

# A Profile of Mangal Bagh

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*Abstract: Mangal Bagh is one of the more enigmatic Islamic warlords to emerge from the Wild West frontier of Pakistan's tribal belts adjoining Afghanistan. Bagh has led a charmed life; from humble beginnings he has risen to be the most powerful man controlling Khyber agency within Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas. His meteoric rise to power holds a curious mix of contradictions; he has swung from the secular to the fundamentalist outlook, has decried the Taliban yet enforcing a similar system of sharia, and has suppressed crime and drugs within his area of influence while at the same time collecting a kind of protection money. This is the story of Mangal Bagh, the new face of the Khyber agency.*

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Photo by Rahimullah Yusufzai.

Northwest Pakistan is witnessing the emergence of new warlords who are setting up formidable militias and gradually are wresting control of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas from the state. Among these new warlords is Mangal Bagh Afridi. Bagh is the head of the Lashkar-e-Islam (Army of Islam), a group poised to become the dominant force in Khyber agency in FATA. The agency is adjacent to the urban center of Peshawar, the capital of the Northwest Frontier Province, separated by just a flimsy barrier, which until recently was not much more than a wooden pole. But this line of demarcation is the end of the reach of the Pakistani government. Beyond the barrier, and in some case even within Peshawar, the writ of the Pakistani government all but disappears; Mangal Bagh has become the law here.

Even though he is as zealous in the fundamentalist interpretation and implementation of his form of sharia, Bagh presents a sharp contrast from other FATA warlords, like Baitullah Mehsud and Mullah Fazlullah. Most noticeably, Bagh has consistently aligned himself ideologically with the state – yet, at the same time defying it – and has vehemently denied terrorism tactics; he has also not joined the Taliban movement in Pakistan. His mission statement is almost Robin Hood-like in character, claiming to mete out egalitarian social justice and rooting out crime, which to some extent is true. But he does this with an iron fist; any resistance is swiftly and permanently quelled. He has visibly reduced the criminal activities in the area, while also having a huge impact on decreasing drug trafficking in the area. At the same time he is engaged in a bitter ideological and sectarian struggle with a rival faction, a feud that has claimed many lives, and has blatantly and forcefully defied the state.

### **The origin of Mangal Bagh**

There are eight clans of the Afridi tribe settled in Khyber agency: Malik-Khel, Qambar Khel, Adamkhel, ZakaKhel, Qamar-Khel, Akakhel, KukkiKhel, and Sepah. The 35-year-old Bagh belongs to the least prestigious Sepah clan.

Born and raised in humble circumstances, his father died early, and his mother raised him almost single handedly. His only education was some years studying at a madrassa, though he did not attain any religious qualifications worth the mention. Thus, initially, he was constrained to holding the unenviable position of a truck-cleaner plying on the smuggling route of Bara-Peshawar. Though most of the reports

put him in the position of a bus cleaner-cum-conductor, Bagh has gone on record saying that his family owned one or two buses that he operated. His modest upbringing definitely shaped his worldview.

His humble origins have made him anti-feudal and pro-people. He loses no opportunity to criticise the Maliks, the hereditary tribal elders who are traditionally pro-establishment and receive all the benefits doled out by the government. He is keen to highlight the plight of the ordinary tribesmen and motivated to solve the problems confronting the common man. If he has his way, he would like to rob the rich to pay the poor like a modern-day Robin Hood. That explains the reason for young men, mostly jobless, to flock to his banner and make up bulk of his Lashkar-i-Islam outfit.<sup>1</sup>

Bagh has led a strange existence, drifting between two differing ideologies. As a young man, he fought with the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviets. When he returned home, he remained a member of the secular and nationalist Awami National Party, the antithesis of fundamentalist parties. Not being too fastidious in his religious approach, Bagh used the ladder of ANP to become Secretary of Bara Transport Association in 2001.

### **Religious influences in Khyber and on Mangal Bagh**

Bagh's first fundamentalist religious exposure came when he joined as a member of Taleeghi Jamaat (an evangelical Islamic organization) and started his trips for the propagation of Islamic principles as dictated by the Jamaat. Innumerable opportunities were opened for him through this organization, and soon thereafter he was seen in the company of Mufti Muneer Shakir. Shakir, a proponent of the Deobandi school of Islamic jurisprudential thought,<sup>\*</sup> came from Karbogha village in the district of Hangu and was engaged in leading a hard-line religious movement under the aegis of Harkat-ul-Islam.<sup>†</sup> Shakir was active in making announcements on a FM radio station and denouncing Pir Saif-ur-Rahman,<sup>‡</sup> a cleric who represented the opposing Barelvi school of thought and in turn headed his own movement of Ansar-ul-Islam. The history of Shakir puts the Mangal Bagh narrative in its paradigmatic perspective.

Shakir, a more radical traveling evangelist, arrived in Khyber agency much later than Rahman, but he built up a following much quicker. Shakir's firebrand tactics were in stark contrast to the comparatively laissez-faire preaching of Rahman. Shakir's initiation, in turn, had come about in late 2003 at the hands of

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<sup>\*</sup> The Deobandi school of thought is opposed to the Shiite tenets of faith in Islam and uses a purely doctrinal approach. The opposing Barelvi school of thought is more lenient and is not opposed to using logic.

<sup>†</sup> Harkat-ul-Islam was a radically oriented organization that developed around the madrassas in the tribal areas; the militancy aspects were not initially part of the group.

<sup>‡</sup> Rahman arrived from Afghanistan in the 1970s and settled in the Soordand area of the Bara tehsil in Khyber agency. Before long, he built up a significant following in the region.

a local cleric, Haji Naamdar, who launched the Amar Bil Maroof Wa Nahianalmunkir (Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice) and commissioned the fiery orator Shakir to preach to followers. Shakir's oratory soon galvanized locals, the majority of whom had been disillusioned by the existing social conditions in FATA, which tended to treat them as inferior citizens compared to Pakistanis in other areas of the country. Socio-economic deprivations played a critical role in catapulting Naamdar's group into an acceptable organization seen as delivering justice. Lashkar-e-Islam has continued and built upon that legacy. In late 2004, lacking the clerical credential of others, Haji Naamdar gradually faded into the background, thereby leaving the field to Shakir, who came into his own and established the ideological foundations for the formation of the Lashkar-e-Islam.

Shakir, aptly nicknamed "Shola Bayan" or fiery speaker, ingenuously set up a makeshift radio operation in his courtyard, and began broadcasting his particular brand of jihadist and sectarian preaching, with a stricter, more traditionalist viewpoint than the Barelvi school of thought.<sup>§</sup> Shakir's "radio ministry" quickly gained popularity. Since this was the time when jihad was in vogue, his sermons attracted hundreds of supporters, many of them formerly from Rahman's faction. As retaliation, and to recapture his target audience, Rahman launched his own radio operation in 2005.

A huge paradox about the FM Mullahs in general is that they are, at least initially, extremely popular in the class they tend to oppress the most: women. Locals mention that women have a lot to do with the success of the FM Mullahs in gaining their followers. This may be strange to Western analysts particularly, since these mullahs tend to convert women under their influence into black walking tents, but perhaps the answer lies in the traditional role of the woman as the matriarchic influence in the tribal society. The women in FATA tend to stay inside homes, where they exact an indiscernible but definite influence on shaping the mindset of the children, particularly since the adult males tend to stay away from the home, sometimes for protracted periods, in search of employment. Shakir and Rahman aired religion-based question-and-answer programs, often about social issues such as marriage and duty, that tended to appeal to the conservative, isolated women in these tribal villages. These clerics convinced the women – Shakir more than Rahman – that it was their bounden religious duty to ensure that their husbands, brothers, and sons observe Islam properly, dress properly, grow beards, etc. Villagers in the region are very poor, but FATA society is an emotive one; they tend to follow local movements that catch on with great zeal. They collectively finance such popular clerical operations by carrying out donation campaigns, which ends by locals donating even the meager valuables that they have. Women have a large role to play in shaping this outlook by their almost invisible, but significant domestic influence on children and men.

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<sup>§</sup> At one point, tribal elders threw Shakir out of Kurram agency for fanning sectarian hatred.

Both Shakir and Rahman discovered that they were competing for the same target audience and the same finite resources. Consequently, their tussle degenerated into all out war. In December 2005, tribal elders in the Bara area denounced and exiled both of them for the charge of fomenting sectarian hatred. But the Pandora's box had been opened; both rival camps by then consisted of hundreds of armed warriors intent on eradicating the other because of their purportedly un-Islamic views. Hence, otherwise avoidable skirmishes resulted between Harkat-ul-Islam and Ansar-ul-Islam. Per tribal jirga decree, both of these evangelist-turned-warlords were made to leave the area after 21 men died as a result of armed conflicts. In response, both Rahman and Shakir went into hiding, but not before Shakir had appointed a deputy as his successor: Mangal Bagh. \*\* Bagh's journey from a truck cleaner to a fundamentalist group commander took less than five years.

### **The development of Lashkar-e-Islam**

Under the name, Amir-e-Lashkar-e-Islam, Bagh took Shakir's organization to heights the latter could have only dreamed of. The power politics between Bagh's group and Ansar-ul-Islam did not abate though; the bloodshed, originally stopped by the jirga, continued until it had taken the toll of about 400-500 human lives. A cease-fire brokered by Afghan Taliban leader Ustad Yasir ended the fighting in Bara and Tirah, but by then Lashkar-e-Islam had emerged stronger than Ansar-ul-Islam. The leadership of the latter had taken refuge in the Tirah Valley in order to survive. While Ansar-ul-Islam is believed to be stronger than Lashkar-e-Islam in Tirah, the remoteness of the valley and absence of government control means the group does not possess much political or military clout, and thus, is unable to get the attention of the media.

In the wake of the disturbance that shed so much blood in 2006, the Pakistan government sent 8,000 troops from the Frontier Corps paramilitary unit to enforce the writ of the state in Khyber. Shakir's headquarters were shelled and Bagh was also told to leave. After a short time in hiding, Bagh resurfaced to assume the undisputed command of Lashkar-e-Islam. There were some reports that Shakir was arrested at the Karachi airport and has been in jail since late 2007. Rahman seems to have dropped of the strategic radar of important warlords in the area.<sup>2</sup> Some reports mention him as fleeing into Punjab. According to a famous Urdu proverb, "two swords cannot be put in the same scabbard." This proverb seems to apply equally well to radical Muslim clerics.

There is strong suspicion that Bagh is fighting a proxy battle for Pakistani intelligence. He is undoubtedly a political opportunist inasmuch as he throws his entire weight about for a tribe fighting against another

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\*\* Qazi Mehboob took over the leadership of Ansar-ul-Islam.

faction, thus managing to broaden his own sphere of influence in the area. While Bagh's primary base is in Bara, his influence has been extending gradually in the region. When Bagh appeared to be moving into Jamrud, some members of the Kukikhel Afridi subtribe opposed his presence. Bagh's armed response prompted some tribal elders to ask for forgiveness, and sellers of liquor and drugs were forced to give up their businesses, at least openly. Bagh's sphere of influence extends into the edges of Peshawar where his fighters intimidate locals. Resistance from villagers in Sheikhan proved to be futile against Bagh's heavily armed force.<sup>3</sup>

Asked to describe Lashkar-e-Islam's objectives, Bagh explained, "Ours is a reformist organisation trying to promote virtue and prevent vice. We rid Bara of drug-traffickers, gamblers, kidnappers, car-snatchers and other criminals and we want to cleanse Jamrud and all of Peshawar of those selling drugs and liquor and running gambling dens."<sup>4</sup> Bagh believes that only he is sufficiently capable to carry out these lofty ideals, especially given the government's poor track record in attempting to do the same. His mission is not just vigilante crime fighting as some analysts and media reports have tended to portray. Bagh openly challenges the writ of the state, and this is as worrying a trend as the formation of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, the umbrella organization of the various Taliban groups in FATA and the Northwest Frontier Province, since at any time Bagh's Lashkar-e-Islam may morph into the more mainstream militant groups. To his credit though, he has so far distanced himself from the Taliban, and has not vigorously resisted the military operations, but all that may just be a part of his strategy. Bagh's true intentions are likely to reveal themselves as the government increases military operations to enforce its writ in Khyber.

Bagh claims to head a force of 120,000 armed fighters under the banner of Lashkar-e-Islam. Under his command, this force controls almost all of Khyber agency with the exception of parts of Jamrud tehsil and a two-kilometer stretch of territory in the Maidan area of the Tirah Valley, which remains Ansar-ul-Islam territory. The Pakistan government claims the number of jihadis in Khyber does not exceed a total strength of 400-600 militants. It is reasonable to assume that neither claim is accurate. Many sources put Bagh's fighting strength to slightly above 10,000.

Regardless of the actual number, Lashkar-e-Islam is a force to be reckoned with in the area. Bagh insists that his mission is to wring the Tirah Valley out of the clutches of Ansar-ul-Islam, and his men are at his beck and call. "All I have to do is to make an announcement on our FM radio channel and my mujahideen volunteers would be ready to fight for the Lashkar-i-Islam. We have about 70 pick-up trucks donated by pious and wealthy tribesmen for use of our men," Bagh explained.<sup>5</sup>

**Life under Bagh's rule**

Bagh maintains an air of fear about him. Heavily armed bodyguards surround him at all times. Long convoys escort him as he moves about the region.<sup>6</sup>

Bagh considers himself justified in adopting a coercive attitude towards the enforcement of sharia. He orders men to don religious caps and women to wear shuttlecock burqas, the black veil that envelops the entire female form in a heavy covering, leaving barely discernible outlets for the eyes. It is the prevalent form of women's garb in FATA under Bagh.

In the second week of June 2005, Lashkar-e-Islam forced markets to close down, announced formation of an Islamic government, banned interest banking, and warned of strict punishment for infractions. It was reportedly announced that a murderer would pay a fine equivalent to roughly \$6,000; the fine for having a dish antenna was \$600; and failure to pray five times a day would cost \$6. No woman was to be allowed in market areas without one of her blood relatives. CD shops were closed down. Music of any kind is not tolerated. Television is ordained by Bagh's illegal FM radio transmissions as un-Islamic. Beards are to be grown compulsorily. Shopkeepers in Bara pay a monthly fee to Lashkar-e-Islam that they used to give to a bazaar committee for security in the large markets; Bagh claims to fill that role.<sup>7</sup>

Bagh has set up Qazi courts<sup>††</sup> for the dispensation of justice.<sup>8</sup> The people come to him for ready and speedily granted justice, unfortunately a rare commodity in the area. Yet, amputation of hands as a punishment of theft is being practiced, and there have been reports of beheadings.

Tribal leaders turn to Bagh for assistance. For example, the member of a Pashtun family visiting from Britain was kidnapped. Two days after Bagh was approached to assist, the man was recovered. When unable to get the Hayatabad police to shut down a dozen kiosks selling heroin, the tribal elders asked for Bagh's help. Reports indicate that Bagh's men were able to shut down all but two of the sellers, who have gone underground to peddle their drugs.<sup>9</sup> Bagh is a man able to get things done, especially where the government appears to be hamstrung.

**Bagh fills a political vacuum**

In the absence of effective government control in Khyber, Bagh's strength has grown. Some locals suggest the government, depending on the situation, ignores Bagh's militant activities and indirectly supports him whenever the state machinery is unable to fix a problem. He enjoys considerable support of

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<sup>††</sup> Qazi courts are an Islamic concept where jurists of highest caliber and education preside over courts dispensing equal-handed justice to all according to sharia dictates. During the Islamic heydays, Qazi courts functioned as intended, but since then the concept has morphed and some would say has been abused by fundamentalists.

people because of his daring, though religious, decrees against vagabonds. When the government fails, Bagh steps in to maintain law and order. In the process he has gained formidable clout among local tribes, which is why he at times comes across as “an independent and high-handed cleric.” Yet, this also causes ripples in his covert relations with the political administration. For instance, in June 2006 Lashkar-e-Islam ran into trouble after the political administration disagreed with the peace committees that Bagh set up for maintaining law and order in the area. The disagreement led to tensions and resulted in the closure of local markets for a few weeks.

Under the leadership of Bagh, the Lashkar-e-Islam has occasionally picked battles with some of the local subtribes. On March 3, 2008, Bagh’s militants attacked the Bara Sheikhan village in Peshawar district (outside of the Khyber tribal area) and killed 10 tribesmen and injured about a dozen over a religious issue. The incident highlights the dilemma of the FATA region; the transmigration of fundamentalist tendencies has started spreading from the rural to the urban mainstream in Pakistan, a troubling trend that belies structural imbalances within the entire Pakistani society.

The writ of the state has eroded so much and the militant groups have become so strong in FATA that they can flaunt their power openly, without any serious restraint. In April 2008, Bagh focused on shutting down the government offices in Bara.<sup>10</sup> Bagh used his radio station to present his case to his followers. He claimed the political administration was attempting to prevent Lashkar-e-Islam from stomping out the “anti-social” elements in the agency. Bagh viewed the action taken against him by the khasadar force (a government-sponsored tribal force) as unacceptable, and he pronounced that he no longer recognized the government’s authority over him or his organization. He went so far as to warn members of the Bara khasadar force that should they continue their duties, their houses would be razed and they would be fined one million rupees, or a little more than \$12,000. Soon after Bagh’s radio announcement, khasadars abandoned their offices and checkpoints throughout Khyber. Even Bara khasadars serving in Peshawar left their posts.

In January 2008, shortly before the general election, Bagh forced the candidates for the National Assembly seat from Bara to host a feast for voters.<sup>11</sup> At this event of some 65,000 people in Mandi Kas Ground, roughly 10 kilometers from Peshawar, Bagh administered an oath on the holy Quran to nominees, wherein they swore not to sign any un-Islamic bill or support anti-country strategies; they also pledged to spend all development funds in consultation with Lashkar-e-Islam. Bagh also promulgated an improvised election code forbidding public processions, use of vehicles, or display of party flags. This was later modified to allow the use of the party flag atop houses, so long as the Lashkar-e-Islam flag was also flown alongside. Bagh warned that the respective tribes of any of the candidates would be taken to



task for violating this oath. As many as 13 out of the 23 candidates contesting the National Assembly seat for Khyber agency delivered speeches to the audiences in the well-guarded venue. Those candidates who participated in the gathering included Amir Shah, Muhammad Saeed, Dr. Niaz Badshah, Haji Faizullah, Maulana Nasrat Amin, Dr. Muhammad Hanif, Barrister Hasham Khan, Senator Hamidullah Jan, Malikzada Zafar Khan, Yar Asghar, Suliman Shah Afridi, Haji Sohail Ahmed, and Dr. Haji Habib Shakir.

In promulgating his code of conduct for the election, Bagh used his oft-repeated theme of basing all Lashkar-e-Islam ideologies on egalitarian social justice. "I administered oath to the candidates after their election in order to provide platform to the poor people as well," he explained.<sup>12</sup> He added that the holding of a collectively public meeting for the candidates' campaign was aimed to put brakes on the colossal expenses that could have heralded unrest in the area. The gathering demonstrated the extent of public support for Lashkar-e-Islam and the pervasion of politics by this ostensibly crime fighting organization that shows all the tenacity of a political organization in its outlook. The public gathering was a huge propaganda success for Bagh and his group, showing to the masses who actually calls the political shots in the area.

### **The government's Khyber Operation**

Insecurity on the part of the government began to rise in June 2008 when Bagh kidnapped 16 Christians from Peshawar. He reasoned that the abductees were indulging in vices and occupying a property that was once part of a madrassa; they were subsequently freed in Bara. The Awami National Party (the ruling political party of the province) claimed the abductions were part of a conspiracy to bring down the provincial government. When civil and military installations in areas like Matani, Mashokhel, Mashogagar, Badaber, Sheikhan, and Michni were attacked, the government's insecurities were further raised. Police parties were attacked twice in Matani, with four policemen killed in each incident. A total of 18 police casualties occurred in Matani alone, a town located 20 kilometers from Peshawar. Rocket barrages were being carried out at will, the targets being sensitive installations. Visits of armed men in double-cabin pickups to certain parts of the Peshawar cantonment to warn the CD shop owners against their "un-Islamic" business also spread terror in the general public.

These acts of violence in and around Peshawar raised alarm bells with the establishment, and media reports began springing up that Peshawar was no longer safe and was about to be taken over by militants. Though Bagh vehemently denied any such intentions, a military operation called Sirat-e-Mustaqqim, or the Right Path, was started on June 28, 2008, ostensibly to restore the government's writ in Khyber agency.

Some 700 Frontier Constabulary soldiers were sent to Bara initially to secure the town and to bolster the defense of Peshawar.<sup>13</sup> The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan accused the government of spreading rumors of a pending attack by Lashkar-e-Islam in order to divert attention away from the government's intention to strike against the Taliban. The Islamist sections of the political leadership of the country also decried the operations. "There is no imminent threat to Peshawar from militants but the government is spreading rumours to provide an opportunity to the US-led NATO forces so they could attack FATA," opined Jamaat-e-Islami chief Qazi Hussain Ahmad. "I am sure the militants cannot capture Peshawar or any other town as they don't have the weapons and the resources to take over big towns."<sup>14</sup>

Even though the operation in Bara was started with much fanfare, eyewitness accounts emanating from the area revealed that more media hype was created as opposed to real action on ground. Bagh had not actively engaged the security forces at all; he withdrew to the Tirah Valley, reiterating his stance not to fight national security forces. Misri Khan, the deputy leader of the Lashkar-e-Islam, told reporters from his organization's stronghold in Bara, that no members had attacked the security forces or any government installations, nor did the group resist the government's operation in Bara.<sup>15</sup>

During the operation, security forces were actively engaged in blowing up bases vacated by Lashkar-e-Islam. This was more of eyewash than anything else, since brick structures can be rebuilt easily by such affluent groups. In Bara, the residence of Mufti Muneer Shakir, of the fiery orator who founded Lashkar-e-Islam, was razed to ground. A building owned by the rival Ansar-ul-Islam was bulldozed on the fourth day of the offensive. A number of base camps of the three target militant outfits – Lashkar-e-Islam, Ansar-ul-Islam, and the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice – were destroyed during the operation. Militant movement was seen in the area, even as security forces stepped up their operations, giving rise to the surmise that the operation had been premeditated between the forces and Lashkar-e-Islam to save face for the establishment.

Meanwhile, Bagh was carrying out operations in Tirah Valley against the Ansar-ul-Islam, even as the Frontier Constabulary were beefing up security in the Bara area, which displays the seemingly nonchalant attitude of this warlord to the government's efforts at retaking his "territory." The operation culminated in 13 days, with an agreement reached between Bagh and the government. The government, of course, declared the operation to be an unmitigated success. Rahman Malik, an adviser to the prime minister, was quite optimistic that Peshawar was secured from any militant threats. "The objectives of the operation have been achieved to a great extent. Now there is no threat to the capital city," remarked the top security official of the country.

Malik made it clear that security forces had been directed to take care of women, children, and elderly tribesmen and to take action only when somebody challenged them, avoiding civilian collateral damage. That is why, he added, no mishap had occurred during the course of the operation. The civilian action led by the governor of the Northwest Frontier Province resulted in the political authorities taking control of the areas as they were cleared by the Frontier Corps.

As happens with any warlord in Pakistan, Inter-Service Intelligence has been assumed to have a hand in the sponsoring of Bagh. There are a variety of opinions about the Bagh tie-in with ISI; some analysts opine that as he was never a part of the ISI jihadist-funding nexus, he is therefore behaving rather independently. Others contend that he is being wooed as a Taliban counter-check by the intelligence agencies. A local politician, who declined to be identified, said, "If we finish Mangal Bagh, the Taleban will come in. He's a better alternative. At least he will never pick up his gun against Pakistan."<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the June operation in Bara, which resulted in the arrests of many criminals but few militants, is also being explained in terms of a placatory response to American pressure, rather than a serious effort at bringing Lashkar-e-Islam under control; US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher was due to visit Pakistan when the operation was started.<sup>17</sup> "It soon became apparent that the military operation in Bara was primarily aimed at pushing the armed tribal militants back so that they no longer threatened Peshawar and kept the Khyber Pass, linking Peshawar with Landikotal and Torkham and beyond with Jalalabad and Kabul, open to traffic, including the huge oil tankers and containers, to serve as a lifeline of all kinds of supplies to the NATO forces operating in Afghanistan."<sup>18</sup>

The security operation hardly seemed to affect Bagh. His writ runs as usual in the Bara area, and he has recently reappeared in the Landikotal area of Khyber, vowing to enforce his codes of conduct there as well.<sup>19</sup> His workers are seen as usual in the Bara area collecting "donations." Things appear to be back to normal in the area, that is if commercial activity in a sovereign state being controlled by an armed militant group can be called normal.

It is difficult to deduce whether he is sending men to fight for the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. He has consistently refused to join Baitullah Mehsud, the Taliban, or al Qaeda. Unlike Haji Naamdar and Qazi Mehboob ul Haq, he is vehemently opposed to allowing foreigners, such as Uzbeks or Chechens, into his territory. While the other two warlords are said to operate on the Taliban pattern of co-opting foreign militants and thereby even al Qaeda cadres (though both groups deny it), Bagh essentially remains a Pashtun nationalist, at least in terms of the ethnic identity of his Lashkar and his own governance policies.

Even the harshest of his critics have never accused Bagh of carrying out terrorist activities or demonstrated any intention of doing so. Bagh always seems to come back to his steadfast position that he would not do anything to hurt his country, the reason he provided for not joining Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan.<sup>20</sup>

Surprisingly, he was accused at one point by the prime minister of trying to blow up parliament with the help of suicide bombers, an allegation Bagh shrugged off as a childish accusation.

A connection with the Taliban movement in Afghanistan cannot be ruled out though. According to some reports, Taliban leaders from Afghanistan mediated a dispute between Lashkar-e-Islam and Ansar-ul-Islam in November 2007. Moreover, even if Bagh is not sending his men to fight in Afghanistan, his state within the state does provide another safe haven for like-minded Taliban with whom he can always find mutually complementary interests and aspirations.<sup>21</sup>

It is feared that Bagh, who was until recently enjoying the support of the government due to his actions against the criminals, will become a dilemma like Maulana Fazlullah and many other Taliban leaders in Waziristan areas, who have established their own states, challenging the government's writ and issuing their decrees. Finally, the government had to take strict actions against them to control them and even on many occasions use the Army. It may come to that for Mangal Bagh and his Lashkar-e-Islam.

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