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Rohingya Crisis in Southeast Asia: The Jihadi Dimension

By Jasminder Singh

Synopsis

The Rohingya problem is an old one. After nearly 70 years, the problem has been greatly aggravated by rising sectarian violence by radical Buddhist groups against Muslims and the involvement of transnational terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

Commentary

THE ROHINGYA crisis in Myanmar has a long history. Following Burma's independence in January 1948, a Rohingya-based insurgency broke out in northern Arakan, now known as Rakhine State, with the aim of integrating with East Pakistan, present-day Bangladesh. By the late 1950s, the mujahidin-oriented insurgency was crushed by the Burmese Army. Since the 1970s, various Islamist groups have surfaced to take up the cudgels of liberation, either to gain greater autonomy or outright independence.

The key groups championing the Rohingya struggle include the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation, the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front and Arakan National Liberation Organisation. Following the success of the Afghan Mujahidin in defeating the Soviets, since the 1980s, extremist jihadi-oriented groups have espoused violent struggle against Myanmar, often with the support of Af-Pak based radical groups and by the late 1990s onwards, groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and Islamic State.

Al Qaeda Support for the Rohingya

Even though Al Qaeda had existed since the late 1990s, it only began to show interest in the plight of the Rohingya since 2013. Hence, at the 12th anniversary of

the 911 Incident, Ayman al-Zawahiri referred to the persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar. In August 2014, Zawahiri launched the Al Qaeda of the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) which included Myanmar as its area of operations.

In 2014, Al Qaeda's affiliates also began expressing support for the need for jihad in Myanmar in support of the Rohingya. In 2015, a key Al Qaeda affiliate in Africa and South Asia, the al-Shabaab and the Pakistan Taliban, respectively, expressed support for the Rohingya, calling for jihad against the Buddhists in Myanmar for supposedly persecuting Muslims.

Abu Zar Burmi, an ethnic Rohingya who emerged as a leading jihadist in Pakistan, also called for revenge against the persecution of the Rohingya. Equally important was the support of Al Qaeda's affiliates in Bangladesh for a jihad in Myanmar, with one of them believed to be training Rohingya for combat operations.

Islamic State's Support for Rohingya

At the launch of Islamic State (IS) in July 2014, the self-proclaimed caliph, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi called for the need of a jihad in Myanmar. The 14th edition of *Dabiq* quoted Shaykh Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif, the amir of the Islamic fighters in Bengal, talking of a jihad in Bangladesh as a stepping stone to Myanmar. There were numerous occasions when pro-Islamic State groups in Bangladesh called for a jihad in Myanmar to support the Rohingya, including the Jama'tul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), the key IS affiliate.

Pro-IS Southeast Asian groups, especially in Indonesia have also joined the call to punish Myanmar for persecuting the Rohingya. In November 2016, an Indonesian pro-IS group planned to bomb the Myanmar embassy in Jakarta, just as the Malaysian police detained an Indonesian en route to Myanmar to support the Rohingya.

Pro-IS groups in Pakistan and India, such as the Lashkar-e-Toiba and the Indian Mujahidin, have also supported the call for jihad in Myanmar. The Rohingya are also reported to be operating with Southeast Asian jihadist groups, as in Poso, Indonesia to support pro-IS groups and in South Mindanao as part of the Wilayah Philippines under Emir Isnilon Hapilon.

Factors Driving Al Qaeda and IS Support

Several factors explain the decision of Al Qaeda and IS to support the Rohingya. First, both groups can no longer ignore the plight of the Rohingya as this has been spotlighted in the mainstream and new media in a big way since 2012. To ignore a cause celebre of Muslim persecution would be self-defeating.

Second, as both IS and Al Qaeda are under pressure from coalition forces, both have decided to attack their 'Far' and 'Near' enemies rather than simply focus on the former as it did in the past.

Third, it is driven by the rising competition between Al Qaeda and IS for influence, especially in areas where there are conflicts afflicting Sunni Muslims. It is not just to

become the preeminent global jihadi group but more important, due to the rising importance of South and Southeast Asia as safe havens, sources of finance and even targets for operations, especially as the Middle East recedes in importance.

Finally, and in particular for Al Qaeda, it is a golden opportunity to recover from its decline globally and being displaced by IS since 2014. By championing the Rohingya cause, it hopes to reverse its fortunes, which it has succeeded somewhat in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In this regard, both Al Qaeda and IS are not merely looking for supporters for their ideological and jihadi cause but also believe that they have a legitimate excuse to support persecuted Muslims in Myanmar.

Consequences of Al Qaeda and IS Support

It looks as though a front for prolonged jihad somewhat akin to southern Philippines and southern Thailand is taking shape in northwest Myanmar. Al Qaeda and IS have capitalised on the image of a persecuted Rohingya community ripe for recruitment and their support for the Rohingya has upped the ante of jihadi violence in Myanmar. Through direct and indirect support for the Rohingya, the seeds of jihadi doctrine and ideology are being planted and that may put the community on an irreversible trajectory of violence.

Both transnational terrorist groups have succeeded in seeding radicalism and terrorism in Myanmar and the surrounding region. The planting of a Muslim insurgency in Myanmar through the Rohingya crisis will take decades to overcome, especially since a haven for Rohingya has emerged at the Bangladeshi border.

As the October 2016 jihadi attack in north western Rakhine State by an Al Qaeda cum IS-supported group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army previously known as Haraqa al-Yaqin, demonstrated, jihadi violence can no longer be handled by Myanmar alone. Myanmar would need to solve its Rohingya problem through political accommodation while at the same time enhancing counter-terrorism cooperation with South and Southeast Asian states.

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