

'If it was jihad then, it's jihad now.'

COLIN FREEZE, TODAY AT 7:56 AM EST

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A former Pakistani intelligence officer says he has a message for Canadian and NATO forces in Afghanistan: "Ultimately you will lose," he told me a phone interview. "You are not bringing any peace here."

Khalid Khawaja, an English-speaking ex-spy, spoke from Lahore after I called him from Kandahar, where I am an embedded journalist with the Canadian Forces. The idea was to try to suss out the views of a known extremist, one who might put regional events in a different kind of perspective.

"In [1980s] Afghanistan, when the Russians attacked, the Canadians and Americans and Europeans supported the jihad against the Russians," Mr. Khawaja said. Foreign policies and foreign armies may shift over time, he said, but real Muslims stand firm.

"Our religion has not changed," he said. "If it was jihad then, it is jihad now."

Mr. Khawaja is the most accessible of Pakistan's rogue elements. The agency he once worked for, the Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI), has been getting a lot of press this week, amid allegations of complicity in the last week's mysterious assassination of Benazir Bhutto and of continued ISI meddling in Afghanistan.

These events occurred after Mr. Khawaja's time. During the 1980s and 1990s, he was something of a regional power broker. Firmly ensconced within Pakistan's military-intelligence apparatus, he first served as an Air Force squadron leader, then as an ISI operative, while forging personal relationships with Afghanistan-based jihadists. He says he has met Osama bin Laden, Taliban Leader Mullah Omar, and just about every Afghan warlord of note.

He also is close to Canada's Khadr family, which is how I know of him. In his latest incarnation, he has been acting as a self-styled civil-liberties advocate, publicly criticizing the Musharraf dictatorship for arresting, disappearing, and killing allegedly dangerous fundamentalists -- people who include the Khadr family and himself.

NATO maintains it is in a war against the Afghan Taliban, but the conflict could be morphing into a broader struggle. Networks of religious extremists on both sides of the border have found a haven in Pakistan-Afghanistan border regions, with some seemingly powerful, if generally unseen, patrons.

Few in the West would have any sympathy for the views of Mr. Khawaja, which might not be all that widely held inside the agencies he used to work for. Even so, if the rogue elements of the ISI are a fraction as radical and as powerful as critics maintain they are, then his point of view may give an insight into a mindset that's crucial for the West to understand.

In other words, how does an extremist ex-spy in Pakistan see Afghanistan and the wider world?

Mr. Khawaja upholds that the world is divided into two: Pakistan's friends and Pakistan's foes.

Who are the foes? The "Americans are enemies of Afghanistan and they are enemies of Pakistan," he said. "They are using even the Canadians now. And for what?"

Who are Pakistan's defenders?

"Topmost," he says, is Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. And the nukes, he said, are closely followed by:

2. The Army.
3. The ISI / intelligence
4. The "mujahedeen"
5. The Taliban
6. Insurgents in the tribal areas.

Mr. Khawaja doesn't appear to be saying that all these entities and the people that control them are necessarily in cahoots and conspiring together. Rather, they amount to powerful forces with common interests that Pakistan can steer and benefit from.

He makes no mention of al-Qaeda, per se. For him, there is no such entity. "Where is al Qaeda?" he asked rhetorically. "I have not met somebody who says 'I am al Qaeda.' They never used this word." He describes the Arab fundamentalist fighters he knows, as "mujahedeen," or literally Islamic holy warriors.

I had last spoke to Mr. Khawaja a year ago. (At the time, I was working on a strange story about how 1995-era exports of two-way radios from North America to the Pakistani Army seem to have figured into post-9/11 arrests of several Canadian and U.S. Arabs. First fingered by Western intelligence, most were accused of having links to Afghanistan and al-Qaeda, but were ultimately let go, uncharged, after horrible ordeals in foreign prisons.)

Since that conversation I hadn't checked in, and was surprised to find out that Mr. Khawaja's own fortunes had taken a nosedive. A few times in 2007, Islamabad had him jailed on a host of allegations involving extremist conspiracies. Friends of his died this summer as Pakistani forces raided an jihadist hotbed known as the Red Mosque.

"I wasn't arrested, I was abducted," Mr. Khawaja said, defiant as ever. His words drip with grievance and outrage. "I can prove in any court of law any case against me is fake."

Pakistan and Afghanistan are one part of a greater struggle, he said, where stalemates are being reached all over the global chessboard. "This will never end," said Mr. Khawaja. "In Palestine, with all the Israeli and American might, they could not finish this thing. Same thing with Kashmir."

"This is a game being played by Americans," he said. "Their ultimate aim is to break Pakistan."

But "kill 2,000 [fighters] and you will find 5,000 more," he asserted. "This is not Taliban and al Qaeda, it is the people of Afghanistan who are resisting this foreign occupation."

But is it really?

Some Afghans I've spoken to suggest they are sick of 30 years of war and foreign interference -- interference not just from the superpowers, but also regional powers, especially Pakistan.

The Taliban (once propped up by the ISI) is trying to regain control of Afghanistan even though there appears to be no great outcry for the return for Mullah Omar,

known for stringing up infidels, banning kites, and jailing men whose beards were too short.

Mr. Khawaja concedes that Taliban rule had some unfortunate glitches. "Mullah Omar's style, his technique – I can differ with him," he said. But he adds that at least the mullah tried to rule by the Koran, he said, which is important. "As Muslims we claim that we will obey God and the Prophet."

Other governments, he complains, including the ones run by Hamid Karzai and Pervez Musharraf, place themselves above God's law.

"Musharraf speaks against the beard and calls himself Muslim? This is wrong," said Mr. Khawaja. No fan of Karzai, he still has some former friends sitting in the Afghanistan government. He complains his power hungry warlords have sold out to become "stooges" of the Americans.

In Pakistan, Mr. Khawaja said, the ISI is not above trying to influence who its secular masters are. It was pointed out that there are credible accounts the spy agency spending millions in the 1990s to influence Pakistan's polls. "I have been into these games myself," Mr. Khawaja said. "It's a game of money. It's a game of sources."

But he suggests such intelligence conspiracies wouldn't extend to murder.

Not everyone agrees. Before the assassination of Benazir Bhutto last week, the liberal Pakistani political leader threatened to blow the lid off of a host of the intelligence-agency conspiracies against her.

"This was stupid by Benazir. She was being fed mostly by Americans," said Mr. Khawaja. While he said he had no real insight into the assassination, he said he didn't think some of the people Ms. Bhutto had fingered as her enemies would have killed her.

His views on the surviving democratic hopeful for Pakistan's presidency, Nawaz Sharif, are well known. Mr. Khawaja has asserted in past interviews that he personally saw the politician solicit funds from Osama bin Laden.

As for President Musharraf, Mr. Khawaja calls the former military leader a hypocrite. "A day before 11 September he had given all-out support for Taliban," said Mr. Khawaja, complaining the general then caved to U.S. pressure in what became a with-us-or-against-us world.

Given the options, the ex-spy says that elections are a false choice for Pakistan. "Why should I vote? No way. To me this whole system is bogus. It just gives you privileged people who are sponsored by Americans."

He said that while the President Musharref may switched course, some elements of Pakistan's military-intelligence complex have always stood their ground.

"Whether you are in ISI or the Army, the feeling is the same," Mr. Khawaja said. "In their hearts, everybody hates Americans."

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