

Demystifying the ISI

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General

The Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence, more commonly known by its distinct trademark initials ISI, is the premier intelligence agency of Pakistan, operationally responsible for providing critical national security and intelligence assessment to the Government of Pakistan. The ISI is the largest of the three intelligence services of Pakistan, the others being the Intelligence Bureau (IB) and Military Intelligence (MI). The ISI nests within the bosom of the Pakistan Army, the most powerful of the wings of the state, far stronger than the executive, judiciary or the legislature. This covert arm of the Pakistan military was developed and honed, interestingly, with help from the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the 1980s. Today, this shadowy military intelligence agency has evolved into what some describe as a state within a state, with no accountability. The ISI, since its birth in 1948, has rewritten the rules of war and has given Pakistan the luxury of playing the Jekyll and Hyde game on the battlefields of its choosing and in the manner it wants, without exposing its troops to danger and its culpability to the enemy. The agency has long faced accusations of meddling in the affairs of its neighbours and supporting terrorist groups, especially against India and in Afghanistan though the same is vehemently denied by Pakistan. Notwithstanding, these denials, it has been established beyond doubt that the ISI continues to give India-centric terrorist organisations like the Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT) and Hizbul Mujahideen (HuM) full-fledged support in all respects, including operating out of Pakistan soil.

The ISI, headquartered in Islamabad, is currently headed by Lt Gen Zaheer ul Islam who replaced Lt Gen Ahmed Shuja Pasha in March 2012. The primary mission of the ISI includes aggressive intelligence which comprises espionage, psychological warfare, subversion, sabotage, counter-intelligence, and maintains active collaboration with other secret services in various countries. Its contacts with the Saudi Arabian intelligence services, Chinese intelligence, the American CIA and British M-16 are well known.

Historical Perspective

After independence in 1947, two new intelligence agencies were created in Pakistan, the IB and the MI. However, the weak performance of the MI in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1947 led to the creation of the ISI in 1948 as an independent intelligence service in order to strengthen the sharing of military intelligence among the Army, Navy and Air Force. Accordingly, the ISI was structured to be manned by officers from all wings of the military and to specialise in the collection, analysis and assessment of external intelligence, military/non-military. The ISI was the brainchild of Australian-born British Army officer, Maj Gen Robert Cawthome, the then Deputy Chief of Staff in the Pakistan Army. Initially, the ISI had no role in the collection of internal intelligence, with the exception of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and Azad Kashmir.

In the late 1950s, when Gen Ayub Khan became the President of Pakistan, he expanded the rôle of the ISI to monitoring opposition politicians and sustaining military rule in Pakistan. The ISI was reorganised in 1966 after intelligence failures in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965 and expanded in 1969. Ayub Khan entrusted the ISI with the responsibility for the collection of internal political intelligence in East Pakistan. Later, during the Baloch nationalist revolt in Balochistan in the 1970s, the ISI was tasked with a similar intelligence gathering operation. The ISI lost its importance during the regime of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was very critical of its rôle during the 1970 general elections, which triggered off the events leading to the partition of Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh. However, after Gen Zia-ul-Haq seized power on July 05, 1977, and became the Chief Martial Law Administrator, the ISI was given a greater role in the monitoring of internal affairs. This helped Zia to curb initial dissent against Martial Law and keep an eye on the activities of various political parties.

The Soviet War in Afghanistan in the 1980s saw the enhancement of the covert action capabilities of the ISI with a central role played by the CIA. A special Afghan Section was created to oversee the coordination of the war. A number

of officers from the ISI's Covert Action Division (Special Activities Division) received training in the United States, while many covert action experts of the CIA were attached to the ISI to guide it in its operations against the Soviet troops by using the Afghan Mujahideen. The ISI, along with the US and Saudi Arabia, nurtured the Afghan Mujahideen and helped them win the war. It was the main conduit for Western and Arab arms and later helped create the Taliban.

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Today, the ISI is the most powerful intelligence agency in Pakistan and is viewed with awe and dread at home and abroad. It is the eyes and ears of the military and is seen by many as the Pakistani equivalent of the CIA and Israel's Mossad – it is, in fact, rated as one of the best organised intelligence agencies in the world. This image took a severe battering after the targeted killing of Osama Bin Laden by the US Special Forces, under the very nose of the Pakistan military and ISI. The then ISI Director Shuja Pasha offered to quit as a result of this embarrassment, but the resignation was not accepted.

Organisation

The ISI is headed by a serving three-star Lt Gen Zaheer ul Islam, who was Corps Commander V Corps till he took over from Lt Gen Shuja Pasha in March 2012. Zaheer ul Islam comes from a military family of Punjab province and has had an earlier stint in the ISI, where he headed the section dealing with domestic and counter-insurgency issues. Under the Director General, three Deputy Directors General report directly to him and are in charge of three separate fields of the ISI: the Internal Wing, dealing with counter-intelligence and political issues inside Pakistan; the External Wing, handling external issues; and the Analysis and Foreign Relations Wing. According to some experts, the ISI is the largest intelligence agency in the world in terms of sheer numbers. While the numbers have never been made public, experts estimate these at about 10,000 officers and staff members, which do not include informants and assets.

There are number of departments in the ISI looking after its various activities involving both internal and external intelligence and security. The Covert Action Division is responsible for paramilitary and covert operations as well as special activities—its roles are akin to the Special Activities Division of the CIA. The Joint Intelligence Bureau is responsible for gathering political intelligence and has three sub-sections with one devoted entirely to operations against India.

The Joint Counter-Intelligence Bureau carries out surveillance of Pakistan's diplomats and diplomatic agents abroad, along with intelligence operations in the Middle East, South Asia, China, Afghanistan and the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union. The Joint Intelligence North (JIN) is exclusively responsible for the Jammu and Kashmir region and Northern Areas – this section is most familiar with Kashmiri and other militants operating against India, acquiring almost a mystical salience as the handlers of Kashmiri militants, both indigenous and of trans-border origin. The word JIN was frequently bandied in code communications intercepted by the Indian security agencies – it seemed to indicate super human powers akin to the 'Genie' of Alladin's lamp. In addition, there are some other departments like the Joint Intelligence Miscellaneous (for espionage and intelligence operations, in other countries), Joint Signal Intelligence Bureau (for intelligence collection along the India-Pakistan border), Joint Intelligence Technical (for the use of science and technology to advance Pakistan's intelligence gathering) and Political Internal Division – though disbanded by the Pakistani government in 2008, this section is stated to have become active since March 2012 on the taking over by the new Director, ISI.

The ISI headquarters in Islamabad is housed in a complex stated to resemble a well-funded private university. The entrance to the complex is discreet, being located next to a private hospital with no signposts, though visitors have to pass through a chain of barriers. Both civilians and members of the armed forces can join the ISI. For civilians, recruitment is advertised and is jointly handled by the Federal Public Services Commission (FPSC) and civilian ISI agents are considered employees of the Ministry of Defence.

ISI-Afghanistan

The ISI is believed to have played a central role in the US backed guerrilla war to oust the Soviet Army from Afghanistan in the 1980s – the CIA backed effort flooded Pakistan with weapons and Afghan, Pakistani and Arab 'Mujahideen'. The CIA relied on the ISI to train fighters, distribute arms, and channel funds. The ISI trained about 83,000 Afghan Mujahideen between 1983 and 1997 and dispatched them to Afghanistan.

The Taliban regime is also widely accepted to have been supported by the ISI and the Pakistani military from 1994 to 2001, which Pakistan officially denied during that time, although then Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has admitted to supporting the Taliban. According to the Pak-Afghan expert Ahmed Rashid, between 1994 and 1999, an estimated 80,000 to 10,000 Pakistanis

trained and fought in Afghanistan on the side of the Taliban. Following the 9/11 attack on the United States by Al Qaeda, Pakistan had no choice but to cooperate with the US due to the ultimatum given to it by then US President George Bush.

However, Pakistan currently continues to support the Afghan Taliban. A secret North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) study of 2012, based on interrogation of over 4,000 captured Taliban, Al Qaeda and other fighters in Afghanistan, concluded that ISI support was critical to the survival and revival of the Taliban after 2001. The British and American governments have enough proof and are aware of the ISI's role, but lack the courage to confront Islamabad because of their own vested interests. Despite Pakistan's blatant denials, the ISI is continuing to provide funding, training and sanctuary to the Taliban insurgency on a scale much larger than previously thought. This stepped up support can be squarely linked to the US planned withdrawal from Afghanistan this year. A case in point is the unstinted support being provided by the ISI to the Haqqani network, a potential *jihadist* group linked to Al Qaeda, and based in Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal territory along the Afghan border. The US claims that this group, from its sanctuaries in Pakistan, plans and executes terrorist attacks on US and NATO troops in Afghanistan. Pakistan officially denies backing the Haqqanis, but concedes links with them, and its reluctance to confront them is keeping in mind the fact that the Haqqani group will be crucial to any future Afghan settlement that Pakistan hopes to be part of.

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ISI and Threats to India

While the ISI has spread its tentacles all over the world, its main focus remains on India and Afghanistan. From assisting the insurgents in India's Northeast to supporting the Khalistani movement in Punjab and finally shifting its focus to Kashmir in the late 1980s with the launch of Operation Tupac, the basic focus of ISI activities has been against India. While the Khalistani movement was successfully tackled by India, though at a heavy price, the Northeast, especially Assam, continues to be a fertile ground for the ISI. According to the Institute for Conflict Management, of the number of extremist groups operating in Assam, the ISI sponsors the Muslim United Liberation Tigers and the United Liberation Front of Assam. Operation Tupac was implemented by Gen Zia ul Haq as an action plan to covertly support, abet and aid the militants in their fight against the Indian authorities in Kashmir. The success of Operation Tupac further strengthened Pakistan's resolve to dabble in Kashmir and gave an impetus to the ISI to enhance

its involvement in making this sponsorship a state policy, which is in place, and even more visible, today. This is evident from the increased activity on the Line of Control (LoC) in the last one year, including the beheading of Indian soldiers in the Rajouri sector and the major incident of intrusion in the Keran sector of Kashmir. The frequent ceasefire violations during this period also point towards a pattern, which cannot be ignored. Add to this the number of terror attacks that India has been subjected to—the major ones being the Parliament attack, the Mumbai attack of November 2008 in which 166 people lost their lives and the attack on the Indian Mission in Afghanistan—where the culpability of the Pakistani involvement (read ISI) has been fully established and authenticated even by international intelligence agencies. David Headley's startling revelations to US intelligence agencies during his interrogation have laid bare the Pakistani double-speak.

Despite this, Pakistan remains in denial mode with no intention of either assuaging or addressing Indian or international concerns on the export of terror from its soil. On the other hand, in spite of the serious challenge posed by the presence of Americans in Afghanistan, the ISI has not significantly let up its campaign in Kashmir or the pressure on terror activities in the rest of India – the terror network remains intact with the ISI's sleeper cells and modules being augmented and activated at will when the situation so demands. What should ring alarm bells in India and the rest of the world are the revelations made by the Indian Mujahideen's operative Yasin Bhatkal to Indian intelligence agencies on the possibility of using dirty nukes in Gujarat, as a retaliation for the Gujarat riots, as reported recently in the print media. He has further revealed that their handlers in Pakistan confirmed arranging such bombs if required but advised against their use due to collateral damage to Muslims as well. While the credibility of such a damning disclosure needs to be confirmed, the possibility of a dirty bomb being made available to the terrorist organisations by rogue elements in the Pakistani establishment or the ISI has existed for some time now. The US and some Western nations, as well as India and Israel, have expressed their misgivings and concerns on this grave issue from time to time. India, for one, cannot ignore this threat, and needs to take appropriate measures.

The Naxal threat is another major challenge being faced by India, affecting a large stretch of Indian territory. According to Indian intelligence agencies, there is undeniable proof of the ISI's involvement with the Naxalites – the ISI is providing them material and financial support. The ISI is looking seriously at increasing its footprint in these Naxal affected areas by using local mafia

connections. What is India's strategy to meet this challenge is not known. The ISI's role in drug trafficking and pushing in counterfeit currency is well known and these are threats that will continue to hound India in the coming years.

Unfortunately, India's own covert operations outfit, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) has singularly failed to nail the ISI, despite being on this very job for decades, with a huge budget to boot. RAW is poorly led by police officers, driven by the babu culture and lacks the political direction, professionalism, commitment and motivation required to face, tackle and defeat a fanatic force like the ISI – this, no doubt, has helped in creating the mystic aura around the ISI's capabilities in India.

Conclusion

Recent reports emanating from the Pakistani and Western media have quoted excerpts from a recent internal assessment and a review of national security carried out by the ISI, stating that the home grown terrorists are now a bigger threat than the Indian Army. No doubt, the Pakistani Taliban and their allies have unleashed a wave of suicide bombings and attacks across Pakistan, killing almost 7,000 civilians since 2003 – they have also specifically targeted the armed forces establishments and have not spared the ISI either. It is, however, unclear whether the assessment of the ISI is fully endorsed by Pakistan's military and the civil government or is just a façade being played out for the benefit of the Americans. For India, the assessments' impact on the ground is yet to be seen – Pakistani actions in the recent past on the LoC and in Kashmir certainly do not exhibit any such change.

The Pakistani military and the ISI continue to play their big double game with almost diabolical insolence. A portion of the billions of dollars they receive from the US for the 'war on terror' ends up reaching the Taliban and other Pakistan supported terrorist organisations—this is in spite of the carrot and stick policy of the US. To give the devil its due, this covert military outfit is an innovative and powerful instrument of war and a formidable force multiplier, to counter which India has not been able to find an answer, and given the predilections of its political leadership, is unlikely to do so in the near future.

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