

Intelligence in Public Media

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate: Covert Action and Internal Operations

Owen L. Sirrs (Routledge, 2017), 317, chapter endnotes, bibliography, index

Reviewed by Gordon Bonin

Contradictions.

For the observer, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) can be a contradiction. For a reader, Owen Sirrs' book on ISI is a set of contradictions.

A former senior intelligence officer with the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), Sirrs does a great service in his book by providing a framework for clearly looking at ISI, its duties, and its roles in the Pakistani military, Pakistani domestic security, and Pakistani foreign relations.

But then there are contradictions that make this a flawed book. Instead of Sirrs applying his intelligence experience and tradecraft to cautiously work out answers based on the publicly available information he can use, too often he runs with rumors and presumptions.

A strength of Sirrs' book is that he lays out the breadth of ISI duties, he gives more space to but does not exclusively focus on its support of militant groups, especially its role in the anti-Soviet insurgency in Afghanistan or its backing of the Afghan Taliban. And this is a current ISI contradiction in US eyes: ISI supports the Afghan Taliban, while Pakistan asserts it is a US ally and provides access to Afghanistan so that US forces can fight the Taliban insurgency.

Questions, Questions, Questions

Sirrs' framework is essentially a series of questions in the book's introduction. The first is the most basic: "What exactly is ISI?" His answer is dead on the mark in helping the reader look at ISI: "It is a military agency." This is important because it helps answer a frequent question about ISI, which Sirrs also asks: "Is ISI a rogue agency or a state within a state?"

Sirrs effectively drives home the fact that as a military agency, ISI does what military leadership tells it to do. "ISI [is] owned by the Army Chief not the prime minister," Sirrs points out. "ISI implements policy set by army dominated planners." He quotes former President and Army Chief Pervez Musharraf, "The government

formulates policy and tells ISI what to do. They do not do [anything] on their own."

Sirrs uses this approach of asking questions throughout the book, starting sections with a barrage of questions, and then ending a section with a flurry of them. The initial batches come across like sets of intelligence requirements intended for collectors. The batches that end sections are like the questions used in brainstorming ahead of drafting finished intelligence. Within this structure, Sirrs lays out ISI's history chronologically.

A strength of the book is the amount of space Sirrs gives to its internal security duties. ISI has a "formidable domestic security role," Sirrs notes. Military leaders have used it to influence domestic politicians and news coverage, to suppress sectarian and ethno-nationalist groups, to protect army interests and its reputation. ISI became known as nasty and all-knowing among Pakistanis. Circa 1975, ISI's internal role became formalized with the establishment of an "internal wing." Sirrs notes the paradox that civilian politicians almost universally decried military and ISI meddling in domestic politics, but the internal wing was created by executive order of a civilian prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was removed from power two years later in a coup.

Throughout the book, Sirrs weaves in sketches of individual ISI officers as they lived through parts of Pakistan's history. Sirrs uses these sketches to put faces on a usually faceless organization and to show the factors that motivate ISI officers and inform their worldview. The most striking is a sketch of a Pakistan Army major who had served in both military intelligence and ISI. In 1971 the major defected to ethnic-Bengali guerrillas in East Pakistan fighting the Islamabad government. The major, an East Pakistani, was alienated by the Pakistan Army's violent suppression of Bengali political agitation. However, the military's repression would end with East Pakistan's independence.

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Militants: The Good, the Bad, and the Different

Sirrs describes how from Pakistan's inception the military saw utility in conducting, what Sirrs calls "unconventional war." Unconventional warfare is essentially the use of militant and insurgent groups in India and Afghanistan. ISI became the military's militant overseer, starting with anti-India groups in the 1950s, and adding Afghan groups in the 1970s. Sirrs in the introduction states that the genesis of the book was a two-month stay at the Counterinsurgency Training Center in Kabul.

He points out that ISI and the Pakistani military have differentiated over the years between "good jihadis," like the Afghan Taliban and anti-India and Kashmir-focused insurgents, and "bad jihadis" who wage war domestically against Islamabad. Pakistani support to the Taliban, including allowing the movement to have unmolested sanctuary inside Pakistan, has infuriated US officials. In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks, "the US focused on the immediate objective of defeating AQ, while Pakistan looked to its long-term goals, which included a pro-Pakistan regime in Afghanistan and use of that country as strategic depth against India," Sirrs assesses. Though "the keystone of cooperation was tracking down and arresting al-Qaida fighters [there was a] growing misunderstanding about the Taliban."

Sirrs notes that ISI's execution of unconventional warfare and militant support has not been entirely successful. The most renowned success was supporting the Afghan resistance that drove out the Soviet Union in the 1980s; a more equivocal achievement was helping the Taliban to take power in Afghanistan in 1996. Otherwise, militant support has been effective, Sirrs notes ironically, in helping Pakistan alienate almost every country it counts as an ally.

To his credit, Sirrs refutes the assumption that ISI and militants are best buddies. He points out that in backing and manipulating the Afghan resistance groups in the 1980s, "control was ISI's top priority" and adds, "Over the long term, this policy built up a bitter hatred for Pakistan's ISI among many Afghans."

Despite the strengths of these insights, he lets me down in how he addresses "Directorate S" and what it is or may be. Directorate S has a mystique. Sirrs describes the ISI unit as "a secret cell planted within an intelligence agency that has tight compartmentalization, rigid communication security procedures, and a network of former intelligence officers to aid militant groups and conduct plausibly deniable operations." Much of this description could be applied to units within the US Intelligence Community. Instead of making an intelligence or analytical argument about whether Directorate S is super-secret squirrel special, or whether it is, maybe, simply the external counterpart to the internal wing, Sirrs, waxes poetic, and calls it "elusive."

For many observers Directorate S is the hobgoblin that causes the ISI to act in ways we don't expect. But Sirrs doesn't connect the directorate to his sound analysis that ISI follows orders from Army leadership.

Usama bin Ladin

Late in the book Sirrs tries to answer the question of whether ISI either knew about or actively helped hide Usama Bin Ladin in Abbottabad. How did Usama bin Ladin "reside, almost in plain view?" For me, this section is another example of Sirrs' dropping his intelligence tradecraft and ignoring the arguments he's already made.

Sirrs doesn't weigh whether Bin Ladin would trust ISI to know where he was hiding, even though he had pointed out "there was no trust in this [AQ-ISI] relationship, only a few shared objectives." He doesn't ask whether AQ fits the profile of the insurgents ISI usually backs. He never really answers the crucial question he asks, "Would Pakistan run the risk?"

For me, Sirrs' book is a lost opportunity. He asks the right questions about ISI and its relationships with the Army, militants, civilian politics, and foreign governments. He frames ISI well, but too often he turns to myths to explain ISI actions or simply leaves them as enigmas.



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