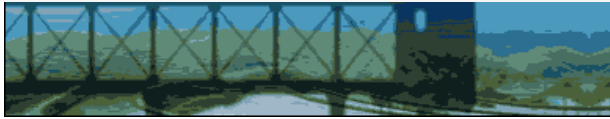


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Afghan Strikes by Taliban Get Pakistan Help, U.S. Aides Say

By MARK MAZZETTI and ERIC SCHMITT
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WASHINGTON — The Taliban's widening campaign in southern Afghanistan is made possible in part by direct support from operatives in Pakistan's military intelligence agency, despite Pakistani government promises to sever ties to militant groups fighting in Afghanistan, according to American government officials.

The support consists of money, military supplies and strategic planning guidance to Taliban commanders who are gearing up to confront the international force in Afghanistan that will soon include some 17,000 American reinforcements.

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Support for the Taliban, as well as other militant groups, is coordinated by operatives inside the shadowy S Wing of Pakistan's spy service, the Directorate for [Inter-Services Intelligence](#), the officials said. There is even evidence that ISI operatives meet regularly with Taliban commanders to discuss whether to intensify or scale back violence before the Afghan elections.

Details of the ISI's continuing ties to militant groups were described by a half-dozen American, Pakistani and other security officials during recent interviews in Washington and the Pakistani capital, Islamabad. All requested anonymity because they were discussing classified and sensitive intelligence information.

The American officials said proof of the ties between the Taliban and Pakistani spies came from electronic surveillance and trusted informants. The Pakistani officials interviewed said that they had firsthand knowledge of the connections, though they denied that the ties were strengthening the insurgency.

American officials have [complained](#) for more than a year about the ISI's support to groups like the Taliban. But the new details reveal that the spy agency is aiding a broader array of militant networks with more diverse types of support than was previously known — even months after Pakistani officials said that the days of the ISI's playing a "[double game](#)" had ended.

Pakistan's military and civilian leaders publicly deny any government ties to militant groups, and American officials say it is unlikely that top officials in Islamabad are directly coordinating the clandestine efforts. American officials have also said that midlevel ISI operatives occasionally cultivate relationships that are not approved by their bosses.

In a sign of just how resigned Western officials are to the ties, the British government has sent several dispatches to Islamabad in recent months asking that the ISI use its strategy meetings with the Taliban to persuade its commanders to scale back violence in Afghanistan before the August presidential election there, according to one official.

But the inability, or unwillingness, of the embattled civilian government, led by President

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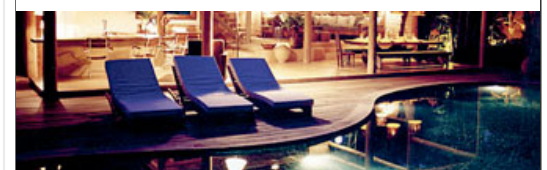
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but the inability, or unwillingness, of the embassies of that government, led by President [Asif Ali Zardari](#), to break the ties that bind the ISI to the militants illustrates the complexities of a region of shifting alliances. Obama administration officials admit that they are struggling to understand these allegiances as they try to forge a strategy to quell violence in Afghanistan, which has intensified because of a resurgent Taliban. Fighting this insurgency is difficult enough, officials said, without having to worry about an allied spy service's supporting the enemy.

But the Pakistanis offered a more nuanced portrait. They said the contacts were less threatening than the American officials depicted and were part of a strategy to maintain influence in Afghanistan for the day when American forces would withdraw and leave what they fear could be a power vacuum to be filled by India, Pakistan's archenemy. A senior Pakistani military officer said, "In intelligence, you have to be in contact with your enemy or you are running blind."

The ISI [helped create and nurture](#) the Taliban movement in the 1990s to bring stability to a nation that had been devastated by years of civil war between rival warlords, and one Pakistani official explained that Islamabad needed to use groups like the Taliban as "proxy forces to preserve our interests."

A spokesman at the Pakistani Embassy in Washington declined to comment for this article.

Over the past year, a parade of senior American diplomats, military officers and intelligence officials has flown to Islamabad to urge Pakistan's civilian and military leaders to cut off support for militant groups, and Washington has threatened to put conditions on more than \$1 billion in annual military aid to Pakistan. On Saturday, the director of the [C.I.A.](#), [Leon E. Panetta](#), met with top Pakistani officials in Islamabad.

Little is publicly known about the ISI's S Wing, which officials say directs intelligence operations outside of Pakistan. American officials said that the S Wing provided direct support to three major groups carrying out attacks in Afghanistan: the Taliban based in Quetta, Pakistan, commanded by Mullah [Muhammad Omar](#); the militant network run by [Gulbuddin Hekmatyar](#); and a different group run by the guerrilla leader [Jalaluddin Haqqani](#).

[Dennis C. Blair](#), the director of national intelligence, recently told senators that the Pakistanis "draw distinctions" among different militant groups.

"There are some they believe have to be hit and that we should cooperate on hitting, and there are others they think don't constitute as much of a threat to them and that they think are best left alone," Mr. Blair said.

The Haqqani network, which focuses its attacks on Afghanistan, is considered a strategic asset to Pakistan, according to American and Pakistani officials, in contrast to the militant network run by [Baitullah Mehsud](#), which has the goal of overthrowing Pakistan's government.

Top American officials speak bluntly about how the situation has changed little since last summer, when evidence showed that ISI operatives helped plan the bombing of the Indian Embassy in Kabul, an attack that killed 54 people.

"They have been very attached to many of these extremist organizations, and it's my belief that in the long run, they have got to completely cut ties with those in order to really move in the right direction," Adm. [Mike Mullen](#), chairman of the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#), said recently on "The [Charlie Rose Show](#)" on [PBS](#).

The Taliban has been able to finance a military campaign inside Afghanistan largely through proceeds from the illegal drug trade and wealthy individuals from the Persian Gulf. But American officials said that when fighters needed fuel or ammunition to sustain their attacks against American troops, they would often turn to the ISI.

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When the groups needed to replenish their ranks, it would be operatives from the S Wing who often slipped into radical madrasas across Pakistan to drum up recruits, the officials said.

The ISI support for militants extends beyond those operating in the tribal areas of northwest Pakistan. American officials said the spy agency had also shared intelligence with [Lashkar-e-Taiba](#), the Pakistan-based militant group suspected in the deadly attacks in Mumbai, India, and provided protection for it.

Mr. Zardari took steps last summer to purge the ISI's top ranks after the United States confronted Pakistan with evidence about the Indian Embassy bombing. Mr. Zardari pledged that the ISI would be "handled," and that anyone working with militants would be dismissed.

Yet with the future of Mr. Zardari's government uncertain in the current political turmoil and with Obama officials seeing few immediate alternatives, American officials and outside experts said that Pakistan's military establishment appears to see little advantage in responding to the demands of civilian officials in Islamabad or Washington.

As a result, when the Haqqani fighters need to stay a step ahead of American forces stalking them on the ground and in the air, they rely on moles within the spy agency to tip them off to allied missions planned against them, American military officials said.

Mark Mazzetti reported from Washington, and Eric Schmitt from Washington and Islamabad, Pakistan.

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