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Pakistani Scientist Who Met Bin Laden Failed Polygraphs, Renewing Suspicions

By Peter Baker
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ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — It didn't seem all that strange to his son when Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood began spending part of his retirement in Afghanistan working on charity projects. But he was curious enough after one of those trips to ask his father if he had met Osama bin Laden there. "He said no," the son recalled.

Only after his father was arrested did Asim Mahmood learn the truth. His father had met with bin Laden twice. "What were you doing with him?" Asim said he demanded. "Why did you meet with him?"

Those are the same questions still being asked by intelligence officials here and in Washington. Mahmood was no ordinary retiree-philanthropist but one of the top nuclear scientists in Pakistan. In addition to lying to his son, intelligence officials concluded, Mahmood had failed a half-dozen lie detector tests they gave him.

The mysterious case of the Pakistani scientist touched off alarms in the West, and CIA Director George J. Tenet raced to Islamabad to personally look into the matter last fall. But four months of investigation by U.S. and Pakistani authorities have failed to yield a definitive explanation of what Mahmood was doing in Afghanistan before the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States. Was he handing over nuclear secrets to bin Laden, or has he been caught up in an investigation built largely on suspicion and circumstance?

Pakistani authorities maintain that whatever he might have discussed with bin Laden, Mahmood did not possess the specialized knowledge necessary to build a weapon by himself, and they decided in January not to prosecute.

Yet U.S. officials said they remain dissatisfied and have pressed Pakistan to keep Mahmood under wraps. He remains on the U.S. list of designated terrorists, his assets have been frozen and he lives under a



CIA Director George Tenet, above, traveled to Pakistan to look into the case of Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, a nuclear scientist who met with Osama bin Laden. (Kemenko Pajic - AP)

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form of house arrest with a guard watching over him 24 hours a day.

No evidence has emerged that bin Laden has obtained nuclear weapons, but he is believed by diplomats and intelligence agencies to have made serious attempts to secure them. "They were knocking on every door. They were trying every avenue," said an Arab diplomat who monitored al Qaeda activity from here. "This was for them the future. Why not? It's a weapon of mass destruction, so why not try to get hold of it? Whether it was biological, germ, chemical, gas, they were looking into every sort of possible thing."

They may have turned to Mahmood, who admired the radical Taliban militia that controlled Afghanistan, a neighbor of Pakistan's. He also held unusual views on such topics as the role of sunspots, genies and palm-reading in modern society. A 38-year veteran of Pakistan's nuclear program, Mahmood spent years working on a process to enrich uranium, and rose to chairman of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission.

His work did not focus on weapons construction, a fact that has convinced authorities and some independent specialists that he would not have been much use to bin Laden. Yet Mahmood helped develop the Kahuta plant near Islamabad that produces enriched uranium for bombs. Before his retirement he was head of the Khosab reactor in the Punjab region that produces weapons-grade plutonium. The production of such fissile materials has long been considered a key obstacle to any terrorists trying to build weapon.

Still, some nuclear experts maintain that the difficulty of creating fissile material means that a terrorist might be forced to try to buy it on the black market. As a result, investigators theorize that bin Laden might have been using Mahmood mainly to find other scientists who could have helped him use such purloined material to build a nuclear device or an unsophisticated "dirty bomb" that could spread radioactive material through conventional explosives.

Either way, Mahmood's philosophy seemed to make him an obvious target for Islamic radicals seeking a collaborator. Pakistani officials said he advocated the massive development of weapons-grade material to help arm other Islamic countries. After he publicly and vociferously argued against government plans to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, he was demoted, and he eventually retired under pressure in 1999.

"Mahmood was one of the nuclear hawks," said Rifaat Hussain, a former Pakistani official who now heads the Defense and Strategic Studies Department at Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad. "People say he was a very capable scientist and very capable engineer, but he had this totally crazy mind-set."

An Audience With Bin Laden

Mahmood represented a faction of scientists in the Pakistani nuclear program who promoted extreme Islamic views and became increasingly disgruntled with the country's more moderate leadership. "There are lots of them over there," said Pervez Hoodbhoy, a nuclear physicist at Quaid-i-Azam. "In recent years it's become a quite frightening place to go to. You see all these long beards."

After his retirement, Mahmood established a charitable organization that operated in Afghanistan. Authorities in Pakistan began focusing on Mahmood's activities last fall after receiving a tip from U.S. intelligence officials. Investigators suspected the organization was a front for dealings with bin Laden.

On Oct. 23, the Pakistani secret service arrested Mahmood, a fellow former government nuclear scientist, Abdul Majid, and five associates from the purported charity.

Most of the men were soon released, but Pakistan held Mahmood and Majid for two months for intensive interrogations conducted jointly with U.S. investigators.

The investigation established that Mahmood met with Taliban leader Mohammad Omar and bin Laden and discussed nuclear weapons with bin Laden. In an interview at his family's home here, Asim Mahmood said that his father had met with bin Laden twice and that bin Laden grilled him about how to build a bomb. But he insisted that his father

sought out bin Laden only to solicit help with the charity and that he refused to trade in nuclear secrets.

"My father never went along," Asim Mahmood said. Bin Laden "asked him about how to make a bomb and things like that. But my father wouldn't help him. He told him, 'It's not so easy, you can't just build a bomb, you can't just do it with a few thousand [Pakistani] rupees. You need a big institution. You should forget it.',"

"He had to meet Osama bin Laden because he was trying to convince him to make a polytechnic college in Kabul," said Asim Mahmood, a 33-year-old physician. "My father thought, 'He's a rich man, he's got so much influence there, maybe he could help.',"

According to Pakistani sources, the nuclear scientist said during interrogation that bin Laden suggested he already had fissile material to build a bomb, having obtained it from former Soviet republics through a militant Islamic group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Bin Laden asked Mahmood to help find other Pakistani scientists more versed in the mechanics of bomb-building, the sources said.

A U.S. source said Mahmood failed polygraph examinations during his questioning. Asim Mahmood confirmed that his father took "six or seven" lie detector tests and failed, but he called the technology unreliable. Although he said his father initially lied to him about bin Laden, Asim Mahmood said he has accepted his father's explanation that the whole situation was misinterpreted. Asim Mahmood also acknowledged that a diagram describing a helium balloon to disperse anthrax spores was found last fall in the building that housed his father's charity in Kabul, but he said it was planted by authorities after the building was abandoned.

'We Have Done Nothing'

Approached in the garden of the gated, two-story house where he lives under constant guard, the elder Mahmood declined to comment. Neither of the scientists is permitted to give interviews. "We're not allowed to see you," Majid said when reached by telephone at his home. "The restriction has been made by your government. Your government and our government don't allow us. I have given the truth to the investigators, but we are not permitted to tell it to anybody else. . . . We have done nothing, only welfare work."

Majid quickly hung up, afraid of the consequences of speaking longer, saying, "Even this telephone call is under observation."

Pakistan became the seventh country known to test a nuclear device when it set off underground bombs in 1998 in response to similar tests by arch-rival India. Analysts say they believe Pakistan has enough fissile material to assemble 30 to 40 warheads, and U.S. officials have been anxious about the security of the program.

But independent specialists cast doubt on whether Mahmood and Majid could have given bin Laden enough help to build a bomb. "They didn't deal with the weapons program, they had nothing to do with the designing of nuclear devices," said Zahid Malik, a biographer and friend of Abdul Qadeer Khan, the former head of Pakistan's nuclear program.

"He may not actually have much more knowledge than you would get from an undergraduate degree in nuclear physics," Zia Mian, a Pakistani nuclear scientist now based at Princeton University, said of Mahmood. "My suspicion is if you gave him a bucket full of plutonium he wouldn't know what to do with it, because he never worked with nuclear weapons, as far as we know."

Path to Prominence

Mahmood grew up in India and moved with his family to a small village 25 miles outside of Lahore after Pakistan was created by the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. He spent his childhood in poverty. He won a scholarship to the University of Engineering and Technology in Lahore and, later, a job in the nascent Pakistani atomic energy program. He spent nearly six years in the 1960s in Manchester, England, where he earned a master's degree in nuclear engineering.

His career was marked by bureaucratic successes – 10 patents, a top civilian award, recognition for his work in detecting leaks of radioactive water. But it also had moments of turbulence. He was replaced as head

of the uranium-enrichment program by Khan, who was later recognized as the father of Pakistan's nuclear program for his pioneering work – an event that started a lifetime feud between the two men.

Mahmood was investigated for two years in the 1970s because of suspicions that he was secretly a member of the Qadyani sect, an offshoot of Islam founded in the 19th century by a man claiming to be the manifestation of the prophet Muhammad. Members of the sect are often persecuted in Pakistan for not being genuine Muslims, but Mahmood eventually satisfied authorities that he was a true believer.

Indeed, his religious beliefs seem to have deepened as the years passed. In 1986, he founded the Holy Koran Research Foundation to explore the intersection between Islam and science, and began writing books advancing provocative theories.

In "Mechanics of the Doomsday and Life After Death," published in 1987, he asserted that natural catastrophes happened in locations where moral degradation has taken hold. In 1998, he published "Cosmology and Human Destiny" arguing that sunspots have determined the course of world events such as World War II, revolutions against colonial power in India, Vietnam and the Philippines and the Communist takeover of Eastern Europe.

Mahmood also became a practiced palm-reader and talked about the role of genies, the spirits called djinnis in the Koran. Once clean-shaven, Mahmood grew a long, unkempt beard as the Taliban and conservative Muslims require, and came under the influence of Israr Ahmad, a prominent, pro-Taliban radical Islamic cleric.

Ahmad styles himself as the "emir" of Tanzeem-e-Islami, an organization whose 2,000 members pledge loyalty to him. In an interview at the religious academy he runs in Lahore, Ahmad said he wants to foster a true Islamic state similar to the one the Taliban attempted. The cleric called the conflict that began in Afghanistan last fall "the last war between Islam and the infidels."

Ahmad, who asserted that the Israeli secret service and not bin Laden carried out the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, said Mahmood started coming to him in the late 1980s, when the cleric was shown preaching on television regularly.

"He's a practicing Muslim," Ahmad said of Mahmood, adding that Pakistani authorities went after Mahmood only to please the Americans. "Our government became oversensitive about these issues."

After his retirement in 1999, Mahmood founded Ummah Tameer-e-Nau (Islamic Reconstruction), an agency purportedly devoted to relief and reconstruction work in Afghanistan. Mahmood appointed Ahmad as the group's patron and traveled to Afghanistan several times, ostensibly to work on projects related to the organization.

Mahmood recruited others to help, including Sheik Mohammad Tufail, chief executive of Tufail F.W. Fabrication, an engineering firm in Lahore. Tufail was arrested in October and held for two months while being interrogated about his involvement in Mahmood's organization.

"It was exclusively a charitable thing," said Tufail's son, Sheik Mohammed Zubair, 43, sitting in the company's offices in Lahore, where a photograph of Pakistan's first nuclear test in 1998 hung from the wall. "It was just to rehabilitate those people, especially the people with no means. . . . To tell you the truth, we were never aware of Osama bin Laden or – what's the other's name? – Mullah Omar until the World Trade Center."

Among the charity's projects were a mill that had just begun producing flour when it was bombed by U.S. warplanes last fall, ambulance units in Kabul and a 12,350-acre land development near Kandahar, according to those involved.

"It was a legitimate project," investor Mohammed Hayat said of the land deal. "They wanted to level the ground and put in some tubes and wells and get it ready for cultivation. There is absolutely nothing [sinister about it]. . . . They were not interested in atomic bombs or anything."

Staff writers Bob Woodward and Barton Gellman in Washington and special correspondent Kamran Khan in Pakistan contributed to this report.

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