

Bernard-Henri Levy

Doubts About an Ally

PARIS—There have been reports recently in the American press concerning the probability that the government of Pakistan has traded nuclear secrets and maybe even technology with Iran. Such disclosures were welcomed by those of us here in France who consider ourselves part of the “anti-anti-American society” and who have long wondered why the United States doesn’t seem more concerned with the character of its major ally in the war against terrorism.

As an observer of Pakistan for more than 30 years—I first went to the region in 1971 as a war correspondent covering the conflict between India and Pakistan over Bangladesh—I have seen the government become ever more degraded as it fell from the hands of the Bhuttos to military leaders such as Pervez Musharraf and then to the point where now—as the Daniel Pearl affair showed—it is doubtful that the executive branch of the country’s government is fully in charge. Is it known in the West that President Musharraf himself had to cancel several trips to Karachi, the economic capital of his own country, for safety reasons?

My last few visits, including one on a diplomatic mission for France following the Afghan war and several more as part of my investigation into the death of journalist Daniel Pearl, brought this point home and gave me a full sense of who really runs things there. What has become obvious is the tremendous power of the ISI, Pakistan’s secret service—so dreaded by average citizens that they rarely speak its name but refer to it instead as the “three letters”—and the deep infiltration of this powerful organization by militant fundamentalists and jihadists.

The most dominant factions in the ISI, in fact, have come to constitute a virtual jihadist group itself. And this is why Pakistan has become the subject of numerous other urgent questions: Did it shelter Osama bin Laden and other members of al Qaeda after the Sept. 11 attacks? Has it provided bin Laden with medical attention since the Afghan war, in the Binori Town Mosque in Karachi, which I happened to visit? Was it involved, and to what extent, in the murder of Pearl?

It is in this context that it’s advisable to consider the problem of the Pakistani nuclear program and the dangers of proliferation that it presents—with Iran certainly, but also with al Qaeda and the still-at-large elements of the Taliban. In my book I bring up the case of the so-called “father of the Islamist bomb,” the man after whom Pakistan’s

leading nuclear laboratory is named, Abdul Qader Khan. He is a revered figure in his country. He is cheered in the streets. His birthday is sanctified in the mosques. I witnessed an Islamist demonstration in which gigantic portraits of him led the march. But this man has long been not only a government official but a fanatical Islamist. This public figure, this great scientist, this man who knows better than anyone (since it is he who developed them) the most sensitive secrets of Pakistan’s nuclear program, is both close to the ISI and a member of Lashkar e-Toiba, a group closely allied with al Qaeda. My story concerned Khan’s “vacations” to North Korea and his links with bin Laden’s men; one of my hypotheses is that Pearl may have been killed to prevent him from reporting on such trafficking of nuclear know-how.

It is clear that the United States accepted the moral imperative when it came to the Afghan war. It is also obvious that, after Sept. 11, the war against terrorism had to be declared, and that it has to be carried on, with all the necessary alliances. But what is the real necessity, in this framework, of the U.S.-Pakistan alliance? Was it necessary, after the most recent visit of Musharraf to Washington, to continue the massive funding of his regime? Is it not possible at least to tie this aid to certain simple political conditions—for example, that the Pakistanis must give proof of a genuine effort to reform the ISI; or that they impose the most severe sanctions on their high-ranking nuclear scientists and officials who take “vacations” in Iran, North Korea or Taliban-held areas of Afghanistan?

This story, unfortunately, I’m unable to cover further, because I have become part of a growing club of reporters who cannot return to Pakistan, simply because they don’t want to end up like one of the best journalists to have covered the nuclear trading story, Daniel Pearl. But I am convinced that a harsher tone, a reformulation of the terms of alliance, is called for, so that our relationship with Musharraf will be more than a gullible, naive embrace—and will conform to moral as well as political imperatives. And I would add that waiting for us is the other Pakistan—that which is liberal, democratic, secular, which fights, back against the wall, against mounting Islamism, and which does not understand why, in this combat, we are not at its side.

Bernard-Henri Levy is the author of “Who Killed Daniel Pearl?”