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## Kashmir: Ground zero of global jihad

By Pepe Escobar

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Arif Jamal is arguably the leading Pakistani expert on the jihad in Kashmir. He is the author of *Shadow War: The Untold Story of Jihad in Kashmir* [1], a groundbreaking, gripping account of the interminable, key conflict between India and Pakistan, based on interviews with hundreds of militants over the years.

The book is essential reading for understanding, among other issues, how the United States-friendly Pakistani army trained nearly half a million jihadis; how United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) money ended up financing the jihad in Kashmir; and how closely interconnected is the situation in Kashmir with the endless turmoil in Afghanistan and the global jihad.

Along with other foreign correspondents from the US, France and Canada, this correspondent recently shared Jamal's knowledge on the ground - in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, as well as in the Pashtun tribal areas of Pakistan. Lately, Jamal has been a fellow at the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard University and is currently associated with New York University.

In an extensive interview, Jamal discusses the origins of jihad, evolving from subversion to guerrilla war and to "privatization"; and how Pakistan's army kept supporting jihadis in Kashmir and the Taliban in Afghanistan even after September 11, 2001, attacks on the US. He sheds light on what really happened in the recent Swat Valley operations in Pakistan against militants - which captured global headlines; on the "Pakistani chapters" of al-Qaeda; and draws a sharp distinction between "historic" al-Qaeda and the new, Pakistani-dominated Jihad International Inc.

He also examines the crucial, myriad links - and ominous implications - involving Afghanistan and Kashmir, rarely addressed by Western media ("the two jihads have always been two sides of the same coin"). His analysis is guaranteed to provide US President Barack Obama's AfPak planners countless white nights.

**Pepe Escobar:** Pakistan's army leaders have been masters of the double game since the

1980s. Could you briefly describe how they deploy their stealth?

**Arif Jamal:** Actually, the strategy of playing a double game is as old as the country. When British India was partitioned into two dominions in 1947, Pakistan faced an enemy in India which was several times bigger, more populated, resourceful and most importantly militarily more powerful. It was not good sense to take on a far more powerful enemy in a conventional military way.

Pakistani military strategist Colonel Akbar Khan conceived the concept of jihad to offset the lack of military balance between the two emerging enemies. Akbar Khan's concept of jihad was no more than subversion in the enemy country, but it was couched in jihadi terms. He himself took over the grand-sounding name of a Muslim conqueror as his *nom de guerre*.

From that time onwards, the Pakistani military leaders kept inciting the local Muslim population in the Indian-controlled state of Jammu and Kashmir to subversion and turning subversion into a guerrilla war until 1980, when they decided to wage a real jihad in Afghanistan [against the Soviets]. At the same time, Pakistan never abandoned the diplomatic option of resolving its conflicts with India. The Pakistan army supported a full-scale anti-Soviet jihad or subversive guerrilla war in Afghanistan. Publicly, Pakistan denied any support to the Afghan mujahideen. The only time Pakistan claimed responsibility for subversion in a neighboring country was when the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan [in 1989]. It was a victory for the jihad policy.

Pakistan intensified its military and financial support to Kashmiri jihadis at the end of the 1980s and kept supporting the Afghan mujahideen even after the withdrawal of the Soviets, but never admitted doing so. Pakistan continued the same policy even after the 9/11 terrorist attacks [in the US]. On the one hand, it joined the US-led anti-terror coalition and on the other hand it kept supporting the jihadis in Kashmir and the Taliban in Afghanistan. At best, under [President] General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's actions against terrorists were selective.

**PE:** Was the operation in Swat Valley [this year] nothing but a big show put up by the army for the benefit of Washington - of course, with the "collateral damage" of displacing 3.4 million people?

**AJ:** It appears so more and more with the passage of time. In the beginning, it appeared they were serious in eliminating the terrorists there. However, knowingly or unknowingly, they gave enough time to top terrorists like Sufi Mohammad and Maulana Fazlullah and their followers to escape. As a result, the terrorists disappeared from Swat Valley but re-emerged elsewhere.

Parts of Swat Valley and other areas where the TNSM [the banned pro-Taliban Tehrik-Nifaz-i-Shariat-i-Mohammadi - Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Laws] had established its control may have fallen back to the military, but the terrorists can always come back. Swat Valley is not in the tribal areas. It would have made a lot of sense if they had quietly encircled Swat Valley before the operation so that nobody could escape.

The Swat operation has created such a huge refugee problem that it may defeat every sincere effort to smash terrorism. I do not know whether the military created this crisis knowingly as part of their double game or because of a bad counter-terrorism strategy. If they let that

happen unknowingly, it is still more dangerous. This would mean that they are not capable of carrying out anti-terrorist operations even if they are willing to.

**PE:** Can you expand on the strategic importance of Swat as a corridor linking Pakistani Kashmir and Afghanistan?

**AJ:** Swat's strategic importance is that it lies somewhere between the borders of Afghanistan and Kashmir. If the "Taliban" get entrenched here, they can spread from there in every direction, ultimately linking Afghanistan and Kashmir through one or more corridors. The terrorists from Kashmir and Afghanistan would be able to freely move between the two. The differences between the jihadis in Afghanistan and those in Kashmir would go and they would unite under one jihadi command. Muslim extremists would emerge a lot stronger as a result. The Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan would establish new sanctuaries in the Himalayas from where they would carry out attacks on Western forces in Afghanistan and elsewhere. It would be a lot more difficult to fight and dislodge them from the Himalayas than from Afghanistan.

**PE:** Whoever was responsible for the recent bombing in Lahore of an Inter-Services Intelligence facility had very good on-the-ground intel on the ISI - not surprisingly, considering the Taliban were "invented" by the ISI in the first part of the 1990s. It has been speculated that the bombing was planned and financed by al-Qaeda, with logistical support by Kashmiri guerrillas and with Pakistan Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud's TTP [Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan] group contributing with suicide bombers. Sounds like a CIA fantasy scenario. Any truth to it?

**AJ:** We do not know and probably will never know for sure who carried out the recent bombing in Lahore in which an important Brelvi cleric, Sarfraz Naeemi, died. The investigating agencies in Pakistan rarely finish the investigations in such cases. One or more Pakistani chapters of al-Qaeda may have been behind it. The Pakistani chapters of al-Qaeda such as the Jaish-i-Mohammad and different factions of the former Harakatul Ansaar have operated in Pakistan freely even after 9/11.

General Musharraf's regime never took any action against them under the false pretext that they were not fighting in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the West also did not consider them part of al-Qaeda because they were primarily engaged in the jihad in Kashmir. The reality was that the Pakistani Deobandi jihadis, such as Maulana Masood Azhar and Maulana Fazlur Rehman Khalil, were the human links between the jihad in Kashmir and the jihad in Afghanistan. The two jihads have always been two sides of the same coin.

**PE:** Baitullah Mehsud seems to have been converted into the new Osama bin Laden. What's fact and fiction? Is he really the new emir of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas [FATA]? Is he really the top "al-Qaeda facilitator", according to CIA spin? What sort of "Kashmiris" are collaborating with him? What does he really want?

**AJ:** Jihad International Inc continuously needs a figurehead. Baitullah Mehsud was catapulted into the new Bin Laden role a couple of years ago because Jihad International Inc appeared to be losing the war in the absence of a figurehead such as Bin Laden. The ISI had fielded him to counter the growing influence of Abdullah Mehsud, who was spinning out of ISI control. Abdullah Mehsud had deviated from the given script by kidnapping Chinese citizens in Pakistan.

Now, Baitullah Mehsud also seems to have spun out of their control. Hence, he also has to be eliminated, and be replaced. Baitullah Mehsud won the first battle against the ISI by having another terrorist, Qari Zainuddin, murdered, who had been propped up by the ISI to take the place of Baitullah Mehsud. This is a flawed policy. Every terrorist has the tendency to spin out of control. If Qari Zainuddin had succeeded, he would have emerged a more dreaded terrorist and would have spun out of his handlers' control. To answer the last part of your question, I would say that many Pakistani jihadi groups have joined Baitullah Mehsud and others have established links with his organization.

**PE:** Is al-Qaeda using Kashmiris in FATA and North-West Frontier Province [NWFP]? **AJ:** Al-Qaeda in the shape of the Jaish-i-Mohammad, Harakatul Jihad Islami and Harakatul Mujahideen has been operating in Pakistan despite formal bans. They were allowed to operate because they also waged jihad in Kashmir as well. As support for militancy dwindled in Kashmir, they went to the FATA to wage jihad against the state of Pakistan. "Kashmiris" from the Valley of Kashmir are mostly not interested in international jihad. Their jihad is aimed at liberating their state from India. The only Kashmiri group from the valley interested in global jihad is the Hizbul Mujahideen.

**PE:** According to your best estimates, how many Saudi jihadis are roaming around FATA? And what about Uzbek and Chechen gun experts? Is "historic" al-Qaeda, with Bin Laden dead or not dead, now playing a sort of very long-range, behind-the-scenes, "wiser" advisory role?

**AJ:** They are probably in the hundreds. They keep coming and going. But, that is surely not the question. They are not playing leading parts. It is the Pakistani jihadis who are assuming leadership roles.

The historic al-Qaeda may or may not be dead, but it has definitely gone in the background. The new Jihad International Inc appears to be aiming at Pakistan rather than at the West. It seems to be trying to take over Islamabad and to turn it into a springboard for global jihad. The difference between the "historic" al-Qaeda and the new Jihad International Inc is that the latter is dominated by Pakistani jihadis while the former was Arab-oriented with an Arab, Bin Laden, at the top. The other difference is that new Jihad International Inc is aiming at India as a primary target while al-Qaeda under Bin Laden wanted to destroy America.

**PE:** What's the potential for the TTP to really threaten Peshawar [capital of NWFP], considering that Peshawar is not Talibanized, and mostly voted for a Pashtun nationalist party last year?

The TTP has a lot of potential for destruction in Pakistan, but cannot occupy any part of it without the support from rogue elements in the state. After all, they do not take over territory through elections. Khyber Agency was very liberal before the ISI started supporting the Lashkar-i-Islam led by Mufti Shakir and Mangal Bagh. Khyber Agency had returned a very liberal lawmaker, Lateef Afridi, to parliament. When the TTP thought it right to take over Peshawar, the ANP [Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party] would simply evaporate in the air. The ANP leaders are already living in virtual hiding. But this would not happen without active support from rogue elements in the state.

**PE:** The Taliban in Pakistan are a social movement as well. They seem to strike a chord with

the general population when they portray Islamabad as a puppet of US imperialism and Zionism. But if Islamabad manages to portray the Pakistani Taliban as merely a terrorist group, do you think that would be enough to win the battle for Pakistanis' hearts and minds?

**AJ:** The Zardari-Gillani government [President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gillani] won the hearts and minds of the people when they won elections [last year]. The propaganda against the democratically elected government comes from sympathizers of the Taliban in the media and politics. These Islamists feel more comfortable under military rule. The vast majority of Pakistanis never supported terrorism in any form.

**PE:** What's substantially wrong with US President Obama's AfPak strategy? Did he get his priorities right? How come he doesn't even mention Kashmir?

**AJ:** The Obama administration is not striking very hard on the source of global jihad, which is the jihad in Kashmir. My sense is the Obama administration understands the issue of terrorism more than the [George W] Bush administration. But, it seems to have accepted pressure from India, and is not mentioning the Kashmir conflict. The earlier idea of appointing a special envoy to Kashmir was a brilliant idea and abandoning it, I think, is the biggest mistake they are making. The Pakistani military will not stop supporting jihad in Kashmir without the resolution of the Kashmir conflict. Pakistan and India cannot resolve the Kashmir conflict without active involvement of America. Meanwhile, the jihad in Kashmir will keep giving birth to global jihadis.

**PE:** To what measure are the US Predator drone war on FATA, the heaps of "collateral damage", the contemptuous Pentagon denials, the connivance of Zardari's government, Pakistan's "national sovereignty" in tatters, leading towards either Talibanization or at least a movement for the emergence of Pashtunistan? Will Pakistan eventually break up?

**AJ:** I do not think that the drone attacks are leading to more "Talibanization" or a nationalist movement for Pashtunistan. But, unfortunately, they are not helping to curb the rise of extremism either. They are at best a short-term solution to stop Taliban attacks inside Afghanistan from Pakistani territory. They are not a long-term solution either. It is only the sympathizers of the Taliban who pose as liberals who are spreading this false theory. This theory ignores the reality that Talibanization pre-existed the drone attacks.

Islamic extremism or what they mistakenly call Talibanization in the West is directly opposed to Pashtun nationalism. It is eroding Pashtun nationalism in a big way. The most favorite targets of the "Taliban" include symbols of Pashtun nationalism, like the tomb of saint-poet Rehman Baba, which they have bombed out, as well as schools, artists' houses, etc.

I do not even think that the drones are attacks on Pakistan's sovereignty. The Americans are carrying out drone attacks in the Pakistani tribal belt with the knowledge and support of the Pakistani government, especially the military. They should be considered joint operations. It is another kind of double game Pakistan is playing; helping the Americans to carry out drone attacks secretly and denying it publicly.

Contrarily, it is the rise of Islamic extremism that is eroding the sovereignty of Pakistan. Many parts of the country are directly under the control of the extremists, where they apply sharia law. Is this not erosion of sovereignty? In reality, the state is continuously receding in the background. When the Taliban send a letter to an audio-video market in Lahore, the

traders come out and make a bonfire of "un-Islamic" videotapes" to avoid Taliban attacks. Is this not erosion of Pakistani sovereignty? On the call of the Taliban, the banks in Peshawar ask their employees to stop wearing Western dresses because it is un-Islamic. Where is Pakistan's so-called sovereignty in this case? The Taliban are asking non-Muslim minorities like Sikhs and Hindus to pay *jyzia*, an Islamic tax, in some parts of the country. That is the real attack on Pakistan's sovereignty.

**PE:** You see jihad expanding to the borders of Jammu and Kashmir in India, in the east, and Afghanistan in the west. The outcome of all this would mean jihadis moving freely between Kashmir and Afghanistan. Is this plan A for the ISI and the Pakistani army, with no plan B?

**AJ:** The ISI is very good at adapting to emerging situations. Most of their plans do not work as intended. It is neither plan A, nor plan B. I think it is an unintended result of the privatization of jihad. The Pakistani military had been privatizing jihad in Kashmir from the very beginning, and later in Afghanistan in the 1980s. After 9/11, the ISI further privatized jihad and outsourced it to former ISI officers.

Parts of NWFP like the Khyber Agency were outsourced to a former ISI officer, Major Amir (retired), who came into limelight when he tried to destabilize the first Benazir Bhutto government in 1989-90. Under ISI pressure, he was retired but not punished. He again came into the limelight when the Nawaz Sharif government unearthed an ISI plot, known as Midnight Jackals, to destabilize his government.

Major Amir is the brother of Maulana Mohammad Tayyab, who heads an extremist Takfiri group, Jamat Ishaat Al Tauheed Wal Sunnah, popularly known as Panjpiris. This group was deeply involved in the rise of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan and the TNSM. The group seems to be working at joining the two jihads. The two brothers played important roles in the formation of the TTP and the radicalization of the TNSM. TTP leader Maulana Faqir Mohammad is their follower and studied in their *madrassa* [Islamic seminary] in Swabi [in NWFP]. The conclusion is that even former ISI officers tend to deviate from the given script and spin out of control.

**PE:** Is there any support left - by people living on both sides of the Line of Control [LoC] that separates Indian-administered Kashmir and Pakistan-administered Kashmir - for jihad? Or will this continue to be just an ISI obsession?

**AJ:** Unfortunately, there is still a lot of support for jihad on both sides of the LoC. The ISI has been exploiting this support and will continue to do so until the Kashmir conflict is resolved for good.

**PE:** What's the ultimate solution for Kashmir? What does the majority, on both sides of the LoC, really want? And who's more flexible, those living in India or in Pakistan?

**AJ:** It is too premature to talk of an ultimate solution. The Kashmir conflict is too complex to talk about in just an interview. The real issue is that India is not ready to deviate from its position and Pakistan is not ready to accept the status quo as the solution. Once both countries are ready for a solution, finding a solution will not be a problem. There are a few dozen of them. The majority of the people in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir may want to join Pakistan, but that would not be fair to the large majority of people in the Jammu and Ladakh regions. The two states should resolve their territorial conflict in a diplomatic

way. Religion should not be allowed to determine the international borders once again, after 62 years.