

An Opening for Jihadists in Southeast Asia

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Myanmar's growing humanitarian crisis is fueling calls for jihad by global extremist groups and threatening to draw Middle East and Asian fighters into a new front.

The Myanmar military's crackdown on the Rohingya, a mostly Muslim minority group, has emerged as a major policy dilemma for the Trump administration as it seeks to calm the Middle East and engage the world's Muslim communities. The Department of State has sent nearly \$100 million in aid to the Rohingya so far this year in a bid to stop what U.S. officials believe has been an act of ethnic cleaning by Myanmar troops. But the Trump administration is weighing its tough words with its hope to bolster Myanmar's civilian leaders, headed by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

The diplomatic balance has been difficult to set. "We cannot be afraid to call the actions of the Burmese authorities what they appear to be -- a brutal, sustained campaign to cleanse the country of an ethnic minority," U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley told the UN Security Council on September 28.

Islamists Take Up the Rohingya Cause

On September 30, an Egyptian militant group aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood claimed responsibility for a small bombing at Myanmar's embassy in Cairo, an indication of how the Asian conflict has attracted Middle East militants. Leaders of global terrorist organizations, including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, have sought to rally their supporters behind a much wider campaign against the Myanmar government and military, which the United Nations and United States charge have engaged in ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya. The leaders of Turkey, Iran, and Qatar have called the crisis in Myanmar an assault on Islam.

These terrorist groups have defined Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, as the next great battleground for Islamists worldwide, following the wars in Syria and Iraq. Myanmar's predominantly Buddhist military is accused of persecuting the Rohingya in an effort to reduce the country's Muslim population. Most of the Rohingya live in the state of Rakhine, which abuts Myanmar's border with Muslim-majority Bangladesh. The UN estimates that more than 500,000 Rohingya have fled into Bangladesh over the past month to escape the violence.

"We call upon all *mujahid* brothers in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines to set out for Burma to help our Muslim brothers, and to make the necessary preparations -- training and the like -- to resist the oppression," al-Qaeda's senior leadership said in a statement issued in September. In a separate statement, al-Qaeda's shura council said: "The Buddhists occupied [Rakhine], from which Islam spread to Burma over two hundred years ago, and changed its name to Myanmar, and then they abused its Muslim people and tortured them."

U.S. Policy Dilemma

Myanmar has emerged as a serious policy dilemma for the Trump administration, which has faced spiraling foreign policy crises since taking office in January. Last week, Haley called for UN member states to impose an arms embargo on Myanmar's military and hinted that the United States and Europe could impose new economic sanctions on the country. Many of the closest U.S. allies in the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia and Turkey, have called for the severing of all financial assistance to Myanmar's government. Indeed, Haley's comments marked a U-turn for U.S. policy toward Myanmar from the Obama administration. President Barack Obama scaled back sanctions on Myanmar in an attempt to normalize relations and support a transition to civilian rule under the Nobel laureate Suu Kyi.

Trump administration officials have said they are seeking to support democracy in Myanmar and build up the country as a potential counterweight to China's growing power in Southeast Asia. But they say Myanmar needs to take quick steps to dampen the conflict in Rakhine, which they fear could spill over into Bangladesh. U.S. officials have also said they are mindful of the potential for the conflict to attract jihadists from the Middle East, Chechnya, and Southeast Asia, potentially further destabilizing Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The current crisis surged when, in late August, Myanmar's military escalated its operations in Rakhine after a terrorist organization, called the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, attacked a string of police posts in the province. Myanmar's government has defined its campaign solely as a counterterrorism operation, a claim the Trump administration is not accepting. Haley likewise called for the cessation of military operations in Rakhine and

the opening up of the province to international aid groups.

Erdogan, Rouhani into the Fray

Middle East leaders, particularly Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, have seized on the Myanmar crisis as evidence of the Western and UN failure to defend Muslims worldwide. The Turkish leader sent his wife, Emine, and foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, to Bangladesh in September to visit Rohingya refugees and to distribute humanitarian aid. Erdogan has also rallied members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to lend their support for the Rohingya.

Iranian president Hassan Rouhani has also rallied to support the Rohingya after facing pressure from hardline Muslim and student groups to act more aggressively on the issue. One of Tehran's powerful political blocs, the Popular Front of Islamic Revolution Forces -- which challenged Rouhani in presidential elections this year -- has said Suu Kyi, Myanmar's civilian leader, should be stripped of her Nobel Prize due to her failure to stop the violence in Rakhine. "A remarkable point about the brutal murder of Muslims in Myanmar is that these crimes occur in a country [whose] political system is headed by the person who received the Nobel Peace Prize," the Front said in an open letter in September.

Prospects

Myanmar's government is bracing for possibly more violence against its embassies in the Middle East and Muslim-majority countries. In September, a Molotov cocktail was thrown at the country's embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia. Police in Pakistan have sharply increased security around Myanmar's diplomatic missions in Islamabad following rallies where protestors threatened to attack housing compounds.

Bangladeshi officials said they have yet to see foreign fighters mobilizing to support the Rohingya, but they acknowledge the threat exists. In recent decades, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have seized on civil wars in Afghanistan, the Balkans, and Syria to further their political agendas and swell their ranks. "Extremist groups always take advantage of instability to promote their agendas," said a senior Bangladeshi official, who called Myanmar a "man-made disaster."

South and Southeast Asian extremist groups are seen as the most likely to try to enter the Myanmar conflict. Bangladeshi migrant workers are prominent in Malaysia and India. And al-Qaeda affiliates in the region have trained Rohingya fighters in recent years for jihad in conflicts in Afghanistan and Syria, according to regional terrorism experts. "Indonesians, Malaysians and others [are] seeking to assist the Rohingya in Myanmar through contacts with Bangladesh-based Rohingya groups," wrote the authors of a report for the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict earlier this year.

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