



## **NEFA Exclusive: An Interview with Mangal Bagh (Lashkar-e-Islam)**

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### **NEFA Exclusive: An Interview with Mangal Bagh, Commander of Lashkar-e-Islam (LI), in Bara, Khyber Agency**



*[Mangal Bagh is the charismatic, de-facto leader of Lashkar-e-Islam (LI), a relatively well-organized armed Islamist faction which controls approximately three-quarters of Pakistan's Khyber Agency. Bagh took control of Lashkar-e-Islam approximately two years ago from its original founder Deobandi cleric Mufti Munir Shakir. In the span of those two years, LI has evolved into a tribe-based militant outfit which has successfully wrested control of the area from criminal networks and the central government. On June 28, 2008, the Pakistani army launched military operations targeting positions held by Mangal Bagh and LI in the Khyber Agency.]*

Q.) "Do you consider yourself as Part of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)?"

A.) "We don't have any association with them."

Q.) "What sort of relationship do you have with the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan?"

A.) "We don't have any relationship with them. They have their own aims and objectives and Lashkar-e-Islam has its own manifesto. We don't have any association with them."

Q.) "Did you provide any support to Taliban here in Pakistan, for example to Baitullah Mehsud or vice versa?"

A.) "Until now, neither did we help them in their activities nor did they."

Q.) "What is your area of 'jurisdiction'?"

A.) "The entire Khyber Agency except Jamrud and a two-kilometer belt in Maidan (local name for the remote Tirah valley, bordering Afghanistan)."

Q.) "What are the main objectives of LI?"

A.) "The main target of LI is to spread the message of the oneness of God to the entire world."

Q.) "Who is funding your organization?"

A.) "People make donations; besides, every single mujahid (fighter) relies on himself to fund his military activities."



Q.) “What are your future plans? Besides the religious outlook of the organization, your men were involved in actions against criminals and those associated with narcotics....”

A.) “Today, every single person of the agency (Khyber tribal agency) who is involved in the liquor business, gambling, kidnapping for ransom or is selling narcotics is our enemy. Our Manifesto consists in cleaning up this area morally and making life difficult for these criminals.”



Q.) “Do you intend to enter politics? You have a political background and were associated with a political party in the past (ANP). But you did not side with any candidate during February 18, 2008 general elections....”

A.) “Everybody knows that we did not make a deal with any of the candidates. It was a clear proof that we wanted the people to decide who can serve them better. We have no intentions to be involved in politics.”

Q.) “You have undertaken the task of cleaning up the area of anti social elements. Don’t you think you need to join the political arena, directly or otherwise, in order to accomplish the target more effectively?”

A.) “If we enter politics, we would not be able to do this job. While what we are doing now can really help to develop our area. Earlier, all the schemes (projects) or jobs announced for the people of this area, were not meant for the poor but for the Spingeeeres (tribal elders recognized by government and who are often paid a form of salary/rent). Development projects were for them, jobs were for them and Drasthakhwan (a specified amount of entertainment allowance given to the tribal elders by the government) were for them. The poor had no share in all this. Now, we ‘requested’ every member of the National Assembly representing the area to pledge in writing that every penny of the development schemes will equally be spent among the various clans of the Afridi tribe. Special attention will be given to the poor and the money will be spent where it is needed the most.”

Q.) “What kind of people can you rely on in your struggle and how many of them?”

A.) “120,000 people have taken oath to fight side by side with the LI; and no matter how strong the resistance is they would never back out.”

Q.) “And do you have faith in them?”

A.) “Yes, I do have faith in all of them. If they did not leave the movement during these tough times, the early days of LI, I am confident they would never do it in future.”

Q.) “How would you deal with a military operation against you, if the government decides to launch one like it did in Swat and Darra Adamkhel?”

A.) “Our objective is to rid our country of slavery and terrorism. These khasadar force and Frontier Corps men are our brothers. We don’t want our country to be disgraced and

weakened. We would never like to fight with our own military and if they wanted a confrontation, then we'll decide there and then."

Q.) "To what extent is LI struggle related to the wider 'jihad' being fought across the border?"

A.) "There are many forms of 'jihad'. The one undertaken by LI is against social evils and social inequality and to attract Muslim towards Masjid and Madrassa. What others are doing (the conflict in Afghanistan) is a war against the enemies of Islam and that is also a good endeavour and one that is certainly appreciated by God. This cannot be denied and we do support their (the Taliban's) struggle."



Q.) "Did your men fight alongside the Taliban in Darra Admakhel or Swat?"

A.) "No, my men did not go to Swat or Dera Adamkhel."

Q.) "Does this mean that you don't have any relationship with them?"

A.) "Yes (we have no relationship with them)."

Q.) "Who do you think is behind the kidnapping of Pakistan Ambassador to Afghanistan?"

A.) "The Ambassador was kidnapped from the Jamrud area of the (Khyber) Agency and that falls out of LI's jurisdiction. Our attempt to enter that area a few days ago was aimed to control the criminals and outlaws who have gathered there and who bring bad reputation to the entire tribal agency. Kidnappings and other criminal activities have become a routine on that road (Pak-Afghan highway) and we therefore try to get there (to establish control) but we were not allowed (by the Khokikhels, the only sizeable clan resisting LI militarily in Khyber). The role being played by Noor ul Haq Qadri (a member of the National Assembly) makes him responsible for every wrongdoing in Jamrud. He is elected MNA from the area from where the Ambassador was kidnapped. This makes Qadri the sole responsible for his abduction. People from this part of the agency have no role in his kidnapping."



Q.) "Earlier, TTP leaders such as Maulvi Faqir Muhammad and Maulvi Nazeer have offered asylum to Osama bin Laden and other al Qaeda and Taliban leaders in their

respective areas of jurisdiction, provided that they will live according to the local traditions. What would you say about this?"

A.) "Well, it is their opinion and their decision."

Q.) "What will you do if they seek shelter from you?"

A.) "Let the time come and we will decide about that there and then."

Q.) "Your earlier stance was to keep you own house in order and that you were not concerned with Palestine, Afghanistan, and even Kashmir. Now, you operate in the settled parts of the country as well. How do you consider yourself eligible to operate beyond the tribal area?"

A.) "Well, the Quran is not meant for Khyber Agency alone, nor is Islam restricted to this area. The mission of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) and the message of Quran was meant for the entire world and every Muslim has a duty to spread the message to the whole world. Every Muslim should invite his brothers towards virtue and help them to refrain from vice."

Q.) "What would you say about the killing of innocent people in suicide bombing operations?"

A.) "We never did this nor have any intention of doing so in future. We believe in fighting directly against the wrongdoers, wherever and whenever is possible to do so."

Q.) "What do you think about the legitimacy of suicide bombings against innocent people?"

A.) "Well, it is for the Ulema (religious scholars) to decide. I do not consider myself in the position to give a verdict on this issue."



Q.) "Who do you think benefited from the killing of Benazir Bhutto?"

A.) "Every pious Muslim. Because, our Pr ophet (Peace be Upon Him) has said that those ruled by a woman would be better suited to live underground than above it. Therefore, I believe that her death was a blessing for all the Muslims who were saved from being ruled by a woman."

Q.) "Why did you shift your attention towards the Kokikhel tribesmen in Jamrud before establishing yourself in Tirah valley (the other area where LI does not rule)?"

A.) "In the early days of LI, the Kokikhel tribesmen had pledged their support to the organization and this means that supporting the movement in the area of need is an obligation for them."

Q.) "People in the tribal and in the settled areas have strong reservations about your actions against shrines (LI campaigns against Sufi shrines). In Khyber Agency, Hindus

and Sikhs have lived in peace for centuries. Why don't you allow Muslims with different beliefs to live peacefully here?"

A.) "We are not against Shrines. With the grace of God we have dozens of shrines here and never disrespected any of them, except for those where illegal activities are taking place or those where music is being played. Such activities are a disgrace to the shrines and we won't allow that to happen."

Q.) "What kind of relations do you have with Haji Namdar (a Wahabi-inspired cleric allied to LI and operating in the Kambarkhel area of Khyber)?"

A.) "He has his own organization and we have our own."

Q.) "Is he subordinate to you?"

A.) "He established his organization before us and did work for the improvement of the area; therefore we did not disturb his outfit and allowed him to work."

Q.) "Do you approve the activities of his volunteers?"

A.) "If they do good things we support them, otherwise we will disapprove what they do openly."

Q.) "Do you approve of forcing people to grow beard, offer prayers, attend religious sermons every morning and wear caps?"

A.) "You cannot force a non Muslim to accept Islam, but once a person accepts Islam on his will, than he can be forced to follow the teachings of Islam."

Q.) "Why is it restricted to a certain tribe falling under his jurisdiction to be forced to behave as above same? Why don't you do the same in your area of jurisdiction?"

A.) "What he is doing by force is done by LI in a peaceful and understanding way. We make people understand the benefits of following the principles of Islam and they agree. We don't have to force them."

Q.) "Haji Namdar claims to have given shelter to the Taliban, and especially Arabs. Do you approve that?"

A.) "There is no foreigner here. He says this to put pressure on his people. No foreigner has come to this agency nor do they need to come here."

Q.) "What kind of relations do you have with the government?"

A.) "Ever since the formation of LI, no one can cite mention a single LI attack on security personnel. We want to live in peace. We have military and paramilitary forces stationed around here, but no one has ever been harmed by our men."

Q.) "The offices of the Agency headquarters in Bara are closed, why?"

A.) "The Khasadar forces manning the office have their own demands to the government and are not attending to their duties. We did not force the office to close."

Q.) "What is your personal background. Your age..."

A.) "I am between 30 and 35 years old."

Q.) "What are your educational qualifications?"

A.) "I did not go to school."

Q.) "Did you attend any madrassa?"

A.) "I attended lessons with Ulemas but did not acquire any formal qualification."

Q.) "You belong to the sepah clan of the Afridi, correct?"

A.) "Yes."

Q.) "What did you do before the LI was formed?"

A.) "I was in the transport business."

Q.) "You had your own vehicles?"

A.) "Yes."

Q.) "Did you drive them yourself?"

A.) "Yes, but mostly I bought and sold vehicles. My vehicles plied routes between various destinations in the country."

Q.) "Do you still have that business?"

A.) "No. it's over now."

Q.) "You had some sort of relationship with the Awami National Party (ANP- the ruling party in NWFP province)...?"

A.) "Yes, but it was restricted to working with a few friends who were with the ANP."

Q.) "Do you regret it?"

A.) "NO, because I was not a member of the party. My affiliation to the party was purely because of Haji Rehman (a slain tribal elder) and after his death I never got myself affiliated with any political party."

Q.) "Where is Mufti Munir Shakir (former LI head and a charismatic Islamist leader with a penchant for FM broadcasts expelled from the area for a security tussle with a rival Sufi cleric)?"

A.) "He is in his native town."

Q.) "Do you still have contacts with him?"

A.) "Yes, at times we do call each other."

Q.) "Can he stage a comeback to the agency?"

A.) "God willing."

Q.) "Do you want him to come back?"

A.) "Well, it is for the Afridi shura to decide. I cannot decide on this matter."

Q.) "Will the local MNA (Member of Parliament) work according to your wishes?"

A.) "Not according to my wishes but he has pledged under oath to the organization to comply... And we have given him some guidelines to work accordingly."

Q.) "How many men do you have?"

A.) "120,000."

Q.) "These are ordinary tribesmen. How many of them are armed fighters?"

A.) "These 120,000 are the armed fighters who can make themselves available at a single call through our FM radio. Our supporters are the entire people of the agency. "

Q.) “Do you intend to capture the remaining part of the agency?”

A.) “We want action against social evils and we want to end social injustice. We don’t intend to capture places but to bring social justice.”

Q.) “People in Peshawar are worried about your growing influence...”

A.) “It is the anti social elements that are instigating doubts in the mind of the people. On the contrary, we are providing protection to those who come from other parts of the country (i.e. from the settled areas).”

Q.) “So, you don’t have any intention to attack Peshawar?”

A.) “We have no intention to attack anywhere. We use weapons against criminals. The people of Peshawar are our brothers. And they speak well of us.”

Q.) “We read in the press that several people sought your support against their rivals (to settle disputes)?”

A.) “We have made the justice system simple and speedy. We have made possible for the people to get justice. That’s why people from the settled areas of the country are requesting us to decide between them and their rivals.”

Q.) “Do you support the Taliban?”

A.) “Well, there are many Taliban groups; some are good and others are bad. It must be a case by case decision....”

Q.) “What about Mullah Umar and his associates who are fighting against the U.S.?”

A.) “They are good people.”

Q.) “Does the U.S. want direct access to the tribal areas...?”

A.) “I have repeatedly appealed to the Pakistani government to withdraw their forces from the tribal areas and to allow them (the U.S.) direct access in order to fight tribesmen.”

Q.) “You want U.S. forces to enter Pakistan?”

A.) “No, not Pakistan but the tribal areas. We just want Pakistan to withdraw its army and Khasadars and let the U.S. forces face us head-on.”

Q.) “But as they did in Afghanistan, if they are allowed to operate in the tribal areas of Pakistan, they would probably mainly conduct air raids while deploying a very limited number of soldiers on the field...”

A.) “Let them come the way they like and do whatever they wish using whatever means they can. It is up to us to handle them.”

Q.) “Pakistan wants foreigners to leave the country...”

A.) “They tried, but they couldn’t do that. The nature of this mountainous terrain will always be an obstacle... They (TTP commanders) have contacted me in several occasions to request me to join the movement but I refused saying, ‘you have your goals to meet and I have my own manifesto...’ I told them that when and where they need my help, I’ll provide it to them—and if I needed their cooperation, I would request it. We don’t want our country to suffer and therefore we want to restrict ourselves purely to the improvement of our tribal agency.”