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The Mercury News

Book explores Pakistani role in brutal murder of reporter

Commentary

By Daniel Snieder

Amid the horrors since Sept. 11, one particular terrorist act stands out for its senseless brutality -- the murder of Wall Street Journal reporter Danny Pearl.

Pearl was in Pakistan in January 2002, investigating the connections of the "shoe bomber" who had tried to blow up a transatlantic flight to a Pakistani Islamic cult. He was lured by a sophisticated plot into a kidnapping in the streets of the city of Karachi.

Pearl's captors videotaped his execution, beginning with a forced confession: "I am American. I am Jewish. My family on my father's side is Zionist." They filmed themselves barbarically cutting his throat and severing his head from his body -- subsequently they cut the corpse into pieces.

Four of the Islamic terrorists who carried out this deed were convicted in a Pakistani court last year. But the event remained wreathed in mystery -- why Pearl? How did the organizer of the murder operate so easily in Pakistan? Why did the Pakistan government claim that it was Pearl's overzealous reporting that was partly to blame?

In the newly published book "Who Killed Daniel Pearl?" French philosopher and writer Bernard-Henri Levy offers a provocative answer to those questions.

"This crime was not petty, a murder for nothing, an uncontrolled act of fundamentalist fanatics," he writes. "It's a crime of state, intended and authorized, whether we like it or not, by the state of Pakistan."

Levy's year-long investigation into Pearl's murder, which he powerfully recounts in his book, took him first to British-born Pakistani Omar Sheikh, who was convicted as the organizer of the plot. Sheikh, Levy concluded, was

an operative of the Inter-Services Intelligence agency, Pakistan's military intelligence arm. Both Sheikh and the ISI were linked as well to Al-Qaida.

Pearl's death, Levy believes, came in part because his investigations came too close to this nexus. The final straw, he thinks, may have been Pearl's probe into evidence that Pakistani nuclear scientists were supplying information and technology to Osama bin Laden.

Levy, in a telephone interview, admits there is an element of speculation in some of his conclusions. The idea, for one, that Pearl was picked out for his investigation into the nuclear connection is not supported by his colleagues at the Journal, though Levy said Pearl's Pakistani assistant told him the reporter was still delving into this issue at the time of his kidnapping.

But there is also plenty of hard evidence to lend credence to the central contentions of this book.

The ISI was the backer of the Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan. It nurtured Islamic militants who crossed the border into Kashmir to pursue a terror war there against Indian rule. Omar Sheikh, as part of that operation, carried out kidnappings of Westerners in Kashmir. He was freed from Indian jails as the result of the 1999 hijacking of an Indian airliner to Afghanistan. Sheikh was escorted to safety by ISI officers, Levy reports, and enjoyed their protection in Pakistan.

The kidnapers of Pearl included a number of Arabs with clear ties to Al-Qaida and the ISI itself had links to Al-Qaida in the past. Sheikh, according to this account and other reports, turned himself in to the ISI first and his presence was not revealed for many days.

On the nuclear front, two senior Pakistani nuclear scientists who espoused Islamist views had close ties to bin Laden. After Sept. 11, they were placed under house arrest. And as I reported in the Mercury News last year, American officials knew that the head of a major Pakistani nuclear lab, A.Q. Khan, provided uranium enrichment technology to North Korea in trade for missile technology.

These are uncomfortable facts for the Pakistani government and for the United States, which relies on close cooperation with Pakistan in the war on terror. U.S. officials know that radical Islamists have strong support within the military.

Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage

undiplomatically let that slip two weeks ago at a meeting with congressional members, telling them he did not believe ``affection for working with us extends up and down the rank and file of the Pakistani security community."

But the United States believes it can rely on Pakistani ruler Gen. Pervez Musharraf, who is seen as a moderate. Levy doesn't deny this logic but he sees Musharraf as a conflicted figure.

``The great fight of our time is between moderate Islam and radical Islam," he told me. ``And the front line of this fight goes right through the middle of Musharraf's brain."