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Plight of the Rohingya: Fuelling Muslim Assertiveness

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

The plight of Myanmar's persecuted Rohingya minority is becoming the Muslim world's latest rallying call. It has also become a new arena for the multiple rivalries. Calls for military intervention on behalf of the Rohingya reflect efforts by competing Muslim states and non-state forces to be seen as defenders of a community under attack.

Commentary

THE PLIGHT of Myanmar's persecuted Rohingya minority is becoming the Muslim world's latest rallying call, emulating the emotional appeal of the Palestinians in the second half of the 20th century. It has also become an arena for the Muslim world's multiple rivalries. Calls for military intervention on behalf of the Rohingya reflect efforts by competing Muslim states and non-state forces to be seen as defenders of a community under attack.

They also echo a greater assertiveness of Muslim states amid perceptions of waning American power as well as a jihadist effort to reposition themselves in the wake of the demise of Islamic State's territorial base in Iraq and Syria.

Assertive Muslim States

To be sure, Muslim states are unlikely to marshal an expeditionary force capable of intervening in Myanmar. Nonetheless, calls for action signal thinking especially among bitter Middle Eastern rivals, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Iran, that favours Muslim states projecting an independent military force.

That thinking is reinforced by concerns about expansion of jihadist groups beyond the Middle East into regions like Southeast Asia and worry that the militants will gain an

upper hand in projecting themselves as the true defenders of the faith compared to Muslim governments who do little more than pay lip service and at best provide humanitarian relief.

Beyond Middle Eastern rivalries and competition with militants for hearts and minds, the plight of the Rohingya could complicate Pakistan's rejection of US pressure to halt support for select extremist groups. It could also put it at odds with China that has backed the Myanmar government, and potentially move Chinese suppression of its Uighur minority in the province of Xinjiang into the Muslim firing line.

Iranian Deputy Parliament Speaker Ali Motahar this week raised the bar by calling on the Muslim world to form a Muslim expeditionary force to go to the rescue of the Rohingya. Calling on Muslims to set up a NATO-like joint military force that can intervene in such situations, Motahar said the crimes of the government of Myanmar will not be halted without using military force.

The deputy speaker's remarks were at the same time a stab at Iran's arch rival, Saudi Arabia, which had initiated the trend towards greater Muslim military assertiveness with the creation two years ago of a 37-nation military alliance commanded by a Riyadh-based retired Pakistani general.

Mohsen Rezaee, the secretary of Iran's Expediency Council and former chief commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards, sought to further put the Saudis on the spot by calling on Iran, Turkey, Syria and Iraq to establish an Army of the Prophet. Predominantly Sunni Muslim Turkey would provide the alliance its non-sectarian credentials.

Calls for Rohingya Aid

The Rohingya question, however, is complicated by the complexity of Muslim identity in Myanmar. To the vast majority of Myanmar people, they are exercising their democratic will in supporting Aung San Suu Kyi and the military against the Rohingya. To a large number of today's Myanmar people, Muslims in Myanmar comprise four groups:

- > those who were brought in or welcomed by the ancient Arakanese rulers as praetorian guards;
- > those who came to "Burma" during the time of the Mughals in India and those remnants of the Mughal empire when the latter collapsed eventually;
- > those who worked for the British colonial administration or came as manual workers during the time of British India and settled in Burma; and
- > those from Chittagong and frontier areas who moved into the Rakhine region during the time of East Pakistan or when East Pakistan broke with West Pakistan; and those who harbour support for Pakistan even though East Pakistan has become Bangladesh today.

The last category is not accepted in Myanmar by the Muslims and non-Muslims. This category forms the core of what is described as the Rohingya today.

So far, competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, when it comes to the Rohingya issue, seems a battle between paper tigers. The two countries are each other's match in rhetoric and lack of deeds. As a result, accusations by Myanmar that Muslim countries are supporting Rohingya militants may be less targeted at Saudi Arabia and Iran and more at Pakistan and Turkey; Ankara has delivered aid to Rohingya fleeing into Bangladesh and described the crackdown as a genocide.

Further Complexity

Myanmar press reports quoted Bangladesh and Indian intelligence as having intercepted two phone calls between Hafiz Tohar, a leader of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) that sparked the crackdown with attacks in late August on Myanmar security forces, and an alleged operative of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's main intelligence agency, as well as a third call with an alleged representative of Islamic State (IS).

The reports suggested that the ARSA attacks were timed to follow a report by a group headed by former UN Secretary General Kofi Anan that warned Myanmar risked fuelling "extremism" if it did not lift restrictions on the freedom of movement and right to citizenship of its Rohingya minority.

There was no independent confirmation of the press reports nor was it immediately clear what interest Pakistan would have in destabilising Myanmar and causing Bangladesh heartburn. That is not to say that there are no links between the Rohingya militants and Pakistan as well as Saudi Arabia.

ARSA leaders are believed to have roots in Saudi Arabia, to have been trained in Pakistan, and gained experience in Afghanistan. ARSA, nonetheless, insists that it has no ties to militants outside Rakhine state and that its aim is to protect the Rohingya rather than wage global jihad.

Geopolitical Implications

Allegations of a Pakistani link comes at a time that China is discreetly debating its hands-off approach to Pakistani links to militancy. China has so far shielded Islamabad by vetoing UN Security Council designation of Masood Ashar, the fugitive leader of an anti-Indian group, as a terrorist. China has also defended Pakistan against US criticism.

The Rohingya issue could swing the pendulum in the Chinese debate. China, like India, has invested in Myanmar infrastructure. The last thing China wants is to be on the receiving end of inflamed Muslim public opinion that embraces the plight of the Rohingya and targets supporters of the government. That is even truer given China's Achilles heel: brutal suppression of basic rights of the Uighurs, a Turkic Muslim group in Xinjiang.

China's massive energy imports and huge infrastructure investments in the Muslim world as part of its Belt and Road Initiative have so far spared it criticism of its crackdown in Xinjiang that targets the Uighur's religious identity. That could change if the plight of the Rohingya becomes the Muslim world's new rallying cry.

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