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## **The Rohingya Crisis: Regional Security Implications**

*By Jasminder Singh and Muhammad Haziq*

### **Synopsis**

*After the border attacks in Maungdaw by Muslim militants, the Tatmadaw (Myanmar national army) has been accused of raping and killing Rohingya and burning their villages by the media and human rights groups. This has rekindled pro-Rohingya jihadist sentiments in the region as well as globally.*

### **Commentary**

ON 9 OCTOBER 2016, some 200 men crossed from Bangladesh into Myanmar's Rakhine (Arakan) State by boat to attack three border guard posts in Maungdaw Township. According to the Myanmar government, the attackers killed nine policemen and took away more than 50 guns and thousands of bullets. Days later, YouTube videos revealed the emergence of the Bangladesh-based Harakah al-Yaqin militant group which is also known as the Faith Movement.

The videos showed militants armed with AK-47 rifles, inviting "Rohingya brothers around the world" to join the fight. Both Faith Movement and Aqa Mul Mujahidin (AMM) were linked to the attacks by online and government sources; they are new groups that probably evolved out of jihadist networks in neighbouring Bangladesh. Since the attacks, the Tatmadaw has been accused of human rights abuses and heavy-handed tactics.

### **Jihadists for Rohingya**

As early as 10 October 2016, the New York Times reported that seven villagers were shot to death by Myanmar forces. Human Rights Watch has reported that the Tatmadaw has burned down 1,250 buildings. Reuters and Myanmar Times also

reported that “Burmese soldiers” had raped Rohingya women in the affected areas. Without access given to international observers, media and humanitarian aid providers, it is impossible to corroborate these claims.

According to an article by Time on 21 November 2016, the Myanmar Government said that “Muslim terrorists burned down the buildings themselves in an attempt to frame the army for abuse and claim international assistance”. The United Nations has weighed in to call for an investigation into allegations of human rights abuses in Myanmar.

Aside from bringing the world’s attention to the alleged human rights abuses, the counter-insurgency in Arakan has attracted the attention of extremists and jihadists from South and Southeast Asia. Online extremists in Indonesia have expressed their desire to mount “jihad” on behalf of the Rohingya, with some supporters hoping that the ‘mujahidin’ will be able to smuggle into Myanmar. The Rohingya crisis has become a rallying cry for jihad and surpasses in gravity when contrasted with issues such as the alleged blasphemy by the governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (“Ahok”). Some social media users in Indonesia have gone to the extent of declaring their readiness to be suicide bombers for the sake of the Rohingya. The Rohingya issue is fast developing into a security threat that would have an adverse impact on peace in the region.

### **Rohingya Crisis Triggering New Jihad**

In May 2013, following the 2012 Rohingya refugee crisis, Indonesians like Chep Hermawan of Gerakan Reformis Islam (GARIS), Jakfar Shidiq of Front Pembela Islam (FPI) and Bernard Abdul Jabbar of Komite Advokasi Muslim Rohingya-Arakan (KAMRA) decided that the only solution to the alleged violence against the Rohingya is by conducting jihad. At the time, Jakfar claimed that a thousand Muslim youths were ready to enter Myanmar to defend the Rohingya. He also claimed that by Ramadhan that year, there would be enough money – 10 billion Indonesian rupiah – to purchase weapons to equip his thousand-man expeditionary force.

Chep Hermawan is also the man responsible for sending several Indonesians to Syria to join the so-called Islamic State (IS) terrorist group; they included BahrumSyah, the leader of Katibah Nusantara in Syria. Also in 2013, two Rohingya leaders had travelled to Indonesia to meet hardline groups, apparently ‘shopping’ for “fighters, guns, cash and bomb-making instructors”, according to The Jakarta Post.

A similar jihadist flare-up is now developing in the wake of the latest atrocities reported. On 30 October, India Today reported that Pakistan-based militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jamatul Mujahidin and the Pakistani Taliban have given full assistance to the Rohingya militants. On 23 November 2016, Posmetro reported that Ehsanullah Ehsan, the spokesperson of Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, a faction of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) called on Myanmar youth to rise and carry out jihad, promising that his group’s training centre, expertise, trainers and personnel are all ready to support them. Ehsan stated that protests, marches and threats have little impact compared to terrorism.

Meanwhile, regional online extremists have begun pledging their support through

profile pictures with the IS flag and a hashtag saying “Pray for P\_A\_R\_I\_S” which refers to the conflict areas of Palestine, Africa, Rohingya, Iraq and Syria. The Indonesian online jihadist community even furnished their Facebook pages with various Rohingya-related propaganda posts and pictures, including a map which provides a possible travel route for potential Indonesian jihadists to enter Myanmar via Aceh. In addition, Muhammad Wanndy, a Malaysian IS fighter linked to the Puchong grenade attack, called on his supporters to prove that they are not keyboard warriors by killing any Buddhist-Myanmar person they may find in Malaysia or Indonesia.

## **Strategic Failure**

The Tatmadaw may not have expected that reports of their alleged human rights abuses would become fodder for jihadi recruitment. This emerging security threat towards Myanmar may ripple across the region. In August 2013, a bomb exploded in the Ekayana Buddhist Vihara in Jakarta, injuring three people: the bomb attack was in response to the sectarian conflict in Myanmar. In November that year, there was a failed plot to bomb the Myanmar embassy to avenge the killing of Rohingya Muslims.

It is not certain whether Tatmadaw’s alleged latest harsh measures were a result of its flawed threat assessment. Firstly, the details of the attack, particularly the amphibious border-crossing of the Faith Movement from Bangladesh to Myanmar, should point to foreign terrorist networks across the border, where the Bangladeshi government has been, according to the Indian Express, complacent in handling the emerging terrorist threat. The Faith Movement’s videos were uploaded almost immediately after the border attacks on their group’s YouTube and Islamic State (IS)- and Al-Qaeda(AQ)-affiliated Telegram channels.

Again, this points to the more affluent, tech-savvy extremist communities that are growing in South Asia. The Tatmadaw has inadvertently allowed the media to frame their counter-insurgency in a way that fuels jihadist propaganda, despite the Rohingya cause being featured in IS and AQ magazines earlier, before the crisis began. Considering that there may be significant foreign involvement in the emergence of the Faith Movement and AMM, defeating these jihadist groups which are thriving on the back of the Rohingya crisis alone may not be sufficient as more could easily be formed to replace them or to pick up from where they have left off.

## **Regional Security Considerations**

Rather than appearing to be the antagonists, the Myanmar government and security forces would have done better by securing its borders, addressing Rohingya’s citizenship status and grievances, and working with the Rohingya as a strategic partner to alert the authorities of terrorist or insurgent activities. According to Myanmar’s Ministry of Information, interrogations revealed that the detainees were “forced to attend terrorist training” and “threatened to be killed” if they refuse. This further emphasises that there may have been an opportunity to win over the Rohingya.

Beyond security issues along the northern borders of Myanmar, Southeast Asian countries must be vigilant. Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand have significant

Rohingya refugee populations. These countries must guard against the possible recruitment or radicalisation of the refugees. It would be unfortunate if these refugees, in their desperation, become members of terrorist organisations or commit terrorist acts in their host countries.

Beyond this, a long-term solution is urgently required to address the plight of the Rohingya minority. Their long-standing grievances and allegations of human rights abuses against them will have to be looked into. The alternative is more internal unrest, massive displacement of Rohingya, and foreign jihadist intervention.

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