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## **Insurgency or Terrorism? A New Front in Myanmar**

After the fall of Mosul and Raqqa, Daesh is looking for fertile ground where the swift return of foreign fighters or a transfer of militants could ignite the jihadist threat. Myanmar risks being next on the list of potential new fronts against transnational jihadism – after North and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Sinai, the Balkans, the Caucasus and Indonesia. Myanmar's Rakhine state is currently the site of deadly clashes between Muslims and the majority Buddhists. The state is home to more than a million Rohingya Muslims, and tensions have existed for years. Now violence has turned into a phenomenon that is qualitatively different from anything in recent decades, and which seriously threatens the prospects of stability and development in the country and the whole region.

The deadly attacks on Border Guard Police (BGP) bases in Rakhine on 9-10 October 2016, and a serious escalation on 12 November 2016, marked the beginning of a full-scale Muslim insurgency, to which Myanmar's military has responded brutally. Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi has rejected UN allegations of atrocities on civilians, justifying military operations with the argument that the country is facing terrorism. What are the root causes of Myanmar's crisis? And how serious is the terrorist threat there, after one year of counter-insurgency operations?

An early mujahidin rebellion erupted in Rakhine in 1948, a few months after Myanmar's independence, demanding political autonomy for Rohingya Muslims, and it was crushed between 1954 and 1961. In 1974, inspired by the rise of pan-Islamist movements in the world, the Rohingya Patriotic Front armed group was formed from remnants of earlier failures, but it was considered defunct as an armed group by the end of the 1990s. A new group, Harakah al-Yaqin (HaY), emerged in the early 2000s. It was established and is overseen by a committee of some twenty Rohingya émigrés, with their headquarters in Mecca and Medina, and which is well-connected in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. It advocated a non-violent pursuit of Rohingya Muslims' rights, until the situation deteriorated. In 2015, Rohingya Muslims saw long-standing restrictions on access to citizenship worsened by the disenfranchising of all Muslims without citizenship cards. The same year, migration routes from Myanmar to Malaysia and Bangladesh were shut down, as the consequence of a regional operation aimed at stopping human trafficking. This caused further despair among Rohingya Muslims, many of whom saw migration as their only chance of a better future. Economic grievances, ethnic marginalisation, and political resentment fuelled the armed uprising of October-November 2016.

The attacks reflected an unprecedented level of planning. Myanmar's troops and BGP responded with what they called "area clearance operations" – denounced by some as "ethnic cleansing." A further counter-insurgency measure established local militias, sometimes described as "vigilante mobs", committed to scorched-earth operations. This latter measure created an additional security problem because arming Buddhist militias could lead the HaY, which has so far avoided attacking Buddhist

civilians, to view them as combatants, and therefore targets. The repression is also causing a refugee crisis in Bangladesh where some 800,000 displaced Rohingya Muslims now live in camps in desperate conditions. Inevitably, this is fertile ground for jihadism.

It is important to stress that HaY's approach and objectives are not linked to transnational jihadism. HaY's stated aim is not to impose Sharia, but rather to stop the persecution of Rohingya Muslims and secure their rights and greater autonomy as Myanmar citizens. This identifies HaY as an insurgent, not a terrorist, group. Nonetheless, the group has sought religious legitimacy for its attacks and has gained it by repeated fatwas of senior Rohingya and foreign clerics. More importantly, the Rohingya Muslim cause has captivated the attention of Islamists. Calls for jihad in defence of the Muslim minority by both Al Qaeda and Daesh leaders prompt fears of a new front against jihadists in Southeast Asia. With parallel ethno-religio-nationalist insurgencies in southern Thailand and the southern Philippines, the Rakhine conflict is the ideal ground for Daesh to collaborate with regional groups. Furthermore, a large number of Rohingya migrants in neighbouring countries and the refugees in Bangladesh are a potential pool of recruits for Daesh.

Myanmar's government, therefore, faces a huge challenge. The emergence of the well-organised and apparently well-funded HaY group has been a game changer in this local ethnic-political confrontation. A dangerous spiral of attacks and a disproportionate military response is likely to increase popular radicalisation and to provide channels that did not previously exist for terrorism.

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