

MUSLIM MINORITY AND JIHAD: THE CASES OF ROHINGYAS AND UYGHURS

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Abstract: The minority Uyghurs in Xinjiang province, China, and Rohingyas in Rakhine State, Myanmar are facing civil and violent persecution by authoritarian governments. These minority ethnic groups are also Muslims. As the world watches in condemnation, there is curiously little traction by Islamist jihadist groups in these countries. That is not to say that their influence is absent in the regions: al-Qaeda in South Asia is taking advantage of the Rohingya refugee crisis and the so-called Islamic State was able to attract Uyghurs to their doomed caliphate. Nevertheless, this paper seeks to understand why jihadists failed to make many inroads in these places when compared to the civil wars in Iraq and Syria. It is important that we understand this phenomenon in order to undermine the influence of jihadists in other parts of the world. Using the framework of ethnic minorities living in Dar al-'Ahd (House of Treaty) this paper argues that the governments in China and Myanmar are oppressing a selective group of Muslims and thus making it difficult to build the case that they are at war with Muslims in general. This argument is based on the classical understanding of jihadism, which is to fight against foreign intrusion in Muslim territories, whereas the call to jihad against one's government is a much more recent and controversial innovation. Therefore, despite different types of persecution by the Chinese and Burmese governments, and the different responses by the locals, there is a comparable relative absence of jihadist movements explained by the limited repression of specific Muslim minorities by governments that have relations with other Muslim countries.

Keywords: Muslim minority, ethnic conflict, persecution, jihad, terrorism, Uyghurs, Rohingyas

Introduction

Islam and extremism have unfortunately become almost synonymous in contemporary media, with no shortage of reason as can be seen from the beheading of a French schoolteacher in October 2020 by a Chechen Muslim who had contact with jihadists in Syria.¹ Orientalism also plays its role in influencing Western views on Islam, which is slowly being rectified with anti-Islamophobia coming into mainstream consciousness. Without downplaying the existence of terrorists among Muslims, we need to also understand the plight of minority Muslims living

under oppression in different parts of the world. More importantly, there is a need to make sense of the oppressive treatment received by Muslims at the hands of their government without falling prey to a discourse of victimhood that could attract Muslims towards violent reaction in the name of religion, commonly and incorrectly known as jihad. The cases of the Rohingyas and Uyghurs show that not all cases of oppression are viewed within the framework of radical jihadism, and this is a good thing to ensure peace and justice for a sustainable future.

Muslims living in Rakhine State in Myanmar and those living in Xinjiang in China have been made to feel like second-class citizens in comparison to the majority Buddhist population in Myanmar and ethnic Han in China. The Rohingyas are not only facing violent persecution, but they are also not considered citizens at all since 1982 when the new Citizenship Law denies them full membership of the nation among the 135 acknowledged ethnicities in Myanmar.² The Uyghurs on the other hand, while recognised as citizens, are facing forced assimilation into Chinese culture. Living conditions of the Rohingyas and Uyghurs have unfortunately worsened following violent riots in these countries following separate rape accusations. In Myanmar, riots started in 2012 after a group of Rohingya men were accused of raping a Rakhine woman.³ Similarly, the violence in Xinjiang in 2009 followed accusations of two Han women being raped by six Uyghur men.⁴ Underlying these accusations is of course ongoing ethnic and sectarian tension that has never evanesced.

In Myanmar, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked and killed 13 security personnel in 2016 which then continued to become a protracted conflict. In Xinjiang, we saw the Urumqi riots which killed 197 mostly Han Chinese and injured another 1700 in July 2009. The rioting by these Muslims became a pretext for harsh state reactions that led to brutality and eventual murders. In the years since, there has been a refugee crisis affecting Myanmar's neighbours due to the Rohingyas fleeing from continued repression and persecution by the state. In Xinjiang, the Chinese government has been accused of human rights abuses against Uyghur Muslims in institutions that the state officially calls 'Vocational Education and Training Centres' that cropped up in 2014 but officially acknowledged in 2018⁵.

In Islam, the concept of jihad can be translated into exertion or struggle. While the greater jihad refers to the inner struggle to lead a virtuous life, the lesser jihad refers to defensive warfare to protect Muslims.⁶ Because the medieval Near East was a place of warfare between communities based upon religious loyalties, jihad took upon a religious overtone, although it was mainly a matter of national security.⁷ Unfortunately, the concept of jihad has been abused and misused by certain groups of Muslims to justify offensive warfare in the name of justice and liberation such as by the Taliban against inefficient governments (both in 1996

and 2021), and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda against the western far enemy. On the other hand, jihad as a rallying cry for nationalist purposes may be justified against foreign invasion and occupation as defensive warfare according to the classical understanding of jihad such as by the Afghan Mujahideen against the Soviet occupation, and by Palestinians fighting against the illegal occupation of their land for more than half a century that has led to a system of apartheid.⁸ The cases of the Rohingyas and Uyghurs can easily be co-opted by jihadists, but there seems to be an absence of direct linkage between ethnic insecurity and the successful formation of jihadist movements among these minority Muslims.

While there is literature covering the plight of the Uyghurs and Rohingyas separately, there is little written on the comparison between both cases despite the similarities. Kichmann did write about both crises, which the author considers as "pressing humanitarian crises",⁹ based on a human rights discourse by Makau Mutua. On the other hand, this paper seeks to understand why jihad as a framework used by terrorists does not seem to bring in thousands of Muslims into Rakhine or Xinjiang to 'fight' against oppressive governments. This paper will argue that using the concept of Dar al-'Ahad, the call for jihad against one's own government—even a non-Muslim government—is not incredibly attractive because of the established international system in which countries work together in different settings either bilaterally or in international organisations. Additionally, the persecution is ethnic-based instead of against the Muslim population in general. Although classical jihadism discusses defensive warfare against oppression as part of jihad, the discourse on jihad is currently not limited to war but can also include humanitarian intervention and multilateral approaches, especially when faced with an authoritarian government that may inflict more damage on the Muslim population.

This paper will proceed with a general discussion on the persecution and oppression of ethnic minorities focusing on South and Southeast Asia, followed by a discussion on jihadism from classical to modern interpretation. In doing so, there is no avoiding discussing the concepts of Dar al-Islam and Dar al-Harb and their relevance to China and Myanmar today. From this discussion, the article introduces its analytical framework to explain the relatively muted response by jihad movements in Myanmar and China. Following that, the cases will be analysed by looking at the separate response within China and Myanmar to explain that despite different approaches, the outcome is the same which is a weak attempt by certain groups to wage jihad. The conclusion follows on why jihadists did not successfully penetrate these places in a full-blown manner and what lessons can be learned for the future of Muslim relations with non-Muslim governments.

Persecution and Oppression of Ethnic Minorities

Minorities in a country could include any diverse social identities including ethnicity, religion, sexuality, gender, class, and even political opinion. While diversity is common in most countries, social cleavages could lead to discrimination and persecution, especially under authoritarian rule where there is little bargaining space among the groups.¹⁰ As most studies on political violence have shown, ethnic heterogeneity interacts with economic underdevelopment and authoritarianism to produce violence within a nation.¹¹ Of the civil wars following World War II, ethnic conflicts account for more than half.¹² Nonetheless, it must be noted that civil war is not correlated to ethnic fractionalization of multiple small groups, but with ethnic polarization where a few large groups compete with one another.¹³

Although ethnic identities are based on social attributes that may be more difficult to alter, it does not have to be remarkable in the larger scheme of a nation.¹⁴ Mousseau thus concludes that political violence is more potent in democratic multi-ethnic nations without strong democratic norms and institutions where scarcity amplifies differences among groups.¹⁵ Similarly, Fjelde argues that among authoritarian states, multi-party autocracies and military regimes are more likely to face armed conflict because of the state's inability to co-opt different minority groups.¹⁶ Peace is difficult to achieve through military intervention in a weak state where differences among ethnic groups are prominent.¹⁷ For half a century since 1962, Myanmar was under military rule which then resumed in 2021, making it more susceptible to insurrection compared to China, which is a single-party regime with the institutional capacity to suppress minority groups. Unfortunately, these acts of violence by a supergroup confirm the fear of a minority group which then leads to further ethnic polarization.¹⁸ Persecution of minorities may be defined as violence or discrimination against any minority group, depriving them of political rights, and indirectly forcing them to choose whether to assimilate, leave, or accept life as second-class citizens.¹⁹ Genocide is legally defined according to the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide as the act of murder against specific people for their identity. On the other hand, ethnic cleansing, which came into the lexicon during the Bosnian war, is an unofficial umbrella term that may include large-scale massacres as well as acts of terror to encourage certain people to leave a territory.²⁰ In other words, force or intimidation is used to make a nation more homogenous. Instead of the state using its resources for purpose of assimilation such as in China, ethnic cleansing appears to be the strategy of the military regime in Myanmar.

Every one of the most significant nationalist and ethnic conflicts that have

taken place in South and Southeast Asia has a lengthy and complicated history, with many of them being the lingering effects of European colonialism. In addition to the legacy left by colonial powers, large-scale population movements, challenges posed to secular states, and the forces of modernization are cited by Mir and Ahmed²¹ as contributing factors to the ethnic conflicts that occur in South Asia. Kosuta²², on the other hand, argued that immigration and colonial privileging may have been the cause of ethnic conflicts in Southeast Asia by looking at secessionist movements by Muslims in Myanmar, Thailand, and the Philippines. The magnitude of the threat that they posed to the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the states in which they were located is particularly remarkable.

Mukherjee²³ utilises a bottom-up method to reflect on the experiences of individuals who are directly influenced by ethnic conflicts. He investigates the roles that religion, race, and ethnicity play within ethnic conflicts. Conflicts have arisen as a result of the persecution of ethnic minorities, such as the persecution of Muslims in Kashmir and Tamils in Sri Lanka. These conflicts put each country's internal security and stability in jeopardy. In a similar vein, the oppression of Muslims in Mindanao during the late 1990s exacerbated the conflict in Southeast Asia, which was only recently resolved with the 2019 establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. As the resolution in the Philippines, Ganguly and Macduff²⁴ outlined two primary strategies for resolving ethnic conflict in Asia: 1) long-term conflict resolution, which entailed bringing about the redressing of the fundamental causes of the conflict, and 2) short-term conflict management, which entailed the formation of a peace process. Unfortunately, development projects based on ethnicity have the potential to exacerbate existing strife. These endeavours have, in many instances, resulted in concrete advantages being brought to the parties affected. However, in other regards, the progress has been very unimpressive and confined to a small number of projects within the context of a wider pattern of subordination and dominance.²⁵ It is possible that the persecution and oppression of ethnic minorities throughout Asia are not as violent as it is in places like Iraq and Syria, where ISIS was active, for example. Regardless of the fact, violation of fundamental human rights of ethnic minorities should always be of concern. This includes the oppression of Muslim minorities. This article presents its argument against the necessity of jihad by situating it within the context of the persecution of minority ethnic groups instead of Muslims.

Jihad in Geopolitics

Jihad as a term has entered the vocabulary in previous decades due to

Muslim fighters who used religion as a justification to fight against their enemies. Traditionally, jihad can be divided into jihad *al-akbar* (the greater jihad) and jihad *al-asghar* (the lesser jihad). The greater jihad is the inner struggle of every Muslim against his or her own ego, or *nafs*, to achieve a higher degree of piety whereas the lesser jihad is to fight against the enemies of Islam such as the Kharijites which is a militant puritanical group that would later assassinate the fourth caliph, Ali, or in defence against foreign aggression. Based on classical interpretation, only persons of authority such as an Imam or Caliph may call for jihad, as opposed to individual citizens. One way to justify jihad is by using the framework that divides the world into realms called Dar al-Islam (House of Islam) and Dar al-Kufr (House of Disbelief). Dar al-Islam would be territories governed by Muslims whereas Dar al-Kufr would be those under the rule of non-Muslims. Khadduri explained that for a state to be part of the Islamic polity, it should only mean that there is freedom for Muslims to propagate their religion and so too for others to invite Muslims to their religion or worldview. Rejecting the Islamic state is akin to choosing to isolate from the world order because one is choosing not to allow the flow of debate from both sides.

Historically, the two realms were constantly at war with each other due to the need to expand territory for security reasons. As argued by Ahmad, there is a widespread belief that the relationship between these two domains is perpetual warfare. However, he insisted that in the current context, war is not the only option. The idea of Dar referring to territorial jurisdiction was most likely innovated by Islamic jurists to justify the expansionist desire of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates decades and hundreds of years after the time of Prophet Muhammad. By calling another territory land of the disbelievers, it created an opportunity for the Muslim army to go to war. Under royal patronage, religious scholars quoted selected Quranic verses that appear to abrogate Quranic injunctions for peace. For example, the Quranic verse “When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever you find them” is often misquoted in isolation when in fact it is immediately followed by “But if they repent and fulfil their devotional obligations and pay the zakat [the charitable tax on Muslims], then let them go their way, for God is forgiving and kind” (Quran 9:5). According to Khadduri, Islam rejects the idea of a secular war as unnecessary violence as it is based on human’s vengeful nature as opposed to upholding God’s laws which is the purpose of jihad. During the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, the jurists’ understanding of jihad was the authority’s attempt to assert control over the territory of Dar al-Islam against the possible use of violence by non-state entities. It is obvious that today’s jihadists are working outside of the classical understanding of jihad.

Classical Islamic jurists have discussed the fact that Dar al-Kufr may be further divided into Dar al-Harb for those that are at war with the Islamic state, and Dar

al-‘Ahd for those who accept a peace treaty in return for protection by the Islamic state. Dar al-‘Ahd used to act as a buffer state between Dar al-Islam and Dar al-Harb. History was made in 1535 when Francis I of France and Sulayman the Magnificent signed a treaty that brought peace and recognition of Christian and Muslim territorial jurisdiction. In other words, France became part of Dar al-‘Ahd. Today, all countries that have signed the Charter of the United Nations to pursue mutual world peace may be included within the domain of Dar al-‘Ahd. Where the Muslim world has peace with non-Muslim territories, coercion of any kind is not permitted as it is a punishable crime in Islam. Therefore, jihad is not to be taken lightly as a physical struggle against any disbeliever but only if, and when, non-Muslims decide to wage an all-out war against Muslims. The different responses by Muslims can be illustrated in Figure 1.

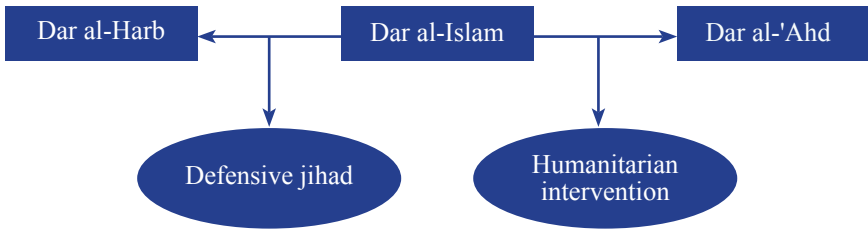


Figure 1: Responses by Dar al-Islam towards oppression done by Dar al-Harb and Dar al-‘Ahd

Therefore, 20th-century Muslim reformers such as Rashid Rida and Muhammad Abduh do not believe that jihad is an offensive war to spread Islam, but a defensive war against the intrusion of Muslim rights.²⁶ In fact, the defence of the right to political and spiritual freedom is accorded not just to Muslims, but also to Christians and Jews who accept Muslim rule.²⁷ It has been argued many times that Quranic verses on war and jihad must be understood within their context; according to Cavanaugh, offensive jihad is taken literally from the text, whereas defensive jihad considers the context.²⁸ Military intervention on moral grounds to protect and save Muslims from tyrannical and oppressive non-Muslim regimes is thus allowed according to several Muslim thinkers.²⁹ However, Dabbous and Islam argued that since the only justification has been a single verse in the Quran (verse 4:75) with no historical evidence, the justification to go to war against an oppressive regime is weak. Nevertheless, the duty to obey rules and regulations should not be conflated with seeing the leader as blameless. Mohammad argued that jihad against an oppressive Muslim ruler may be in the form of political revolution for a more democratic participation based on shariah.³⁰ The rise of transnational jihadism began to take shape in the 1980s when Salafi jihadists

were successful at calling for Muslim fighters from all over the world to take part in warfare against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. As a defensive war against a foreign superpower, the call for jihad against the Soviet Union during the Cold War resonated with Muslims and had credence. Unfortunately, this decade-long conflict was also the breeding ground for the Osama Bin Laden-led al-Qaeda which later committed the atrocities on September 11, 2001. Following the end of the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, the country fell into civil war. Crenshaw³¹ has argued that civil war is a necessary condition to breed foreign fighters, especially civil wars that brought in intervention from non-Muslim countries. Civil wars provide a setting for insurgents to build their capabilities, which in turn might attract the intervention of local authorities or even third-party countries. Unfortunately, “political-strategic” intervention (as opposed to humanitarian intervention) increases the likelihood of terrorism by the insurgents.³² By this token, the armed insurgency in Myanmar should have attracted jihadists to protect the Rohingyas, but that has not happened in any large measure.

More recently, al-Qaeda has been taking advantage of the grievances of the local population to promote its global objective to fight against the infidels and enemies of Islam. According to Kfir³³, this so-called ‘glocalism’ is a strategy by al-Qaeda that has been used against the Chinese state and the Myanmar Army for their role in endangering the lives of Muslims. Al-Qaeda, and ISIS more specifically, wanted to re-create the Islamic Caliphate of the past. However, it has been argued that Islam is an apolitical faith and that this exercise to create a Caliphate is not possible today³⁴ and so it reduces the credibility of these jihadists. Moreover, Bokhari and Senzai³⁵ argued that most Muslims do not accept al-Qaeda’s framework of jihadism as it has proven to create domestic chaos and international hostilities.

This paper adds to the literature by comparing the cases in Myanmar and China to come to an understanding of the reasons that jihadists have not been able to take advantage of the plight of minority Uyghurs and Rohingyas for mobilisation purposes. Although as ethnic minorities they are allegedly facing dire persecution and even ethnic cleansing, the paper argues that these Muslim minorities do not necessarily find themselves in the vortex of Islamic jihadist pull because they are neither facing a foreign threat nor severe restriction on practising Islam. Instead, what is happening in China and Myanmar is ethnic persecution by a majoritarian government that targets a specific minority group as opposed to the entire Muslim population. Despite the different political mobilization tactics by a global terrorist organization such as al-Qaeda, the outcome is still similar which is a relative absence of a large-scale Muslim jihadist movement in Myanmar and China.

Framework of Analysis

Based on the preceding discussion, this article believes that an investigation of the confluence of various elements is critical in offering a full understanding of the absence of jihad today. The case studies' national and geopolitical factors merit additional consideration. Concerning the absence of jihad, this article draws on the Dar al-Ahd discussion to suggest that there are alternative and more efficient approaches to address the problems of persecution and oppression of Muslim minorities. Therefore, this study's independent variables are 1) demographic and 2) geopolitical factors. The demographic component refers to whether Muslims in general or specific groups of Muslims were persecuted. If only certain groups of Muslims are barred from practising Islam, jihad is unnecessary. In contrast, the geopolitical component relates to whether the non-Muslim government has bilateral or multilateral relations with other Muslim governments. If they do, these countries are deemed as being part of Dar al-Ahd and must be dealt with through other measures such as diplomacy, sanctions, or peacekeeping forces.

The presence or absence of prominent jihadist movements in countries where Muslims are oppressed is the study's dependent variable. According to secondary and primary data gathered such as from Al-Qaeda's *Azan* magazine, while organisations such as Al-Qaeda issued calls for jihad in Myanmar, the appeal for jihad does not connect with the larger Muslim populace as there are other Muslims living outside of Rakhine that are free to practice the religion. Furthermore, Myanmar has relations with other Muslim countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia within ASEAN. This study employs Mill's method of agreement, which results in the same outcome for two cases—Myanmar and China—even though they are different in many other ways. As a result, the similarities between the cases would explain the conclusion.

Table 1 compares the differences between minority Uyghurs and Rohingyas, in government actions, and responses by the locals.

Uyghur	Rohingya
Turkic ethnic group	Indo-Aryan ethnic group
Roughly 11 million in Xinjiang	Approximately 500,000 in Myanmar
Recognized ethnic minority in China	Citizenship denied
Under a totalitarian single-party government	Under authoritarian military rule (with electoral democracy from 2011 until 2021)
Separatist and independent movements by locals since the 1990s	Armed insurrections by locals since the 1970s

Turkistan Independence Party (TIP) is a local extremist organisation operating since 1988.	Arakan Rohingya Salvation Party (ARSA) is a local insurgent group operating since 2013.
More than a million are allegedly in detention camps since 2015	Mass displacement of more than 740,000 people since 2017

Table 1: Comparison of Variables between Uyghur and Rohingya Muslims

Response to Ethnic Persecution

Rohingyas

The Rohingyas are a people comprising several Muslim minority groups living in Myanmar in the northern part of Rakhine State. Despite recognizing other Muslim minority groups, the Burmese government continues to assert that Rohingyas are Bangladeshi and do not deserve to be recognised as citizens. Unlike other Muslims in Myanmar who speak Burmese and have Burmese names, the Rohingyas speak a dialect of Bengali and have Muslim names, underscoring their differences from the majority. As a result, the Rohingyas' rights to education, employment and freedom of movement have been restricted since independence in 1948. The military has also carried out assimilationist policy and offensive attacks against the Rohingyas including mass murder, torture, and rape to a point that there are less than half a million Rohingyas living in Myanmar today, making it a clear case of ethnic cleansing.³⁶ Due to the conflict, the Rohingyas formed insurgent groups such as the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) in the 1980s, which is now defunct.

Following the 2012 ethnic riot in Rakhine State, some Buddhist extremists have also been brazened in attacks against the Rohingyas. According to Human Rights Watch,³⁷

Following sectarian violence between Arakanese and Rohingya in June 2012, government authorities destroyed mosques, conducted violent mass arrests, and blocked aid to displaced Muslims. On October 23, after months of meetings and public statements promoting ethnic cleansing, Arakanese mobs attacked Muslim communities in nine townships, razing villages and killing residents while security forces stood aside or assisted the assailants. Some of the dead were buried in mass graves, further impeding accountability.

In response, ARSA, formerly known as Harakat al-Yaqin, was formed in 2013. Similar to some Uyghur leaders such as Zahideen Yusuf, some ARSA leaders were also trained by jihadists who fought in Afghanistan.³⁸ Despite its best effort, ARSA has fewer than 600 active members, again showing the lacklustre approach of jihad as a call to wage war against the government. As a countermeasure to these armed groups, the government has initiated a doctrine called “Four Cuts” in which civilians are targeted to cut insurgents’ access to food, funds, intelligence, and recruitment.³⁹ Unfortunately, the government’s effort has further alienated the people who are suffering the consequences. Also, as argued by Barton⁴⁰, the immediate threat to peace and security in Rakhine is not the possibility of ARSA organising into a persistent insurgent operation akin to Patani in southern Thailand. Instead, ARSA’s presence will be used by the government to justify more human rights abuses which in turn would further radicalise the Rohingyas.⁴¹

Transnational terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, Taliban and the Somalia-based al-Shabab are adept at taking advantage of the misery of Muslims to further their own agenda. Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) has especially tried to exploit the perilous situation faced by Rohingya refugees in Cox’s Bazaar, Bangladesh. Al-Qaeda Central has also been somewhat invested in the Rohingya crisis as can be seen from the call for the Myanmar government to relax its policy against Rohingya Muslims or they should “be ready for the consequences”.⁴² This statement was made a year before AQIS was established. Al-Qaeda also referenced Myanmar six times in its *Resurgence* magazine⁴³, proving the organisation’s attention towards the crisis. Yet, relatively less mobilization has occurred in Myanmar because the government’s persecution of ethnic Rohingyas is not the same as a foreign invasion of a Muslim country.

In explaining the Rohingya crisis, al-Qaeda has framed it according to a religious narrative of oppressed Muslims fighting against Buddhists to justify the call for jihad. Further support for its claim came in the form of an alleged hadith that reads, “The Prophet of Allah (peace be upon him) said – ‘Allah has saved two groups of my Ummah from the hellfire; the group that will invade Al-Hind (the Indian subcontinent) and the group that will be with Eesa (Jesus), the son of Mariam’.” However, such a narrative has been debunked by Jamiat Ulama e-Hind, a leading organisation of Muslims in India, to have been purposely misconstrued by both radical Muslims and Islamophobes⁴⁴. It can be understood here that the call for jihad was not successful among Muslims in the subcontinent (including Myanmar) because of the weak reason to do so. Using the framework of this paper, Myanmar is firmly within the domain of Dar al-‘Ahd because it has bilateral and multilateral relations with other Muslim countries in South and Southeast Asia, and because persecution is against a specific ethnic minority group as opposed to the entire Muslim population.

Since 2014, AQIS has taken over the mantle as protector of the Rohingyas to spread its propaganda with call for Muslims from around the world to travel to Myanmar or to at least support the efforts financially⁴⁵. To make it more effective, AQIS connected the plight of the Rohingyas to other forms of persecution faced by Muslims around the world including in Syria, Palestine, and Afghanistan. However, there is truly little credibility over AQIS' influence among Muslims in Myanmar and less so over its operational capability. Steckman⁴⁶ argued that this is due to the small size of the organisation and Myanmar's geographic distance from AQIS' base in India and Pakistan. The only link between al-Qaeda and Muslims in Myanmar was through the now-obsolete RSO in the 1990s. In addition, it is a mistake to equate Myanmar with Afghanistan where the country had faced foreign invasion since at least 1979.

The appeal of al-Qaeda among Muslims in Myanmar is especially doubtful with the London-based Burmese Muslim Association releasing a statement saying that "the Muslims in Burma will never accept any help from a terrorist organisation, which is in principle a disgrace and morally repugnant"⁴⁷ following the establishment of AQIS. Thus, we can see that the call for jihad does not resonate with the people without proper context. In the case of Myanmar, it is a case of ethnic persecution by an authoritarian regime which precludes the necessity of Muslims from other countries to participate.

Besides al-Qaeda, ISIS was also another notable terrorist organisation that was using the crises in Myanmar to expand its vision of a Caliphate. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, founder and former leader of ISIS, used to collate the Rohingya crisis with conflicts in other parts of the Muslim world such as in Central African Republic⁴⁸ to emphasize the levels of oppression faced by Muslims. Intriguingly, the onset of the Rohingya crisis coincided with the territorial losses faced by ISIS in the Middle East. In September 2015, ISIS' *Furat Media* called for jihadists from Bangladesh to fight in Myanmar⁴⁹ and ISIS tried to expand its influence in the region by featuring the Rohingya crisis in its online publication such as *Dabiq*.⁵⁰ As an organisation, ISIS has been successful at recruiting Southeast Asians, especially Muslims from Indonesia and Malaysia.⁵¹ In September 2017, a group of Malaysians travelled to Myanmar via Thailand and Bangladesh.⁵² Nevertheless, due to demographic and geopolitical factors, it appears that ISIS has not been remarkably successful in Myanmar when compared to the 20,000 foreign fighters present in Syria and Iraq in 2015.

Uyghurs

Although Uyghurs make up a small fraction of ethnic minorities among the majority Han Chinese, at 11 million, they are a force of their own, comparable

to a small nation. As argued by Horowitz⁵³, ethnicity itself is not automatically linked to social conflict. In the case of China as well, it was the rise in the rhetoric of a superior Han Chinese that caused antagonism with the minority Uyghurs. This appears to be a continuation of the project of the Chinese Communist Party since 1949 which was to assimilate different ethnic groups into a ‘multi-ethnic and unitary’ China. As a result of this unification, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia have experienced numerous grievances including economic disparities with the Han, state control of religious and cultural practices, Han settlement, and ethnic discrimination.⁵⁴

The threat against China’s security was also exacerbated by the rise and eventual rule of the Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan. One such incident was the Baren Incident in April 1990 when a group of Uyghur men led an armed uprising against security forces. Their goal was the ultimate establishment of an ‘East Turkestan Republic’. It was reported that the leader, Zahideen Yusuf, had been part of the Afghan jihad in the 1980s or had links to Afghanistan’s mujahideen groups.⁵⁵ Similar to the Rohingyas, the Uyghurs also had their own mass organisations against the government. The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which is affiliated with al-Qaeda as a successor to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), has used the oppression of the Uyghurs as a reason to perpetuate its propaganda against China. While TIP is the only organisation in the region that is considered a terrorist organisation by the United States and the United Nations, China’s Ministry of Public Security also considers the Eastern Turkestan Liberation Organisation (ETLO), the World Uighur Youth Congress (WUYC), and the East Turkestan Information Center (ETIC) as Uyghur terrorist organisations.⁵⁶ TIP had, as its stated goal, the independence of East Turkestan (Xinjiang) from China. In its effort to achieve that goal, according to the Chinese government’s official document, the movement has committed more than 200 acts of terrorism since 1990⁵⁷.

Following the September 11 attacks, the Chinese government framed its conflict with Uyghur separatists within the framework of the global war against terrorism. This is done in order to gain support from the international community on its crackdown against the Uyghurs for the sake of national security.⁵⁸ Alas, by framing the crisis as a struggle against Islamist terrorists as opposed to ethnic separatists, the government inadvertently legitimised al-Qaeda’s assertion that the Uyghurs are part of a larger web of global jihadism. Nevertheless, tangible support for Uyghur separatists in the early 2000s is weak. The visible predicament of the Uyghurs today has gained the attention of the world’s media because it has been framed as a human rights issue as opposed to a geopolitical crisis.

There has been no reported violence or terrorism on strategic infrastructure between 1997 and 2008, especially so since 2001.⁵⁹ After a dormant decade,

there was an increase in violent incidents in Xinjiang which the government blamed separatism, terrorism, and extremism – “the three evils”. It erupted in Urumqi, the capital city of Xinjiang, in 2009, and left almost 200 people dead. The government reacted with mass arrests of Uyghurs, leading Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to accuse the government of ‘genocide’.⁶⁰ A few years later, in 2013, there were five major incidents in Xinjiang attributed to ‘extremists and terrorists’ with links to ‘jihad’.⁶¹ A year later in 2014, there were four major incidents that the government claimed were committed by ‘extremists’ from Xinjiang such as the knife attack at Kunming train station, the suicide bombing of Urumqi’s main train station, and attacks on an open-air market and government buildings. Despite ‘jihad’ being used to explain the violence, it is limited to the locals as opposed to being a rallying cry to jihadists from other countries. With a strong single-party state, the government was able to quickly suppress the attacks⁶² without affecting its relations with other Muslims within and outside the country. The recent upsurge in conflict can be explained as minority discontent with the government as opposed to ongoing separatist ambition by the Uyghurs. The ethnic riots eventually led to the internment of Uyghurs in so-called vocational and training camps by the authoritarian Chinese government. The Muslim Uyghurs were detained for travelling to or contacting people from any of the twenty-six countries China considers sensitive, such as Turkey and Afghanistan; attending services at mosques; having more than three children; and sending texts containing Quranic verses’.⁶³ Furthermore, in March 2017, the regional government passed a law that prohibited people from growing long beards and wearing veils in public. The training centres were justified to eliminate so-called ‘extremism’ and the government has claimed that there has been a decrease in violence since 2016 when this programme started.⁶⁴ These actions by the Chinese government fall under the violation of human rights instead of war, and thus do not necessitate defensive jihad.

In China, the Muslims being detained in the so-called vocational camps have little to do with TIP or al-Qaeda. Moreover, given their better economic status in comparison to neighbouring countries, there is little support for the separatist movement by Uyghurs in Xinjiang.⁶⁵ Rather than espousing a desire to join the larger Islamist movement in the region, the increased incidents are more a result of ethnic minority repression and the competition for economic opportunities with the Han.⁶⁶ The framing of the conflict in religious terms is a recent innovation as a mobilizing source for the political imagination of the people against the government.

Another reason for the lack of violence in 2016 is the fact that instead of operating within China, TIP has concentrated more within Pakistan and Afghanistan with a close relationship with the Taliban. It is also because of

this geographical distance that TIP mostly operates within cyberspace.⁶⁷ As discussed in the case of Chechnya by Wilhelmsen⁶⁸, militants are willing to work with radical Islamist organisations for material support, even if their goals and ideology are different from these transnational jihadists. In the case of TIP, they supplied fighters to Afghanistan in return for protection from the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

The relationship between ETIM (TIP's predecessor) among the Uyghurs with al-Qaeda went all the way back to 1997 when ETIM asked for permission to open training camps in Afghanistan that would house up to 500 Uyghur families. However, Osama bin Laden did not seem to prioritise Xinjiang when he only listed Egypt, Palestine and Chechnya as being under oppressive regimes.⁶⁹ It can be said that the relationship between Uyghur nationalists and al-Qaeda is superficial at the very most for the limited benefit of each organisation. Furthermore, TIP never adopted al-Qaeda's strategy of using suicide bombings. However, in 2014 al-Qaeda did publish an article in its *Resurgence* magazine asserting that,

the province has been colonised by the Hans, asserting that in 1943, 93% of the inhabitants were Uyghur, whereas by 2014 the balance had shifted to 45% of the population being Chinese. It also claimed that the Communist Party murdered more than 4 million Muslims in Xinjiang in 1949, conducted more than 30 nuclear weapons tests in the province (leading to the deaths of around 200,000 Muslims from radioactive waste), forbade men under the age of 20 to learn the Quran and prohibited women from wearing the hijab.⁷⁰

As part of the protection deal, al-Qaeda Central made an appeal in 2019 for jihadists to stand in solidarity with Muslims in East Turkistan (Xinjiang) who are being oppressed by the "pagan nations".⁷¹ The use of pagan as a term to refer to the Chinese government elevate the conflict of one between Muslims against non-believers, and thus, situate the conflict within the larger framework of a global jihad against a supposed Dar al-Harb. Of course, it is incorrect to call China part of Dar al-Harb as there are Muslims living in other parts of the country that do not face the kinds of persecution in Xinjiang. China also has peaceful relations with other Muslim countries, especially in developing their economies within its Belt and Road Initiative. Hence, China better reflects the concept of Dar al-'Ahd where peace is prioritised with countries that do not act as an aggressor towards all Muslims.

Al-Qaeda's support appears to only be rhetorical to improve its own declining image as they are not willing to commit to physical presence. Al-Qaeda never made any ostensible attempt to conduct its operation within China. While there

is no exact figure, in recent years it has been estimated that more than 5000 Uyghurs have travelled to the Middle East to join the various jihadist camps since the 2011 Syrian civil war.⁷² Instead of getting more fighters coming into Xinjiang, the fear is that terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS were using this local conflict to buttress their own agenda and thus bring Uyghurs into other war zones. TIP in the Levant, founded in 2012, is protected and supported by al-Nusra Front in Syria whereas TIP's position has become weak in Afghanistan after it was expelled from the former Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) in Pakistan.⁷³ TIP's strength and influence in its immediate backyard seem to vary.

Although TIP members are more loyal to al-Qaeda than ISIS, there were still up to 175 Uyghurs fighting with ISIS in Syria. In 2014, Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi, the former leader of ISIS, indicated through a speech released by ISIS' *Al Hayat* media the possible attacks in China in retaliation for the oppression faced by Muslims in Xinjiang.⁷⁴ However, not only did a few foreign fighters go to Xinjiang, but ISIS also had little influence on the Uyghurs in Xinjiang because the struggle by minority Uyghurs is limited to civil repression by an authoritarian government as opposed to a religious struggle.

Conclusion

This paper started with a question on why the relatively little movement of Muslim fighters has been observed in Myanmar and China despite attempts by al-Qaeda and ISIS to portray these crises as oppression against Muslims that justifies the call for jihad. Based on the literature on jihad, this paper created a framework of analysis in which demographic and geopolitical factors play an important role to dissuade Muslims from joining jihadist movements in Myanmar and China. To strengthen the argument, this paper did a comparative study on the ethnic conflict in Myanmar and China and link it with the influence of al-Qaeda and ISIS. While there have been multiple reports, especially on counterterrorism efforts in these two countries, a comparative study that looks at both is absent. The only comparative study looked at humanitarian intervention in these countries. Based on Mill's method of agreement, this paper discovered that despite multiple differences, the cases of the Uyghurs and Rohingyas share similarities in that they are both cases of ethnic persecution by governments that do have relations with other Muslim countries.

Applying the concept of jihad within the larger framework of Dar al-Islam and Dar al-Harb, this paper argues that the call for jihad in Myanmar and China is not as powerful as those in the Middle East. The governments in China and Myanmar cannot be considered as waging war against the entire Muslim population because there are other Muslims who are allowed to live peacefully

in these countries. In contrast, when jihadists in the Middle East were fighting against occupation by a foreign power, they were seen as fighting against those who are seeking control over the entire Muslim population, such as when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979.

The significance of this study is in the comparative approach that is utilised to make sense of the conundrum. By looking at two cases that have many different variables, it is possible to narrow down the similarity that they share. Understanding the failure of jihadists to entrench in these countries provides a glimpse at what can be done to ensure the continued failures of jihadists which is important, especially with the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in the summer of 2021. The article concludes with the following policy recommendations:

1. More Muslims must be made aware that Dar al-Harb no longer exists today because of the bilateral and multilateral relations that non-Muslim countries have with the Muslim world.
2. Greater effort must be made by all stakeholders including the government, NGOs, and academic institutions to discuss classical jihadism as a concept in international relations as a method to counter violence and extremism.
3. Policymakers and experts need to counter the discourse of Muslims being under siege from a nationalist standpoint and focus on pragmatic and attainable solutions in international relations such as through increased multilateral efforts in humanitarian and economic aid.

Notes

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