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Al-Qaeda seeks a new alliance

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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NORTH-WEST FRONTIER PROVINCE, Pakistan - Fighting in the Swat Valley and the neighboring districts of Buner and Dir between Taliban militants and Pakistani security forces is still raging after a week, forcing about 1.4 million people from their homes in addition to another 550,000 people displaced by earlier fighting there and in other regions.

The military claims it has made "considerable headway" in the intense fighting, killing hundreds of militants in this latest phase of the [South Asian](#) war theater.

The reaction of the militants will be crucial in deciding the direction of this struggle, which has been instigated under intense pressure from the United States on Islamabad.

In this regard, [Asia](#)

Times Online spoke to a top ideologue, on the condition that neither the name of the man nor the location of the meeting be hinted at in the writing.

He said that al-Qaeda had already anticipated that [Washington](#) would bring Pakistan and [India](#) on board in the fight against militants, and even try to get cooperation from [Iran](#). The aim would be to geographically isolate the militants.

But the militants, said the man, planned to occupy a strategic corridor that stretched from Nangarhar province in Afghanistan through Pakistan's Khyber Agency and the Pakistani Balochistan area of Turbat all the way to Iranian Balochistan.

The militants plan to establish a new regional alliance. In this regard, Iranian Jundullah (Army of God) leader Abdul Malik Rigi is due to meet an al-Qaeda emissary in the near future near a Pakistani Balochistan coastal town to lay the foundation for joint regional operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and India.

Al-Qaeda has in the past had some [reservations](#) about the Iranian Jundullah, an insurgent

Sunni Islamic organization opposed to Tehran, on suspicion it had links to US and Pakistani intelligence.

In the past three years, a few Pakistani Balochi anti-Shi'ite elements who were previously part of the Sunni militant group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi worked with Jundullah. They carried out joint operations against Iranians and Shi'ites in the region.

These Pakistani Balochi elements played a role in bringing al-Qaeda and Jundullah closer, making it clear that Jundullah is now an independent organization with its headquarters in the southern Pakistani [port city](#) of Karachi. It has bases, though, in Pakistani Balochistan and the Iranian province of Sistan-Balochistan.

Jundullah has the narrow aim of destabilizing the Iranian Shi'ite regime. Al-Qaeda wants to sell its franchise to Jundullah, with two main aims:

- To destroy or disrupt operations at Chabahar port, which could be used for North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) supplies going to Afghanistan. The current main route through Pakistan is under heavy attack by the Taliban.
- Establish al-Qaeda's presence in Iran to carry out operations to create a strategic balance against any Iranian role in Afghanistan and Iraq.

At present, Jundullah is a naive and financially poor organization which only carries out low-profile, stand-alone, sporadic attacks inside Iran. It claims to have killed about 400 Iranian soldiers over the years, but it does not pose any real threat to Tehran.

Al-Qaeda aims to change this, as it did with the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi in Pakistan.

The Lashkar-e-Jhangvi is a breakaway faction of the Sepah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), a political anti-Shi'ite party which aimed to have Shi'ites declared non-Muslims through legislation. In elections, the SSP could not secure more than one seat in parliament, while several of its leaders were assassinated by Shi'ite militant organizations.

That compelled a small number of SSP members to form a militant group - the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (Army of Jhangvi), named after their founder, Maulana Haq Nawaz Jhangvi. Jhangvi was subsequently killed by Shi'ite militants.

Initially, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi carried out target killings of Shi'ites in mosques and their religious leaders. The Shi'ite organization Sepah Mohammad reciprocated in bloody kind against Sunnis.

The Pakistani security forces tightened the noose around the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, forcing its members to flee to Afghanistan, where the Taliban were ruling. These members, with little political ideology and poor, were embraced by al-Qaeda and given training in its camps.

After the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, when al-Qaeda retreated to Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi members provided them help, and in the process their interaction increased.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi's members proved good fodder for al-Qaeda's suicide bombings as many of them were already dead-enders, wanted by the Pakistani security agencies dead or alive and abandoned by their families.

Other developments will complement the new alliance between Jundullah and al-Qaeda. For

the first time, for instance, there has been a huge influx of Pakistani Balochis to al-Qaeda's camps in South Waziristan and North Waziristan in Pakistan's tribal areas on the border with Afghanistan.

This is all a part of establishing a new strategic corridor for militants. The meeting of Abdul Malik Rigi with an al-Qaeda emissary is expected to take this a step closer to realization.