

# Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR)

## Assessment of the Pakistan Military's Discreet Propaganda Factory Post-1990

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*The ISPR was founded in 1949 as the public relations wing of the Pakistan Armed Forces. However, its role, responsibilities and activities have expanded notably over the last three decades. This article evaluates the role of the ISPR in cyber propaganda via print and electronic media after 1990s. It also sheds light on the ISPR's youth-internship scheme and its plausible role in digital espionage. The main arguments in this article are derived from information available on official websites of Pakistan military, their local newspapers, and relevant social media platforms.*

### INTRODUCTION

The ISPR was established in 1949 as the mouthpiece of the Pakistan Armed Forces to disseminate military-related news and information to the public. As per the mandate, ISPR was required to act as a bridge between military and civil society and prior to the 1990s, its responsibilities were limited.<sup>1</sup> However, the information technology (IT) revolution of the 1990s is believed to have expanded ISPR's role much beyond the original mandate. There is little documentation of ISPR's activism over the last three decades, that is, from 1990 to 2020. Thus, the subject lacks in-depth research mainly due to dearth of information in the open domain, and the current understanding of its operations is limited. Moreover, the comments of former Director General (DG) ISPR, Major General (Maj

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Gen) Asif Ghafoor, on 'social-media driven fifth generation war' also call for greater attention towards Pakistan's propaganda warfare.<sup>2</sup>

This article seeks to fill the gaps by assessing Pakistan military's main objective behind ISPR's involvement in manufacturing and distribution of biased narratives after 1990. As per the study, ISPR's activism is based on a two-pronged agenda: first, winning internal legitimacy vis-à-vis its civilian government; and second, active cyberwarfare against India to stir domestic chaos and harm its international reputation. The article discusses two aspects of ISPR, namely, its cyber propaganda via print and electronic media; and its discreet youth internship scheme and likely involvement in digital espionage activities in India. As the Indian intelligentsia remains focussed on Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) operations, the role of ISPR in anti-India activities is yet to be fully grasped. The main analysis in this article is deduced from analysis of primary information available on web portals of Pakistan military and ISPR, the Pakistan Army's *Green Book 2020*, local newspapers and social media platforms. Additionally, a small database of ISPR interns has been prepared based on relevant information gathered from open-source social media domains.

#### TRACING ISPR'S FOOTPRINTS POST-1990

Post-1990, the Pakistan military boosted its investments in the organisation with the intention to build favourable narratives and 'project power through weapons of mass influence'.<sup>3</sup> In 1992, ISPR produced its first two family dramas, *Khajoor main Atka* and *Sunebray Din*, both showcasing the life of army officers in Pakistan.<sup>4</sup> Between 1994 and 2014, ISPR produced six more military-oriented dramas.<sup>5</sup> The year 2015 marked a shift in its media policy from dramas to documentaries and songs. Over the last five years, 21 documentaries<sup>6</sup> and 60 songs<sup>7</sup>, on themes ranging from patriotism, the role of the Pakistan Army in nation building, the Kashmir issue, to army operations in Waziristan, have been produced. However, in 2019, dramas made a comeback with the airing of *Ehd-e-Wafa*. The show glorifies the Pakistan Army as an *azeem fauj*, that is, a great institution, 'which offers tea to the enemy and asks how it tastes'<sup>8</sup> In a dramatic depiction, the lead actor (a Pakistan Army officer) is shown taking a satirical dig at the Indian Air Force pilot, Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, whose aircraft was shot down in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) in an aerial dogfight in 2019. Besides TV shows, ISPR is also believed to be running FM radio

channels,<sup>9</sup> some of these without authorisation. As per a petition filed by renowned Pakistani activist Asma Jahangir in 2016, the military's media wing runs illegal radio channels (such as 89.04 FM) in 55 cities to spread false information,<sup>10</sup> despite the rejection of ISPR radio licences by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) in 2007.<sup>11</sup> Pakistani journalist Matiullah Jan has also raised similar concerns in 2018 about ISPR's illegal radio network.<sup>12</sup> As expected, such queries are generally ignored.<sup>13</sup>

Besides the use of electronic media, ISPR has also been active in print media propaganda by means of written publications. The monthly magazine *Hilal* is the Pakistan Armed Forces' official magazine, published since July 1948.<sup>14</sup> Initially known as *Mujahid*, the magazine was rechristened as *Hilal* in 1951.<sup>15</sup> Contributions by national and foreign authors on a diverse range of topics, including military activities, politics, economy, foreign policy and international relations, signal the dominance, political clout and influence of the armed forces on the country's domestic affairs. With five versions, namely, *Hilal English*, *Hilal Urdu*, *Hilal for Her*, *Hilal for Kids* and *Hilal Kids Urdu*, the magazine ensures a wide readership across age, gender and literacy levels.<sup>16</sup> The distribution of the magazine is managed via 18 authorised distribution outlets in 11 cities across the country, with the maximum presence in Punjab (Table 1).

A cursory analysis of 11 issues of *Hilal* magazine for the year 2015<sup>17</sup> brings out how the Pakistan military attempts to connect with the masses: first, by highlighting its active involvement in non-military domains, such as politics, foreign policy, economy and socio-religious domain; and second, by reiterating an existential threat from India (Table 2).

While there is sufficient coverage of military activities, such as joint exercises or military history, the focus of the magazine clearly is much beyond armed forces. As evident from Table 2, in 2015, a minimum of two pieces on internal political developments, society, religion or economy were included in every issue. Even though internal security and crime-related issues fall under the Ministry of Interior, the army's role in managing the issues was discussed. Ten out of 11 issues included a one commentary on Pakistan's foreign policy and international relations. All the issues carried at least one article on India, touching upon a variety of topics ranging from Indian political landscape under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); Hindutva, Islamophobia and communal discrimination; and on India's nuclear capabilities. Besides, four issues

Table I ISPR Distribution Outlets, Province-wise

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Province</i>	<i>City</i>	<i>Number of Outlets</i>	<i>Provincial Total</i>
1	Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT)	Islamabad	3	3
2	Punjab	Rawalpindi	5	9
		Lahore	2	
		Multan	1	
		Attock	1	
3	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)	Chitral	1	4
		Peshawar	1	
		Mardan	1	
		Abbottabad	1	
4	Sindh	Karachi	1	1
5	Balochistan	Quetta	1	1
Total				18

Source: ISPR, 'Hilal Magazine Outlets', 2020, available at <https://www.ispr.gov.pk/magazine-outlets.php>, accessed on 30 April 2020.

carried out elaborate writings on human rights violations by the Indian regime in the former Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) state.

Additionally, the 2020 April edition of *Hilal* (Vol. 57, edition 4) has also been examined.<sup>18</sup> While the magazine has 'War against Covid 19' as its underlying cover page theme, the opening article by Sardar Masood Khan (PoK's President) on 'Kashmir's Freedom', followed by journalist Amir Zia's opinion piece on 'Modi and Hindutva', hint at the ISPR's hidden intentions and misplaced priorities. The India-centric choice of the articles is not accidental, rather it is intentional and in congruence with the previous assessment. Moreover, the choice of authors, both non-military, also helps to project the magazine as the voice of the nation, conveniently camouflaging the military's agenda. The four contributions reflecting on Covid-19, the main theme, have been included in the middle of the magazine. Thus, ISPR's publications merely reaffirm the popular belief<sup>19</sup> that Pakistan is an 'army with a country'.<sup>20</sup> By elevating the stature and legitimacy of military, the magazine attempts to belittle the importance of Pakistan's political system and civil society to a secondary and subordinate level.

At this point, it may be relevant to flag the concept of 'fifth-generation warfare'—a term used by ISPR's former DG Asif Ghafoor, in

Table 2 Hilal Magazine, 2015

S. No.	Issue Month	Main Theme	Military Related	Politics, Religion, Society and Economy (internal security)	India-centric Articles (Kashmir related)	Foreign Policy	Advertisements
1	January	Peshawar APS terrorist attack, December 2014	11	2 (1)	3 (1)	1	Fauji Foundation
2	February	Terrorism and Peace	6	11 (3)	2 (1)	2	Ltd
3	March	Nation Building and Pakistan National Day	9	5 (2)	1	2	Fauji Cements Ltd
4	April	Afghan Cadets Training in Pakistan	6	5 (2)	2 (2)	1	Fauji Cereals
5	May	Humanitarian Aid to Nepal and Peace in Balochistan	8	3 (1)	1	6	
6	June	One year of Op Zarb-e-Azb and Defence Budget	9	4 (3)	1	1	
7	July	Regional Peace and War on Terror	7	5	2	4	
8	August	Pakistan Independence Day	3	8 (1)	3 (1)	2	
9	September	1965 Indo-Pak War Golden Jubilee	13	10 (1)	4	-	
10	November	Op Zarb-e-Azb	5	7 (1)	2	2	
11	December	Remembrance for 16 December 2015 APS, Peshawar, terrorist attack	10	5 (2)	3	1	

Source: 'HILAL Magazine English 2015', Pakistan Virtual Library (PVL), 2020, available at <https://pdfbooksfree.pk/hilal-magazine-english/>, accessed on 3 May 2020.

2018, to refer to anti-state propaganda by external players, which ‘targets minds’ and operates in a social media domain, unlike conventional wars fought in a physical space.<sup>21</sup> Similar views are reiterated in Pakistan Army’s official *Green Book 2020*, which states that the future wars will essentially be driven by ‘*propaganda and mind games*’.<sup>22</sup> The Pakistan military’s new ‘strategic communication strategy’ intends to counter this new genre of warfare by promoting ‘alternate and counter narratives’ with an ‘emotional appeal’.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the foreign office has been advised to launch psychological operations to influence ‘Indian masses and liberal intellectuals’, as well as circulate graphic materials ‘which show India in poor light’.<sup>24</sup> Evidently, the Pakistan military’s propaganda is being driven by dual objectives: stirring domestic chaos by maligning the image of the ruling government and the military among Indian masses; and damaging India’s reputation in global diplomatic circles. Thus, ISPR’s sphere of activities cannot be fully understood in isolation, but as a subset of Pakistan military’s evolving doctrine.

#### ISPR’S YOUTH INTERNSHIP PROGRAMME

Besides the aforementioned media policy, another interesting but relatively discreet aspect of ISPR’s outreach strategy has been its internship programme. Under the internship scheme, military’s media wing recruits and trains young students in ‘narrative warfare’ to promote its image within the country and engage in cyber propaganda against India’s military and civil officers.<sup>25</sup> The ISPR’s former DG (2012–16), Lieutenant General (Lt Gen) Asim Saleem Bajwa, also known as ‘Army’s media Tsar’,<sup>26</sup> is believed to have been instrumental in transforming the organisation into a ‘gigantic and high-profile institution’ with increased resources and authority.<sup>27</sup> For the first time in August 2018, a media report<sup>28</sup> about the internship programme was put up by ISPR (No. PR-237/2018),<sup>29</sup> followed by a similar ISPR report<sup>30</sup> a year later in July 2019 (No. PR-144/2019).<sup>31</sup> In both the press reports, the Chief of Army Staff (COAS), General Qamar Javed Bajwa, could be seen addressing<sup>32</sup> and interacting with young interns at ISPR Headquarters in Rawalpindi.<sup>33</sup>

Though these reports indicate that the internship programme may have begun around 2017–18, there is no official document to ascertain this. The official websites of ISPR and the Pakistan Army have no mention of the internship programme, hinting at deliberate obscurity surrounding the scheme. In the absence of official material pertaining

to the internship scheme, a primary study was conducted based on the information available in open domain. Forty-nine (49) profiles of individuals having past or current affiliation with ISPR as interns were identified on LinkedIn, the world's largest professional network.<sup>34</sup> Based on a random keyword search, 36 females and 13 males were selected for the study sample. Six variables were examined in the profile analysis, namely, gender, province, current designation, university affiliation at time of internship, internship period and duration, and intern duties.

As opposed to the prior estimate, the primary study brings to notice that the programme may not have been initiated in 2017–18, but rather may have been operational since 2005.<sup>35</sup> A majority of the interns (38) in the sample got affiliated with ISPR after 2010, and only 12 intern profiles prior to 2012 could be located online. This suggests that before 2012, the programme was either highly selective or much concealed. The ISPR's overall transformation is believed to have taken place under Lt Gen Asim Saleem Bajwa<sup>36</sup> (2012–16) and his successor, Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor (2016–20). According to Ayesha Siddiq, Lt Gen Bajwa's credentials in expanding the military's media wing through his team of 'social media warriors' are well established.<sup>37</sup> In all likelihood, the internship programme gained prominence under these two military leaders.

The study also informs about geographical and educational affiliation of the interns. Interestingly, 13 interns belong to Federal Capital and Azad Jammu and Kashmir, with five from Rawalpindi, three from Islamabad, two from Lahore and one from Peshawar; however, there is zero representation from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan. Given Islamabad's paranoia and discriminatory policies towards the Baloch and the Pashtuns, the numbers are not surprising. Yet, it is important to mention that LinkedIn's provincial description of Pakistan is incorrect and misleading,<sup>38</sup> thereby making it difficult to ascertain the exact province-wise affiliation of the interns. A study of their educational profiles reveals that nine interns had an affiliation with the National Defence University (NDU), a publicly funded military institution.<sup>39</sup> Seventeen students were from a cluster of four public universities—Foundation University, Bahria University, National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST), and the National University of Modern Languages (NUML)—with retired military officers placed in top administrative posts. Six female candidates had affiliation with the Rawalpindi-based Fatima Jinnah University.

**Table 3** Educational Affiliation

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Educational Institute</i>	<i>City (province)</i>	<i>Military Representation</i>	<i>No. of Interns</i>
1	NDU	Islamabad (ICT)	<b>Chancellor:</b> Pakistan President <b>President:</b> Lt Gen Muhammad Saeed	9
2	Fatima Jinnah Women University	Rawalpindi (Punjab)	<b>Chancellor:</b> Punjab Governor <b>Vice Chancellor:</b> Dr Saima Hamid	6
3	International Islamic University	Islamabad (ICT)	<b>Chancellor:</b> Pakistan President <b>Rector:</b> Prof. Dr Masoom Yasinzai	6
4	Foundation University	Islamabad (ICT)	<b>Chancellor:</b> Pakistan President <b>Rector:</b> Maj Gen Changez Dil Khan (Retd)	5
5	Bahria University	Islamabad (ICT)	<b>Chancellor:</b> Pakistan President <b>Rector:</b> Vice Admiral Tanveer Shaukat (Retd)	5
6	NUST	Islamabad (ICT)	<b>Chancellor:</b> Pakistan President <b>Rector:</b> Lt Gen Naweed Zaman (Retd)	5
7	Quaid-e-Azam University	Islamabad (ICT)	<b>Chancellor:</b> Pakistan President <b>Vice Chancellor:</b> Dr Muhammad Ali	3
8	Riphah International University	Islamabad (ICT)	<b>Chancellor:</b> Mr Hussan Muhammad Khan <b>Rector:</b> Dr Ghulam Abbas Miana	3
9	NUML	Islamabad (ICT)	<b>Chancellor:</b> Pakistan President <b>Rector:</b> Maj Gen Muhammad Jaffar	2

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Educational Institute</i>	<i>City (province)</i>	<i>Military Representation</i>	<i>No. of Interns</i>
10	SZABIST	Islamabad (ICT)	<b>Chancellor:</b> AzraFazalPechuho <b>President:</b> Shahnaz Wazir Ali	2
11	COMSATS Institute Information Technology	Abbottabad (KP)	<b>Chancellor:</b> Pakistan President <b>Rector:</b> Prof. Dr Muhammad Afzal	1
12	University of Punjab	Lahore (Punjab)	<b>Chancellor:</b> Chaudhry Mohammad Sarwar <b>Vice Chancellor:</b> Dr Niaz Ahmad	1
<b>Total</b>	12	3	–	48

Source: Author.<sup>40</sup>

Note: One intern has not mentioned university affiliation in profile.

Out of the remaining candidates, 16 were from the International Islamic University, Quaid-e-Azam, Riphah University, Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Institute of Science and Technology (SZABIST), the Commission on Science and Technology for Sustainable Development in the South (COMSATS), and Punjab University (see Table 3).

The most ambiguous and woolly aspect of the internship programme is the selection process. Neither does the ISPR official website advertise about the internship scheme nor is there any mention of the internship application on the Pakistan military website.

As revealed by a United Kingdom (UK)-based scholar working in the area of intelligence studies,<sup>41</sup> the internship programme is deliberately unadvertised and runs on recommendation basis through a network of ISPR-affiliated professors. These academics, scattered in educational institutes across the country, are asked to recommend the most suitable candidates for the programme. Seemingly, this network-based approach helps the organisation to maintain some degree of secrecy and anonymity regarding the interns as well as the exact nature of tasks involved. Although, in 2019, the placement office of Fatima Jinnah Women University<sup>42</sup> in Rawalpindi had advertised openings for the post of social media specialist (female) in military-owned media house (alias ISPR).<sup>43</sup> The job role, as clearly specified on the university website, required candidates to ‘attract and interact with targeted virtual communities and

networks users'. Refined job titles, such as media specialist or analyst, are being deliberately used by ISPR to camouflage the real nature of work, including online espionage (in other words, honey-trapping).

Even though the above-mentioned advertisement is not directly linked to the internship programme, it offers some important insight into ISPR's operations. Given that internship programme largely revolves around social media-related jobs, it is plausible that some of the young candidates are being selectively trained and recruited for similar online espionage activities, besides the usual propaganda manufacturing. At this point, it needs to be mentioned that 10 interns have used the keywords 'social media' or 'media analysis' in job description, while one female intern of 2017 batch has clearly mentioned 'psy[chological] operations' in her job description.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, the keyword 'media propaganda' has been found in primary job roles of two 2017 batch interns.

#### DIGITAL ESPIONAGE AND HONEY-TRAPPING

Joining the dots, one may connect ISPR's digital activism to the rise of honey-traps laid for Indian soldiers over the last few years. At least 98 personnel of the Indian Armed forces are believed to have been honey-trapped between 2015 and 2018.<sup>45</sup> As per the report, these agents—well trained in fluent Hindi with a north Indian accent—impersonate as Indian women (at times, female military officers) to lure the soldiers into sharing sensitive information. In 2019, the Indian intelligence agencies identified an ISI-run call centre based in Punjab's Jhelum city as the main training centre for the imposters.<sup>46</sup> While the Indian intelligentsia links all the propaganda blitzkrieg to Pakistan's ISI per se, the attribution of such cases to the ISI should not be an obvious assumption anymore. Speaking at an international security seminar held in London in 2019, Lt Gen Ata Hasnain (Retd.) rightly highlighted India's deficient understanding of ISPR's operations.<sup>47</sup> In his words, 'in India "everyone knows the ISI but no one knows what the ISPR is"'.<sup>48</sup>

The ISPR's involvement in the digital espionage seems highly likely, based on the aforementioned discussion, and therefore it becomes important to locate the role of military's media organisation within Pakistan's intelligence network. Two potential scenarios exist: first, it is possible that the ISI may have outsourced all the media-related espionage to military's media wing; and second, ISPR may have been tasked with supply of well-trained and efficient digital spies to the ISI, which then



**Figure 1** ISPR Intern with Lt Gen Bajwa (L) and Former COAS, General Ashfaq Kayani (R), 2012

*Source:* Chandna, 'With DG ISPR, GHQ, Pakistan Army', n. 49.

deploys them on various assignments. Either way, ISPR's role in online spying activities cannot be ruled out.

Thus, a key aspect of the internship programme is the nature of tasks assigned to the interns. Interns' testimonials on miscellaneous social platforms also offer important insights into the programme. Ysa Chandna, a 2012 batch intern at ISPR, offers a very detailed narration of his internship experience at ISPR.<sup>49</sup> His primary involvement was in 'strategic public relations and communications functions' and one of his job roles was to draft 'articles advocating the Military's perspectives to be published in English language newspapers'. Military advocacy is, in fact, a convenient way to popularise the armed forces within Pakistan by winning over the youth and giving them a chance to interact with the country's most powerful men.

As per his account, the interns were required to spend four days at the General Headquarters (GHQ) at Rawalpindi and rest of the days 'at a different battlefield of Pakistan, interacting with soldiers, unit officers, and locals affected by the ongoing operations to better understand the complications involved in fighting counter-insurgencies [and] urban warfare'.<sup>50</sup> Interactions with senior military echelons and a high-level exposure at such a young age are important factors which aid in popularising a pro-military stance. Another intern, who did his internship in 2018, has also shared photos from a field visit to Toli Peer, the highest place in the north-eastern area of Rawalkot district, PoK.

While there is no direct reference to India or anti-India propaganda, visits to PoK regions are an obvious choice to colour the minds of the



**Figure 2** Intern Field Visit to Toli Peer, 2018

*Source:* Sardar Uzair, 'Great Experience and Some Old Memories of My Life', *Steemit*, 2018, available at <https://steemit.com/pictures/@sardaruzair/great-experience-and-some-old-memories-of-my-life>, accessed on 26 April 2020.

youth and infuse a sense of anti-India sentiment, which can find a convenient outlet in ISPR's media writings.

Given that the main work of most interns seemingly revolves around social media outreach, it is also possible that the work includes fabricating and publishing pro-military articles which are meant to counter anti-army narratives within and beyond Pakistan. A likely example of one such fabrication could be a blog article titled, 'The Pulwama Attack is More than a Massacre—It's an Unfortunate Reminder', published in *The Express Tribune* on 15 February 2019,<sup>51</sup> one day after the terrorist attack in Indian city of Pulwama. Under normal circumstances, a Pakistani article underlining 'Kashmiris' disenchantment with India', 'resentment in IoK' and 'Hindutva' would not surprise anyone. However, the write-up was accredited to Vikram Anand, a fake Indian (Hindu) name deliberately chosen to lend legitimacy to the controversial arguments.<sup>52</sup> Over the last few months, many Pakistan-based fake social media profiles have been impersonating important figures, such as Saudi Princess Noura bint

Faisal<sup>53</sup> to malign the Indian state internationally by fabricating<sup>54</sup> false photographic evidence of Islamophobia and communal violence across India. Thus, there is evidence suggesting that ISPR has been making inroads in envelope journalism by planting false stories.

#### INCENTIVES AND MOTIVATION: MILITARY–YOUTH INTERFACE

Mahmood Adeel, a Pakistani blogger, while labelling the ISPR's interns as the 'future troll army',<sup>55</sup> rightly questions the underlying motivations of a military organisation in hiring youngsters in such huge numbers.<sup>56</sup> From the military's perspective, the internship programme offers many political and strategic gains. The army's overall strategy has shifted from coup and coercion to persuasion. Pakistan experienced its last<sup>57</sup> military coup in 1999<sup>58</sup> when General Parvez Musharraf ousted elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and ruled the country till 2008.<sup>59</sup> Since then, Pakistan has witnessed two more general elections, in 2013 and 2018,<sup>60</sup> and democratically elected<sup>61</sup> civilian governments have represented the nation. However, in Pakistan's political theatre, the bayonet still overweighs the ballot and the army continues to hold the reins<sup>62</sup> of the country covertly.

Given Pakistan Armed Forces' well-established dominance over its political class, employment of youth in its most elite and powerful organisation certainly helps to build a positive reputation and enhance its legitimacy vis-à-vis the civilian government. Thus, the army perhaps intends to counter the internal political challenge by directly connecting with the youth. Also, given the supremacy of cyberwarfare in contemporary security realm, militaries worldwide have felt the need to enhance their technological quotient. Pakistan's military seems to have identified the country's educated, tech-savvy youth as an inexpensive strategic tool for cyber propaganda and online espionage, rather than investing their monetary resources in training the old minds. The internship scheme may also be seen as a perfect platform to train and indoctrinate young, gullible minds, and to shortlist the most suitable candidates for employment based on their aptitude, skills and talent.

There is no documental proof of monetary or non-monetary benefits offered to the ISPR interns. Given the military's revered status in Pakistan, it may be easier to attract and lure the youth into this programme irrespective of the amount of monetary compensation offered. Disillusioned with the corrupt<sup>63</sup> and weak civilian governments,<sup>64</sup> many young students may find it rewarding to undergo the ISPR internship

as a value addition in their CV. In a country where military affiliation is seen as a qualification, the youngsters may find such affiliation appealing in order to enhance their employability in future. Pakistan's poor job market<sup>65</sup> and high unemployment<sup>66</sup> levels also explain why the Pakistani youth may be attracted to join the internship programme.<sup>67</sup> The compensation and reward structure includes lucrative 'jobs and contracts'<sup>68</sup> in the Fauji Foundation.<sup>69</sup> The primary study reveals that 30 out of 50 candidates interned at ISPR for a period less than one year, while only 10 interned for a longer duration (over one year). Moreover, three former interns are currently employed with ISPR's current media team and 10 are working with other media channels, such as *ARY News* or *BOL News*, while five have digressed to miscellaneous non-media fields such as academia or tertiary sector.<sup>70</sup>

This information gives a rough idea of the duration and professional transition pattern of interns, post-internship period. However, according to the UK-based scholar, mentioned earlier, 'the ISPR internship programme is a life-term commitment and the interns, once selected, permanently remain on ISPR's payroll. Post-internship, many (students) take up jobs within as well as outside Pakistan. However, their affiliation and commitment to the cause of ISPR never gets dissolved.'<sup>71</sup> It is evident from the given discussion that ISPR's designation of being a public relations agent is, at best, a sophisticated charade.

#### CONCLUSION

Given that the work that ISPR does remains a relatively unknown aspect of Pakistan military's evolving strategy, this article is a modest attempt to fill the gaps and initiate a well-informed debate on the subject. Unbeknownst to the public, ISPR has expanded its bandwidth to reach out to a large cross-section of Pakistani society by two means: first, by subtly feeding biased narratives through its electronic and print media networks; and second, by employing the youth in its youth internship scheme. Generally speaking, ISPR's actions may be seen as another manifestation of Pakistan military's inclination to use it as a propaganda tool both internally and externally, as part of its evolving 'fifth-generation' war strategy. In order to respond to the ISPR's information narrative-driven strategy of 'hybrid warfare', it is important to take cognisance of the changing nature of security challenges emanating from Pakistan and supplement the conventional military strategy with a more mature and measured approach. A discussion on India's counter-strategy to this

threat remains outside the purview of this article, but the urgency to design a counter-strategy cannot be overstated.

#### NOTES

1. The ISPR operates as a part of Joint Staff Headquarters, which is run by military officers of all three wings (army, navy and air force) and civilian officers. While the ISPR institutionally involves all the three forces, the dominance of army is evident in the fact that out of 20 Director Generals (DGs) since its inception, 19 have been army officers, with the only exception of Commander Maqbool Hussain, who headed the organisation from 1952 to 1965.
2. Asif Ghafoor, 'Pakistan's Future is Bright, Says DG ISPR', Power Play, *ARY News*, 11 January 2018, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jCU94XDFFOo&feature=youtu.be>, accessed on 12 April 2020.
3. 'ISPR's Role', *DAWN*, 4 February 2020, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1532397>, accessed on 25 October 2020
4. ISPR, 'Dramas', ISPR Productions, 2020, available at [https://www.ispr.gov.pk/index-new-02.php#ispr\\_productions](https://www.ispr.gov.pk/index-new-02.php#ispr_productions), accessed on 25 April 2020.
5. The list of dramas is as follows: *Mujahid* (1994); *Ujalay se Pahlay* (1996); *Alpha, Bravo, Charlie* (1997); *Wilco* (2008); *Jaan Hatheli Par* (2012); and *Faseel-e-Jaan se Aagaay* (2014).
6. As of 6 November 2020, the list of documentaries include: *Azeem Maa* (2015); *This is Our Home* (2016); *Hum kon Hain* (2016); *Road to Future* (2016); *Martyrs of Pakistan* (2017); *Journey to Peace* (2017); *Manzil se Aage* (2017); *Pakistan Army Team Spirits* (2017); *Sisters in Arms* (2017); *Glorious Resolve* (2018); *CPEC First Convoy* (2018); *Army Medical Corps* (2018); *Wagha Border* (2018); *Legacy of Peacekeeping* (2018); *Rang Laega Shaheedo ka Labu* (2019); *3 Days Standoff* (2020); *365 of 370* (2020); and *Story of Pakistan* (2020).
7. In 2020, five new songs were released, namely, *Har Ghari Tayyar Kamran*; *Yun Pakistan Bana Tha*; *Ja Chor Day Meri Waadi*; *Charhta Suraj Hai Apna Pakistan*; and *Kashmir Hun Mein*. Only one song (*Pakistan Zindabad*) was released in 2019 while 32 songs were released in 2018.
8. ISPR, *Ehd-e-Wafa*, Dramas, ISPR Productions, 2010, available at [https://www.ispr.gov.pk/index-new-02.php#ispr\\_productions](https://www.ispr.gov.pk/index-new-02.php#ispr_productions), accessed on 25 April 2020.
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