking action to head off the ‘Islamic bomb,’ the US might increase the chances of alienating Pakistan.

For some American and British policymakers, public speculation provoked anxiety about the propaganda implications. Not only would a break in relations with moderate Muslim state like Pakistan adversely affect the similarly restrained Gulf states’ sentiments, there was apprehension about the ‘Islamic bomb’s’ impact on Israeli and Indian attitudes towards Pakistan. Cyrus Vance – in agreement with his British counterparts – fretted not about the reality of an ‘Islamic bomb’, but the effects of the looming public outcry on India and the Middle East.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ ‘Summary Record of a Meeting Held by Mr. H.A.H. Cortazzi,’ 5 March 1979, TNA FCO96/949, 3.

⁷⁶ Brzezinski to Carter, ‘Daily Report,’ 1 March 1979, JCPL, RAC NLC-1-9-8-12-0.

⁷⁷ UKE Islamabad to FCO, ‘Pakistan: Economic Angles,’ 5 March 1979, TNA FCO96/949.

⁷⁸ ‘Pakistan and the Symington Amendment,’ 17 March 1979, U[nited] S[tates] N[ational] A[rchives Record Group 59], R[ecords of] W[arren] C[hristopher, 1977-1980], Box 56, Pakistan; Vance to Carter, ‘Nuclear Problems in the Sub-continent–Status Report,’ 19 March 1979, JCPL, RAC NLC-15-37-5-11-8.

India remained a major concern, as New Delhi vacillated over whether or not Pakistan was pursuing an ‘Islamic bomb.’⁷⁹ The Indians frequently made much of the issue, unsurprisingly given the long history of Indo-Pakistani conflict. Britain’s high commissioner to India, Sir John Thomson, offered a more nuanced response, suggesting that there might only be general, ephemeral support for the Pakistani nuclear programme amongst Muslim countries.⁸⁰ At the highest level, British prime minister Jim Callaghan agreed with his Indian counterpart Morarji Desai that if there *were* evidence of Arab involvement in Pakistan’s project, this would make the situation much more serious, but Callaghan could offer no evidence of Muslim funding.⁸¹ At this stage, American and British policymakers and diplomats recognised that the ‘Islamic bomb’ idea was a provocation, not a reality, prompting Israeli fears of a nuclear threat from the Islamic world, increasing long-standing Indo-Pakistani tension, and potentially pushing India towards full nuclear weaponisation.

Alarmists in Washington and London argued that the ‘Islamic bomb’ represented a genuine threat. Hummel – having previously claimed that Zia’s comments were a ‘gaffe’ – now contended that sharing nuclear technology was the *quid pro quo* for Islamic support of Pakistan’s programme, suspecting that supporters included Libya and Saudi Arabia.⁸² Meeting with senior State Department officials in Washington, Anthony Parsons (temporarily deputy under-secretary at the FCO) observed that ‘events in Pakistan were one of the most horrifying developments since 1945’.⁸³ Parsons had never been shy about making fearful pronouncements regarding Islamic nuclear

⁷⁹ UKHC New Delhi to FCO, ‘Nuclear Developments,’ January 30, 1979, TNA FCO96/947; UKHC New Delhi to FCO, ‘Nuclear Developments,’ February 1, 1979, TNA FCO37/2200.

⁸⁰ UKHC New Delhi to FCO, ‘Pakistan: Nuclear Weapons programme,’ 9 March 1979, TNA FCO96/948.

⁸¹ FCO to UKHC New Delhi, ‘India/Pakistan Nuclear,’ 4 April 1979, TNA FCO96/951.

⁸² USE Islamabad to SD, ‘Nuclear Reprocessing,’ 6 August 1978, USPQB, Doc.11, 1; USE Islamabad to SD, ‘Nuclear Aspects of DepSec Visit Discussed With UK and French Ambassadors,’ 7 March 1979, USPQB, Doc.26A, 2-3.

⁸³ ‘Record of a Discussion in the State Department,’ 16 March 1979, TNA FCO96/950, 1. Parsons had been British ambassador to Iran, 1974-1979 and had witnessed at first hand the rise of political Islam in that part of the world.

capability. ‘Pakistan is paranoid in its attitude towards India,’ he wrote, ‘and I do not at all like the association between the Pakistani nuclear programme and Arab money (not proven but likely) in the present atmosphere prevailing in the Moslem world. It would not be difficult to construct a Nevil Shute type scenario out of all of this.’⁸⁴

Parsons’ view – influenced by the recent Iranian Revolution – exposed an underlying fear of a violent, irrational Muslim world dragging the planet to a nuclear fate of the kind so vividly depicted in Shute’s 1957 novel *On The Beach*. Shute’s representation of atomic apocalypse had galvanised readers and reviewers alike and in the intervening years it had become the iconic image illustrating nuclear Armageddon.⁸⁵ Parsons’ comments are illustrative of ‘Islamic bomb’ fears in government. However, his argument’s main thrust was that Pakistan was an unstable, paranoid state with a deeply unsatisfactory government.⁸⁶ Parsons’ statements, whilst expressing fear of Muslim nuclear weapons, were more deeply founded in classically Western concerns about ‘irrational’ and ‘unstable’ oriental peoples and rulers. The concerns expressed by Parsons did, however, have a genuine basis. Pakistan *did* have an extremely troubled and volatile political history, with extended periods of military rule and martial law.

In the face of alarmists such as Hummel and Parsons, the influential British GEN 167 Official Group on Nuclear Proliferation thought it unlikely that Arab countries would knowingly fund the Pakistani nuclear programme, even though many Muslim states might be glad that a co-religionist had achieved the ‘ultimate technological feat’.⁸⁷ For countries like Saudi Arabia, relations with the West were seen as far more important than connections with Islamabad, despite the significance of

⁸⁴ ‘India, Pakistan and Nuclear Weapons,’ 8 March 1979, TNA FCO96/950.

⁸⁵ Daniel Cordle, ‘Beyond the apocalypse of closure: nuclear anxiety in the postmodern literature of the United States,’ in Andrew Hammond (ed.), *Cold War Literature: Writing the Global Conflict* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 75fn7.

⁸⁶ ‘Record of a Discussion in the State Department,’ 16 March 1979, TNA FCO96/950, 1.

⁸⁷ ‘Pakistan’s Military Nuclear Programme: Pressures and Inducements,’ 23 March 1979, TNA Cab[inet Office Records] 130/1073, 6.

Pakistan as a bulwark between the Muslim world and the USSR. The group suggested enlisting Arab governments in order to put pan-Islamic pressure on Pakistan, arguing that security concerns related to India – and not a desire to equip the Muslim world with a ‘nuclear sword’ – were the main drivers behind the nuclear programme. Consequently, addressing Islamabad’s security issues – a constant in British and American discussions about Pakistan – represented the surest way of achieving positive results.⁸⁸ Where the pan-Islamic issue might come into play – GEN 167 suggested – was after a Pakistani nuclear test, where Islamabad might enlist Muslim countries to help resist Western pressure to give up ‘the first nuclear weapon to be developed in a Moslem country.’⁸⁹

Despite the apocalyptic visions of some individuals, in 1978 and early 1979 policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic saw the ‘Islamic bomb’ meme as provocative, rather than a genuine threat. The most worrying aspects were the potential reactions of Israel and India, two states with ambiguous nuclear capabilities who felt most threatened by, respectively, the Islamic world and Pakistan specifically. The consensus was that although it was a worrying idea, there was no hard evidence for an ‘Islamic bomb’.

As the ‘Islamic bomb’ was on the cusp of becoming a major public issue, the Carter administration faced a wave of intelligence and publicity that made the Symington Amendment’s imposition a virtual certainty. January to March saw numerous efforts aimed at retarding the imposition by engaging with Zia’s government. The State Department saw the problem as one of regional security and stability: with the situation in Iran, a rupture with Pakistan could pose serious regional problems for the US.⁹⁰ The

⁸⁸ Ibid, 8, 11.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 1.

⁹⁰ Saunders and Pickering to Newsom, ‘Mini-PRC Meeting on the Pakistan Nuclear Problem,’ 20 January 1979, USPQB, Doc.23A, 2.

elite, multi-agency Policy Review Committee (PRC) agreed to delay the Symington Amendment's imposition on the grounds of on-going diplomatic efforts and Pakistan's critical regional importance.⁹¹ Hummel had confronted Zia with intelligence about the nuclear programme and the Pakistani president responded angrily, offering inspection rights to Pakistan's nuclear facilities as proof of his peaceful intentions.⁹² The administration seized this opportunity, as it usefully demonstrated to Congress the correctness of resisting the Symington Amendment's application.⁹³ In the end, Zia dashed hopes for inspections when – unmoved by warnings about US legislation – he informed Warren Christopher that he would not permit scrutiny of nuclear facilities and refused to rule out a 'peaceful' nuclear test.⁹⁴

The growing publicity attendant upon Pakistani ambitions highlighted the problematic nature of open US challenges to Zia's government. In contrast to the 'softly softly' approach favoured by some State Department officials, Carter's roving non-proliferation ambassador Gerard Smith echoed Anthony Parsons' view that the situation posed the 'sharpest challenge to the international structure since 1945.' Smith argued that when faced with an eroding global consensus against nuclear weapons, '[T]he prospect of 'Moslem' bombs is as likely as a German and Japanese bomb (consider what their jingos would make of these countries remaining 3d class powers.)'⁹⁵ The threat in Smith's eyes was not the 'Islamic bomb', but the impact of Pakistani nuclear attainment on the international scene, leading to a cascade of key non-nuclear states deciding to pursue the nuclear option. Smith argued that the current non-proliferation

⁹¹ 'Summary of Conclusions: Mini-PRC on Nuclear Matters,' 22 January 1979, JCPL, RAC 24-102-7-4-1, 2.

⁹² Kux, *Disenchanted Allies*, 236.

⁹³ Memo, 30 January 1979, JCPL, RAC NLC-128-9-16-7-6, 2; 'Call on Mr P H Moberly by Mr T Pickering,' 26 February 1979, TNA FCO37/2200, 1; UKE Washington to FCO, 'Indo-US Relations: Sino/Pakistan and Nuclear Dimensions,' 21 February 1979, TNA FCO96/948, 3-4.

⁹⁴ Vance to Carter, Memo, 2 March 1979, JCPL, RAC NLC-128-14-5-2-7, 2; Kux., 239.

⁹⁵ Smith to Christopher, 'Memorandum to the Deputy Secretary,' 27 March 1979, USNA, RWC, Box 56, Pakistan III, 1

policy towards the subcontinent was too parochial and demanded that the situation be placed in a global context.⁹⁶ Realising that publicity about the Pakistani programme was inevitable, State Department non-proliferationists such as Tom Pickering favoured a ‘sunshine approach,’ placing the full glare of publicity on Pakistan, potentially turning international opinion against Islamabad.⁹⁷

Zia’s intransigence, the Symington Amendment’s looming implementation, and the flow of information on the purchasing project led the State Department to scramble for a new policy. Hummel argued only a ‘bold initiative’ would meet Pakistani security requirements and constrain nuclear ambitions.⁹⁸ Pickering and Harold Saunders (assistant secretary of state for Near East Affairs) suggested such a ‘bold initiative’, an ‘audacious buy-off’ comprised of extensive security assistance – consisting of arms sales and economic aid – aimed at assuaging Pakistani fears.⁹⁹ Pickering and Saunders also noted that, ‘The likelihood of an ‘Islamic bomb’ with its consequences in the Arab-Israeli dispute will increase Congressional concerns over anything we might propose doing for Pakistan.’¹⁰⁰ Here, Pickering and Saunders worried that the ‘Islamic bomb’ meme would cause increased consternation in an actively non-proliferationist Congress. However, the proposal never gained traction. Warren Christopher’s assistant Steve Oxman thought Pickering and Saunders were ‘dreaming’ if they imagined the package would look like anything other than a bribe for Pakistan and if they believed Congress would permit such a package in the face of persuasive evidence of Pakistani nuclear ambitions.¹⁰¹ Despite their conflicting conclusions, all those concerned recognised that Congress might pursue an even tougher line against Islamabad because of the media

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ ‘Record of a Discussion in the State Department,’ 30 March 1979, TNA FCO 96/951, 2-3.

⁹⁸ USE Islamabad to SD, ‘Pakistan’s Nuclear Program: Hard Choices,’ 5 March 1979, USNA, RWC, Box 56, Pakistan II.

⁹⁹ Oxman to Christopher, Note, 5 March 1979, USNA, RG59, RWC, Box 56, Pakistan II.

¹⁰⁰ Saunders and Pickering to Vance, ‘A Strategy for Pakistan,’ 5 March 1979, USNA, RWC, Box 56, Pakistan II, 2.

¹⁰¹ Handwritten marginalia, ‘A Strategy for Pakistan,’ 5 March 1979, 7.

prominence of the ‘Islamic bomb’ *and* the genuine evidence of Pakistan’s nationalist nuclear ambitions.

By early April, events were taking place that typified the tension between the various strands of Carter’s foreign policy and regional and global proliferation concerns. As Smith had noted in March, the administration needed to think about how Pakistan was affecting the global environment.¹⁰² Pakistani security was certainly a regional issue and non-proliferation was a global issue. Addressing one meant addressing the other, and vice versa. On April 6, 1979 – two days after Bhutto’s execution – Carter invoked the Symington Amendment, embargoing military and economic aid to Pakistan because of mounting evidence of a uranium enrichment project. The aid cut-off, coupled with the Khan Affair’s exposure, created more headlines and antagonised a Pakistani political establishment dealing with the violent domestic convulsions provoked by Bhutto’s execution.¹⁰³ Islamabad was particularly aggrieved that the US had continued to supply nuclear fuel to the Indian reactor at Tarapur, an issue that was causing difficulties for the Indo-American relationship.¹⁰⁴ There was scant enthusiasm in the Carter administration for the imposition of sanctions, as Pakistan would suffer little real harm from the withdrawal of bilateral economic aid. However, failure to publicly react to the blatant Pakistani activities would signal acquiescence to Islamabad’s nuclear ambitions and diminish US credibility on non-proliferation issues.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Smith to Christopher, ‘Memorandum to the Deputy Secretary,’ 27 March 1979, USNA, RWC, Box 56, Pakistan III, 1

¹⁰³ ‘U.S. Aid to Pakistan Cut After Evidence of Atom Arms Plan,’ *NYT*, 7 April 1979, 1; ‘U.S. Cutting Aid to Pakistan in A-Facility Dispute,’ *WP*, 7 April 1979, A1; ‘Pakistan Denies It Plans A-Bomb: Denounces Washington Aid Cutoff,’ *NYT*, 9 April 1979, A1.

¹⁰⁴ For a perceptive analysis of the Tarapur issue, see Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb*, 218-219. On the problems of nuclear exports during the 1970s, see J. Samuel Walker, ‘Nuclear Power and Nonproliferation: The Controversy Over Nuclear Exports, 1974-1980’, *Diplomatic History*, 25:2 (Spring, 2001), 215-249.

¹⁰⁵ Peter A. Clausen, *Nonproliferation and the National Interest: America’s Response to the Spread of Nuclear Weapons* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993) 147-148.

At the same time as the Carter administration was grappling with the issue of non-proliferation credibility, the media extensively publicised the Khan Affair.¹⁰⁶ The story eventually broke wide open as other news outlets followed ZDF's lead.¹⁰⁷ The FCO expected an onslaught against Britain, and readied briefings defending British actions.¹⁰⁸ During May 1979's hard-fought British general election campaign, the FCO attempted to deflect questions towards The Hague and aligned Britain with American concerns about the enrichment programme.¹¹⁰ In the wake of April 6 and the Islamic element's widening media prominence, London and Washington placed little credence in the idea of a pan-Islamic nuclear capability originating in Pakistan. Despite provocative Indian speculation that Pakistan's sole nuclear desire was to produce an 'Islamic bomb' funded by Arab money, key FCO officials were unanimous in doubting the real or potential existence of an 'Arab bomb.'¹¹¹ The JNU's David Carter described evidence for this as 'woefully thin.'¹¹²

Meanwhile, Islamabad responded to the Symington Amendment's imposition by making the embargo a pan-Islamic issue. Agha Shahi argued that it was 'discriminatory, based on false charges, and designed to keep nuclear power out of the hands of Muslim countries.'¹¹³ Shahi contended that the restriction was the fault of a 'Zionist lobby' and denied that Libya or *any* Muslim country was funding the nuclear programme.¹¹⁴

During this tense period, State Department guidance for US consular officials

¹⁰⁶ UKE Washington to FCO, 'Pakistan Nuclear,' 7 April 1979, TNA FCO96/951, 1.

¹⁰⁷ UKE Bern to FCO, 'Pakistan Nuclear,' 3 May 1979, TNA FCO96/953.

¹⁰⁸ Lavers to Baxter, 'Pakistan: Nuclear Weapons Programme,' 6 April 1979, TNA FCO96/951, 1-2.

¹¹⁰ Alston to Whyte, 'Pakistan Nuclear,' 3 May 1979, TNA FCO96/953, 2.

¹¹¹ UKHC New Delhi to FCO, 'Pakistan,' 19 April 1979, TNA FCO96/952, 1; Alston to White, 'South Asia–Nuclear Issues,' 19 April 1979, TNA FCO96/952, 1; Mallaby to Alston, 'South Asia–Nuclear Issues,' 23 April 1979, TNA FCO96/953, 1.

¹¹² Carter to Granger, 'Pakistan,' 20 April 1979, TNA FCO37/2203.

¹¹³ White House Situation Room to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 'Additional Information Items,' 10 April 1979, JCPL, RAC NLC-1-10-3-25-9, 2.

¹¹⁴ USE Islamabad to SD, 'GOP [Government of Pakistan] Reacts to US Aid Decision: More Political Leaders Attack US Move,' 9 April 1979, USNA, RWC, Box 57, Pakistan.

emphasised the problem of regional and global proliferation and *not* religious affiliation:

Q: What would be the implications for the Middle East of what has been described as a “Muslim bomb” to balance the Israeli bomb?

A: As you know the Israelis have repeatedly stated in the past that they would not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons in the region. In our view, any proliferation of nuclear weapons anywhere can only have the most serious consequences for world security.¹¹⁵

US discussion guidelines for consular officials illustrated that policymakers – despite what individuals might think in private – realised the ‘Islamic bomb’ was a propaganda problem by stressing that the issue was *not* one of discrimination, emphasising extensive US nuclear cooperation with Muslim countries like Indonesia, Turkey, and pre-revolutionary Iran.¹¹⁶

Over time, it became apparent that the evidence for an ‘Islamic bomb’ was limited at best, non-existent at worst. In bilateral US-UK discussions, Pickering highlighted fragmentary Australian indications about Libya and Iraq.¹¹⁷ However, he observed that while Saudi Arabia was a substantial aid donor to Pakistan, it was doubtful the Saudis explicitly intended to finance the nuclear programme, especially as Riyadh was making disapproving noises about Pakistani atomic intentions.¹¹⁸ John Bushell, in his valedictory dispatch as British ambassador in Islamabad, echoed doubts

¹¹⁵ SD to USE Islamabad, ‘Contingency Press Guidance,’ 6 April 1979, JCPL, RAC NLC-16-116-2-10-3, 4.

¹¹⁶ SD to USE Amman et al, ‘The Pak Nuclear Problem and the Suspension of US Aid,’ 23 May 1979, JCPL, RAC NLC-16-116-4-10-1, 3.

¹¹⁷ SD to USE Canberra, ‘Pakistan’s Nuclear Program,’ 7 April 1979, JCPL, RAC NLC-16-116-2-18-5.

¹¹⁸ Alston to Fearn, ‘Pakistan Nuclear Programme,’ 20 April 1979, TNA FCO96/952, 3.

about the willingness of Muslim states to align themselves with Pakistan's nuclear project and a concurrent Pakistani unwillingness to ally with Iranian-style political Islam. Bushell argued that 'cooperation with Muslim brothers, yes, alliance on the basis of fundamentalist Islam, no thank you.'¹¹⁹ The ambassador contended that Pakistan was indeed a significant Muslim nation in terms of its population, but other Islamic states might treat the thought of Pakistan as an 'arsenal of Islam' with caution.¹²⁰ Furthermore, Bushell asked, 'In Islamic terms an 'arsenal' Pakistan may be: but now an arsenal in nuclear terms also? With the problems of its politics and policies post-Bhutto, which Arabs can seriously want to become engaged with Pakistan?'¹²¹ Following up, the outgoing ambassador argued that the further Pakistan went with a nuclear programme, Zia would find it harder to give it up, particularly if it became an asset in Pakistani relations with the wider Muslim world.¹²²

By late spring, the US government was making efforts to persuade interested parties that the 'Islamic bomb' was little more than propaganda. The Americans voiced fears of a nuclear arms race on the sub-continent and tried to demolish New Delhi's belief that the real danger posed by Pakistan lay in an Israeli/Islamic nuclear confrontation.¹²³ In Washington, Pickering faced questioning in Congress. He noted that the administration believed Pakistan was aiming for nuclear weapons capability but refused to openly discuss alleged Libyan financing, leading to further media comment.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Bushell to Owen, 'Pakistan-Valedictory Dispatch,' 26 April 1979, TNA FCO96/955, 7

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid, 7-8.

¹²² Bushell to Parsons, 'Pakistan, India, and Nuclear Weapons,' 29 April 1979, TNA FCO96/953, 2.

¹²³ Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2010) 314; UKE Washington to FCO, 'US/Indian Nuclear Discussions,' 30 April 1979, FCO96/953, 1.

¹²⁴ , 'Testimony, Assistant Secretary Thomas R. Pickering, Subcommittee on Energy, Nuclear Proliferation and Federal Services,' 1 May 1979, TNA FCO96/953, 12; 'Panel Told Pakistan Gained A-Weapons Ability By "End Runs",' *WP*, 2 May 1979, A15.

In meetings between Vance, Smith, and Agha Shahi, Shahi stressed that the ‘Islamic bomb’ was pure speculation, highlighting that Pakistan had turned down Saudi offers to finance the reprocessing plant. Castigating the ‘Islamic bomb’ as nonsensical was a theme in Shahi’s representations throughout 1979.¹²⁵ US officials felt that Pakistan was working hard to get the right reaction from the Muslim and developing worlds, in case they had to publicly justify the nuclear programme’s military nature.¹²⁶ From using the ‘Islamic bomb’ as a threat, the Pakistanis began belittling the very idea they had helped create. Vance’s subordinate, deputy assistant secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Peter Constable, writing on 6 June, argued that the US could address potential Pakistani nuclear sharing by distributing nuclear technology amongst Pakistan’s ‘Islamic friends’. Coupled with renewed US-Pakistani ties, this offered the US ‘a much better chance of exerting influence against any GOP [Government of Pakistan] move to contribute to a so-called Islamic bomb.’¹²⁷ Thus, Constable advocated undercutting Pakistan by offering Muslim states the fruits of nuclear technology without the threat of nuclear weapons. Yet, there was still no hard evidence for the ‘Islamic bomb’. Intelligence sources acknowledged that the issue was the subject of feverish speculation and believed that Pakistan might have a material interest in spreading nuclear technology, but analysts had no substantive evidence for pan-Islamic nuclear cooperation.¹²⁸

However, the CIA suggested that offers of political and financial support from oil-rich sympathisers in the Islamic world might tempt Pakistan. Indeed, Saudi Arabia, Libya, or Iraq might have induced Pakistan to share sensitive nuclear equipment and to

¹²⁵ Extract from US telegram, FCO to UKE Islamabad, ‘Pakistan Consortium Meeting 5-6 June,’ 8 June 1979, TNA FCO96/955, 2.

¹²⁶ UKE Washington to FCO, ‘Agha Shahi’s Talks in Washington,’ 8 May 1979, TNA FCO96/954, 3.

¹²⁷ SD to USE New Delhi, ‘Non-proliferation in South Asia,’ 6 June 1979, Wilson Center History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114198> (accessed 9 September 2013), 6-7.

¹²⁸ Thornton to Brzezinski, ‘Minutes—May 23 PRC Meeting on Pakistan and Subcontinent Issues,’ 25 May 1979, JCPL, RAC NLC-24-102-10-6-5, 4.

propose terms for future nuclear cooperation.¹²⁹ The CIA later reversed its position on the Iraqi example, casting doubt on Pakistani willingness to provide nuclear technology or materials to Baghdad because of Islamic solidarity.¹³⁰ In an assessment of Pakistani connections in the Middle East, the agency again suggested that Libya and Pakistan were cooperating on nuclear weapons, later contending that Pakistani attainment of ‘the bomb’ might axiomatically imply Libyan nuclear capability.¹³¹ The CIA’s position is at least partially explicable by reference to the agency’s position at the end of the 1970s. Carter was circumscribing the CIA’s powers, and the foregrounding of new ‘threats to national security’ would serve as a countermeasure to this. In the case of Iran, the general feeling within government was that the intelligence agency had failed to anticipate the clerics rise and triumph. Thus, a fixation on the Muslim threat may have been overcompensation for this oversight.¹³²

As media speculation mounted, further pressure came from the nation most fearful of Islamic nuclear capability. Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin contacted British, French, and West German leaders warning of the dangers posed by the ‘Islamic bomb’ and demanding action. Writing to Thatcher, Begin described in dire terms the consequences of a Pakistani nuclear weapon in the hands of Gaddafi.¹³³ The attached Israeli briefing linked Pakistan and the Arab world, but none of the Israeli intelligence was new and nothing confirmed the existence of pan-Islamic nuclear cooperation.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ NIO for Nuclear Proliferation to Director of Central Intelligence, ‘Monthly Warning Report—Nuclear Proliferation,’ 24 July 1979, USPQB, Doc.41, 2.

¹³⁰ ‘Interagency Intelligence Memorandum: Iraq’s Nuclear Interests, Programs, and Options,’ 1 October 1979, JCPL, RAC NLC-6-34-4-10-3, 10.

¹³¹ ‘Pakistan: The Middle East Connection,’ February, 1980, CIA FOIA www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0000631184.pdf (accessed 30 October 2013), 5; ‘Developments in the Libyan Nuclear Program,’ May, 1980, JCPL, RAC NLC-6-48-4-23-4, 11.

¹³² Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, personal emails to the author, 4 June 2012, and 4 December 2013. I am indebted to Professor Jeffreys-Jones for his generosity in taking the time to discuss the CIA’s position during the period.

¹³³ Begin to Thatcher, Letter, 17 May 1979, TNA FCO96/954.

¹³⁴ ‘Pakistani Activity in the Nuclear Field,’ appended to Begin to Thatcher, 17 May 1979.

The FCO's Paul Lever – an experienced senior civil servant – did not subscribe to Begin's assertions, stating:

While we share their concern, we believe that they may be making over much of Pakistani-Arab links. Although the Pakistanis are getting financial aid from Arab states the limited evidence available to us (and the Americans) does not support the suggestion that there is any plan to produce an "Islamic Bomb" or to produce weapons-usable material in Pakistan for other Islamic countries.¹³⁵

The speaking note prepared for Thatcher's May 23 meeting with Begin reflected this viewpoint, shared throughout the FCO and other departments.¹³⁶ Despite the media exposure, JNU chief Robert Alston emphasised the continuing validity of earlier British Joint Intelligence Committee reporting that there was little evidence of Arab assistance for Pakistan's nuclear activities.¹³⁷ In the face of widening media coverage, the FCO advised British consular officials worldwide that there was 'virtually no evidence' for 'Arab financing' of Pakistan's nuclear programme.¹³⁸

Thatcher responded via a personal letter to the Israeli leader.¹³⁹ Thatcher sympathised with Israel's position, but repeated the FCO's analysis that, 'None of the evidence currently available to us suggests there is any arrangement to transfer weapons-useable material from Pakistan to other Islamic states or organisations.'¹⁴⁰ She

¹³⁵ Lever to Cartledge, 'Pakistan's Nuclear Programme,' 22 May 1979, TNA FCO96/954, 4.

¹³⁶ Alston to Moberly, 'Pakistan's Nuclear Programme,' 22 May 1979, TNA FCO96/954; 'Briefs for Quadripartite Ministerial Dinner in the Hague on 29 May,' 22 May 1979, TNA FCO37/2204.

¹³⁷ Alston to Moberly, 'Pakistan's Nuclear Programme,' 5 June 1979, TNA FCO96/955, 1. This JIC report remains classified, although the conclusions can be apprehended from Alston's briefing.

¹³⁸ 'Pakistan Nuclear,' May 3, 1979, TNA FCO96/953, 2; FCO to UKE Washington et al, 'Pakistan Nuclear: Publicity,' 4 May 1979, TNA FCO37/2203, 2.

¹³⁹ Alston to Moberly, 5 June 1979.

¹⁴⁰ Thatcher to Begin, Letter, 19 June 1979, TMSS, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/118926> (accessed 10 December 2013), 1

went on to outline the many steps Britain had taken to thwart clandestine Pakistani purchasing and urged Begin to consider his *own* country's role in preventing Middle Eastern nuclear proliferation.¹⁴¹ A month later, British foreign secretary Lord Peter Carrington probed Indian foreign minister Shyam Nandan Mishra at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Lusaka, Zambia. Carrington asked if the Pakistanis were developing an 'Islamic bomb' or a 'Pakistani bomb'. Mishra's aide, Jagat Mehta, could not discern an 'integrated Islamic political strategy' behind the programme. Carrington replied that if it did prove to be an Islamic bomb, 'it would make the Middle East even more unstable.'¹⁴² The Thatcher-Begin letters and the related FCO discussions illustrate the way in which fears created by the 'Islamic bomb' meme needed addressing. Despite the media coverage there was still little intelligence pointing to a pan-Islamic nuclear project.

As media attention to Pakistan's 'Islamic bomb' increased, public speculation began to affect relations between both the US and Pakistan and the UK and Pakistan. Robin Fearn – the British embassy in Islamabad's head of chancery – described the Pakistanis as being in a state of 'mounting exasperation' over the never-ending revelations about their clandestine activities.¹⁴³ Most damaging for trilateral relations was American journalist Richard Burt's mid-August feature on Pakistan in the *New York Times*. As one of three potential solutions to the Pakistani problem, Burt suggested that the US was planning military strikes against nuclear installations.¹⁴⁴ Pakistani foreign secretary Sardar Shah Nawaz protested vigorously to Hummel, claiming that the

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 1-2.

¹⁴² 'Note of a Conversation Between the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and Indian Foreign Minister in Lusaka,' 3 August 1979, TNA Records of the Prime Minister's Office 19/155.

¹⁴³ UKE Islamabad to FCO, 'Pakistan Nuclear,' 2 July 1979, TNA FCO96/956, 1.

¹⁴⁴ 'U.S. Will Press Pakistan to halt A-Arms Project,' *NYT*, 12 August 1979, 1.

article had been ‘inspired’ by the US government.¹⁴⁵ In the midst of this, Shah Nawaz submitted a letter Zia had composed before the Burt article. According to Zia, Congress had misunderstood the Pakistani nuclear programme which, making matters worse, was described as a ‘Muslim atom bomb.’ Zia offered Carter a ‘firm assurance that Pakistan’s nuclear programme is entirely peaceful in nature and that Pakistan has no intention of acquiring or manufacturing nuclear weapons.’¹⁴⁶ This assurance – something that US officials had sought for months – was not as unequivocal as the administration desired and fell short of explicitly ruling out nuclear testing or the transfer of materials to other states, but that did not stop Zia repeating similar formulations for the rest of the year.¹⁴⁷

The Burt article elicited hasty US government repudiations, and concurrent Pakistani moves to increase defences around the ‘peaceful’ enrichment facilities at Kahuta.¹⁴⁸ Here was a key instance of the media coverage surrounding Pakistan’s nuclear aspirations and the notion of an ‘Islamic bomb’ having a demonstrable and damaging effect on the chances for a diplomatic solution by further alienating Pakistan. State Department spokespeople hurried to deny that the US was planning to strike at its South Asian ally while the Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned Hummel for a dressing-down.¹⁴⁹ In conversation with British consular officials, Mike Hornblow of the State Department’s Pakistan desk denied strike plans were in place but conjectured that Burt might have misunderstood ‘unknown individuals’ who were speculating about Indian or Israeli military action.¹⁵⁰ American rebuttals failed to

¹⁴⁵ USE Islamabad to SD, ‘Letter from President Zia-ul-Haq to President Carter,’ 14 August 1979, JCPL, R[ecords of the] N[atational] S[ecurity] S[taff], Box 96, P[akistan:] P[residential] C[orrespondence:] 1-12/79.

¹⁴⁶ Zia to Carter, Letter, 9 August 1979, JCPL, RNSS, Box 96, PPC 1-12/79, 2, 4.

¹⁴⁷ Tarnoff to Brzezinski, ‘Letter of August 9 from President Zia of Pakistan to President Carter,’ 27 August 1979, JCPL, RNSS, Box 96, PPC 1-12/79, 1; Tarnoff to Brzezinski, ‘Response to Letter of August 9 and September 29 from President Zia of Pakistan to President Carter,’ 10 October 1979, JCPL, RNSS, Box 96, PPC 1-12/79; Zia to Carter, Letter, 29 September 1979, JCPL, RNSS, Box 96, PPC 1-12/79, 2.

¹⁴⁸ Fabian to Lavers, ‘Pakistan Nuclear,’ 30 July 1979, TNA FCO 96/957, 1; Came to Gould, Untitled, 30 July 1979, TNA FCO37/2206.

¹⁴⁹ Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Release, 14 August 1979, TNA FCO96/958.

¹⁵⁰ Fortescue to Holloway, ‘US/Pakistan,’ 14 August 1979, TNA FCO96/958.

prevent a stern rebuke from the Pakistani government, which castigated the Burt article and the CBS report as part of a campaign to incite ‘Israel, India, and even the Soviet Union to destroy Pakistan’s budding nuclear facilities.’¹⁵¹ Such was the Pakistani response, diplomats opined that there was likely to be lasting damage to bilateral relations and a reduction in the scope for ‘rational dialogue’ on the nuclear issue.¹⁵² Pakistan’s ambassador to Britain attacked the media speculation as inspired by the US government, the suggestion of an ‘Islamic bomb’ prompting him to ask: ‘why should Pakistan, which depended a great deal on economic support from its Islamic friends, so exacerbate the Arab/Israel situation as to threaten the continuation of this help[?]’¹⁵³ Zia expanded upon this theme when British parliamentarians visited Pakistan, treating them to a tirade on the ‘American conspiracy’ and the ‘myth of an Islamic bomb.’¹⁵⁴

Within the US General Advisory Committee on Arms Control and Disarmament (GAC), there was speculation that it was the Israelis – supposedly working on a plan named ‘Entebbe 2’ – who were most motivated to strike at Pakistani nuclear facilities out of fear of Middle Eastern proliferation.¹⁵⁵ ACDA’s Charles van Doren noted that Burt had made things a lot harder for the US. While military options had *not* been under consideration, the categorical denials about the fracas issued by the State Department made it all the more difficult to *ever* consider such an option.¹⁵⁶

Faced with Islamic opposition to the United States and a deteriorating situation in South Asia, in London the Cabinet saw attacks on the US embassy in Islamabad as evidence that ‘the influence of Islamic extremism’ was spreading from Iran to

¹⁵¹ UKE Islamabad to FCO, ‘Pakistan Nuclear,’ 16 August 1979, TNA FCO96/958, 1-2.

¹⁵² Ibid, 2.

¹⁵³ Murray to Archer, Untitled, 15 August 1979, TNA FCO96/958, 2.

¹⁵⁴ Forster to White, ‘Visit of British Parliamentarians,’ 23 September 1979, TNA FCO96/959, 2.

¹⁵⁵ General Advisory Committee on Arms Control and Disarmament, ‘Friday Morning Session,’ 14 September 1979, USPQB, Doc.42, 12-13.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 15. There is no clear evidence that the US formulated plans for strikes against Pakistan. Corera argues – from uncited ‘private memos’ and post-facto interviews – that the option was suggested. These memos have not surfaced during archival research. See Corera, *Shopping for Bombs*, 28.

Pakistan.¹⁵⁷ Despite this, FCO observers opined that non-proliferation diplomacy relying upon generalisations about an ‘Islamic bomb’ could prove damaging rather than useful: ‘It seems dangerous, for instance, to put about suggestions of an ‘Islamic bomb’’. In general, we think it would be a mistake to make quite sweeping generalisations without backing them up with proposals for action which might be taken to remedy the situation.’¹⁵⁸ Here, the FCO displayed a nuanced view of the situation, recognising that lumping the entire Muslim world into a single monolithic group was counter-productive. Likewise, the British analysts argued that panicked fear-mongering of the kind seen in the media served no purpose without solutions to address the problem’s root causes. Finally, like many of their American counterparts, British policymakers saw financial incentives as a greater motivator for Pakistan to proliferate to countries such as Libya or Saudi Arabia than any sense of Islamic solidarity.¹⁵⁹ The Islamic links posited in the *Observer* ‘Dr Khan’ article were, in the FCO’s view, so speculative as to be unworthy of comment.¹⁶⁰

Just as the ‘Islamic bomb’ became embedded in public discourses, the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan forced rapid bridge-building between the West and the Islamic world. While covert governmental and overt Congressional pressure continued on Pakistan during the 1980s, the US and UK governments recognised that action against Pakistan was subservient to anti-Soviet action in Afghanistan. It was not enough to simply repair relations with Pakistan, but better relations between the West and the wider Muslim sphere were needed to foster a coalition against the USSR. Carter himself publically noted American ‘respect and

¹⁵⁷ ‘Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet Held at 10 Downing Street,’ 22 November 1979, TNA CAB128/66, 2.

¹⁵⁸ Asia Group Meeting, ‘Agenda Item 3(a): Pakistan’s Nuclear Weapons Development Programme,’ 13 December 1979, TNA FCO37/2208, 4.

¹⁵⁹ ‘Asia Group: Verbatim Report, 13 December; Pakistan Nuclear Development Programme,’ 13 December 1979, TNA FCO96/961, 2.

¹⁶⁰ ‘How Dr Khan Stole the Bomb for Islam,’ *TO*, 9 December 1979, 11; ‘Additional Advice for the Prime Minister: Nuclear Proliferation (Second *Observer* Article),’ 18 December 1979, TNA FCO96/961, 2.

reverence for Islam and all those who share the faith of Islam.’¹⁶¹ Mention of the ‘Islamic bomb’ required curtailing lest it create rifts in the emerging alliance between the ‘free world’ and the ‘Muslim world.’ As Andrew Preston argues, the assembling of an Islamic coalition to resist the Soviets was founded in a belief that this would ‘realign the Islamic world’s sympathies towards the United States.’¹⁶² Unlike the negative public image of the ‘Islamic bomb’, within government Islam was now viewed as a positive force for good in a reinvigorated Cold War.

Conclusion

When America and Britain engaged in anti-proliferation activity against Pakistan in the late 1970s, the historical record runs counter to popular belief. Contrary to alarmist analyses, the ‘Islamic bomb’ was seldom an important factor in American and British non-proliferation policy. While the media and peripheral politicians manufactured the ‘reality’ of an ‘Islamic bomb’, governments level assessed the concept evidentially. Although some key individuals feared – and institutions such as the CIA investigated – the meme, the consensus was that it was a propaganda rather than a policy challenge. Thus, while Washington and London battled media representations of Pakistan’s nuclear aspirations as a pan-Islamic project, policymaking carried on as normal. What this propaganda problem did do was change public perceptions of Pakistani atomic aspirations geopolitically, from a regional South Asian problem to a much wider problem encompassing the Middle East, with all the challenges that implied. For the American and British governments, it was the *publicity* surrounding pan-Islamic nuclear capability and the *perception* this created, not belief in the reality of an ‘Islamic bomb’ that created problems.

¹⁶¹ Jimmy Carter, ‘Relations with Islamic Nations, Statement by the President’, 7 February 1980, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=32899> (accessed 10 November 2013)

¹⁶² Preston, *Sword of the Spirit*, 578.

The ‘Islamic bomb’ meme has become an abiding feature of discussions surrounding the nuclear ambitions of Muslim states. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, the ‘Islamic bomb’ frequently and repeatedly emerged as shorthand for an aggressive, confrontational ‘Islamic’ quest for power.¹⁶³ The meme was founded in the rhetoric of Pakistani leaders seeking to justify – and gain sympathy and support for – their nuclear ambitions. Bhutto and Zia presented this ‘official conspiracy’ as a means to an end, the rhetoric becoming intertwined with the genuine conspiracy represented by the Khan Affair, snowballing into a ritualised media trope that resonates up to the present day. Those in government who knew more about the Khan conspiracy than the public struggled to find any evidence for an Islamic dimension to Pakistani nuclear desires and those who posit conspiracy theories about an ‘Islamic bomb’ in the twenty-first century would do well to consider the events of 1977-80.

¹⁶³ See Gusterson, ‘Nuclear Weapons’, 125-126 for examples of this trend.