

# The US, Pakistan and the “terrorist” Hamid Gul

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In the wake of the Mumbai terrorist attacks, the name of retired Lieutenant General Hamid Gul, former head of Pakistani military intelligence—the Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI)—has appeared prominently in the international press. Various newspapers have reported that the Bush administration is seeking to have Gul, together with at least three other Pakistani citizens, blacklisted at the UN for their alleged support for various terrorist groups, including Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is accused of orchestrating the Mumbai atrocity.

While the US State Department is yet to confirm the step, the Pakistan-based *News* leaked details last weekend of a US charge sheet sent to the Pakistani government. Among other accusations, it alleged that Gul had "maintained extensive contacts over the years with Taliban and Al Qaeda," had in 2005 provided "overarching guidance" to the Taliban on "operational activities in Afghanistan," and had helped in recruiting and training anti-US insurgents.

While making no secret of his hostility to the US, Gul flatly rejected allegations that he supported terrorism as "fictitious". Speaking to the press on Monday, he declared that he would call on the UN to set up an international commission in Pakistan at which he would "present myself for inquisition". Referring to Washington's accusations, he declared: "I was quite a darling of theirs at one time. I don't know what this is about. It looks like they have a habit of betraying their friends."

Gul's comment highlights an inconvenient fact barely referred to in the commentary about the Mumbai attacks in particular and the "war on terrorism" in general. The nexus between the Pakistani

establishment, the army and the ISI, and various Islamist organisations was forged in the CIA-backed jihad in the 1980s against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. It was not only Gul who was Washington's "darling" but the ISI as a whole as well as the Afghan "freedom fighters" that now form the backbone of the Taliban, Al Qaeda and various Islamist terrorist organisations around the world.

Throughout the Cold War, the US regarded Pakistan as a key "frontline" anti-Soviet state. The prominence of the military in Pakistani society is in no small part due to US support for a succession of juntas in Islamabad as a bulwark against the Soviet Union and its ally in South Asia, India. Washington supported the seizure of power by General Zia ul-Haq in 1977 and turned a blind eye to his execution of ousted Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1979, his transformation of Pakistan into an Islamic state and his repression of any domestic opposition.

General Zia was a crucial partner in American efforts to destabilise the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. In what marked a key turning point in the Cold War, the US, first under President Carter then President Reagan, jettisoned the previous policy of détente and actively sought to destabilise the Soviet Union by transforming Afghanistan into "Moscow's Vietnam". In its largest ever "covert" operation, the CIA worked hand-in-hand with the ISI and Saudi intelligence in recruiting, funding, arming and training a huge network of Afghan mujahedin backed by tens of thousands of Islamist fanatics from across the globe.

The consequences for both Afghanistan and Pakistan were devastating. With US backing, Zia actively promoted religious backwardness and right-wing

Islamic parties as a battering ram against the working class, attacked the rights of women and inflamed sectarian divisions. The ISI-coordinated guerrilla war was funded in part by drug-running on a vast scale, which led to the development of a drugs and gun culture that continues to corrode Pakistani society today.

Gul was the quintessential product of this reactionary policy. Zia appointed him as ISI head in 1987 at the height of the war in Afghanistan. Following Zia's assassination in 1988, he continued in that post after Bhutto's daughter Benazir took over as prime minister. The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan allowed the ISI to capitalise on a wave of anger and disaffection in 1989 in Indian-controlled Kashmir and forge links with the emerging Kashmiri insurgency. Gul was transferred from his ISI post in 1989 after he promoted the formation of a right-wing Islamist coalition in opposition to Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

Washington continued to rely on Pakistan as its key ally on the Indian subcontinent well into the 1990s. As Afghanistan descended into a chaos of conflicting militias following the Soviet withdrawal, the US tacitly supported the formation of the Taliban movement by Pakistan and the ISI in 1993. American oil interests were seeking a stable Afghanistan as a route for planned oil and gas pipelines out of Central Asia. It was only in the late 1990s in response to Al Qaeda attacks on US targets that Washington turned sharply against its former allies—attacking alleged Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan in 1998.

Subsequent US demands that Pakistan take action to pull the Taliban regime into line were bound up with a broader strategic shift toward India that was rapidly emerging as an important economic power. In 1999, President Clinton pressured Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to order the military to end its support for armed Kashmiri separatists who had seized the Kargil heights in Indian-controlled Kashmir. Sharif's backdown produced seething resentment inside the Pakistani army, leading to the seizure of power by General Pervez Musharraf just months later.

Having helped transform the Pakistani military into a bastion of Islamist reaction, the US demanded an abrupt about-face in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. As Musharraf later explained in his autobiography, the Bush administration made an offer that Pakistan could not refuse. US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Armitage bluntly told Musharraf that the country would be bombed back to "the Stone Age" if he did not immediately end all support for the Taliban regime and assist the US invasion of Afghanistan.

The US invasion of Afghanistan has only compounded the crisis in that country and neighbouring Pakistan. The anger fuelled by seven years of US occupation is providing a steady stream of recruits to various Islamist militias operating inside Afghanistan and the neighbouring border areas of Pakistan. It is hardly surprising that a section of the Pakistani military and ISI remains resentful toward Washington and supportive of the Taliban as well as the Kashmiri militants. Gul, now retired, speaks for this layer.

The transformation of Gul from Washington's "darling" into candidate for the UN terrorist list is the product of shifting US policies. By making an example of him, the White House is seeking to discipline the Pakistani establishment as a whole as it recklessly pursues US economic and strategic interests throughout the region.

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