

Lashkar-e-Zil

AT A GLANCE

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HOW TO CITE

Mapping Militants Project (MMP). “Lashkar-e-Zil.” Last modified July 2018.
<https://mappingmilitants.org/node/441>

SUMMARY

Formed: 2002

Disbanded: Group is active.

First Attack: December 2007: LeZ allegedly participated in an assassination attempt on two-time Pakistani Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto. (unknown casualties)¹

Last Attack: January 6, 2010: LeZ claimed responsibility for a suicide attack targeting a Pakistani military base in the Sudhnoti district of Azad Kashmir. (4 killed, unknown wounded)²

OVERVIEW

Lashkar-e-Zil (LeZ) is the paramilitary special forces branch of Al Qaeda’s base. (AQ). The group was formed in 2002 as a successor to Brigade 055, AQ’s former special operations unit that crumbled after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Although it has remained part of Al Qaeda, LeZ has acted largely as an auxiliary unit comprised of militant fighters from a variety of groups and providing support for associated extremist organizations. LeZ operates in Pakistan and Afghanistan and works closely with many of the other militant organizations in the region, including the Haqqani Network, Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP), and the Afghan Taliban. LeZ is well trained and well equipped and has successfully defeated the Pakistani Army in multiple engagements.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Lashkar-e-Zil (LeZ), or “The Shadow Army,” is the paramilitary special forces unit of Al Qaeda (AQ) that was founded in 2002. LeZ is the successor organization to AQ’s

Brigade 055 (or the 055 Brigade), which was decimated during the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001-2002.³ Similarly to Brigade 055, LeZ draws fighters from a range of Afghan, Arab, and Central Asian terrorist organizations including Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Harkat-ul Mujahideen, Harkat-ul Jihad-e-Islami (HuJI) and Jaysh-e-Muhammad.⁴ It is believed that these groups contribute fighters to LeZ because doing so is seen as a type of status symbol that denotes the strength of their relationship with AQ.⁵

LeZ was originally led by Khalid Habib, an experienced Al Qaeda leader of Egyptian descent. However, Habib was killed by a U.S. drone strike on his compound in Taparghai in Northern Waziristan on October 16, 2008. Habib was succeeded by Abdullah Saeed al-Libi, who was also killed in a U.S. drone strike in December 2009. His successor, Ilyas Kashmiri, was the leader of Harkat-ul Jihad-e-Islami (HuJI) before becoming head of LeZ; he proved to be one of LeZ's more dynamic commanders. However, Kashmiri was killed in June 2011, again by a U.S. drone strike. Mustafa Abu Yazid took over command of the organization at this time, only to be killed in yet another U.S. drone strike in July 2014. Allegedly, due to the U.S.'s success in killing previous LeZ leaders, Al Qaeda has yet to announce the name of the group's current commander.⁶

Throughout its history, LeZ has worked closely with the Haqqani Network, Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) and the Afghan Taliban; it has often acted more as an armed wing of the TTP and the Afghan Taliban than as an armed wing of Al Qaeda. The group was created by Al Qaeda and shares the group's overall goals and tactics. However, it remains relatively autonomous and its operations are largely dictated by the leader of the group at any given time. LeZ has been particularly instrumental in the TTP's consolidation of power in the Pakistani tribal areas and the Taliban's successes in Eastern and Southern Afghanistan in the late 2000s.⁷ But perhaps LeZ's most notable attack was when it coordinated with the TTP and the Haqqani Network on a suicide bombing at the CIA's Forward Operating Base Chapman in December 2009. The group is also suspected of having played a role in planning the 2008 Mumbai attacks, although the extent of its involvement in these attacks is unclear.⁸ The Shadow Army has also been instrumental in the Taliban's consolidation of power in Pakistan's tribal areas and in the Northwest Frontier province.⁹

In early 2008, LeZ orchestrated attack on the NATO supply line passing the Pakistani Khyber Agency into Afghanistan, which carried 70 percent of NATO supplies for Afghanistan. This attack created a serious crisis for NATO troops and resulted in a very successful operation for AQ.¹⁰ Although the group's activity decreased somewhat after the death of Ilyas Kashmiri in June 2011, the group has not disappeared. Most recently it is believed to be working in cooperation with Al Qaeda's newest branch, Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, which formed in 2014.¹¹ U.S. drone strikes have continued to take a serious toll on the group's leadership, continuing to degrade its capabilities.¹²

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

Because of the U.S.'s success in killing previous LeZ leaders, Al Qaeda had not announced the name of the group's current commander as of July 2018.¹³

Khalid Habib (2002-October 16, 2008): Habib was an experienced Al Qaeda leader before being named the head of the newly formed LeZ in 2002. He was killed in a U.S. drone strike in Northern Waziristan on October 16, 2008.¹⁴

Abdullah Saeed al-Libi (October 16, 2008-December 2009): al-Libi succeeded Habib as the leader of LeZ in October 2008. He was killed by a U.S. drone strike three months later in December 2009.¹⁵

Ilyas Kashmiri (December 2009-June 2011): Kashmiri was the commander of Harkat-ul Jihad-e-Islami (HuJI) before becoming head of LeZ. He proved to be one of LeZ's more dynamic commanders and drastically expanded the organizations operations in Eastern Afghanistan and Western Pakistan. Kashmiri was killed in a U.S. drone strike in June 2011.¹⁶

Mustafa Abu Yazid (June 2011- July 2014): Yazid assumed command of LeZ following Kashmiri's death in June 2011. He was later killed in a U.S. drone strike in Northern Waziristan in July 2014.¹⁷

B. NAME CHANGES

There are no recorded name changes for this group.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 2010: 10,000 (*The Long War Journal*)¹⁸

D. RESOURCES

LeZ is believed to receive the vast majority of its resources from AQ, although it may also receive small amounts of arms and financing from the other organizations with which it cooperates, such as the Afghan Taliban and the TTP. LeZ may also train alongside many of the other groups active in the region in a series of camps that are used jointly by the Taliban, AQ, the Haqqani Network, Hizb-i-Islami, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Harkat-ul-Jihad Islami, among others.¹⁹

LeZ draws fighters from a range of Afghan, Arab, and Central Asian terrorist organizations including Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Harkat-ul Mujahideen, Harkat-ul Jihad-e-Islami (HuJI) and Jaysh-e-Muhammad.²⁰ It is believed that these groups contribute fighters to LeZ because doing so is seen as a type of status symbol that denotes the strength of their relationship with AQ.²¹

E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

Although LeZ is primarily active in the Pakistani tribal areas of Waziristan, Bajaur, Peshawar, Khyber, and Swat, it has also carried out attacks against U.S.-led coalition forces in the Afghan provinces of Khost, Kabul, Kandahar, Nuristan, Nangahar, Wardak, Pakika, Ghazni and Kunar.²² The LeZ is also believed to run a series of training camps for Taliban and al Qaeda fighters in the Helmand province of Afghanistan.²³ LeZ has been instrumental in the Taliban's consolidation of power in Pakistan's tribal areas and in the Northwest Frontier Province.²⁴

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS

LeZ is a Wahhabi, Salafi-Jihadist organization. Because it is a sub-branch of Al Qaeda, its ideology is assumed to be similar to that of the larger organization.²⁵

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

This group has no known political activities.

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS

LeZ is known for its guerrilla style attacks, often undertaken in conjunction with Taliban or TTP forces.²⁶ LeZ's forces are well trained and have allegedly defeated both the Pakistani Army and Afghan security forces on multiple occasions. The group is known to use AK-47s and Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs) among other weapons.²⁷

In Afghanistan, the group primarily targets U.S.-led coalition forces and Afghan security forces. While in Pakistan, its main targets are Pakistani military installations, such as air force and naval bases, and Pakistani military officers known to be working against the Taliban, TTP, or AQ.²⁸

LeZ is organized into units analogous to battalions, brigades, and divisions in Western armies. It is believed to include 3-4 brigades, each commanded by a trusted AQ commander.²⁹

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

December 2007: LeZ allegedly participated in an assassination attempt on two-time Prime Minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto (unknown casualties).³⁰

July 2008: LeZ, Taliban, AQ, and Hizb-e-Islami forces attacked a U.S. outpost in Wanat in the Nuristan province of Afghanistan. The attack was repelled only after the base was almost overrun and 9 U.S. soldiers were killed (9+ killed, unknown wounded).³¹

November 2008: LeZ claimed responsibility for the assassination of Major General Amir Faisal Alvi, the former commander of the Special Services Group of the Pakistani Army (1 dead, 0 wounded).³²

December 31, 2009: LeZ is believed to have coordinated with the TTP and the Haqqani Network on the suicide attack on the CIA's Forward Operating Base Chapman in the Khost Province of Afghanistan (10 Killed, 6 wounded).³³

January 6, 2010: LeZ claimed responsibility for a suicide attack targeting a Pakistani military base in the Sudhnoti district of Azad Kashmir (4 killed, unknown wounded).³⁴

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

As of July 2018, this group has not been designated as a terrorist organization by any major national government or international body.

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The relationship between LeZ and the communities in which it resides is unknown.

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

LeZ is the "special forces" arm of Al Qaeda and as such has extremely close relations with AQ.³⁵ The leaders and top commanders in LeZ are experienced Al Qaeda fighters who are drawn from the upper echelons of AQ leadership. The head of AQ, Aymenn al-Zawahiri, is believed to have ultimate control over the group, even though LeZ technically has a command chain independent of AQ. In addition to working closely with AQ Central leadership, LeZ is also believed to work closely with AQ's newest affiliate, Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent.³⁶

LeZ also has close relations with the Haqqani Network, Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) and the Afghan Taliban, and has often acted as much as an armed wing of the TTP and the Taliban as of Al Qaeda. LeZ has been particularly instrumental in the TTP's consolidation of power in the Pakistani tribal areas and the Taliban's successes in Eastern and Southern Afghanistan in the late 2000s.³⁷ It is somewhat unclear whether the Haqqani network, the Taliban and TTP simply coordinate with LeZ or if they actually contribute soldiers to its ranks. It has been reported, however, that LeZ draws fighters

from a range of Afghan, Arab, and Central Asian militant organizations including Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Harkat-ul Mujahideen, Harkat-ul Jihad-e-Islami (HuJI) and Jaysh-e-Muhammad.³⁸ It is believed that being chosen to contribute troops to LeZ is a type of status symbol for these groups and denotes the strength of their relationship with AQ.³⁹

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

As of July 2018, there is no publicly available information on state sponsors or external influences for this group.

MAPS

- Global Al Qaeda
- Pakistan

¹ Zahid, Farhan. "Lashkar-eZil: Al-Qaeda's 'Shock and Awe' Force." *Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor* 12(23): 5 December 2014. Web. 8 Nov. 2015.

² Mir, Amir. "Lashkar-e-Zil behind Azad Kashmir suicide hits." *The News*, 11 Jan. 2010. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

³ "055 Brigade/Lashar al Zil." TRAC, Date unknown. Web. 9 Nov. 2015; Zahid, Farhan. "Lashkar-eZil: Al-Qaeda's 'Shock and Awe' Force." *Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor* 12(23): 5 December 2014. Web. 8 Nov. 2015; Celso, Anthony. *Al-Qaeda's Post 9/11 Devolution: The Failed Jihadist Struggle Against the Near and Far Enemy*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014; Rogio, Bill. "Al Qaeda's paramilitary 'Shadow Army'." *The Longwar Journal*, 9 February 2009. Web. 9 Nov. 2015.

⁴ Zahid, Farhan. "Lashkar-eZil: Al-Qaeda's 'Shock and Awe' Force." *Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor* 12(23): 5 December 2014. Web. 8 Nov. 2015.

⁵ Rogio, Bill. "Al Qaeda's paramilitary 'Shadow Army'." *The Longwar Journal*, 9 February 2009. Web. 9 Nov. 2015.

⁶ Zahid, Farhan. "Lashkar-eZil: Al-Qaeda's 'Shock and Awe' Force." *Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor* 12(23): 5 December 2014. Web. 8 Nov. 2015.

⁷ Rogio, Bill. "Al Qaeda's paramilitary 'Shadow Army'." *The Longwar Journal*, 9 February 2009. Web. 9 Nov. 2015; Zahid, Farhan. "Lashkar-eZil: Al-Qaeda's 'Shock and Awe' Force." *Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor* 12(23): 5 December 2014. Web. 8 Nov. 2015.

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¹⁰ Shahzad, Syed Saleem. "The Real danger is that al Qaeda and the Neo-Taliban will drag the United States into regional war." *The Boston Review*: January/February 2010. <http://bostonreview.net/archives/BR35.1/shahzad.php>

¹¹ Zahid, Farhan. "Lashkar-eZil: Al-Qaeda's 'Shock and Awe' Force." *Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor* 12(23): 5 December 2014. Web. 8 Nov. 2015.

¹² Roggio, Bill. "Mullah Sangeen Zadran, al Qaeda commander reported killed in drone strike." *The Long War Journal*, 6 Sept. 2013. Web. 16 Nov. 2015

¹³ Zahid, Farhan. "Lashkar-eZil: Al-Qaeda's 'Shock and Awe' Force." *Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor* 12(23): 5 December 2014. Web. 8 Nov. 2015.

¹⁴ Zahid, Farhan. "Lashkar-eZil: Al-Qaeda's 'Shock and Awe' Force." *Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor* 12(23): 5 December 2014. Web. 8 Nov. 2015.

¹⁵ Zahid, Farhan. "Lashkar-eZil: Al-Qaeda's 'Shock and Awe' Force." *Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor* 12(23): 5 December 2014. Web. 8 Nov. 2015.

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