

PAKISTAN IN THE WAKE OF BIN LADEN: Private Security Companies Constitute a “State within a State”

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The Pakistani city of Peshawar is situated an hour from Afghanistan. Driving there from Islamabad, the landscape was mostly lush green fields, poor villages and mud houses. After being stopped at five checkpoints along the way, an attempt to intercept foreigners and militants entering the sensitive city, on arrival there was a dramatic change in mood.

Dust filled the air and the roads were in various states of disrepair. Kidnappings and suicide attacks were common. During the days of President Pervez Musharraf, religious fundamentalists were empowered to rule the area and any photos of women were prohibited. Today, however, countless posters of women selling cleaning products were visible. All females wore burqas and men grew thick beards.

The city has become a focal point for the growing tension between Pakistan's various political and militant factions. Pakistan, more than 10 years after the September 11 attacks, is a broken country. Militants are eating their host, launching attacks inside Pakistan and Afghanistan and demanding the overthrow of the central government. The ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) is effectively a state within a state, detaining, kidnapping and killing civilians and journalists at will.

Crikey spoke to some of Pakistan's leading reporters in Karachi, Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Peshawar to understand how Pakistan remains, as writer Ahmed Rashid calls his latest book, [on the brink](#). The private security industry is integral to this equation, inflaming a militarised and unaccountable situation and providing vital surveillance to a heavily monitored state.

At a government building in Peshawar, everybody was on edge as I entered because militants continued to attack every few days. I spoke to a senior official who requested anonymity due to the sensitivity of the subject matter.

“Mohammad” was a wealth of knowledge about the role of privatised security and development companies in the area since September 11. He said that mapping of local communities in FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) had taken place, conducted by private companies, that was then used by the US for intelligence against suspected militants.

It was a version of the “human terrain system”, a [US army program](#) that attempts to better understand local communities. Its record has been an [object failure](#), with accurate cultural sensitivity impossible when night raids, drone attacks and bombings accompany friendly chats in the village.

Villagers in FATA were asked personal questions about their children, ID numbers, families and how many people slept in the houses. Local Pakistanis were employed by Western contractors to do the interviews, due to language fluency, but locals weren't told how the information would be used.

Mohammad told *Crikey* the company, Gulf Associates, did a survey of Peshawar on water supply and drainage. Every household was asked questions about family size but "people were told they needed to provide these details to get water". This was the twisted logic of outsourcing essential services in the "war on terror".

The nexus in Pakistan between the ISI, federal government, militants and private security operates with no official transparency.

Shaukat Qadir has been at the centre of these discussions for years. He was given official permission in 2011 to visit the Osama bin Laden house in Abbottabad and interview some of the key players in the Pakistani government and intelligence in an attempt to understand how the world's most infamous fugitive was able to live in [supposed hiding for so long](#).

A retired Pakistani Army brigadier, Qadir, in a white salwar kameez, invited me to his home in Rawalpindi to discuss his report's findings. He said he believed only a few ISI and Pakistani officials knew the whereabouts of bin Laden before his death. "I refuse to believe it was due to incompetence or complicity," he argued.

His most explosive allegation was that one of bin Laden's wives eventually sold him out as a way to share in the \$US25 million reward money. There was intense rivalry [among bin Laden's wives](#) (some of whom are soon to be deported from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia and Yemen: but Qadir didn't know if that reward had been paid).

He'd heard that al-Qaeda, "who were totally broke before this", had received — not directly from the US although Qadir claimed Washington had unwittingly paid al-Qaeda this money — about \$US12 million and his wife \$US1.5 million.

Al-Qaeda, which had seemed irrelevant when the Arab Spring began and country after country overthrew autocratic regimes, was now back in the game, he believed. This was due to the crushing of the revolutions by US client states in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain that showed Islamists as key figures of resistance. Qadir wasn't claiming that al-Qaeda was an all-powerful organisation, too many leaders had been captured or killed, but they remained a potent force.

Aside from the ISI, private security companies were another state within a state. *Crikey* has been given exclusive access to a list of 62 retired military men who joined private security companies. The national security journalist source told me that at least half of these men had been arrested and then released for corruption and working for the Americans. Although it was an open secret that many Pakistani officials worked with the US, these men were targeted briefly for pushing the murky rules too far.

The most revealing company name on the list was G4S Wackenhut Pakistan. G4S is a British-based behemoth in the industry with a [troubling human rights record](#). It remains the world's largest security firm on revenues, operating in 125 nations and employing more than 650,000 people. I saw countless men in G4S uniforms across the country.

In many nations since September 11, private security companies have too much power and often replace functions of the state. In Pakistan, however, the government uses former military people to work for private security companies, giving them unique access to the gathered intelligence. The war economy fuels an elite group of companies and individuals determined to make money from political instability. It is the definition of vulture capitalism.

Journalists rarely report this deep collusion between intelligence, private security and the state because they face threat of death or assault. According to the Committee to Project Journalists, Pakistan is one of the most dangerous countries in the world to [practise reporting](#).

Hamid Mir is arguably Pakistan's most famous talk-show host and journalist. He interviewed bin Laden three times, including once after 9/11, the only journalist known to have [spoken](#) to the al-Qaeda leader after the attacks: "His words and deeds were very different," Mir told me. In person, he remembered, bin Laden was gentle and calm, far from the image of a radical. But his actions and desire to cause carnage showed him a person capable of extreme violence.

Mir has been the victim of countless ISI attacks and kidnappings, loved and loathed at various times by the Pakistani government, Taliban and militants. He has sent his son out of the country to ensure his safety. He takes big risks by naming and shaming ISI officials who threaten him and other journalists. Very few others follow his lead.

He claimed that recently President Asif Ali Zardari called him personally and asked him to cease criticising some military figures. He refused. Zardari then urged him to organise more security for his protection and use state-provided services. Mir said he didn't trust them but he had arranged a guard to accompany him day and night. "Zardari is only President in the papers," Mir mused, confirming that the real power in Pakistan lies with the military and intelligence services.

I asked him about the role of private security and intelligence and he reached for his copy of the Pakistani constitution; clause 256 states, "Private armies forbidden". Mir said they operated far more frequently in past years, mostly former military men out to make more money in the private sector, but less often today.

Mir's story was sadly familiar. If he was given a degree of protection because of his fame — this didn't save journalist Syed Saleem Shahzad who was murdered by the ISI last year in all likelihood because he had uncovered a connection between [al-Qaeda and the Pakistan Army](#) — such comforts were not shared by many other reporters.

Journalists who report on Waziristan, the area suffering US drone bombardment, face some of the toughest conditions.

The New York Times employee Ihsan Tipu is from the area and told me that incessant buzzing of drones is always in the air, bringing deep anger to villagers and psychological problems to families. Despite US claims that "terrorists" were targeted, countless [civilians were being killed](#), he said. "A main driver there is revenge," he said.

Crikey met several journalists who travelled from the tribal regions to Islamabad to tell their stories. They felt threatened by militants, the Taliban, al-Qaeda, ISI and local officials. Leading investigative journalist [Umar Cheema](#) told me that this insecurity was exactly what the

authorities wanted. Having been himself kidnapped and tortured by the ISI in 2010, Cheema said the ISI wanted to instil fear in anybody who challenged its behaviour and individuals to believe they could be reached, harassed or hurt no matter where they were.

America and the West have backed the Pakistani state's brutality since September 11.

This is the enigma of Pakistan. It is a nuclear-armed nation that is seemingly always on the verge of collapse due to a desperate need for American money and to secure its regional position against India and Afghanistan. The result is a quasi- police state, backed by private security, silencing critics of its politics of capitulation towards militants and Washington.

It is only brave journalists and human rights workers who are showing a viable alternative.

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