In early May, seven months after an earthquake killed more than 70,000 people and left 3 million homeless, the Pakistani army ejected most remaining foreign relief workers from the still-devastated region of Azad Kashmir, the Pakistan-controlled part of Kashmir. Then, between May 13 and 16, a series of 38 throat slittings and beheadings occurred in villages of southern Azad Kashmir. The youngest victim was four months old.

The army blamed infiltrators from India. But on the morning of May 17, two men said to be armed with Sten guns and daggers accosted girls on their way to school in the village of Sanghola. Alerted girls screaming, villagers surrounded the school and captured the men. The men claimed to be road workers but a body search revealed ID cards of the kind carried by Pakistan Army's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Villagers identified both as Punjabi by accent. Around noon, villagers escorted the two men, on foot, to local police at Rawalakot. At 11:30 pm, six army officers, including a colonel and a brigadier, took the captured men from the police at gunpoint. Whereas most local police are Kashmiri, most army personnel at the ISI headquarters down the road from Rawalakot are Punjabi.

The next day, Azad Kashmir’s Prime Minister of, Sardar Sikandar Hayat, declared his government "unable to protect you [people of Kashmir]". Thousands demonstrated in Rawalakot, Kotli, Mirpur and Bhimbar. The head of Azad Kahsmir’s ruling party and its former PM, Sardar Abdul Qayyum, said: "Elections are meaningless, the actual government will be formed by ISI." Both Hayat and Qayyum subsequently declined to participate in the July 11 elections in Azad Kashmir.

The last killing I heard of occurred on June 10 in Gulpur. I had to cut short my investigation when ISI agents began following me and interrogated my hosts about any interest I might have in the chura ("daggers" - meaning the recent killings) and "camps" (meaning jihadi activities).

While no direct evidence links ISI to the killings, many native Kashmiris I talked to and most nationalists (banned from elections as they advocate a Kashmir independent from Pakistan and India) believe ISI is behind the killings. Two troubling facts credit this argument: first, there have been no reports of the incidents in the mainstream Pakistani press; second, while the army initially promised the police and people of Rawalakot an investigation, they've done nothing.

Kashmiris I have interviewed believe the killings were intended to incite public turmoil in furtherance of a motive shared by ISI and the jihadi groups that the army supports, namely, to stop the peace process with India. Although Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf now appears committed to a rapprochement with India, and is trying to rein in the jihadi groups after their repeated attempts on his life, the same man was the instigator of the Kargil attacks across the International Line of Control in 1999 that brought India and Pakistan to the brink of nuclear war. Senior army commanders told me that the peace process with India is a "non-starter, because India will only come to the negotiating table and give up Kashmir if forced to".

In February 2006, speaking to a Pugwash conference at the presidential palace, Musharraf lauded the peace process. But he was challenged from the audience by people who had witnessed almost every officially banned jihadi group operating freely in Azad Kashmir, brandishing guns from army vehicles, promising relief only to people who understood, as Lashkar-e-Taiba leader Hafiz Saeed put it, that “the earthquake is the result of the rulers’ sinful policies” and God’s punishment for neglecting a particular, radical view of Islam. Since this event, however, Lashkar-e-Taiba and other jihadi groups have relocated away from the main roads and into more remote areas of Kotli and Trakhil.

American security forces at present teamed with ISI in the hunt for Osama bin Laden have been stunned by the Islamist sentiments of some officers. In October 2001, Musharraf sent ISI chief Lt. Gen. Ahmed to Afghanistan to negotiate Bin Laden’s surrender. Instead, Ahmed openly encouraged
the Taliban regime to fight the U.S. Another former head of ISI, Hamid Gul, has become openly Islamist and anti-American, and continues to enjoy influence in ISI.

Most worrisome is the potential for Islamists to gain control of Pakistan’s nukes, which remain under operational control of field commanders. It is almost inconceivable ISI was unaware of Abdul Qadeer Khan’s rogue nuclear operations, which included transnational shipments of tons of large equipment as well as information on metallization, bomb design, manufacture and testing from the rival Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission. (Indeed, former CIA director George Tenet testified that the U.S. knew). Senior members of PAEC visited Bin Laden and the Taliban in August 2001, were arrested in October 2002, then released to stump with Laskhar-e-Taiba (founded in 1980 as the military wing of a Wahabi sect, LeT joined Bin Laden’s International Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders in 1998, massacred hundreds of civilians in Jammu and Kashmir, organized a suicide attack on India’s parliament in 2001 that again brought the area close to nuclear war, and has trained people recently caught spying on Australia’s nuclear facilities as well as six of eight men arrested by India for the July 11 train bombing in Mumbai that killed nearly 200). To top it all off, PAEC’s new chairman, Anwar Hussain, who is engaged in construction of a new plutonium reactor that will greatly increase Pakistan’s ability to produce bombs for missile delivery, recently declared, "I am proud never to have soiled my hands shaking those of Abdus Salam" (Abdus Salam, who died in 1996, was Pakistan's greatest scientist, a Nobel prize winner and humanist; he considered himself Muslim but belonged to the Ahmadiyyeh sect, and so a heretic by government decree).

Given substantial Islamist influence in ISI as well as among those in charge of Pakistan’s nuclear weapon production, there is perhaps more cause to worry about America’s “great ally” in the war on terror than, say, Iraq.