

Mass Destruction, Mass Distribution

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The Atomic Bazaar

By William Langewiesche

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On the Siberian side of the Ural Mountains, two time zones east of Moscow and in deep forest, there is a city of 85,000 people. Recently some of its occupants have been building large, lavishly appointed homes. There is no obvious explanation of where the money is coming from. The housing boom is of some interest because the city in question, Ozersk, is one of the 10 closed nuclear cities in Russia. Many tons of weapons-grade uranium and plutonium are stored there, and the security surrounding it is not very impressive.

This is one of the many disturbing things that William Langewiesche tells us in "The Atomic Bazaar," a short, taut and striking account of the current and prospective state of the deadly nuclear game. The first half of the book discusses the prospect of terrorists acquiring and using a nuclear weapon. The second discusses the prospect of proliferating state ownership of such weapons. While there is serious cause for concern on both accounts, Mr. Langewiesche is more pessimistic about state ownership than terrorist use.

For terrorists, or for criminals interested in a deal with terrorists, Russia is the most promising source of the highly enriched uranium needed to make a bomb. And the most likely way of getting Russian uranium without alarm bells ringing is by cutting a deal with someone with legitimate access to the stuff. Whether the recent housing construction in Ozersk means that such deals have already been cut is not known.

Then there is the problem of getting the uranium, about 100 pounds of it, to where it can be used or sold -- say, Istanbul. Mr. Langewiesche, after spending time on the ground in Georgia and on the mountainous Iran-Turkish border, concludes that such a journey would not be too difficult. Georgia is one of the most corrupt countries in the world, while Kurdish opium traffickers in the mountains of east Turkey might easily serve as guides and helpers if the price is right. Current American efforts to interdict such traffic, Mr. Langewiesche claims, are ineffective: They rely too

much on electronic gadgetry and on the cooperation of corrupt governments; they neglect, in the meantime, informal power structures and the goings-on in the backcountry.

In the end, though, Mr. Langewiesche believes that the odds are stacked against the terrorists. The cumulative risks associated with acquiring and moving nuclear material, finding a secure location to make a bomb, actually making it and then selecting a target, delivering and exploding it -- and maintaining a high level of secrecy throughout -- would require an exceptional combination of efficiency and luck to achieve success.

So much for the goodish news. On the subject of the proliferation of weapons among states, Mr. Langewiesche is uniformly downbeat. He uses the story of the rise and fall of A.Q. Khan -- the scientist who made the Pakistani bomb and created a secret international market in nuclear advice and material -- to good effect. Khan was a vain and boastful man, but he was also a formidable operator. For many years he was given his head -- he was dismissed from his high-level position in Pakistan's government only in 2004 -- because those in power feared a nuclear India and wanted the prestige of belonging to the nuclear club.

Khan's task was made easier, as Mr. Langewiesche shows, because of the greed of European supplier-companies that were prepared to bend or ignore the rules in the case of a customer willing to pay double or triple the going rate for sensitive, proscribed equipment. And for crucial periods Khan was free from the anti-proliferation constraints normally imposed by the U.S. Washington needed the support of Pakistan, first against the Russians and then against al Qaeda, and adjusted its priorities accordingly. There are no disinterested actors in the politics of nuclear weapons.

Khan's activity was driven not just by vainglory but by a sense of mission. It derived from the belief, widely held among the world's have-nots, that the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty possesses no moral authority and is simply an instrument to perpetuate the advantage of the rich and powerful. Thus Khan found many customers, clients and admirers in what we used to call the Third World. And when the Bush Doctrine announced America's intention to intervene in the internal affairs of other countries, in the cause of promoting its values, some of those countries were given a powerful additional incentive to acquire nuclear weapons.

Khan has now fallen from grace, but Mr. Langewiesche maintains that the network he discovered, developed and exploited -- something more like the Internet than a rigid structure -- survives and cannot be dismantled. Nuclear proliferation has thereby reached the point of no return. The desire for self-sufficiency will drive it forward -- in fits and starts and sometimes with backward slips,

certainly, but incrementally forward. For, given the strength of motivation and the availability of know-how, "no amount of maneuvering will keep determined nations from developing nuclear arsenals."

Some of those nations will have "poor command-and-control systems, and fragile, overly bellicose governments." Which means, Mr. Langewiesche concludes, that the next couple of decades will be unlike the past six, in that some of the weapons will almost certainly be used in anger. This will not necessarily mean a global nuclear holocaust, as it would have during the Cold War. Just limited local or regional devastation.

How convincing is this analysis? Pretty compelling for someone of a realist disposition, especially given the level of incompetence and disarray recently displayed by the leading nuclear states, the main actors with an interest in proving it false. If you have any anxiety left over after worrying about global warming, you might want to read this book. The odds are that this catastrophe will happen in your lifetime.

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