



On the Trail of Daniel Pearl

A new book suggests Pakistani officials may have had a role in the reporter's death

By DAREN FONDA

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Pakistan's government has recently had to contend with charges that its military and intelligence services continue to aid the Taliban, and also that it may have exported nuclear technology to North Korea. Now, celebrated French intellectual Bernard-Henri Levy has suggested that even the plot to murder American journalist Danny Pearl may have reached the upper tiers of government in Islamabad.

Pearl's murder has never quite been solved. Since the Wall Street Journal reporter was abducted and executed in Karachi in January 2002, four men with ties to radical Islamist groups have been convicted of the crime by a Pakistani court. The suspected ringleader, a British citizen named Ahmad Omar Saeed Sheikh, has been sentenced to death, while the other three are serving 25-year terms. But several other alleged accomplices remain at large, and the man who may have slashed Pearl's throat — Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, a top Qaeda operative who recently revealed to U.S. authorities fresh details about the Sept. 11 attacks — is being held incommunicado.

At considerable risk to his own safety, Levy — who, like Pearl, is Jewish — spent more than a year investigating the murder in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bosnia, and other locales. Levy doesn't buy the argument that Pearl, who was 38, was murdered simply because he was an American and a Jew — “crimes” to which he confessed moments before he was decapitated. Rather, Levy suggests, Pearl's killing was a “state crime,” orchestrated by a syndicate of Jihadist groups with the backing of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), its CIA. Levy theorizes that Pearl was close to uncovering ties between ISI chiefs and al Qaeda. He also believes Pearl was on the trail of Pakistani nuclear scientists who may have helped the terrorist group.

Separating fact from speculation is tricky in Levy's book, "Who Killed Daniel Pearl?"; he writes at times in the staccato prose of a hard-boiled novelist, casting himself as the central detective, and some of his embellishments about, say, what Pearl was thinking during his nine days of captivity, take vivid dramatic license. Though he provides few hard truths, however, he raises intriguing questions. During his many visits to Pakistan, Levy interviewed police, pored over trial transcripts, met with Pearl's contacts and retraced the former reporter's footsteps in Karachi. He writes that the hotel Akbar in Rawalpindi, where Pearl was abducted, was "controlled, almost managed" by the ISI; he says that the man Pearl was headed to see, a cleric named Sheikh Mubarak Gilani, is a "spiritual guru" to alleged British shoe bomber Richard Reid.

Levy notes that Sheikh, who set up the Gilani meeting for Pearl, is a known terrorist sprung from an Indian prison in 1999 by the hijackers of an Indian Airlines flight who demanded his freedom as a condition for peacefully abandoning the plane in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. As Levy points out, Sheikh operated freely in Pakistan, living openly with his wife and son, even though he worked with Jihadist groups who may have had connections to Osama bin Laden. Through these and other associations, Levy also infers that Sheikh was connected to the ISI. And he questions why Pakistani officials announced Sheikh's arrest only a week after he had actually turned himself in — at about the same time that Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf was visiting Washington.

An essential component of any murder investigation is motive, and Levy speculates on the reasons an assortment of Pakistani groups may have wanted Pearl dead. The French author believes Pearl had been on the trail of prominent Pakistani nuclear scientists, one of whom had travelled to North Korea for a "vacation" and another who had ties to a secretive Islamic charity operating in Afghanistan. A month before his abduction, Pearl had co-written an article in the *Journal* alleging that Dr. Bashiruddin Mahmood, one of the fathers of the Pakistani bomb, had discussed nuclear weapons with Osama bin Laden. Pearl didn't break that story; it had been widely reported. Nonetheless, Levy writes: "One can imagine that (Pearl) was establishing the list of ISI superior officers who...were willing to close their eyes to a technology transfer to terrorist groups."

If Pearl had been chasing such a hot story, it would have

been news to the Journal. In a review of Levy's book last week, the paper's editorial features editor wrote that Pearl's "editors, in constant contact with him, knew nothing of such a discovery — and given Journal practice, he'd certainly have told them if he had such news." A spokesman for the Pakistani embassy in Washington told TIME that Levy's claims are "beyond belief."

Colleagues and Pakistani fixers who had worked with Pearl in Karachi, Rawalpindi and Bahawalpur deny that the Journal correspondent has been working on a story about Pakistani nukes. And while the ISI may well have been linked with the Kashmir-focused terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammed, to which Sheikh belonged, it's a stretch to extrapolate from there that the ISI backed or ordered Pearl's killing. For one thing, sources say, it's not the ISI's style to hire Yemenis or Arabs, the nationalities of the accomplices, to do the job. And if the ISI didn't like what Pearl was investigating it would have been simpler to boot him from Pakistan, as the ISI has occasionally done to nosy foreign journalists. Though the ISI didn't kick him out, Levy says that with the publication of his book he's become part of a "growing club of reporters who cannot return to Pakistan."

Levy concedes that we may never know who ordered Pearl's murder. But his book has a larger agenda: To promote the idea that America should focus more on fighting terrorism in Pakistan — where radical Islamists may be close to acquiring nuclear know-how — than in Iraq. "I assert that Pakistan is the biggest rogue state of all the rogue states," he writes. It's a provocative thought for a conspiracy buff or anyone else to ponder.