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FOREIGN POLICY ESSAY

Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army: Not the Jihadis You Might Expect

By **C. Christine Fair** Sunday, December 9, 2018, 10:00 AM

Editor's Note: Myanmar has produced one of the world's worst human-made humanitarian crises, with the government there persecuting the Rohingya, a Muslim minority, with thousands dying and hundreds of thousands being displaced. C. Christine Fair, my Georgetown colleague, warns that violence related to this crisis may grow over time. A range of radical groups are focusing on the Rohingya, as are political leaders seeking to burnish their Islamist credentials. All this may produce violence in the years to come.

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Today, more than one million Rohingya are languishing in squalid camps in southern Bangladesh after suffering ethnic cleansing at the hands of the Myanmar state in late 2017. The international community has largely ignored the suffering of the Rohingya and failed to hold Myanmar accountable. While the 2017 events are the most recent and most gruesome in scope and scale, Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims have endured decades of political oppression and episodic violence since Myanmar secured its independence from the British in 1948.

Even the name they use to describe themselves is disputed: In Myanmar, the term Rohingya, which simply means "from Rakhine" (a state in Myanmar), is rejected in preference to the ethno-linguistic appellation "Chittagonian Bengali Muslims" to describe the persons who have lived in Myanmar's northern state of Rakhine for generations. Neither the government of Myanmar nor most of its citizens recognize the Rohingya as a legitimate ethnic group and instead contend that these hapless people are Bangladeshi. Bangladesh, which became an independent state in 1971, rejects this claim and avers that they are citizens of Myanmar. While Rohingya were citizens of Myanmar at independence, in the subsequent decades the state vitiated these rights and waged campaigns of violence against them, precipitating bouts of temporary displacement to neighboring Bangladesh. With Myanmar and Bangladesh both rejecting the Rohingya as their citizens, they are de facto stateless.

In spite of the grotesque brutalities the Rohingyas have endured, they have not articulated an Islamist or separatist demand. Their demand is simply to return to Myanmar with citizenship and, problematically, with government recognition as a distinct ethnic group. The Rohingya have not given rise to many violent non-state actors claiming to represent them. One of the few violent groups that has emerged in recent years is the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). While many in the "Islamist terrorism" industry have been quick to paint ARSA with the jihadi brush, I am skeptical of ARSA's Islamist bona fides. ARSA has assiduously rejected Islamist appeals. However, other Islamist groups in the region have identified the Rohingya as a *cause celebre*, including the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the Islamic State, and al-Qaeda Indian Subcontinent. The longer the Rohingya remain cramped in inadequately-appointed camps in Bangladesh or countenance ongoing ethnic cleansing in Myanmar, the more probable it becomes that either the nature of ARSA will bend towards Islamism and/or Islamist militant groups will conduct violence on their behalf.

Rohingya: A Long History of Suffering

While the social and political standing of the Rohingya began to decline when Myanmar gained independence in 1948, their situation became ever-more perilous following the military coup of 1988. A few years later, in 1991, the junta deployed troops to northern Rakhine and confiscated Muslim agricultural land to feed its troops and establish encampments while imposing forced labor and arbitrary taxes. In response to these immiserating conditions, nearly a quarter of a million Rohingya fled to Bangladesh where they lived in congested camps. Ultimately, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) oversaw the repatriation of about 200,000 of these refugees, all the while repudiating the conditions under which repatriation took place, including involuntary repatriation.

A restless peace perdured in Rakhine for nearly a decade, with the notable exceptions of anti-Muslim violence that occurred in 2001. Violence returned in 2010, when Rakhine Buddhists protested a commitment made by the junta-established Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) to grant Rakhine Muslims citizenship as a part of the elections in which they were allowed to vote. Subsequently, in May 2012, several Muslim men raped and killed a Buddhist woman, which catalyzed violence in the northern part of Rakhine state and in the provincial capital of Sittwe. The following month, a mob assaulted and killed a group of ten Muslims in central Myanmar after anonymous actors distributed inflammatory flyers to instigate violence against Muslims. As the ensuing violence spread, including retaliatory Muslim assaults on Buddhists, the government declared a state of emergency and deployed additional troops to enforce it. According to government of Myanmar figures (which may be inaccurate), several hundred persons were injured or killed; additionally, 5,338 homes, mostly belonging to Rohingya, were destroyed and another 75,000—again mostly Rohingya—were displaced.

In October 2012, another wave of anti-Muslim violence resulted in the displacement of 32,000 persons, the majority of whom were Muslim. The government responded by interning some 140,000 Rohingya in overcrowded camps in Rakhine and imposing harsh restrictions on freedom of movement on those not in the camps. The United Nations reports that as of August 31, 2018, there are some 128,245 Rohingya living in 23 camps across Rakhine, most of which are near Sittwe. There is also a ghetto, known as Aung Mingalar, in which 4,000 Muslims are confined in Sittwe itself. Without access to jobs, food, or medicine, Rakhine's Rohingya are dependent on the international community, which Myanmar grants selective access.

An Unexpected History of Non-Violence

Ostensibly inspired by Islamist movements elsewhere in the world, the Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF) formed in 1974, but over time split into several factions. Perhaps the most important and well-known successor to the RPF was the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), which formed in 1982. It also split in 1986 and gave rise to the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF). The RSO and the ARIF later formed a loose alliance in 1998 known as the Arakan Rohingya National Organization.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the RSO had no presence in Myanmar but had bases in Bangladesh along the border. It never enjoyed support within Myanmar, and by the early 2000s, it had lost its remaining operational capabilities.

A new actor has emerged in recent years: the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). ARSA is led by Atta Ullah, a Rohingya Muslim who was born in Pakistan's port city of Karachi to a Rohingya migrant father who fled Myanmar sometime in the 1960s. When he was a young child, his family moved to Mecca where he was educated in an Islamic school. While little is known about Atta Ullah, he seems to have departed Saudi Arabia in 2012 shortly after violence erupted in Rakhine. The name of the group he initially founded was "Harakah al-Yaqin" (literally "Movement of Faith"), which perpetrated several high-profile attacks against Myanmar's Border Guard Police (BGP) headquarters and two other bases on October 9, 2016. In response, the state launched a brutal crackdown including extensive "clearance operations" in an effort to recapture the myriad small arms and thousands of rounds of ammunition stolen by the outfit. The organization subsequently rebranded as ARSA.

While ARSA did not have any ostensible religious motivations, it did legitimize its attacks on Burmese security forces using Islam. It also encouraged senior Rohingya clerics and numerous foreign clerics to issue fatwas asserting that its campaign against Myanmar's security forces is legal given their ongoing persecution of Muslims in Rakhine state.

ARSA launched several high-profile insurgent attacks. On October 9 and November 12, 2016, it conducted several coordinated attacks on BGP bases in Rakhine. Amnesty International believes the group, brandishing swords and guns, is culpable for one and possibly two massacres of some 99 Hindu women, men, and children, as well as other abductions and murders of Hindu villagers in August 2017. In August 2017, it conducted its most complex attack, which entailed attacking some 30 police posts and an army base in Rakhine; at least 59 insurgents died, along with 12 members of the security forces. In response to this outrage, the Myanmar military mobilized to conduct mass atrocities that the United Nations has declared to be tantamount to genocide. The most recent attack occurred on January 5, 2018, when the group targeted a vehicle with a remote-control mine and then staged an ambush; six soldiers and one civilian driver were injured. It has not conducted any operations since.

Myanmar contends, with very little evidence, that ARSA is an Islamist militant group which aggregates the interest of Myanmar's Muslim mosaic to undermine the Buddhist nature of the state. The international press has also been quick, with just as little evidence, to assert that the Rohingya are next the wave of jihadists. On these grounds, Myanmar has won the support of China, Russia, and India, which have their own concerns about their domestic Muslim populations and how best to contend with the threats they pose—both real and imagined.

Those who argue that ARSA is a jihadist outfit focus on the fact that Attah Ullah was born in Pakistan and raised in Saudi Arabia. They cite unnamed and unaccountable "intelligence sources" to assert that he is close to LeT, and attempt to connect him with Abdus Qadoos Burmi, another Pakistani of Rohingya descent who is based in Karachi, has ties to LeT, and has appeared in videos arguing for jihad in Myanmar. None of these analysts alleging that ARSA is Islamist produce evidence beyond anonymous "intelligence sources," many of whom are Indian and have their own vested interests in this popularizing this narrative to burnish their claims that LeT is not simply an Indian domestic problem.

Despite these allegations, ARSA has consistently asserted that it is not seeking a separate state or the imposition of Sharia law. In September 2017, ARSA said it wanted to "make it clear" that it had no "links to al-Qaeda, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, Lashkar-e-Taiba or any transnational terrorist group." Indeed, ARSA has nothing to gain and everything to lose by associating with any Islamist movement.

Problematically for ARSA's messaging, though, its flag depicts all of Rakhine state. This has made Buddhists worried that ARSA's agenda is not simply securing the political conditions for Rohingya to safely return, but a larger agenda to assert dominance over the Buddhist-majority Rakhine state.

Is the Past Prologue?

The past outcomes of Myanmar state violence, in which the Rohingya suffer silently and without violent mobilization, may not be the best predictor of the future for several reasons. First, this current crisis confronting the Rohingya is thoroughly unprecedented in scale, scope, and the rapidity with which it has transpired. There is a deep well of grievances from which ARSA or any number of Islamist groups can draw.

Second, Bangladesh's prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, has sought to mitigate criticism that she is anti-Islam given her relentless campaign against the Jamaat Islami Bangladeshi, an Islamist political party that has traditionally aligned with her political nemesis, the Bangladesh National Party, and is accused of collaborating with Pakistan in perpetrating war crimes during the war for independence in 1971. To burnish her Islamist credentials, she has allied with the radical (and sometimes violent) Hifazat-e-Islam (HI), which nearly toppled her government several years ago.

According to authorities who discussed this situation with me in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, Hasina has allowed HI to open thousands of *quami madaris* (religious seminaries that do not teach Bangladesh's school curriculum) in the camps in Cox's Bazar and young men can be seen wearing the distinctive skull cap that identifies them as madrassah students. *Quami madaris* have long been associated with a "rejection of modernity as a whole, including modern education, and their employment of vigorous indoctrination techniques rather than methodical pedagogy," as well as ties to terrorist groups in Bangladesh.

At the same time, Hasina has eschewed any form of education that would permit the Rohingya to integrate into Bangladesh's formal economy. Per force, they seek to earn cash through various illicit means available.

Third, both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda Indian Subcontinent have identified the Rohingya as a target of opportunity. Equally disconcerting is the fact that a variety of Pakistan-based and international terrorist organizations have set their sights on recruiting the Rohingya.

Fourth, and finally, Hasina's refusal to disperse the refugees throughout the country will continue to tax the host community, who endure the negative externalities of the camps in their backyards, including the imperious behavior of aid workers in the camps. There is little short-term benefit to dispersing the Rohingya refugees. Most Rohingya have expressed little interest in migrating onward and there are few countries who want to receive more of them.

For the foreseeable future, the Rohingya are most likely to be confined to the camps in Bangladesh, no matter how crowded or dangerous. The unprecedented scale of the crisis, domestic political concerns in Bangladesh, and growing attention from jihadi groups make the Rohingya ripe for radicalization, even though groups like ARSA have resisted the violent Islamist ideology associated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Even if ARSA does not emerge as the next wave of jihad as some fear, it is entirely possible that other violent groups will conduct attacks on their behalf in Myanmar or elsewhere. Should this happen, the plight of the Rohingya will become even more dire as what little international support they have at present will quickly dissipate.

Given that the international community is unlikely to muster any pressure on Myanmar, the least international actors can do is continue to help Bangladesh support this beleaguered community and monitor the situation for any developing security concerns while longer term solutions are developed.

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