

# Role of ISI in Warfare



**Established:** 1948

**Headquarters:** Islamabad, Pakistan

**Agency Type:** Military Intelligence

**Known For:** Covert operations, espionage, counter-intelligence

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The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) is widely regarded as Pakistan's foremost and most influential intelligence agency, playing a pivotal role in the country's national security framework since its inception in 1948. Established shortly after the creation of Pakistan, the ISI was initially formed to unify and coordinate intelligence activities across the army, navy, and air force. Over the decades, it has grown exponentially in both size and scope, developing into one of the most sophisticated and powerful intelligence organizations in the world. The agency's core responsibilities include intelligence gathering, espionage, covert operations, and counterintelligence, which it executes with a high degree of professionalism and secrecy. Its operations have extended beyond Pakistan's borders, involving strategic and tactical engagements in regional conflicts and global intelligence collaborations. Despite its notable achievements and contributions to Pakistan's defense and security, the ISI has also been a subject of intense controversy and debate. Critics often point to its covert involvements in political affairs, proxy warfare, and alleged support for various non-state actors, which have drawn scrutiny from international communities. Nevertheless, the ISI continues to be a crucial player in Pakistan's defense strategy, constantly adapting to new challenges in the rapidly evolving landscape of modern warfare and intelligence.

# Afghanistan and the Soviet-Afghan War

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During the decade-long Soviet-Afghan War from 1979 to 1989, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan emerged as a critical and strategic actor in shaping the course of the conflict. The war began when Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan to support the communist government, sparking a fierce resistance from various Afghan Mujahideen groups who opposed the Soviet-backed regime. Recognizing the geopolitical significance of this conflict during the height of the Cold War, the ISI took on a pivotal role as the primary facilitator and coordinator of Pakistan's support to these Mujahideen fighters. Acting as the main conduit for international aid, the ISI, in close collaboration with the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) through the covert program famously known as Operation Cyclone, systematically trained, equipped, and strategically guided a range of insurgent groups across Afghanistan. The ISI's involvement included not only the distribution of weapons and financial support but also the training of guerrilla fighters in mountain warfare, intelligence gathering, and sabotage tactics. This support proved to be instrumental in sustaining the insurgency against the Soviet military, inflicting heavy casualties and causing significant logistical challenges for the invading forces. Over the years, the ISI's efforts contributed significantly to weakening Soviet resolve and military effectiveness, ultimately playing a decisive role in forcing the Soviet Union to withdraw its troops in 1989. This withdrawal marked a major turning point in the Cold War and left a lasting impact on regional geopolitics, with the ISI's role in this conflict becoming one of its most notable chapters in history.

## Kashmir Insurgency and Operation Tupac

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In the late 1980s, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) initiated a covert and far-reaching campaign known as Operation Tupac, which was designed specifically to support and intensify insurgent movements within Indian-administered Kashmir. This operation was a strategic move by Pakistan to challenge Indian authority in the region by fostering separatist sentiments and armed resistance. Through a well-coordinated network of funding, arms supply, training camps, and logistical support, the ISI provided critical backing to multiple militant groups operating across Kashmir. The objective was not only to destabilize the region but also to internationalize the Kashmir conflict, drawing global attention to the grievances of the Kashmiri people. Over the years, Operation Tupac dramatically escalated the insurgency, resulting in prolonged violence, heavy casualties on all sides, and a heightened state of military tension between India and Pakistan. The operation's legacy continues to influence the complex and sensitive geopolitics of South Asia, contributing to ongoing instability and periodic escalations along the Line of Control (LoC).

## Proxy Warfare and Asymmetric Tactics

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The ISI has long employed proxy warfare as a central pillar of Pakistan's national security strategy, particularly aimed at gaining strategic depth against regional adversaries like India. Proxy warfare involves supporting non-state actors, militant groups, and insurgents to carry out operations that advance Pakistan's interests without direct military engagement. This approach allows Pakistan to exert influence in contested areas while maintaining plausible deniability and minimizing direct confrontation risks. The ISI's proxy tactics include the provision of financial resources, weapons, intelligence, and training to these groups, empowering them to conduct sabotage, guerrilla warfare, and terrorism. By using asymmetric tactics—methods that rely on speed, surprise, and irregular forces—the ISI has sought to counterbalance India's conventional military superiority. These covert operations have shaped numerous conflicts and crises in the region, making proxy warfare a critical but highly controversial aspect of Pakistan's defense doctrine.

## Role in Post-9/11 Global War on Terror

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Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the ISI found itself at the center of the international war on terror. Initially, Pakistan aligned closely with the United States, offering critical cooperation to track down and dismantle Al-Qaeda networks and other extremist groups operating in the region. The ISI assisted in intelligence sharing, military operations, and efforts to stabilize Afghanistan under the global anti-terrorism agenda. However, the agency's role quickly became contentious as it was also accused of maintaining secret, covert ties with insurgent groups such as the Taliban and the Haqqani Network. This duality—cooperating publicly with the West while allegedly supporting militant groups behind the scenes—has led to intense scrutiny and criticism. International observers, governments, and analysts have debated the extent and motivations of ISI's engagement, pointing to a complex balance between Pakistan's security interests and international obligations.

## Cyber and Psychological Operations

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The ISI's extensive involvement in regional and international conflicts has rendered it one of the most controversial intelligence agencies globally. Various governments and human rights organizations have accused the ISI of supporting terrorist organizations, engaging in political interference within Pakistan, and conducting operations on foreign soil without authorization. These allegations include claims of backing militant groups accused of terrorism, manipulation of domestic politics to influence election outcomes, and covert activities that undermine regional stability. The agency's secretive nature and lack of transparency fuel widespread suspicion and criticism, both inside Pakistan and internationally. Despite denials and official statements, the controversies surrounding ISI continue to dominate discussions about Pakistan's role in global security and counterterrorism efforts.

## Controversies and Criticism

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ISI's involvement in various international conflicts has made it a controversial organization. Allegations of supporting terrorist organizations, political manipulation within Pakistan, and operations in foreign territories have led to intense global scrutiny.

## Legacy and Global Reputation

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Despite the myriad controversies, the ISI is widely regarded as one of the most effective and influential intelligence services in the world. Its deep-rooted capabilities in intelligence gathering, covert operations, and strategic influence have allowed Pakistan to punch above its weight in regional and global affairs. The agency's successes in shaping the outcomes of key conflicts, intelligence-driven counterterrorism efforts, and its enduring role in Pakistan's national security architecture have cemented its reputation as a critical institution. However, the dual nature of its activities—both lauded for effectiveness and condemned for secrecy and alleged malpractices—ensures that ISI remains a subject of intense debate. Its legacy is complex, embodying both strategic acumen and contentious practices that continue to impact South Asia's security landscape profoundly.

*"ISI is not just Pakistan's shield—it's a sword in silent warfare."*