

Ghazi Force: Pakistan's Nemesis Strikes Again

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Summary

Ghazi Force is likely to continue to haunt Pakistan given its renewal of fund-generating activities and the links that it has established with like-minded groups.

In February 2012 BBC Urdu reported that banned Pakistani *jihadi* groups are reviving their local and international funding sources and that their affiliates have started opening local and foreign currency accounts under pseudonyms.¹ One such banned group is the Ghazi Force (GF), or Ghazi Abdul Rashid Shaheed Brigade (GARSB). The report has reiterated the agencies' fear of the group gaining momentum with renewed funding.² Previously, there were reports of the GF publicly raising funds in the Punjab Province through religious and social welfare gatherings. The group has been a nemesis for Pakistan in the recent past and is likely to haunt the country in future, especially if it gains greater funding and establishes links with other like-minded groups.

The GF is named after the imam Abdul Rashid Ghazi who died in the Lal Masjid siege in 2007. The fierce confrontation between the security forces and armed religious students at Lal Masjid sowed the seeds for the birth of a new generation of militants in Pakistan. The GF also comprises of relatives of the students who died in the siege. Its members felt betrayed by the government, especially because its leaders were believed to have been on the payroll of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Post Operation Sunrise, the instances of suicide bombings have increased manifold within Pakistan, and many of these have been attributed to the GF.

The GF has "established" its credentials via numerous audacious and deadly attacks. The group has two objectives: to enforce *Sharia* law in Pakistan through coercion, and to take revenge on those who raided the Lal Masjid and killed their spiritual head, Abdul Rashid Ghazi. A link between the GF and the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) can be traced immediately after the Lal Masjid incident. In July 2007, 200 fighters of the TTP occupied the shrine of Haji Turangzai in Lakaro area and renamed it as "Lal Masjid". Also, the feeling of vengeance among the GF became stronger after the government launched operations against the TTP in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the tribal areas of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

Fidaullah, alias Abdul Rehman, alias Junaid, a resident of village Sawarhi in the Buner District of the former North West Frontier Province (NWFP; now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), is believed to have founded the GF with the support of Taliban militants Niaz Rahim, Habibullah, and Ajmal. However, Fidaullah's arrest in May 2009 and the successful military siege in Swat forced the group to go underground. The GF later re-emerged under the guidance of Niaz Raheem, who is now considered the leader of the group. The

¹ See "Banned Jihadi Groups get their Money-Trains Back Online: Report, *The Express Tribune*, February 4, 2012, available at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/331686/banned-jihadi-groups-get-their-money-trains-back-online-report/>, accessed on March 15, 2012.

² Ibid.

terror training camps of the GF are situated in the hilly areas of Jangjo, also called Guljo, in Hangu district, in South Waziristan and Orakzai. The group is also working towards establishing its network in Sindh. GF mainly recruits youngsters from different parts of Punjab and the tribal areas. Reports reveal that the training imparted in the Guljo camps includes making explosives and ambushing military units. Additionally, training is also given in light and heavy weapons.³

Since 2007, most of the attacks within Pakistan have been attributed to the TTP, which is an umbrella group of numerous Pakistani Taliban factions headed by Hakimullah Mehsud. Their targets were the military, ISI, and elites. Pakistan's investigating agencies have revealed that key terrorists associated with the group were operating from locations such as Peshawar, Dera Ismail Khan, Kohat, Mardan, Karachi and Islamabad.⁴

Many Pakistani intelligence and government reports link the GF to militants in the Swat and FATA regions, and there is evidence of the group's close ties with Pakistani Taliban/TTP and the Haqqani network. The TTP and GF operated together during the Swat operation in early 2009 and planned attacks on foreign targets in Islamabad. The ideological link between the GF and TTP lies primarily in their anti-Shia leanings. Also, the stated objectives of both the groups include resistance against the Pakistani state, which has acted as the common denominator for fostering this alliance. Reports suggest that the GF also has active links with the Ilyas Kashmiri group and Al-Qaeda.⁵ The prime role of the TTP is to offer the GF a safe haven for its fighters as well as recruit members for operations. It is also important to note that despite this association and dependency, the GF maintains a certain degree of operational freedom.

The core of the GF consists of an estimated 50 fighters and supposedly functions on cell-based structures, which helps intensify their terrorist potential and minimises the chances of disruption. While the core fighters may be limited to 50, the GF has affiliated itself with numerous other terrorist groups in the region, which expands its reach and cadre strength. The GF is known to have sent a dozen new recruits to training camps in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir⁶ and is also involved in training underage boys in Islamabad's *madrassas* for terrorist activities and suicide bombings.

³ Bill Roggio, "Islamabad Police capture 'Ghazi Force' Commander," *The Long War Journal*, November 20, 2009, available at http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/11/islamabad_police_cap.php, accessed on March 15, 2012.

⁴ Animesh Roul, "Little-Known Ghazi Brigade Now a Major Player in the Punjabi Jihad?," *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume 8 Issue 28, *The Jamestown Foundation*, available at [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=36621](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=36621), accessed on 15 March 2012.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Reports in 2010 averred that Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), a faction of the TTP, was reorganising itself into smaller cells in order to improve coordination from Karachi to Waziristan. One of the smaller cells of the LeJ is the Junoodul Hafsa, which is actually a part of the GF.⁷ The GF's links with the LeJ appears to have strengthened its power to attack military installations, initiate deadlier attacks, and inflame sectarian violence. Apart from killings, the GF is also known to be involved in kidnapping wealthy people and people from rival religious sects for ransom, in order to fund its activities.

The GF leaders' links have proved to be vital for their operations and "effectiveness" in terms of their training and the attacks they have carried out. Abdul Aziz has had strong links to al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders, including Osama bin Laden, Mullah Omar, and Sufi Mohammed, the leader of the pro-Taliban Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammed (TNSM, or the Movement for the Enforcement of Mohammed's Law).

Considering the group's objective of enforcing Sharia Law in Pakistan and its vow to seek revenge from the "Un-Islamic Pakistan state", Islamabad has a lot to worry about especially in the wake of the revelation that the group is seeking more funds to revitalise itself. With the TTP outsourcing its operations to various groups, the Ghazi Force may be considered as a valuable asset by the former in view of its operational effectiveness.

⁷ Zia Khan, "The Fission of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi", *The Express Tribune*, November 17, 2010, available at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/78500/the-fission-of-lashkar-e-jhangvi/>, accessed on March 13, 2012.