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## **Myanmar's Rohingya Conflict: Foreign Jihadi Brewing**

*By Jasminder Singh & Muhammad Haziq Jani*

### **Synopsis**

*The ethnic violence in Rakhine (Arakan) state in Myanmar is being complicated by the involvement of a jihadi group from the Indian subcontinent. The Harakah al-Yaqin's call for jihad has put the Rohingya at risk along with their cause for survival and self-identification.*

### **Commentary**

THE RECENT Maungdaw border attacks on the Myanmar police by Rohingya militants have brought a new dimension to the conflict between the Rohingya and the Buddhist majority. Foreign-based jihadists are taking advantage of the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar state's Rakhine state to pursue their cause.

This is reflected in two online publications of the jihadists. The first was in the April 2016 issue of Dabiq, the mouthpiece of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS aka ISIL), in which a Bangladeshi jihadist Abu Ibrahim called on others to join him to help the oppressed Rohingya and support them in every possible way. He also warned that ISIL militants in Bangladesh would begin launching operations within Myanmar in time.

The second publication belongs to Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) titled *Al-Balagh* which is aimed at Bengali speakers. Recently, it referenced the Muslims in Myanmar and the Philippines and urged other Muslims to join their fight against oppression.

Since these statements, a fighting force of between 40 to 250 men had been organised. They planned the attacks on Myanmar border police over three months.

They travelled by boat along a coastal route and were aided by “local Muslims” with unsubstantiated links to the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) at the time.

### **The Birth of *Harakah al-Yaqin***

Harakah al-Yaqin, or the Movement of Certainty, was born out of the competition between ISIL and AQIS to gain more recruits for their global terror networks. Some have long argued that the Rohingya would never resort to violent struggle because the poverty-stricken and stateless Muslims have neither the resources nor the physical strength – due to their abject conditions – to have and pursue a dream for autonomy and self-government.

On 9 October 2016, a Facebook page supposedly belonging to RSO posted on its Facebook page that it is “still alive” after it was accused of being responsible for the attacks, on the same day, against three border guard posts in Maungdaw Township. The attacks resulted in the deaths of nine policemen along with several of the attackers as well as the looting of “more than 50 guns and thousands of bullets”. The RSO had been blamed by the Myanmar government for other recent attacks and was believed to be dormant for some time until what appears to be a revival message on the Facebook page.

Two days later, on 11 October 2016, two videos surfaced on YouTube and were circulated in jihadist information circles. In the videos, what appeared to be militants were featured speaking in a mixture of Bengali, Arakanese and Arabic languages. According to these sources, the videos were recently taken by illegal immigrants from Bangladesh who managed to cross over to northern Arakan where the attacks on police posts on the border took place. Armed with AK-47 rifles, militants of unknown ethnicity stared into the camera, holding up their index finger in a pose identified with ISIL these days while their leader spoke to “Rohingya brothers around the world”.

This group of militants, now identified as belonging to Harakah al-Yaqin, wants foreign-based Rohingya and jihadists to join them in northern Arakan to fight Myanmar forces who were looking for them at that moment. They requested medicine and for foreign-based Rohingya to relinquish their love for the world and their fear of death and to sacrifice their lives. They also asked for religious leaders to issue fatwa to legitimise their violence.

### **Implications for Southeast Asia**

Harakah al-Yaqin has attracted the attention of jihadists in the rest of Southeast Asia, from Indonesia to the Philippines. Their videos have already circulated among Malay, Tagalog and Thai-speaking ISIL supporters and fighters on social media who believe that the self-styled mujahidin are seeking revenge for the injustices of the Myanmar military and that they had bribed the security forces for weapons. Every subsequent video or picture depicting the suffering of the Rohingya will only serve as fuel for jihadist propaganda. Furthermore, Harakah al-Yaqin has managed to turn its acts of violence into a security concern for Southeast Asia.

The non-refugee Rohingya-Bengali diaspora has been suspected of intentional or

unintentional involvement with Southeast Asian militant groups. Unverified reports on social media also suggest that Myanmar Muslims have made their way to the Philippines to link up with ISIL-affiliated terrorists. On 12 October 2016, the RSO Facebook page even uploaded an older video of the Abu Sayyaf group beheading a Filipino with the words “surprise after a long time from Arakan”.

Previously, in 2015, the Pakistani Taliban and Somali Al-Shabab had called on Muslims in Southeast Asia to come to the aid of the Rohingya. These references suggest that at the very least, there is an ideological nexus between jihadists in South Asia and Southeast Asia which may influence the shape of armed jihadism in Southeast Asia. After all, with the military decline of ISIS/ISIL in Iraq, returning jihadists would look for opportunities in the region to pursue their cause.

### **Policy Implications**

Regional security forces should no longer be only focussed on the Indonesian archipelago or the southern Philippines. They should also be on the lookout for militant-related activities and jihadist movements in northern Myanmar. The Myanmar government can no longer ignore the Rohingya situation and treat it as a Myanmar issue. The peace and security in Arakan, Myanmar and the wider Southeast Asian region is at risk.

All parties cannot afford the political dispute between the Rohingya and the Myanmar state to be hijacked by global jihadism. Should a jihadi insurgency break out along the borders of Bangladesh and Myanmar, helping the Rohingya in their struggle for survival and security will be critical for counter-insurgency success. Managing the relations between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar, especially along the country's western frontier will be a key factor in containing extremism and radical activists. The Rohingya crisis cannot be left to fester and remain unresolved as it could eventually affect the stability and security of the region.

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