

# Understanding the Ghazi Force

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ADITI MALHOTRA

Pakistan's once feared terrorist group, the Ghazi Force is back in the limelight. This time for the reported revival of their funding sources and its resurrection to inflict greater damage on the Pakistani state. A recent report from the Pakistani intelligence agency obtained by BBC Urdu states that banned *jihadi* groups are reviving their local and international funding sources, after their affiliates started opening local and foreign currency accounts under pseudonyms.<sup>1</sup> One such banned group is the Ghazi Force (GF) or Ghazi Abdul Rashid Shaheed Brigade (GARSB). The intelligence agency has reiterated their fear of the group gaining momentum with renewed funding.<sup>2</sup> Previously, there were reports of the Ghazi Force publically raising funds in the Punjab Province through religious and social welfare gatherings. Ghazi Force has been a nemesis for Pakistan in the recent past and is likely to haunt them further with greater funding and links.

The rise of this group seems to be one of the side-effects of Pakistan's policy of nurturing Islamic extremists and employing them to gain 'strategic depth'. As a response to the Lal Masjid Siege, code-named Operation Sunrise, the group was formed in 2007. Figures compiled by the Federal Ministry of Interior show that a total of 3,433 people were killed in 215 suicide attacks across Pakistan during the three years since Operation Sunrise, between July 2007 and July 2010. Additionally, 2007 witnessed 54 suicide hits, killing 765 persons, mostly hailing from law enforcement agencies.<sup>3</sup> While there are numerous terrorist groups responsible for the increase in attacks, a list of audacious attacks is being attributed to a previously unknown militant group called the Ghazi Force (GF).

## **Background**

Built in 1965, the Lal Masjid/Red Mosque is one of the oldest mosques in Islamabad. Following the Deobandi school of thought, it drew numerous students from all over Pakistan. The first *Imam* of the mosque was Maulana Muhammad Abdullah, a beneficiary of the erstwhile President Zia-ul-Haq's program of state-directed Islamisation. Post-Abdullah's assassination in 1998, his sons Abdul Aziz and Abdul Rashid Ghazi took control of the mosque.<sup>4</sup> The brothers had maintained close links with the Taliban and militant groups like Al-Qaida's affiliate organization Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM). The relationship grew stronger after the authorities of the Lal Masjid declared war against the state of Pakistan.

Umm-e-Hassan, wife of Abdul Rashid Ghazi, headed the Jamia Hafsa *madrassa* (girls religious school) which was adjacent to the Lal Masjid and Maulana Aziz was the head of Jamia Fareedia *madrassa* (boys religious school).<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that the *madrassas* had been a safe haven for militants who opposed Pakistan's alliance with the US in Afghanistan. As opposition grew, the mosque became a centre for religious protests against the government.<sup>6</sup>

## **The Lal Masjid Crisis**

The crisis between the mosque and the state began with a succession of instigations by the *madrassa* students. On January 21, 2007, the students of Jamia Hafsa launched a protest against the demolition of an illegally constructed *mosque*. As an act of protest, heavily-armed girls occupied a government children's library. Following this incident, on March 26 of the same year, the madrasa students assailed a house which was allegedly used as a brothel and kidnapped the females residing there. In order to ensure the release of students and teachers arrested by the police earlier, the students also took a few policemen as hostages. After negotiations between the mosque administration and the Islamabad authorities, the hostages were released.

Confident about their objective, Abdul Ghazi set up a court within the mosque and issued *fatwas* against those who they believed to be violating the *sharia* law and regarded as morally corrupt people. The students threatened and attacked music and video shops, claiming that they sold un-Islamic and objectionable content. Eventually, the Lal Masjid leaders lost faith in the state to undertake their dream of an Islamic state and therefore sought to fulfill the task on their own. The Pakistani authorities were also losing their patience during negotiations with the Lal Masjid administration.

The situation worsened on June 23, 2007, when the students kidnapped 9 people including 7 Chinese in Islamabad. While the government was becoming increasingly frustrated with Lal Masjid hardliners, the June 23 incident was the last straw on the camel's back. President Hu Jintao expressed shock over the incidence and called for security for the hostages. It is believed that Chinese pressure was also a reason for authorities in Islamabad to take action against the clerics in Lal Masjid. On July 3, the security forces surrounded the Lal Masjid-Jamia Hafsa complex. In retaliation, the students killed a soldier and burnt nearby government buildings and vehicles. As the attempts to negotiate between the government and the Lal Masjid administration failed, on July 10, the security forces stormed the mosque, leading to a bloody confrontation resulting in the death of Abdul Rashid Ghazi and numerous other students.

## **The Aftermath**

The fierce confrontation between the security forces and armed religious students sowed the seeds for the birth of a new generation of militants. The group, Ghazi Force also comprises of relatives of the students who died in the Lal Masjid assault. These militants feel betrayed by the government, especially when its leaders were believed to be on the payroll of both, the government and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).<sup>7</sup> On the first anniversary of the Lal Masjid siege, a suicide bomber targeting the police at an Islamic rally killed almost 15 people.<sup>8</sup> On July 10, 2008, Maulana Abdul Aziz addressed an Islamic gathering and warned the Pakistan authorities to enforce Sharia law or face a "bloody revolution."<sup>9</sup> However, Maulana Abdul Aziz has denied any involvement with the GF stating that the group was shaped while he was in jail.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the Lal Masjid has had anti-Shia leanings, which implies that there remains a high possibility of an alliance with groups (such as Al-Qaeda, Jaish-i-Mohammad and the Ilyas Kashmiri network) within Pakistan with a similar ideology.<sup>11</sup> The GF, named after the killed *imam*, has two objectives: to enforce *Sharia* law in Pakistan through coercion and to take revenge from those who raided the Lal Masjid and killed their spiritual head, Abdul Rashid Ghazi.<sup>12</sup>

Fidaullah alias Abdul Rehman alias Junaïd, a resident of village Sawarhi in the Buner District of NWFP, is believed to have founded the GF with the support of Taliban militants Niaz Rahim, Habibullah and Ajmal.<sup>13 14</sup> However, Fidaullah's arrest in May 2009<sup>15</sup> and the successful military seige in Swat, forced the group to go underground. The force later re-emerged under the guidance of Niaz Raheem,

who is now considered the leading force of the group.<sup>16</sup> Maulana Niaz Raheem alias Bilal is a former student of the Red Mosque. The terror training camp of the GF are situated in hilly areas of Jangjo, also called Guljo, in Hangu district<sup>17</sup> and Orakzai. The group mainly recruits youngsters from different parts of Punjab and tribal areas.<sup>18</sup> News stories reveal that the militant training in Guljo camps includes making explosives, ambushing military units. Additionally, training is also given in light and heavy weapons.<sup>19</sup>

### Attacks

Most of the attacks since 2007 have been attributed to Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is an umbrella group of numerous Pakistani Taliban factions, headed by Hakimullah Mehsud. Islamabad's Inspector General of Police, Kalim Imam, has averred that GF has been responsible for most of the deadliest attacks in Islamabad since 2007.<sup>20</sup> The targets of the attacks were the military, ISI and Pakistani elites. A senior commander of GF, named Jamshed Ahmad aka Tahir, was captured by the police in November 2009. The commander was believed to be to the mastermind of four suicide attacks ascribed to the GF in 2009.<sup>21</sup> Apart from killings, the group is also known to be involved in kidnapping of wealthy people and people from rival religious sects, to fund its activities.<sup>22</sup>

Following is a list of attacks that have links with the GF:

**Table of Attacks<sup>23</sup>**

<b>Types of Attack</b>	<b>Details</b>	<b>Fatalities/Injuries</b>
Suicide Bombing (September 2007)	Attacked the dining hall of the elite Karar commando anti-terrorism group at their base in Ghazi Tarbela.	16 commandos killed, 29 wounded
Suicide Bombing (March 23, 2009)	Attack near the headquarters of the Special Branch (an intelligence agency of the Federal Capital Police) in Sitara Market, Islamabad.	1 killed
Suicide Bombing (April 4, 2009)	Targeted an FC (a federal paramilitary) checkpoint on the Margala Road in Islamabad	8 people killed (Frontier Constabulary personnel)
Suicide Bombing (June 6, 2009)	Suicide attack against Rescue 15, a police helpline unit, in Islamabad.	2 killed, 4 injured
Suicide Bombing (October 5, 2009)	GF facilitated the recruitment of a security official who undertook the suicide bombing in the office of the World Food Program.	5 aid workers killed
Military Convoy attacked (2009)	Tahir was also involved in an attack on a military convoy in Sirseni village of Swat	6 soldiers killed

Beheading (2009)	Fidaullah, the founder of GF publicly slaughtered 3 residents of Swat District in Sultanwas and Pir Baba, separating their heads from their bodies on the charges of spying for the security forces.	3 people
Suicide Bombing (July 1, 2010)	3 suicide bombers attacked the shrine of Sufi mystic Syed Ali Hajwairi in Lahore	40 killed, 175 injured.
Date Unknown	A senior commander of GF named Jamshed Ahmad aka Tahir confessed (after his arrest) to demolishing a girls' school in Hazara village in Swat.	Unknown
Date Unknown	Tahir confessed to blowing up a bridge in which 12 soldiers were killed.	12 soldiers killed

**The links of GF leaders have proved to be vital for their operations and 'effectiveness' in training and attacks.**

The GF is known to have sent a dozen of new recruits to training camps in Azad Kashmir<sup>24</sup> and are also involved in training underage boys of Islamabad *madrassas* for terrorist activities and suicide bombings.<sup>25</sup> The core of the GF consists of an estimated 50 fighters<sup>26</sup> but the number may be downplayed as the information was revealed by Fidaullah during his interrogation by the police. The organisation supposedly functions on cell-based structures which helps intensify their terrorist potential and minimises the chances of disruption.<sup>27</sup> While the core fighters may be limited to 50, the group is affiliated to numerous other terrorist groups in the region which expands the reach and cadre strength of the GF.

Pakistan's investigating agencies have revealed that key terrorists associated with the group were operating from important locations such as Peshawar, Dera Ismail Khan, Kohat, Mardan, Karachi and Islamabad.<sup>28</sup> Many accounts link the GF to militants in Swat and FATA region<sup>29</sup> and there are evidences of close ties with Pakistani Taliban/ Tehreek-i- Taliban Pakistan (TTP).<sup>30</sup> TTP and GF operated together during the Swat operation in early 2009<sup>31</sup> and have planned attacks on foreign targets in Islamabad. Reports suggest that the GF also has active links with the Ilyas Kashmiri group and Al-Qaeda.<sup>32</sup> Primarily, TTP offers the GF a safe haven for its fighters and the GF maintains a certain degree of operational freedom.<sup>33</sup> A news piece stated that Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), a *jihadi* outfit with strong links to al-Qaeda, is splitting its power into smaller cells to ensure improved coordination from Karachi to Waziristan. One of the smaller cells of the LeJ includes GF.<sup>34</sup> GF's links with LeJ would clearly strengthen its power to attack military installations and wage deadlier attacks.

The links of GF leaders have proved to be vital for their operations and 'effectiveness' in training and attacks. Abdul Aziz has strong links with Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders, including 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); as well as TNSM/Taliban leaders Fariq Mohammed (Bajaur), Mullah Fazlullah (Swat), and Omar Khalid (Mohmand).<sup>35</sup>

In August 2010, figures released by Pakistani authorities reflected the pattern of rising suicide attacks apparently emanating from the mid-2007 Lal Masjid siege.<sup>36</sup> As noted by Tushar Ranjan Mohanty of SATP, before Operation Sunrise, the Islamist terrorist groups in Pakistan were mostly under the control of state agencies, specifically the ISI, and were directed externally against India and coalition forces in Afghanistan. However, the Lal Masjid siege turned these malcontents against the Pakistani state, under the new banner of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The feeling of vengeance became stronger after the government launched operations against the TTP in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and tribal areas of the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA).<sup>37</sup>

Considering Ghazi's objective of enforcing Sharia in Pakistan and its vow to take revenge from the 'Un-Islamic Pakistan state', the group may soon become an implacable force to reckon with. While Pakistan's security forces are resolutely targeting the GF and TTP, one cannot overlook the fact that most of the groups have connection with groups that are backed by the state and employed as covert tools of foreign policy. The distinction between the groups is eventually fading and selective targeting of some groups and appeasement of others by Pakistan's administration will not do much good. The promotion of *jihad* as a tool against India in Kashmir and Afghanistan to achieve their strategic objectives has seemingly backfired. While Islamabad continues to deny pursuing any such policy, it is imprudent to overlook the menacing presence of homegrown terrorists that continues to threaten regional stability at large and the Pakistani state in particular.

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Aditi Malhotra is an Associate Fellow at CLAWS.

## Notes

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