

MYANMAR

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MARIA KUSMINA

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# Myanmar – new breeding ground for terrorist networks?

## THE “ARAKAN ROHINGYA SALVATION ARMY” (ARSA) IN FOCUS

**On 1<sup>st</sup> February 2018, a previously unknown man threw an incendiary device onto the Rangoon<sup>1</sup> property where Myanmar’s de facto prime minister and Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi resides. Even though security officials took the incident seriously while at the same time not wanting to overstate it, the increasing threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia<sup>2</sup> has hardly been noticed elsewhere, especially in Europe. There is good reason Myanmar should be the focus of interest in such discussions.**

Even if the subcontinent long ago moved past the period of classic cross-national and anti-regime wars, a drastic change in the forms of violence could be observed over the decades<sup>3</sup>: extremist groups were formed, and they networked with one another to coordinate their struggles in the name of religion. Myanmar and the persecution of the Rohingya, an Islamic minority, is repeatedly at the centre of discussion in current security policy debates. The conflict has already resulted in the formation of armed rebel groups that, according to their own reports, are fighting for the rights of the Rohingya.

Security experts fear that the systematic persecution of the Rohingya could provide fertile ground for radicalisation since international terror organisations have already announced their desire to avenge the persecution of the Rohingya<sup>4</sup>.

The UN has also issued an urgent warning that the hopeless and desperate situation of the violently expelled Rohingya offers fertile conditions for radical extremism<sup>5</sup>.

But how real is the threat of terrorism in Myanmar and to what extent does it emanate from the Rohingya themselves?

### ARSA – Terror or self-defence?

In October 2016, rebels of the “Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army” (ARSA), formerly “Harakah al-Yaqin” (“the Faith Movement”), attacked military posts for the first time in the State of Rakhine, the Rohingya homeland. Myanmar’s government already classified the rebel group as a terror organisation<sup>6</sup>. ARSA, on the other hand, sees itself as one of Myanmar’s many ethnic armies fighting for the self-determination of an ethnic minority. Other armies of resistance, however, can be recognised by the military uniforms they wear, whereas the ARSA rebels continue to dress in civilian garb and are therefore indistinguishable from the local villagers. The military strategy of the poorly equipped

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Myanmar Times, 02.02.2018, in: <https://www.mmimes.com/news/petrol-bomb-lobbed-daw-aung-san-su-kyi-s-house.html> (05.02.2018).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Perras, Arne (2017): Nächste Front, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 26.05.2017, in: <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/suedostasiennaechste-front-1.3522085> (10.01.2018).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Basedau, Matthias et al. (2005): Multiple Unsicherheit: Befunde aus Asien, Nahost, Afrika und Lateinamerika. Hamburg, Deutsches Überseeinstitut, in: [https://archive.org/stream/bub\\_gb\\_i9j1GpgyvscC#page/n5/mode/2up](https://archive.org/stream/bub_gb_i9j1GpgyvscC#page/n5/mode/2up) (09.01.2018).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Bashar, Iftekharul (2018): Global Threat Forecast. Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses, A Journal of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, Volume 10, Issue 1, in: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/CTTA-January-2017.pdf> (17.01.2018).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Perras, Arne (2017)

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Das Risiko der Radikalisierung (2017), 18.09.2017, in: <http://orf.at/stories/2407549/2407447/> (15.01.2018).

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ARSA counts on mobilising unarmed villagers who usually attack poorly guarded government outposts in the middle of the night. This is essentially what happened on 25<sup>th</sup> August 2017 when, following an attack by ARSA, counter-attacked and killed 400 presumed ARSA rebels. According to Myanmar expert Bertil Lintner, the threat from ARSA is still significantly smaller than the rebels claim and the military assumes. His conclusion is based on insider information and analysts who conclude that the group's size is limited to a few hundred fighters, not thousands as was previously assumed<sup>7</sup>.

### Terrorism in Southeast Asia

Terrorist attacks are not a new phenomenon in Southeast Asia. Decades ago, there was already fighting involving Islamic extremists. In the Philippines, the extremist movement dates back over a century. At that time, however, militant rebel groups had virtually no link to one another and their focus was on change in their own country. This primarily involved the implementation of religiously based Islamic law (Sharia) more than the creation of an Islamic state. Factors such as the course of globalisation – perceived above all as the threat of Americanisation – dissatisfaction with their own government, and encounters with exiled extremist fighters from Afghanistan, changed this orientation: yearning grew for a pan-Islamic Southeast Asia, and from an ideological perspective, this seemed more necessary than ever. On this basis, the Islamic rebel groups increasingly began to network with one another, and their level of organisation increased with the aid of Al-Qaida<sup>8</sup>. The originally Indonesian group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) revealed itself to be especially skilled in this process. By cooperating with local bandits like Abu Sayyaf and with the support of Al-

Qaida, they were successful in extending their network beyond national boundaries and sending their rebels to Afghanistan for training. Their network soon included over 100 different radical groups<sup>9</sup>. Experts differ in their descriptions of JI's trans-national network: some assume that Southeast Asian terrorism is, in the final analysis, a phenomenon that was sparked – and controlled – by Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaida, motivated by growing global jihadism and anti-Americanism. There continues to be a lack of agreement on how far the links to Al-Qaida ultimately extended and whether these were based on individuals and their contacts or on institutionalised relations<sup>10</sup>. Independently of this argument, it can be said of these two terrorist networks – JI and Al-Qaida – that they had a symbiotic relationship, sharing training camps and objectives and exchanging financial resources<sup>11</sup>. Already by the 1990s, this led to the trans-national group JI becoming one of the greatest threats to the security of Southeast Asia. Attacks such as the one in Manila in 2002, in which 22 people were killed, the bombing of a Bali nightclub in 2002 that killed 202 people, and the attacks in Jakarta on a Marriott hotel in 2003 and the Australian Embassy in 2004, where over 20 people died, were only some of the high points of their actions, which proved that they were in a position to conduct logistically complex and internationally sensational terrorist attacks<sup>12</sup>.

### Situation in Myanmar remains unclear

After decades of military rule, Myanmar returned at the start of 2016 to democratic government headed by

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Lintner, Bertil (2017): The truth behind Myanmar's Rohingya insurgency, 20.09.2017, in: <http://www.atimes.com/article/truth-behind-myanmars-rohingya-insurgency/> (21.01.2018).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Basedau, Matthias et al. (2005)

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Archarya, Amitav and Archarya, Arabinda (2010): The Myth of the Second Front: Localizing the 'War on Terror' in Southeast Asia, pp. 75-90, in: <https://doi.org/10.1162/wash.2007.30.4.75> (10.01.2018).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Basedau, Matthias et al. (2005)

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Vaughn, Bruce et al. (2005): Terrorism in Southeast Asia, in: <https://fas.org/sqp/crs/terror/RL31672.pdf> (11.01.2018).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Basedau, Matthias et al. (2005).

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Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. Despite the opening to democracy, Myanmar continues to vacillate between an internal peace process and armed domestic conflicts in which ethnic minorities confront not only the government but also one another, as will be made clear by the example of the Rohingya conflict. The military, which, under the 2008 constitution, holds the key cabinet departments of defence, the interior, and border security, takes a very clear stand against efforts by ethnic minorities in favour of federalisation. Since October 2016, when ARSA took responsibility for carrying out an armed attack against Myanmar's border posts, the Rohingya conflict is once again the focus of world public opinion<sup>13</sup>. The Rohingya themselves claim to have originated in Rakhine State, where their ancestors are said to have lived for centuries. Most Burmese, however, believe that they entered the territory during the British colonial period (1885-1948). The government continues to affirm its position that most Rohingya only migrated illegally from Bangladesh in 1948, furthermore denying them Myanmar citizenship and the rights that accrue to that status<sup>14</sup>. In August 2017, the military began an unprecedented military offensive in the State of Rakhine, during which, according to UN reports, more than 650,000 Rohingya fled into neighbouring Bangladesh, where they have remained ever since in improvised refugee camps<sup>15</sup>.

### Buddhists versus Muslims?

Prominent representatives of the government and the Buddhist community defend the action and

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Lorch, Jasmin (2017): Birma/Myanmar, in: Dossier Innerstaatliche Konflikte, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, Bonn. pp. 97-101, in: <http://www.bpb.de/internationales/weltweit/innerstaatliche-konflikte/> (15.01.2018).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Khan, Alam (2017): Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis: An Analysis of Security Threats for South Asia, International Journal of Management and Social Science Research Review, pp. 155-159, online: <http://ijmsrr.com/downloads/1803201729.pdf> (17.01.2018).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Tagesspiegel (2018): Rückführung von Rohingya-Flüchtligen verschoben, 22.01.2018, in: <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/bangladesch-rueckfuehrung-von-rohingya-fluechtligen-verschoben/20874220.html> (22.01.2018).

maintain that the Rohingya represent a threat since they sought to erect an Islamic stronghold in Myanmar. As a result, they say, the international media portrayed the situation in an entirely incorrect manner, and not even the UN appears to be clear on what is really going on: as an embattled group, the Buddhists would only strike back<sup>16</sup>. This argument is also made by the extremist Buddhist leader Ashin Wirathu. Dubbed by western media the "Burmese Bin Laden" or even "Burmese Hitler"<sup>17</sup>, he has emerged as a central figure in the conflict through his hatred-inciting rhetoric against the Rohingya. He is very active on social media and is convinced that Islam represents an existential threat to Myanmar and that the global media are controlled by the Arabic world. Despite shunning violence and rejecting terrorism, he constantly stresses the danger, arguing that even those who are filled with love and kindness should not sleep next to a rabid dog<sup>18</sup>. Bertil Lintner warns, however, that not all of Myanmar's Muslims should be lumped together and that the conflict needs to be better differentiated by the international community: unlike the Rohingya, most Muslims living in other parts of Myanmar speak Burmese and are Burmese citizens. It is therefore not a matter of Muslims versus Buddhists but rather of presumably illegal immigration on the part of the Rohingya<sup>19</sup>.

### Myanmar in the sights of terrorist networks?

Despite the many assumptions and assertions, the Rohingya themselves have not yet taken on the image of extremists, which

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Senzel, Holger (2017): Konflikt für Extremismus nützlich? 18.09.2017, in: <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/rohingya-extremisten-101.html> (16.01.2018).

<sup>17</sup> Kruse, Niels (2017): Ashin Wirathu – der buddhistische Mönch, der nur Hass kennt, 20.09.2017, in: <https://www.stern.de/politik/ausland/ashin-wirathu-aus-myanmar-der-buddhistische-moench-der-nur-hass-kennt-7628978.html> (17.01.2018).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Lintner, Bertil (2017): Rohingya Refugee Crisis: It's Not Muslims vs. Buddhists, 11.12.2017, in: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/rohingya-refugee-crisis-not-muslims-vs-buddhists-says-writer-bertil-lintner.html> (21.01.2018).

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does not mean, however, that they remain immune to the future influence of terrorist militia. Compared to their parents, members of Rohingya's young generation would rank as more radical. The fear is present in international expert circles that the Islamic State (ISIS) is exploiting the mass exodus of the Rohingya to reinforce religious extremism in the area<sup>20</sup>. Political scientist Ali Riaz, an expert on Islamic militancy in Bangladesh, commented that the desperate situation of openly dissatisfied humans, along with the religious dimension, provides fertile ground for extremism. He draws on historical comparison for his assertion: the Taliban movement traces its origins to the Afghan refugee camps of the 1980s and 1990s, predominantly those in Pakistan. He describes the refugee situation in Bangladesh and India as very precarious. The Indian government already perceives the Rohingya refugees as a security threat and is making plans for their deportation<sup>21</sup>. Brennan and O'Hara, investigating the question of the extent to which the Rohingya actually represent a threat of radicalisation, emphasised as early as two years ago that the threat comes not from the Rohingya themselves but rather from the alleged Rohingya extremists, who, despite not even being Rohingya or coming from Rakhine, are nonetheless exploiting the crisis for their own purposes. They further maintain that the Burmese government finds it convenient to play the terror card since this takes the focus off government wrongdoing and puts it onto the need to fight against the alleged terrorist actors<sup>22</sup>.

In 2013 and 2014, respectively, Al-Qaida and ISIS publicly declared their interest in the Rohingya conflict. On the one hand, both groups can no longer ignore the Rohingya crisis, especially since western media have made the conflict a subject of

discussion. On the other hand, the two terror groups are engaged in a sort of competition<sup>23</sup>: It is a question of who has the greatest influence over regions in conflict, and Al-Qaida perceives an opportunity here to challenge the world's assumption that it has been replaced by ISIS<sup>24</sup>. Even if ARSA, contrary to the assertions of intelligence analysts<sup>25</sup>, clearly distances itself from claims that it has links to international terrorist organisations or that it is fighting in the name of Islam, this does not prevent Al-Qaida from exploiting the conflict for its own purposes. The terror organisation called on all Muslims, especially those in Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Philippines, to support the Rohingya both financially and physically. ISIS too is prepared to exploit the Rohingya crisis for its own purposes. In the search for new zones of conflict, ISIS members have already identified the State of Rakhine as a target, as described in an article in an ISIS magazine. Above all, the strategic significance of Bangladesh as a springboard for terror attacks on Myanmar is highlighted<sup>26</sup>. The Rohingya themselves perceive their greatest threat to be the possibility that terror attacks will be perpetrated in their name. For this reason, ARSA even used Twitter to post explicit messages discouraging jihadis from coming to Myanmar. The tweets expressed their wish not to have jihadi participation since this would make an already bad situation even worse<sup>27</sup>. The Rohingya themselves, according to reports, are furious with the ARSA rebels and do not consider that the group represents them: its members did not originate in Rakhine State, nor do they speak the Rohingya language. The Rohingya consider the group to be complicit in their desperate situation<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Senzel, Holger (2017)

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Das Risiko der Radikalisierung (2017)

<sup>22</sup> Brennan, Elliot and O'Hara, Christopher (2015): The Rohingya and Islamic Extremism: A Convenient Myth, in: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/191758/2015-brennan-ohara-the-rohingya-and-islamic-extremism-a-convenient-myth.pdf> (17.01.2018).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Singh, Jasminder (2017): Rohingya Crisis in South-east Asia: The Jihadi Dimension. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 069). Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, in: <http://hdl.handle.net/10220/42332> (16.01.2018).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Lintner, Bertil (2017): The truth behind Myanmar's Rohingya insurgency, 20.09.2017.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Bashar, Iftekarul (2018).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Rist, Manfred (2017): Die UNO kritisiert Zustände in Burma, 24.02.2017, in: <https://www.nzz.ch/international/ein-jahr-der-erneuechterung-in-burma-erschuetternder-bericht-zu-den-minderheiten-id.141314> (16.01.2018).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Das Risiko der Radikalisierung (2017).

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## Terrorism and radicalisation 2.0

The utilisation of social media as a communication and recruiting platform has made the threat more decentralised, more unpredictable, and especially difficult to identify<sup>29</sup>. Pro-Islamic extremists have already distributed photos and videos on the Internet that portray the suffering of the Rohingya. In their posts, they call for jihad in Myanmar. A video titled "Children of Rohingya in Aceh Ready to Return to Myanmar for Jihad" was distributed that shows a group of men in uniform training for jihad in Myanmar. Another video, "Indonesian Mujahid in Preparation to Save the Rohingya in Myanmar", shows hundreds of men shouting and preparing themselves for the "trip to Myanmar". Yet another video, "Soldiers of FPI Departing to Myanmar" by the Indonesian Front Pembela Islam (FPI), calls men to battle against Myanmar. Following this call, 1200 volunteers declared themselves ready to wage jihad in Myanmar. An FPI spokesperson declared publicly that these people are ready to die for their religion if they encounter resistance<sup>30</sup>.

### Outlook

Even if the ARSA attacks have done little damage so far, they are nonetheless effective, and they fuel anxiety. For these reasons, the seemingly real terrorist threat is taken seriously by both the government and the international community. Whereas to date it does not appear to be proved that the Rohingya are radicalising, evidence is mounting that other extremist groups are doing this in the name of the Rohingya. The "Advisory Commission on Rakhine State" was tasked by Aung San Suu Kyi with investigating the conflicts and

challenges in Rakhine and issuing recommendations for the government. In its final report, the commission speaks of an urgent need for action to resolve the crisis in Rakhine to prevent radicalisation<sup>31</sup>: if the conflict continues along its present path, it will become a more serious threat not only for Myanmar but for all of Southeast Asia. From the perspective of security policy, therefore, finding a solution for Rakhine State appears more urgent than ever<sup>32</sup>. Experts question whether Myanmar is still in a position to resolve the conflict on its own. Since Europe's political influence is limited, however, the U.S., Australia and China were asked to develop a comprehensive strategy against terror<sup>33</sup>. All in all, there are no simple responses to religious extremism in Southeast Asia since the causes are too diverse, the prognoses too varied, and the sources too dubious with respect to terrorist networks<sup>34</sup>.

Under diplomatic pressure, the government has recently consented to allow exiled Rohingya to return under certain conditions. This would involve close scrutiny of their identity documents to enhance domestic security. Implementation of this agreement has been put off indefinitely, however<sup>35</sup>. It thus still remains to be hoped that Myanmar will find peaceful solutions and that the State Counsellor's highest priority, achieving peace, will move from words to real action; since, as Aung San Suu Kyi takes care to observe, "We can do nothing without peace in our country<sup>36</sup>."

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Advisory Commission on Rakhine State (2017): Towards a peaceful, fair and prosperous future for the people of Rakhine, In: [http://www.rakhinecommission.org/app/uploads/2017/08/FinalReport\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.rakhinecommission.org/app/uploads/2017/08/FinalReport_Eng.pdf) (05.02.2018).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Bashar, Iftekharul (2018).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Perras, Arne (2017).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Tagesspiegel (2018): Rückführung von Rohingya Flüchtlingen verschoben.

<sup>36</sup> Sein, Kyaw and Farrelly, Nicholas (2016): Myanmar's Evolving Relations: The NLD in Government. Institute for Security and Development Policy, in:

<http://isdp.eu/content/uploads/2016/11/2016-Myanmar-Evolving-Relations-NLD-in-government-1.pdf> (17.01.2018).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Bashar, Iftekharul (2018).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Mahzam, Remy and Ansar, Muhammad (2017): The Inevitable Jihad in Myanmar. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 163). Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, in: <http://hdl.handle.net/10220/43709> (16.01.2018).