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Al Qaeda's paramilitary 'Shadow Army'

[The Long War Journal](#) ^ | February 9, 2009 | Bill Roggio

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Al Qaeda has reorganized its notorious paramilitary formations that were devastated during the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and 2002. Al Qaeda has reestablished the predominantly Arab and Asian paramilitary formation that was formerly known as Brigade 055 into a larger, more effective fighting unit known as the Lashkar al Zil, or Shadow Army, a senior US intelligence official told The Long War Journal.

The Shadow Army is active primarily in Pakistan's tribal areas, the Northwest Frontier Province, and in eastern and southern Afghanistan, several US military and intelligence officials told The Long War Journal on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the subject.

The paramilitary force is well trained and equipped, and has successfully defeated the Pakistani Army in multiple engagements. Inside Pakistan, the Shadow Army has been active in successful Taliban campaigns in North and South Waziristan, Bajaur, Peshawar, Khyber, and Swat.

In Afghanistan, the Shadow Army has conducted operations against Coalition and Afghan forces in Kunar, Nuristan, Nangahar, Kabul, Logar, Wardak, Khost, Paktika, Paktia, Zabul, Ghazni, and Kandahar provinces.

"The Shadow Army has been instrumental in the Taliban's consolidation of power in Pakistan's tribal areas and in the Northwest Frontier Province," a senior intelligence official said. "They are also behind the Taliban's successes in eastern and southern Afghanistan. They are helping to pinch Kabul."

Afghan and Pakistan-based Taliban forces have integrated elements of their forces into the Shadow Army, "especially the Tehrik-e-Taliban and Haqqani Network," a senior US military intelligence official said. "It is considered a status symbol" for groups to be a part of the Shadow Army.

The Tehrik-e-Taliban is the Pakistani Taliban movement led by Baitullah Mehsud, the South Waziristan leader who has defeated Pakistani Army forces in conventional battles. The Haqqani Network straddles the Afghan-Pakistani border and has been behind some of the most high-profile attacks in Afghanistan.

The Shadow Army's effectiveness has placed the group in the crosshairs of the covert US air campaign in Pakistan's tribal areas. In October 2008, the US killed Khalid Habib al Shami, the leader of the Shadow Army, in a strike on a compound in North Waziristan.

A look at the Shadow Army

The presence of the Shadow Army has been evident for some time, as there have been numerous reports of joint operations between the Taliban, al Qaeda, the Haqqani Network, Hizb-i-Islami, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Harkat-ul-Jihad Islami, and other terror groups. In January 2008, The Long War Journal noted that the various terror groups were cycling through the numerous camps in the tribal areas and have organized under a military structure.

While the Shadow Army has been active, there has been little visual evidence of its existence until now. The Long War Journal has obtained a photograph of a unit from the Shadow Army operating in Pakistan's Taliban-controlled district of Swat.

The photograph was taken some time in January of this year. It shows what appears to be either a reinforced squad or two squads of foot soldiers. Fourteen fighters are in view, and others appear to be in the far background. All of the fighters are wearing masks, new clothes, sneakers, and web gear. One fighter is wearing a Camelbak. The weapons are uniform; six AK-47s and one RPG are in view.

A look at the clothing of the fighters gives a good indication of the identity of the fighters, an expert on al Qaeda told The Long War Journal. The length of the pants of pictured fighters is described as being at "al Qaeda height" -- meaning only al Qaeda and allied "Wahhabi/Salafi-jihadis" wear their pant legs this high.

"The extremists who follow al Qaeda's religious beliefs think that pants must be at least six inches above the ground because there's a hadith [a saying of the Prophet Mohammed] that says clothes that touch the ground are a sign of pride and vanity," the expert said. "This, along with the new dyeing of men's beards red or yellow is a sure sign of al Qaeda-ization."

The type of masks worn and the tennis shoes are also strong indicators that these fighters "are non-Afghan fighters," an expert on the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan said. "Those types of masks I have seen, and they are always on the Pakistani side of the border," the expert said. "The tennis shoes and socks are a big indicator that they are non-Afghan fighters, probably Pakistanis or Arab/Central Asian fighters."

Military Organization of the Shadow Army

The Shadow Army is organized under a military structure, a US military intelligence officer familiar with the situation in northwestern Pakistan informed The Long War Journal. There are units analogous to battalion, brigade, and division formations found in Western armies.

The military organization has a clear-cut command structure with established ranks. A senior al Qaeda military leader is placed in command of the Shadow Army, while experienced officers are put in command of the brigades and subordinate battalions and companies.

The re-formed Brigade 055 is but one of an estimated three to four brigades in the Shadow Army. Several other Arab brigades have been formed, some consisting of former members of Saddam Hussein's Republican Guards as well as Iraqis, Saudis, Yemenis, Egyptians, North Africans, and others.

During the reign of the Taliban in Afghanistan prior to the US invasion in 2001, the 055 Brigade served as "the shock troops of the Taliban and functioned as an integral part of the latter's military apparatus," al Qaeda expert Rohan Gunaratna wrote in *Inside al Qaeda*. At its peak in 2001, the 055 Brigade had an estimated 2,000 soldiers and officers in the ranks. The brigade was comprised of Arabs, Central Asians, and South Asians, as well as Chechens, Bosnians, and Uighurs from Western China.

The 055 Brigade has "completely reformed and is surpassing pre-2001 standards," an official said. The other brigades are also considered well trained.

One official said the mixing of the various Taliban and al Qaeda units has made distinctions between the groups somewhat meaningless.

"The line between the Taliban and al Qaeda is increasingly blurred, especially from a command and control perspective," the official said. "Are Faqir Mohammed, Baitullah Mehsud,

Hakeemullah Mehsud, Ilyas Kashmiri, Siraj Haqqani, and all the rest 'al Qaeda'?" the official asked, listing senior Taliban commanders in Pakistan that operate closely with al Qaeda. "Probably not in the sense that they maintain their own independent organizations, but the alliance is essentially indistinguishable at this point except at a very abstract level."

The Taliban have begun an ideological conversion to Wahhabism, the radical form of Sunni Islam practiced by al Qaeda. "The radicalization of the Taliban and their conversion away from Deobandism to Wahhabism under Sheikh Issa al Masri and other al Qaeda leaders is a clear sign of the al Qaeda's preeminence," the official noted. Sheikh Issa is the spiritual adviser for Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Ayman al Zawahiri's organization that merged into al Qaeda, and the leader of al Jihad fi Waziristan, an al Qaeda branch in North Waziristan.

The establishment of the joint Taliban and al Qaeda military formations under the overall command of the Shadow Army has been facilitated by the proliferation of terror training camps in the tribal areas and the Northwest Frontier Province.

In the summer of 2008, senior US intelligence officials told The Long War Journal that more than 150 camps and more than 400 support locations were in operation in Northwestern Pakistan. Most of the camps are considered "transient" in nature, an official said. Trainers and recruits may gather in villages and meet to conduct training in the vast mountains and valleys in Pakistan's northwest. As of last summer, an estimated 25 to 40 of the camps were considered permanent.

These camps have various functions, and not all of them are used to train the Shadow Army. Some of the camps are used to indoctrinate and train suicide bombers for attacks in Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, and the West. Some of the camps are devoted to training the various Kashmiri terror groups who have flocked to the tribal areas and are also integrating with the terror alliance. One of these camps serves as a training ground for the Black Guard, the elite bodyguard for Osama bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri, and other senior al Qaeda leaders.

Click map for full view. Taliban presence, by district and tribal agency, the Northwest Frontier Province and the Federally Administered Tribal Agencies. Information on Taliban presence obtained from open source and derived by The Long War Journal based on the presence of Taliban shadow governments, levels of fighting, and reports from the region. Map created by Bill Raymond for The Long War Journal.

An effective fighting force

The Shadow Army has distinguished itself during multiple battles over the past several years, particularly in Pakistan's tribal areas and in the Northwest Frontier Province. Taliban forces under the command of Baitullah Mehsud defeated the Pakistani Army in South Waziristan during fighting in 2005-2006, and again fended off the Pakistani Army in 2008 after fighting pitched battles and overrunning a series of forts.

In Swat, the Pakistani military was twice defeated by forces under the command of Mullah Fazlullah during 2007 and 2008. Earlier this year, the military launched its third attempt to secure Swat, which has been solidly under the control of the Taliban. The most recent operation was initiated after Fazlullah issued an amnesty to certain government officials and called for others to be tried in a sharia court. The military regained control of a small region last week, but fighting has been heavy. A few days ago, Taliban forces overran a police station and captured 30 members of the police and paramilitary Frontier Corps.

In Bajaur, the hidden hand of the Shadow Army has been seen in multiple reports from the region. Taliban forces dug a series of sophisticated trench and tunnel networks as well as bunkers and pillboxes. The Pakistani military took more than a month to clear a six-mile stretch of road in the Loizam region. Pakistani military officials also said the Taliban "have good weaponry and a better communication system (than ours)."

"Even the sniper rifles they use are better than some of ours," the Pakistani official told Dawn "Their tactics are mind-boggling and they have defenses that would take us days to build. It does not look as though we are fighting a rag-tag militia; they are fighting like an organized force."

Taliban forces have also conducted battalion-sized operations in Hangu. In July 2008, a Taliban unit laid siege to a police station and a fort in Hangu. The fort was abandoned by the Frontier Corps and the Taliban destroyed it.

The Shadow Army has had some recent successes in Afghanistan over the past year. In July 2008, the unit made up of al Qaeda, the Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Hizb-e-Islami joined forces and conducted a complex assault on a US outpost in Wanat in Nuristan province. The attack was repelled after the force nearly overran the base. Nine US soldiers were killed in the assault, the largest loss by US forces in a single engagement in Afghanistan to date.

Another engagement in the Surobi region in Kabul province was likely the work of the Shadow Army. A force ambushed a French military convoy in a valley just outside of the capital and pinned down the unit for hours. Ten French soldiers were killed, and the Taliban was able to seize French weapons abandoned on the battlefield.

The effectiveness of the Shadow Army can be seen in a video taken by an Al Jazeera reporter during an operation in Loisam in the Bajaur tribal agency in the fall of 2008 [see video below]. The Taliban forces drive off a battalion-sized assault from regular Pakistani Army troops that are supported by at least a platoon of tanks. The Pakistani tanks are seen racing away from the fighting, and the Pakistani infantry moving in behind them does the same after taking fire. The reporter describes the Pakistani tank commander as "quite shaken." The tank commander calls for airstrikes to take out the Taliban positions, but the infantry and tanks go into full retreat and return to base after the Taliban counterattacks.

The Pakistani unit involved in the fighting was the 63rd Battalion of the Frontier Force Regiment. This is a regular Army unit, not part of the paramilitary Frontier Corps. The 63rd was deployed to Somalia during the peacekeeping mission in the 1990s. More than 8,000 Pakistan troops were deployed in the Loisam region to clear the Taliban and al Qaeda forces, but only took the village after leveling the town.

The Pakistani retreat sent a chill up the spine of a US Army officer who was shown the video. "Clearly the Pakistani forces lack discipline and morale, but even with these problems the combined armor and infantry attack, backed by air support, should have gone better," the officer said.

"Those troops have obviously met stiff resistance," the Army officer continued. "You just watched a full battalion, supported by tanks, break contact after an attack by a supposedly undisciplined, 'rag-tag' force of Taliban fighters. For the Taliban to drive off that unit, it has to be organized, disciplined, well-armed, and competent."

Read more:

http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/02/al_qaedas_paramilita.php#ixzz0g5s8DEh6

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Pictures and a video at website. The Long War Journal is a great source and resource for information on the War on terror.

1 posted on **21 February 2010 00:22:40** by **K-oneTexas**
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Lots of information in this article, but the main thing I take from it is how closely intertwined the Taliban is with Al Qaeda. There is no separating the two.

2 posted on **21 February 2010 00:36:53** by **denydenydeny** ("Leftists are like vampires; shine a light on what they are doing and they retreat."-Andrew Klavan)

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