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The Price of Getting Documents from A.Q. Khan: Carrying his Water

By David Albright and Paul Brannan

The *Washington Post* in a March 14, 2010 article "[Pakistani scientist Khan describes Iranian efforts to buy nuclear bombs](#)" with significant assistance from Khan confidant Simon Henderson, asserts two remarkable yet equally unbelievable claims by A.Q. Khan:

- 1) That in 1989 or 1990, General Aslam Beg promised to give the Iranians a few nuclear weapons and technology in lieu of 10 years of Pakistan's defense budget; and,
- 2) That Khan's provision of two old centrifuges and two sets of centrifuge drawings to Iran followed this offer, and that Khan was ordered to do so by the Pakistani government as some type of consolation prize to Iran.

The *Washington Post* invested considerable effort trying to verify the first claim, including visiting Pakistan. Nonetheless, it was unable to obtain confirmation of this alleged agreement. It did receive several denials, including from Beg, and a possible indication that Beg may have supported a deal to trade nuclear technology for money.

Moreover, Pakistan did not possess very much weapon grade uranium in 1989 and 1990, which would further cast doubt on claims that it was willing to give away nuclear bombs, which it viewed as critical for its survival.

Despite all this investigative work by the *Washington Post*, the agreement in the first claim rests on Khan's word in a 2004 confession, which he reportedly wrote when he was under intense pressure to defend himself against Pakistani authorities, minimize his role in proliferation to Iran, North Korea, and Libya, and shift the blame to others. Given Khan's long history of shading the truth, this statement is of dubious merit in any case, which may be one of the reasons the *Washington Post* does not release it. Simon Henderson's objectivity about Khan has been called into question since the early 1990s, when he started to soft-pedal Khan's tales as he sought Khan's continued confidence in order to write a book about him.¹

The *Washington Post* spent little time trying to confirm the second claim, namely that this centrifuge assistance Khan alleges actually occurred in 1989 or later. The IAEA has often reported that Khan's initial centrifuge assistance occurred in 1987, two years before the supposed deal for nuclear weapons. A detailed discussion of this assistance is also available in [Peddling Peril](#). The *Washington Post* article states that Iran told the IAEA that a Pakistani "network" had offered substantial centrifuge assistance in 1987, but the article failed to follow-up that the IAEA determined that the network was the one controlled by Khan and it provided centrifuge designs and a few centrifuges during and after a 1987 meeting in Dubai between Iranians and members of the Khan network. Khan probably de-emphasized a 1987 meeting because he was likely heavily involved in it; instead he emphasized these later alleged interactions between other Pakistanis and Iran.

¹ Simon Henderson, "We can do it ourselves." (A.Q. Khan as Pakistan's leading nuclear scientist) (includes interview) *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, September 1993. According to Henderson, he sought Khan's cooperation on a biography that Henderson hoped to write. See also: David Albright, Paul Brannan and Andrea Scheel Stricker, "Self-Serving Leaks from the A.Q. Khan Circle," ISIS Report: December 9, 2009; <http://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/self-serving-leaks-from-the-a-q.-khan-circle/20>

Likewise, he may have deliberately downplayed his connection to individuals in his own smuggling network by referring to them simply as “suppliers” in the letter quoted by the *Washington Post* article.

We are left to conclude that claims 1 and 2 cannot both be true. But could the first be true and the second false? We may never know. So far, that depends on how one views Khan’s credibility. Cicero said, “A liar is not believed even though he tell the truth.”

As a postscript that further demonstrates just how difficult it is to determine when or whether Khan is ever telling the truth, [Khan told reporters on Monday](#) that the *Washington Post* report was “just [a] pack of lies.” Yet the *Post*’s article is based largely on a long statement that the *Washington Post* verified as written by Khan. The document, which Khan ensured was passed to his family, was then given to Simon Henderson for use with foreign media.