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IS Entry into Rakhine Conflict: Urgency in Nation-Building

By Jasminder Singh & Muhammad Haziq Jani

SYNOPSIS

*The entry of the IS affiliate in Myanmar, *Katibah al-Mahdi fi Bilad al-Arakan*, could potentially intensify communal violence in Rakhine State. Myanmar's long-term solution lies in nation-building, which must be intensified in the new year.*

COMMENTARY

IS' EARLY attempts to insert itself into the communal conflict in Rakhine seemed to have manifested, at best, in tenuous support for the Rohingya; it referenced the need for jihad in Myanmar. In June 2014, when self-proclaimed caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi [announced](#) the so-called Islamic State (IS) in his speech that also called for jihad in Myanmar, he promised revenge for atrocities committed against Muslims.

In 2016, the *amir* of IS affiliate in Bangladesh (or IS Bengal) Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif [reiterated](#) the call for jihad, viewing Bangladesh as a stepping stone to Myanmar. Other pro-IS groups in Bangladesh also [called for jihad](#) in Myanmar to support the Rohingya, including key IS affiliate Neo-Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh.

Rise of ARSA

Such calls to jihad in Myanmar were also sounded by [pro-IS groups](#) in Pakistan and India, such as the Lashkar-e-Toiba and Indian Mujahidin, as well as IS supporters in Southeast Asia. Unlike other pockets of IS' global network, these calls were not immediately followed up by the formation of an area-specific unit. Despite the capabilities of IS' network in South and Southeast Asia, IS' footprints in Myanmar following these calls for jihad were negligible.

During this period, the [Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army](#) (ARSA) was the focal point

of militancy in the long-standing Rohingya conflict. Led by Ataullah Abu Ammar Jununi, ARSA was formed after the 2012 Rakhine State riots and first made itself known as *Harakah al-Yaqin* (Faith Movement). The group reportedly received funding and training from Al-Qaeda-linked networks in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

ARSA conducted its first attacks on Myanmar border posts along the Bangladesh border in October 2016; it continued to target Myanmar security forces in a series of reprisals for the Myanmar military's "clearance operations", which resulted in the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis.

ARSA's raids on Myanmar's security forces (police and military) had largely been asymmetrical, suffering heavy losses in order to obtain weapons and ammunition. International attention focused on the Myanmar army's reported human rights abuses in its treatment of the uninvolved Rohingya population.

To position itself better in the conflict, ARSA insists that it is "[defending](#)" the Rohingya population and that it is a secular group as opposed to an Islamist one linked to a transnational terrorism network. It [abandoned](#) its Arabic name for ARSA to this effect.

New Group: Katibah al-Mahdi of Arakan

In early November 2020, a new jihadist group in Rakhine, *Katibah al-Mahdi fi Bilad al-Arakan* (Brigade of al-Mahdi in the Arakan State) represented by its spokesperson Abu Lut al-Muhajir, made *bai'ah* (oath of allegiance) to IS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi.

The group's name referenced [al-Mahdi](#), an eschatological, prophesied saviour of Muslims that IS once claimed to be in the service of. Several possibilities could be surmised from this development.

First, given that the oath was published in IS' mouthpiece for the Indian subcontinent, *Sawt al-Hind* ("The Voice of Hind"), *Katibah al-Mahdi* could potentially seek to coordinate its activities with groups operating in India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

Second, with "al-Muhajir" (the Emigrant) appended to his name, *Katibah al-Mahdi's* leader and members could be emigres from the Middle East or other parts of South Asia or Rohingya who had travelled to other parts of South Asia for training and are now returning.

It is also possible that Abu Lut himself, and perhaps some other members of the group, could be non-Rohingya IS supporters from India, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh.

Broader Shift in Ideology

In this latter scenario, the Rakhine conflict could serve as a training ground or outlet for IS supporters and add to IS' "harvest", a term it uses to [measure](#) the operations conducted by its fighters and supporters globally.

Third, the use of the term *katibah* (military unit or brigade) suggests that the group likely comprised a large number of fighters and could be more organised. This would

follow the trend of similarly named IS units either based in or outside Syria such as Katibah al-Bittar al-Libi, Nusantara, Macina, Yarmouk, Aqsa and Khaybar.

The timing of the *Katibah al-Mahdi's bai'ah* could also point to a few issues. Understandably, a new unit in Myanmar would be in line with IS Central's desire to expand its global footprint having lost its territories in Iraq and Syria.

However, it could also explain a broader shift in the ideology of Rohingya militants away from ethno-nationalism, given that ARSA's efforts had only resulted in horrific reprisals from the Myanmar army and that the international community could not resolve the humanitarian crisis.

Addressing Root Causes: Nation-Building

Notwithstanding the current dearth of information about the newly emerged IS affiliate, the security implications of the emergence of *Katibah al-Mahdi* are potentially significant not just for Myanmar but both South and Southeast Asia. The use of the term 'Katibah' suggests a commitment to military operations to achieve its goals.

At a time of the COVID-19 pandemic and where national resources are focused on overcoming the health and related economic crisis, the rise of groups such as *Katibah al-Mahdi* clearly poses a greater challenge for Myanmar.

It is also a signal that the military or violent option could be the greater focus, either by Rohingya or in the name of the Rohingya for what this minority had endured in Myanmar since 2012.

This will up the ante and more violence may be expected in the largely Buddhist-Bamar conflict with the Muslim Rohingya, with their attendant implications for regional security.

COVID-19: New Dimension to Conflict

In a COVID-19 centric environment, this will add a new dimension of conflict.

The competition among transnational groups such as Al Qaeda and IS is also likely to be intensified as both try to carve out an area of control and claim a territory to champion, not just Rohingya-related causes but also to inspire other regional militant groups in the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 situation.

The surfacing of *Katibah al-Mahdi* may also worsen relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, not just in Myanmar but also in Bangladesh, India, and possibly Southeast Asia. Aside from military targets, the IS affiliate could potentially attack local Buddhists and Hindus.

If this happens, it would worsen interfaith relations, particularly among communities already tensed by real and perceived fears of Islamophobia and faith-based nationalism. A long-term solution is to address the root causes of the oppression of the Rohingya in Myanmar by looking beyond the security lens to giving support for nation-building.

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