

## The ISI and Terrorism: Behind the Accusations

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### Introduction

Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), has long faced accusations of meddling in the affairs of its neighbors. A range of officials inside and outside Pakistan have stepped up suggestions of links between the ISI and terrorist groups in recent years. In autumn 2006, a [leaked report](#) by a British Defense Ministry think tank charged, "Indirectly Pakistan (through the ISI) has been supporting terrorism and extremism—whether in London on 7/7, or in Afghanistan, or Iraq." In India, Mumbai's police chief has [claimed to have proof](#) that the ISI planned the July 2006 bombing of the Indian city's commuter rail system, which was carried out by the Kashmir-based militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba. After massive bombings marred former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's October 2007 return to Pakistan, some of her supporters blamed the ISI; Bhutto herself called for the sacking of the country's intelligence chief.

In a September 2006 BBC interview, President Pervez Musharraf underscored the importance of his nation's role: "Remember my words: if the ISI is not with you and Pakistan is not with you, you will lose in Afghanistan." In a later [appearance](#) on NBC's "Meet the Press," Musharraf acknowledged some retired ISI operatives could be abetting the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. But Pakistan's government denies allegations of supporting terrorism, citing as evidence its cooperation in the "war on terror," in which it has taken significant losses, politically and on the battlefield.

## Does ISI support terrorists?

“The ISI probably would not define what they've done in the past as ‘terrorism,’” says [William Milam](#), former U.S. ambassador to Pakistan. Nevertheless, experts say the [ISI has supported](#) a number of militant groups in the disputed Kashmir region between Pakistan and India, some of which are on the [State Department’s Foreign Terrorist Organizations list](#). Though the level of assistance to these groups has varied, [Kathy Gannon](#), who covered the region for decades for the Associated Press, says previous support consisted of money, weapons, and training.

Though Pakistani officials deny any current support for the Taliban—which the State Department does not deem a terrorist group—the ISI certainly has supported Afghan insurgents in the past. ISI’s first major involvement in Afghanistan came after the Soviet invasion in 1979, when it partnered with the CIA to provide weapons, money, intelligence, and training to the mujahadeen fighting the Red Army. At the time, some voices within the United States questioned the degree to which Pakistani intelligence favored extremist and anti-American fighters. Following the Soviet withdrawal, the ISI continued its involvement in Afghanistan, first supporting resistance fighters opposed to Moscow’s puppet government, and later the Taliban.

Pakistan stands accused of allowing that support to continue. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has repeatedly said Pakistan trains militants and sends them across the border. In May 2006, the [British chief of staff for southern Afghanistan told the \*Guardian\*](#), “The thinking piece of the Taliban is out of Quetta in Pakistan. It’s the major headquarters.” Speaking at the Council on Foreign Relations in September, [President Musharraf responded](#) to such accusations, saying, “It is the most ridiculous thought that the Taliban headquarters can be in Quetta.” Nevertheless, experts generally suspect Pakistan still provides some support to the Taliban, though probably not to the extent it did in the past. “If they’re giving them support,” Gannon says, “it’s access back and forth [to Afghanistan] and the ability to find safe haven.”

## **How much control does Pakistan's political leadership have over the ISI?**

Experts say Musharraf exercises firm control over his intelligence agency. "I do not accept the thesis that the ISI is a rogue organization," Milam says. "It's a disciplined army unit that does what it's told, though it may push the envelope sometimes." With a reported staff of 10,000, ISI is hardly monolithic: "Like in any secret service, there are rogue elements," says [Frederic Grare](#), a South Asia expert and visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment. He points out that many of the ISI's agents have ethnic and cultural ties to Afghan insurgents, and naturally sympathize with them.

President Musharraf's admission that retired ISI agents may be helping Taliban fighters suggests his government knows of at least some unsanctioned Pakistani support for the Afghan insurgency. Experts note Musharraf's acknowledgement also gives him plausible deniability of any sanctioned assistance Pakistan may also be providing. [Marvin G. Weinbaum](#), an expert on Afghanistan and Pakistan at the Middle East Institute, says Pakistan has sent "retired" ISI agents on missions the government could not officially endorse. Some observers believe Pakistan's duplicity is deliberate: "Musharraf's been playing with us since day one," Grare says.

## **What has Pakistan done to combat terrorism?**

Pakistan has arrested scores of al-Qaeda affiliates, including Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the alleged mastermind of the 9/11 attacks. The ISI and the Pakistani military have worked effectively with the United States to pursue the remnants of al-Qaeda. Pakistan also stationed 80,000 troops in the troubled province of Waziristan near the Afghan border. Hundreds of Pakistani soldiers died there in resulting clashes with militants, which [Musharraf told a recent CFR meeting](#) "broke the al-Qaeda network's back in Pakistan."

Though Pakistan has effectively battled al-Qaeda, Weinbaum says it has largely ignored Taliban fighters on its soil. "There are extremist groups that are beyond the pale with which the ISI has no influence at all," he says. "Those are the ones they go after."

### **What is Pakistan's interest in aiding the Taliban?**

Pakistan does not enjoy good relations with the current leadership of Afghanistan, partly because of rhetorical clashes with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, and partly because Karzai has made strong ties to India. Some experts say Pakistan wants to see a stable, friendlier government emerge in Afghanistan. Though the raging insurgency certainly doesn't serve this goal, increased Taliban influence, especially in the government, might. Supporting the Taliban also allows Pakistan to hedge its bets should the NATO coalition pull out of Afghanistan.

Not everyone agrees with this analysis. According to Weinbaum, Pakistan has two policies. One is an official policy of promoting stability in Afghanistan; the other is an unofficial policy of supporting jihadis in order to appease political forces within Pakistan. "The second [policy] undermines the first one," he says.

### **What is Pakistan's interest in aiding Kashmiri militants?**

Throughout its existence, Pakistan has viewed India as its enemy. Though Islamabad has a real interest in fostering better relations with New Delhi, little love is lost between the nations. Some experts say the Kashmiri militants keep pressure on the Indian government, though others point out the militants' actions have sparked tense showdowns between the two nuclear-armed states in the past.

While Pakistan has a formidable military presence near the Indian border, Gannon says the militant groups there serve as "their second line of defense and offense."

### **How valid are the recent British and Indian charges against Pakistan?**

Experts are skeptical. Indian officials claim to have evidence that the ISI planned the July bombing of the Mumbai commuter trains, but the charges seem unlikely to some observers of

the long, difficult India-Pakistan relationship. The two nations have a history of finger-pointing, and while some of the allegations hold water, there is a tendency to exaggerate. Furthermore, endorsing an attack on India would undermine Musharraf's own policy. "Pakistan is genuinely trying to open up relations with India," Gannon says.

In Weinbaum's view, the British report—which London insists is not a statement of policy—makes "too broad a statement." Though Pakistan does offer safe haven to Kashmiri groups, and perhaps some Taliban fighters, the suggestion that the ISI is responsible for the 7/7 bombings of London's mass transit system is "a real stretch," Gannon says.

### **What is the status of Pakistan's relationship with the tribal leaders in its northwestern provinces?**

Despite President Musharraf's claims of success in Pakistan's three-year military incursion into Waziristan, the region remains problematic. Local tribesmen are the traditional power brokers, and over the last two decades, they have earned large sums of money offering safe haven to Taliban and foreign fighters. At the outset of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, many militants fled across the border into Waziristan, putting pressure on the Pakistani government to address the situation. ISI officials met resistance when they asked local leaders to hand over foreign militants. Pakistan deployed troops to the area, though reports suggest that they took as many casualties as their adversaries. Unable to make military progress, Pakistani officials [negotiated a peace deal](#) with the local tribesmen, which was seen by many as a capitulation to tribal influence in the area.