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The Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence: A Profile

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In the past few weeks, Pakistan has come under intense pressure from the United States, Afghanistan and India to curb alleged involvement of its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in terrorist activities. Such pressure has built rapidly in the aftermath of bomb blasts, some carried out by suicide bombers, in July 2008 in many parts of South Asia. Those outrages caused well over a hundred deaths. Much before the recent attacks, the ISI's power and influence in politics had gained it the reputation of "a state within a state", suggesting that Pakistani governments, especially those formed by civilians, have little or no control over its activities. The ISI rejects such accusations, claiming that it is a professional organisation dedicated fully to gathering intelligence that would strengthen Pakistan's national survival and security.

Existing literature on spy agencies is replete with data suggesting that acting irregularly and even in illegal ways is not unusual for such organisations. Even in stable and strong democracies, governments are not always fully in control of them and they can set up their agenda rather freely. Charges that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation sometimes act in defiance of United States governments have been made several times, but since such organisations work in great secrecy, it is not easy to find solid corroborative evidence against them that can show that they do act against the will of the government. However, the general assumption underlying the functioning of such entities is that they act under a coherent chain of command, and, in principle, their activities are purported to enhance national security.

Pakistan's President, Pervez Musharraf, has described the ISI as "Pakistan's first line of defence."² On 5 August 2008, the Pakistan government criticised the Americans for blaming Pakistan for the recent terrorist activities. It was claimed that, on 24 May 2008, Pakistan provided the Americans with the exact location and movement of the Taliban leader, Baitullah Mehsud, who had driven to a remote South Waziristan mountain post in his Toyota Land Cruiser to address the press [among the journalists present was the BBC Pakistan correspondent]. He returned back safely to his abode. The statement went on to say that the United States military has the capacity to direct a missile to a precise location at very short notice as it has done close to 20 times in the last few years to hit al-Qaeda targets inside

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² Statement published in the Pakistani newspaper, *The News*, 6 August 2008.

Pakistan. However, no action was taken against Mehsud. This attitude was described by Pakistan as intriguing and confusing. Pakistan also alleged an Indian hand in the trouble in Baluchistan as well as the Afghanistan government in protecting Baluch secessionists.

Making allegations and counter-allegations is typical of spy agencies and the exact truth may never be known to the public at large. On the other hand, it is possible that, for the resurgence of terrorism, the factors that have created the present situation may be far more complex and may include many other players.

In any event, it is worth recapitulating the chronology of the July terrorist attacks. On 6 July 2008, in a suicide bombing in Islamabad, 21 people lost their lives, including 15 policemen. The next day in Karachi, six crude bombs exploded in different parts of the city, causing grievous injury to 25 people. Pakistan blamed Mehsud for the attacks – he was also blamed for the assassination of Ms Benazir Bhutto on 27 December 2007.

However, it was after the attack on the Indian embassy in the Afghanistan capital, Kabul, on 7 July 2008 that killed more than 60 people, including four members of the Indian diplomatic staff, that protests began to be aired directly against the ISI. The Afghans immediately started claiming that the attack had been masterminded by an intelligence agency of a neighbouring country. Given the strained relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, it was not difficult to apprehend that the Afghans were pointing the finger at Pakistan. A few days later, India made similar accusations. President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan went on to claim that his government had convincing evidence that suggested that the attack had been masterminded by Pakistani intelligence. The CIA chief, Robert Gates, initially said that he had not seen any evidence of a Pakistani involvement, but soon afterwards, the United States position changed when the Afghan and Indian point of view was presented to the Bush administration.

In the meantime, terrorist outbursts continued and bomb blasts took place in the Indian city of Bangalore on 25 July 2008 and in Ahmedabad on 26 July 2008. Some 60 people lost their lives and many more were injured. The Indian police claimed to have found dozens of unexploded bombs in Surat and other Indian towns and cities. There was no doubt that some forces were trying to instigate communal clashes between Hindus and Muslims in India, and indeed aiming at undermining the efforts that had gone on for quite some time to develop better understanding and relations between India and Pakistan. India did not directly name the ISI for those attacks, but alleged that a Pakistani involvement in them was present even when the actual blasts may have been carried out by Indian Muslims recruited by extremist organisations.

Under the circumstances, the recent visits of Pakistan's newly elected Prime Minister, Mr Yousaf Raza Gilani, to the United States and Sri Lanka were marred by constant barrage of questions and comments about Pakistan's alleged inability to control the terrorists, who were receiving support from the ISI. Thus, what was supposed to be an excellent occasion to showcase his vision of Pakistan and what he hopes to achieve as prime minister became instead an embarrassing exercise in finding arguments to exonerate Pakistan from charges of inability to control rouge elements in Pakistani society.

In the United States, President George Bush, as well as presidential candidates, Mr John McCain and Mr Barack Obama, and other leaders whom Mr Gilani met, urged him to do much more to root out extremism and terrorism. The same were the concerns raised by the American media. The only positive gain was that the Congress voted in favour of a US\$15

billion aid package to Pakistan, of which the major portion would be spent on economic development.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation Summit which he attended immediately afterwards was dominated by Mr Gilani assuring his South Asian counterparts that his government was determined to fight terrorism. In an interview with a Sri Lankan newspaper, he rubbished all accusations that the ISI was involved in the Kabul bombing, asserting that it took orders from him and reported to him in accordance with requirements laid down in the Pakistan constitution. In any case, in a 45-minute long meeting with Indian Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, Mr Gilani pointed out that Pakistan too was a victim of terrorism and that both Pakistan and India should work together to fight that evil. In a separate meeting with President Karzai, he promised to carry out an investigation to find out if there was any involvement of the ISI in the Kabul bombing. The question, of course, is, does Mr Gilani enjoy real powers as the chief executive of the Pakistan government? Mr Gilani was indeed making a technically correct statement when he said that, constitutionally speaking, the ISI was under his jurisdiction and reported to him, but for all practical purposes, it is the Chief of Army Staff to whom the ISI reports and takes orders from. In the past, whenever a civilian government had tried to establish its control over the ISI by appointing a general it trusted, but who was unacceptable to the military establishment, the latter trumped over it by appointing its own men to strategic positions dealing with intelligence on internal politics. This way, the ISI continued to maintain a watch on the activities of the civilian government itself.

In order to make sense of why the ISI enjoys, in actual reality, such wide discretionary powers and is allegedly involved in terrorism, we need to look at it in a historical perspective.

The ISI was founded in 1948 to facilitate intelligence gathering and sharing between the three main sections of the armed forces: the army, navy and air force. There are other military and civilian intelligence agencies too, but the ISI is undoubtedly the most powerful and the most politicised among them. The exact number of people who work for it is not known but estimates suggest it has at least 25,000 employees. Another 30,000 serve as informants and in other related roles. Although its official brief is about enhancing national security and, therefore, concerned primarily with intelligence gathering and other related activities pertaining to external threats to Pakistan, it was given a political task already in the late 1950s when General (later Field Marshal) Mohammad Ayub Khan (1958-1969) ordered it to monitor oppositional politicians from East Pakistan because he did not trust that Bengali police officers of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) would do that sincerely. Similarly, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971-1977) ordered the ISI to collect intelligence in Baluchistan after an arms cache allegedly dispatched by Iraq to help Baluch separatists was uncovered in 1973. Bhutto too did not trust the Baluchis working in the CID.

General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988) tasked the ISI to bolster the Mohajir Qomi Movement in the Sindh Province as a counterweight to the Pakistan People's Party, led by Benazir Bhutto, but the real big boost to the ISI's status and importance came during the Afghan jihad of the 1980s. He assigned the ISI the crucial task of setting up bases in Pakistan where Mujahideen (Islamic warriors) could be indoctrinated and trained to fight the holy war against the Soviet Red Army that had marched into Afghanistan in 1979, with a view to bolstering the fledgling communist regime that had come to power the previous year through a military coup. During this time, thousands of Islamic schools called madrassas were set up by the Islamists, where hundreds of thousands of pupils (Talibans), mainly from the Pushto-

speaking tribes on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan tribal belt, were indoctrinated in a severely militant type of Islamic ideology. This massive undertaking was given full help by the United States and Saudi Arabia. The ISI did not have any direct involvement in the setting up of the madrassas, but naturally the pupils indoctrinated in them were drafted into jihad operations in Afghanistan and, later, in the Indian-administered Kashmir.

After the Soviets withdrew in 1989 and the Americans hurriedly left without ensuring a smooth and stable transfer of power to Afghan politicians, a fierce and bloody power struggle irrupted among rival political and ethnic factions constituting Afghan society. While Pakistan backed the predominantly Pushtun Taliban, arch rival India threw its weight behind the Northern Alliance, comprising the Uzbek, Tajik, Hazara and other ethnic groups. The Taliban emerged victorious in that gory encounter and Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan increased dramatically.

It should not be surprising that, in that process, some officers in the ISI became hardcore Islamists although the ISI, as a body, may have remained a professional organisation focusing primarily on national security. Moreover, some top military and ISI officers began to nurture the dream of establishing an Islamic super state that would initially comprise Pakistan and Afghanistan, but would then expand into the Indian-administered Kashmir through successful jihad, and later to the Central Asian republics, and even Iran could possibly be integrated into it. From the Pakistan military's point of view, such expansion westwards would provide Pakistan "strategic depth" vis-à-vis arch rival India.

The Kashmir jihad which took off soon after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan was spearheaded by militant Pakistani organisations such as Laskhar-e-Toyyaba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Muhammad (JM). These outfits actively supported a popular uprising of Kashmiri Muslims that had emerged against Indian rule and, as a result, were involved in violent conflict with Indian troops. Later, these organisations began to expand their activities into India and the result was several terrorist outrages in both Indian-administered Kashmir as well as in other parts of India. It was widely suspected that the ISI maintained close connections with the LeT and JM.

Given these major assignments and concomitant involvement in militant operations, it should not be surprising that the ISI appropriated far more power and acquired much greater influence than is normally the case with intelligence agencies of middle level powers such as Pakistan. Also, the fact that democracy and civilian institutions never took a firm root in Pakistan and the military dominated the political scene meant that the ISI, the primary military intelligence agency, began to be dreaded as a state within a state.

However, the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States set in motion a worldwide campaign against terrorism. While Pakistan joined the "war on terror" and the Musharraf regime began to arrest Al Qaeda operatives, militants active in the Indian-administered Kashmir continued to be described by it as freedom fighters. However, after the 13 December 2001 terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament, pressure on President Musharraf to dissociate with such militancy increased enormously. In an important address to the Pakistani nation on 12 January 2002, President Musharraf declared that Pakistan remained committed to the just struggle of the Kashmiri people against Indian dominance, but, in future, militant organisations such as the LeT and JM will not be allowed to organise jihad on Pakistani territory for engagement in the Indian Kashmir.

Such utterances did not go down well with sections of Pakistani society that sympathised with the militants, among them were indeed serving and retired military officers, including senior officers in the ISI hierarchy. Several unsuccessful assassination attempts on President Musharraf and his loyal generals took place. It was found that some insiders were involved in those attacks. Consequently, a reshuffling of key positions in the military and the ISI took place as President Musharraf placed his trusted men in those positions. It is, however, possible that such actions were not thorough and, therefore, some dissident ISI functionaries who harboured sympathies for the Taliban and militant organisations remained undetected.

In any case, former ISI Director, Lieutenant-General Hameed Gul, and other retired military officers as well as rightwing Islamist leaders began openly to blame the government for making Pakistan national interests subservient to those of the United States. Voices were also raised in favour of the Kashmir jihad. During 2007, the terrorists directed their wrath at the Pakistan military personnel and installations. Almost every other day, bomb blasts and suicide attacks took place. As a result, hundreds of fatalities and injuries were suffered by the military. President Musharraf blamed the Taliban, but it is possible that dissident elements from the military and especially the ISI aided the Taliban in carrying out the attacks.

It is widely believed by the Pakistani military establishment that the Karzai government is closely allied to India and, therefore, Indian influence has increased significantly in Afghanistan. Such developments are seen as inimical to Pakistani interests. It is, therefore, possible that, in the attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul, such considerations may have played some role. The Americans claim to have intercepted messages exchanged between the ISI officers and the Taliban in which the former provided information to the latter on the movement of North Atlantic Treaty Organization troops.

On the other hand, within the Pakistani tribal areas, bloody clashes between the Taliban and the Pakistani military continue. In the last few months, hundreds of Pakistani military personnel lost their lives in such encounters. The military and the ISI have also continued to render help to the Americans in tracking down Al Qaeda operatives. Thus, the military establishment, which includes the ISI, apparently plays contradictory roles in the current situation.

It is, however, very unlikely that the mainstream ISI, headed currently by General Nadeem Taj, and previously by General Pervez Kayani (currently Chief of Army Staff), have been acting in defiance of the policies of President Musharraf, when he was firmly in power before the 18 February 2008 general elections. However, after the civilian government took over in the end of February 2008, that chain of command may have become less effective. There is nothing to suggest that the linkages and networking between the ISI officials and the Taliban and militant organisations such as LeT and JM have been severed altogether.

In any event, the pressure on Pakistan to deal effectively with terrorist networks within its territory will remain. Given the thriving market for conspiracy theories in Pakistan, some people believe that the United States, Afghanistan and India are developing a joint strategy against Pakistan. If that be true, then instead of the Taliban, Al Qaeda, LeT, JM and the ISI being blamed for terrorism, the Pakistani state itself may be viewed as a rogue entity that needs to be dealt with severely. In one sense, that would be a self-fulfilling prophecy of those who believe that Pakistan is a victim of some international plot against it.

It is, therefore, in Pakistan's interest that it strives hard to crush all networks and organisations that may be involved in terrorism. The ISI should indeed play its legitimate role in gathering intelligence imperative to strengthen Pakistan's security, but such activities should conform to the overall norms and standards that international law approves for the conduct of nations.

Equally, it is important that regional and world powers should assist Pakistan in strengthening its democratic institutions and in establishing hegemony of civilian rule. Also, efforts should be made to persuade the Pakistani and Indian military establishments and their spy agencies not to engage in a perpetual zero-sum combat to gain influence in South Asia and Afghanistan. There is the need to radically re-orient the politics of South Asia in a positive direction so that this region may benefit from the economic opportunities that are at hand. A destabilised Pakistan will inevitably carry adverse repercussions for its neighbours Afghanistan and India. Given the fact that Pakistan is a nuclear weapon state, such an outcome can spell disaster for the South Asian region as well as the rest of the world.

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