

The Ghazi Force: A Threat to Pakistan's Urban Centers

By Syed Manzar Abbas Zaidi

PAKISTAN IS INCREASINGLY under siege from militant factions that are primarily based in the country's northwest tribal region. Most attacks are blamed on Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an umbrella group of multiple Pakistani Taliban factions led by Hakimullah Mehsud. Disaggregating the various militant factions part of the Pakistani Taliban is more difficult. Yet details are emerging about a relatively new militant group that has undertaken a number of deadly attacks on Pakistani government and Western targets. Known as the Ghazi Force, it emerged in the wake of the government's July 2007 siege of Islamabad's *Lal Masjid* (Red Mosque), a bastion of extremist thought. The attack on *Lal Masjid* is largely considered a turning point in Pakistan's struggle against militancy, and the rise in domestic attacks since 2007 is seen as a direct result of the incident.¹

According to Islamabad's inspector general of police, the Ghazi Force has been behind some of the capital's deadliest attacks since 2007.² The official argues that the Ghazi Force dispatched a suicide bomber to attack the government's commando unit involved in the *Lal Masjid* siege in September 2007, helped to recruit the suicide bomber who blew himself up in the offices of the World Food Program in October 2009, was involved in a deadly suicide bombing at the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad in September 2008 and attacked a NATO supply convoy in June 2010.³

This article profiles the Ghazi Force, identifies how the group was formed and assesses its future trajectory. It finds that this relatively new militant group is posing a growing threat to Pakistan's urban centers.

The Role of Lal Masjid in the Formation of the Ghazi Force

For many years, *Lal Masjid* served as an indoctrination and waypoint station for Islamic fighters traveling to Afghanistan during the jihad against the Soviet Union. More recently, the mosque became a jihadist symbol of defiance against the Pakistan government's pro-Western and anti-jihadist policies. Students at *Lal Masjid* openly defied the writ of the state in the heart of Islamabad when they brazenly commandeered government buildings, kidnapped Chinese women who they accused of being sex workers and openly displayed weapons.⁴ The leading clerics at *Lal Masjid*, Abdul Rashid Ghazi and his brother Maulana Abdul Aziz, were responsible for a 2004 *fatwa* that said Pakistani soldiers killed while fighting the Taliban in South Waziristan Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) did not deserve a Muslim funeral or burial at Muslim cemeteries.⁵

On July 10, 2007, after a security standoff, government troops stormed the facility, and there were heavy exchanges of gunfire between fighters in the mosque compound and security forces. The operation infuriated radical Muslims throughout Pakistan and is likely responsible for the rise in domestic attacks in the country. The Ghazi Force soon emerged, named after Abdul Rashid Ghazi, the leader of *Lal Masjid* who was slain during the government operation.⁶

The Ghazi Force Enters the Jihadist Milieu

Due to limited intelligence on militant groups in South Asia in general, it is not completely clear how the Ghazi Force developed. It is believed that Niaz Raheem and a militant known as Fidaullah co-founded the Ghazi Force with the support of two militants known as Habibullah and Ajmal.⁷ Niaz is a former student at *Lal Masjid*, while Fidaullah reportedly indoctrinated students at *Lal Masjid* and convinced them to join suicide training camps

in South Waziristan.⁸ Fidaullah, who was arrested by Pakistan's authorities in June 2009, also reportedly ordered the beheadings of three men in Buner District of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) on charges of spying for security forces.⁹

Niaz Raheem, the current leader of the group, came from Swat in Pakistan's northwest, and was a student of Jamia Faridia at *Lal Masjid*.¹⁰ During his time at the mosque, Niaz was in charge of communications for the women's wing of the *Lal Masjid* establishment, known

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as Jamia Hafsa.¹¹ During the July 2007 security operation against *Lal Masjid*, Niaz escaped the complex with other students and took refuge with Maulana Sher Ali Khan of the Akora Khatak seminary in Attock District of the NWFP.¹² While at Akora Khatak, Niaz founded a students' organization of those who fled *Lal Masjid*; this grouping was peaceful, however, and did not yet have militant overtones.¹³ He eventually traveled with other *Lal Masjid* students to Swat, where he reportedly came under the influence of Maulana Fazlullah.¹⁴ Fazlullah then

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 *Lal Masjid* had two seminaries—Jamia Faridia, the male *madrasa*, and Jamia Hafsa, its female counterpart.

11 Personal interview, Amir Rana, director of Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies and internationally acclaimed researcher on militancy in Pakistan, July 2010.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

1 Syed Manzar Abbas Zaidi, “Red Trigger: Lal Masjid and its Aftermath,” *International Journal of Terrorism and Political Hot Spots* 4:1-2 (2009).

2 Kathy Gannon, “The Ghazi Force: Vengeful New Militant Group Emerges in Pakistan,” Associated Press, July 1, 2010.

3 Ibid.

4 Zaidi.

5 Ibid.

6 Maulana Abdul Aziz was taken into Pakistani custody shortly before authorities stormed the mosque compound.

7 Munawer Azeem, “Mastermind of Islamabad Suicide Attacks Arrested,” *Dawn*, June 1, 2009.

introduced Niaz to Hakimullah Mehsud in Orakzai Agency, who at the time was the TTP's deputy *amir* for the area. Hakimullah reportedly took Niaz under his wing, and instructed him to set up the militant group that soon came to be known as the Ghazi Force.¹⁵

Although it is a distinct group, the Ghazi Force can be considered a faction of the TTP umbrella organization. The Ghazi Force is believed to be based in Orakzai Agency, with a possible training camp in Guljo in the adjoining Hangu District of the NWFP.¹⁶ The Ghazi Force is reportedly engaged in

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resisting Pakistan Army operations in the tribal areas side-by-side other Taliban factions. The main role of the TTP appears to be offering the Ghazi Force sanctuary for its fighters along with logistical assistance, whereas the Ghazi Force retains a certain amount of operational freedom. Nevertheless, tactical decisions by groups under the patronage of the TTP are reached by consensus of the TTP high command.

At its core, the Ghazi Force consists of an estimated 50 fighters.¹⁷ At first glance, the size of the group appears small. Yet other deadly groups have had a similar sized cadre. The dynamics of asymmetric conflict are important in understanding these numbers, as guerrilla tactics and a

fluid organizational structure are more important than numbers. The Ghazi Force appears to be relying on cell-based structures within the organization, which amplifies their terrorist potential and makes disruption more difficult. Moreover, the estimate of the Ghazi Force's cadre size is based on police interrogations with Fidaullah, who may have downplayed the group's numbers. Kathy Gannon, an Associated Press journalist who did seminal work on the Ghazi Force, believes that the group's terrorist credentials are just the tip of the iceberg, and that there is more to the entity than their propensity to target Islamabad.¹⁸

In accordance with the TTP's tendency to outsource operations to other organizations, the Ghazi Force appears to be the TTP's "Delta Force" in Islamabad, similar to how Lashkar-i-Islam is employed for attacks in Peshawar.¹⁹ Typically, those that undertake attacks in urban areas are locals who know the area and are able to blend in with the city's population. Fidaullah, for example, was arrested in Islamabad, raising the possibility that other members of the Ghazi Force use safe houses in Islamabad and Rawalpindi.²⁰ In fact, they could still be using the *Lal Masjid* establishment to "lie low" before activating operational cells.²¹

The Future of the Ghazi Force

What is the future path of the Ghazi Force? First, the Ghazi Force is a relatively new militant group; therefore, it will likely try to establish its reputation with a series of escalating terrorist attacks. These attacks are important to establish its jihadist credentials. Islamabad's police force already consider the Ghazi Force a major threat, and are devoting significant resources to countering the group. The police are anticipating new major attacks from the organization.

Second, the Ghazi Force is anti-Shi'a, which means its members can associate themselves with a range of sectarian groups in Pakistan that are operating on the same ideological underpinnings. As a result, alliances with al-Qa`ida, Jaysh-i-Muhammad, the Ilyas Kashmiri network, the Punjabi Taliban and other groups are possible. Clear recognition from these groups, however, will require the Ghazi Force to execute more significant attacks or increase its numbers. Even though these bigger groups are also in intimate contact with the TTP, they tend to recognize other TTP "franchises" such as the Ghazi Force only if they prove worthy of attention. Thus, newly emerging groups have to prove themselves to the TTP high command and its partners to "outbid" other small umbrella groups for attention and recognition. Judging by its recent history, the Ghazi Force may soon become a more prominent militant faction in Pakistan's increasingly violent domestic militant milieu.

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¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ This information is based on the police interrogation report with Fidaullah, one of the founding members of the Ghazi Force. He remains in custody of the Islamabad police.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Personal interview, Kathy Gannon, journalist, Associated Press, June 2010.

¹⁹ The TTP has a number of allied groups that it relies on for attacks in urban areas. The Ghazi Force is used for attacks in Islamabad, the "Punjabi Taliban" in Lahore, Lashkar-i-Islam and affiliates in Peshawar, and the Meherban Mehsud group and affiliates in Karachi.

²⁰ Azeem.

²¹ This is a view shared by many analysts alongside the author who have studied this phenomenon, including Amir Rana and Kathy Gannon.