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The Inevitable Jihad in Myanmar

By Remy Mahzam and Muhammad Ansar

Synopsis

Violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State has driven over 125,000 Rohingya Muslims fleeing towards neighbouring Bangladesh following the destruction of an entire Muslim village allegedly by Myanmar security forces. The crisis has resulted in growing regional resentment against Myanmar, with hardline Islamist groups promising to wage 'jihad' in Myanmar.

Commentary

WORSENING TENSIONS between Rohingya Muslims and Buddhists in Rakhine have sparked a wave of anti-Buddhist sentiments across Southeast Asia. Pro-Islamist groups as well as sympathisers from Indonesia and Malaysia have shared videos and photographs of the alleged atrocities by Myanmar's security forces against the Rohingya in social media as well as mobile communication platforms.

The postings even include calls for recruitment for 'jihad' in Myanmar. A rally is scheduled to be held at the entrance of Borobudur Buddhist temple in central Java this week on 8 September 2017 to protest the persecution of the Rohingya. These protests over the plight of the Rohingya pose serious security implications in the region amidst the pressures from the Islamic State (IS) terror group in Marawi, Philippines.

Offensive or Humanitarian Jihad?

Exhortations to mount an offensive against Myanmar have been evident in recent videos uploaded by several Islamist groups. A video released on 3 September 2017 titled "Anak Pengungsi Rohingya Siap Balik ke Myanmar Untuk Berjihad - dari Aceh" (Children of Rohingya in Aceh Ready to Return to Myanmar for Jihad) shows a group of uniformed personnel from Aceh undergoing physical training without weapons in preparation for their self-proclaimed jihad in Myanmar.

Another video, “*Persiapan Para Mujahid Indonesia Menuju Myanmar Selamatkan Muslim Rohingya*” (Indonesian Mujahid in Preparation to Save the Rohingya in Myanmar) introduces a battalion numbering in the hundreds, dressed in standardised attire making battle cries of jihad while getting ready for a journey to Myanmar. A third video, “*Laskar FPI Berangkat ke Myanmar*” (Soldiers of FPI Departing to Myanmar) demonstrates the attempt by Indonesia’s right-wing Islamist organisation, Front Pembela Islam’s (FPI) to involve itself in the crisis. FPI has opened registration for 1,200 *mujahideen* volunteers to join in the humanitarian jihad in Myanmar.

Although the ‘jihad’ advocated by these hardline Islamist groups is essentially humanitarian and non-military in nature, statements by those administering the recruitment and mobilisation of members do not preclude the possibility of armed violence. FPI’s spokesperson for the jihad movement, Ustadz Aka, stated that those volunteering must be “willing to die for Islam” as there is a high possibility of resistance from the Myanmar security forces.

The group sets four conditions for the recruitment of *mujahideen* volunteers: permission from their parents, be at least 21 years old, have “martial ability”, and are prepared to die in Rakhine State.

Defensive Jihad

Ustadz Aka also indicated that the nature of jihad in itself is comprehensive, correlating the crisis in Northern Rakhine to the Palestine conflict and implying that the humanitarian effort may descend into violence. This is further compounded by the decision of Myanmar to block aid to Northern Rakhine, which may induce the use of force as a form of retaliation to ensure aid is received.

A history of animosity between the Rohingya and the Myanmar security forces, coupled with armed insurgencies in Rakhine, have made jihad and violence inevitable. On 9 October 2016 attacks by the group, known previously as Harakah al Yaqin but now known as Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army or ARSA triggered strong retaliation by the Myanmar army, displacing over 75,000 Rohingya Muslims into neighbouring Bangladesh.

The Myanmar security forces were accused of gang-rapes and mass killings in a United Nations (UN) Flash Report for February 2017. The Myanmar government has denied the allegations and has blocked access for the UN Human Rights Council mission to perform further investigation. ARSA has taken advantage of the crisis to step up recruitment for its group and to launch retaliatory assaults. Their group leader, Ataullah abu Ammar Jununi, claims that ARSA is fighting a genuine defensive battle based on morality and principles.

On 25 August 2017, ARSA coordinated attacks on 30 police posts and an army base in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships in Western Myanmar’s Rakhine state. The violence by ARSA in response to the alleged atrocities only accentuates the crucial need to bring development to alleviate the Rohingya-Buddhist conflict in Rakhine. Sustainable solutions can only be achieved by comprehensive measures to resolve the plight of the Rohingya.

A Fertile Jihadic Landscape

The call for jihad in Myanmar may also serve to reinforce or legitimise terrorist groups operating in terror-prone regions in Indonesia as well as Philippines. The conditions in Rakhine are ripe for the influence of extremist stimuli, including the infiltration of IS ideology which may worsen the situation in Myanmar. Incidentally, Rakhine has already been declared by IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as a region where jihad is to be conducted, from as early as 2014 when the so-called caliphate was first declared.

Foreign fighters who have previously set eyes on Marawi in southern Philippines will eventually turn their attention to Myanmar as the situation deteriorates. The Rohingya crisis may pave the way for future IS networks and its affiliates to collaborate with hardline Islamist groups in the region. The networking of the various extremist groups may soon grow if an IS Wilayah or region is to be established in Rakhine.

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