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Pakistan Uses Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency for Political Gains in Afghanistan

By Ehsan Azari

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The Pakistani spy agency Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has recently captured nine out of the 18 key members of the Taliban central command circle known as Mullah Omar-led Quetta Shura. Does that sudden and unusual strike mean Pakistan is going to divorce itself from its long-standing ally the Taliban once and for all? Or is that a strange spectacle designed to make new political fortunes in Afghanistan?

It is a good question, without an easy answer. If the ISI's motive behind the arrest is fair and square, it will certainly be the beginning of the end of the Taliban insurgency; and if it is one more of the agency's familiar tactics, it will certainly start off a new fighting season in the approaching Afghan spring.

The history of Pakistan's use of religious extremism as a cheap and effective policy tool against its neighbouring India and Afghanistan suggests that the ISI is going to punish those among the Taliban leaders who disobey the spy agency or even those who have been willing to negotiate with the Western backed government in Kabul. The arrest of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, second to the Taliban secretive supremo Mullah Omar has been interpreted by many analysts as a new ploy to block attempts made by the President Obama and Kabul to initiate a political settlement in Afghanistan. According to Afghan sources Baradar was in secret talks with Kabul which was mediated by Saudi Arabia.

This claim is further backed up by Pakistan's refusal to hand over the captured Mullahs to Afghanistan. An independent interrogation might have revealed more details and more importantly the truth about the ISI past secret dealings with the Taliban and their possible negotiations with the government of President Hamid Karzai. The US and the Afghan government had already requested Mullah Baradar's extradition to Afghanistan. "During the two-week period, CIA Director Leon Panetta and other US officials asked the Pakistani government and military leaders to transfer Baradar and other Taliban leaders to the US detention centre at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan in order to allow the US military to interrogate him," reported by the Los Angeles Times on February 19.

The extradition has been barred apparently by the Lahore High Court which towards the end of February ruled that the Pakistani government cannot hand over any of the Taliban detainees to Afghanistan. Earlier the Pakistani Interior Minister Rahman Malik said that Mullah Baradar would be returned to the "country of origin (Afghanistan)". The ISI might have persuaded the court to make this decision, for the agency has had a history of directing the country's domestic politics since it was founded by British in 1948. As in recent months, the ISI has been manipulating the Pakistani media for disseminating anti-American narrative in order to mislead public opinion in the country.

For Pakistan keeping the Taliban leaders in custody is obviously far more useful than their extradition to Afghanistan. As a bargain chip, the ISI can use the arrested Taliban leaders to gain high-ground in the Afghan game and tame those among the Taliban leadership who are turning against the Pakistani state.

The Taliban's arrests in Karachi reveal yet another fact that the command-and-control structure of the Taliban insurgency and al-Qaida terrorist network exist not in the tribal Pashtun belt alone, but also throughout the Pakistani metropolitan urban centres. This has always been denied by Pakistani authorities in the past.

In addition to the Afghan Taliban, there are other lethal anti-Western religious extremists in Pakistan who still enjoy ISI patronage. Al-Qaida-linked militants such as Punjabi Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammad and Sipah-e-Sahaba are active in terrorist activities in the region. They also function as an influential ideological support for the Afghan Taliban. The Afghan security authorities said that LeT terrorists were behind last week's suicide bomb raid on an Indian guesthouse in Kabul. The LeT was also believed to be responsible for deadly attack on Mumbai.

Many experts believe that the ISI's multi-layered and covert links with the Taliban is part of Pakistan's strategy to use them as an effective leverage against arch-rival India. The real intention behind the link, however, is to gain control of Afghan domestic politics and especially contain the Pashtuns on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan 2310km long border known as the Duran Line, which was drawn by British Empire in 1893. The disputed border has remained as a haunting nightmare for the Pakistani military and spy agencies. Since the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the country's military sought out to find a robust strategy and effective weapon against the Pashtunistan issue. With the help of radical mullahs, the ISI finally found the golden

goose. They poisoned Islam with the extremists and al-Qaida and began to export political Islam to Afghanistan since the early 1970s.

This explains Pakistan's need for advocating the dark forces in Afghanistan and their use as a straitjacket for an estimated 45 million Pashtuns in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Afghanistan was the only country that refused to recognise Pakistan as a legitimate state after the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Greater autonomy for the Pakistani Pashtuns, known as the Pashtunistan cause was part of the Afghan foreign policy for decades. In 1963 when Daud Khan was Afghanistan's Prime Minister, Afghanistan's support for the formation of Pashtunistan in the Pakistani tribal belt brought Kabul and Islamabad to the brink of an outright war. This truth reveals the calculus behind Pakistan's hidden strategy in Afghanistan.

The complex and deliberate entanglement of the ISI with the Taliban and others of their ilk is not only an impediment to the political and social evolution in Afghanistan but a major stumbling block to the efforts of the West to bring a lasting peace in this long-suffering country. The extension of war in Afghanistan holds out the greatest hope for the ISI to promote Pakistan's geopolitical strategy as well as keep American tax-dollars flowing. The recent capture thus unfolds Pakistan's strategy to use both Taliban insurgency and Western counter-insurgency in Afghanistan for its internal and regional security interests.