

Impact of the Rohingya Crisis on the Threat Landscape at the Myanmar-Bangladesh Border

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Though the Rohingya crisis is rooted in history, its contemporary manifestations have far-reaching impact on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. This restive borderland, located at the northern coast of the Bay of Bengal, is at risk of becoming a new breeding ground for violent extremism. Myanmar's treatment of its Rohingya Muslim minority is the key factor behind the crisis. In 2017 alone, over 6,700 Rohingyas were killed in a controversial military operation. More than 700,000 Rohingyas became refugees and crossed the border into Bangladesh to join about half a million Rohingyas from previous influxes. Rohingyas today constitute one of the largest refugee populations in Asia. This paper aims to map the impact of the crisis while focusing on the threat landscape. The plight of the Rohingyas has evoked strong emotions in the Muslim world which have attracted Daesh and Al Qaeda's attention.

Despite living in what is today's Buddhist-majority Myanmar for centuries, Rohingya Muslims are not recognised as citizens of Myanmar and are largely regarded as outsiders due to ethno-linguistic and cultural differences as well as political reasons. Lack of recognition¹ and legal status limits the Rohingya community's freedom of movement, access to education and other basic human rights. It also makes them vulnerable to racial abuse, structural discrimination, and ethnic violence and creates a fertile ground for their radicalisation. Drawing on available literature, credible reports, review of extremist publications available in the public

* This paper was submitted on 2 August 2018.

¹ The paper uses the theoretical prism of Axel Honneth's idea of *Anerkennung*, meaning recognition. For details, see Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996.

domain, and interviews conducted in Bangladesh and Myanmar, the paper argues that unless the crisis is resolved in a sustainable manner there is a high possibility of a complex and long-drawn-out insurgency along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border and an expansion of a crime-terror nexus in the region.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section gives an overview of the Rohingya crisis, including a brief historical background and its current and emerging manifestation. The second section explains the impact of the Rohingya crisis on the threat landscape at the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. The section critically examines both the local and transnational threats and cautions that a prolonged crisis may create new opportunities for transnational terrorist groups to turn the borderland into a new jihadist battleground. The third section explains how the crisis is possibly contributing to the growth of transnational crime such as narcotics smuggling and human smuggling and to the growth of a crime-terror nexus. The fourth section locates the key areas of bilateral, regional and international cooperation and collaboration on security and provides a set of policy recommendations.

A Protracted Crisis

The Rohingya crisis is the continuation of a post-colonial conflict that still simmers today.² The question of Rohingya identity and quest for recognition remains central to this conflict. Rohingyas are an ethnic Muslim minority living in western Myanmar's Rakhine state (formerly known as Arakan). The community is mostly concentrated in the northern part of the state, bordering Bangladesh, as a result of which there is a linguistic similarity as well as kinship ties.³ Being geographically separated from the rest of Myanmar by the *Arakan Yoma* (Arakan Mountain range), Rakhine state has historically been connected to its western neighbour, what now constitutes Bangladesh. During the pre-colonial period and most of the colonial era, Arakan was a vibrant, plural and syncretic space where various

² For details on Rohingya history, see Moshe Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar*, Lexington Books, 2002.

³ During the early 1960s, the area was called Mayu frontier district. It included the Rohingya majority townships, namely Maungdaw, Buthidaung Township, and Rathedaung Township.

cultures and religions interacted. One of the key results of the interaction was the development of a Muslim-majority enclave in north Arakan under royal patronage in the late sixteenth century. The Rohingyas are not a monolithic community; rather, most of them have mixed-ancestry, owing to Arakan's trade linkages with the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia.⁴

After the independence of Burma (it was not Myanmar then) the relationship between the north-Arakanese Muslims or Rohingya Muslims and their Buddhist counterparts went through various phases of conflict but was never properly managed. Post-colonial Arakan saw various Rohingya political movements, often with armed wings, for various degrees of autonomy. Eventually, a series of armed rebellions led to some concessions by the democratic regime of Prime Minister U Nu.⁵ Establishing the Mayu Frontier administration is a case in point. Since the 1962 military take-over, the Rohingyas' struggle for recognition was seen with suspicion as a possible form of separatism and was dealt with through use of hard-power. In 1964 Rohingya Independence Front (RIF) was established with the goal of creating an autonomous Muslim zone for the Rohingya people. In 1969 RIF changed its name to Rohingya Independence Army (RIA) and in 1973 it became the Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF). The RPF was largely an ethno-nationalist group fighting for their rights and their military capability was limited. But nevertheless its quest for autonomy was seen by the Ne Win administration as an attempt to secession. This mismanaged conflict eventually led to systematic state-led alienation and de-territorialisation of the Rohingyas. For example, the state first started to deny Rohingyas their identity by portraying them as foreigners, and in 1978, Myanmar launched a military operation known as Operation Nagamin (Operation Dragon King), which killed thousands of Rohingyas and expelled 200,000-250,000 Rohingyas, who took shelter in neighbouring Bangladesh.⁶

In 1982, Myanmar adopted a highly discriminatory Citizenship law that does not recognise the Rohingyas as one of the ethnic minorities, which

⁴ Imtiaz Ahmed, *The Plight of the Stateless Rohingyas: Responses of the State, Society and the International Community*, Dhaka: The University Press Ltd, 2010.

⁵ There is a long list of groups that emerged and splintered during this period. The groups include The Mujahideen Movement, Rohingya Liberation Party (RLP)/Rohingya Liberation Army (RLA), and Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF).

⁶ Carl Skutch, *Encyclopaedia of the World's Minorities*, London: Routledge, p. 128.

further stripped Rohingyas of their rights as equal citizens and made them stateless. The sense of statelessness, exclusion and deprivation led to a new identity based on religion and attracted the attention of the Islamist charities for relief and resettlement. The Rohingya Patriotic Front dissolved by mid 1980s, as two organizations with more Islamist character emerged in succession. The Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) was established in 1982 and Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) in 1986. The RSO remained active in Bangladesh until the mid-2000s. The group used Cox's Bazar as its base. The group was also active in Karachi, Pakistan. RSO possessed a significant arsenal of light machine-guns, AK-47 assault rifles, RPG-2 rocket launchers, claymore mines and explosives.⁷ In 1998 a defecting faction of the RSO and remnants of Rohingya Patriotic Front formed the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO). ARNO was formed to organize all the different armed groups into one group. The group was operating in Cox's Bazar and had presence in several parts of Chittagong division of Bangladesh. ARNO had an armed wing named Rohingya National Army (RNA). RNA developed ties with various elements fighting Myanmar's armed forces. The group has also collaborated with a Rakhine Buddhist separatist organization named the Arakan Army (AA) and the alliance lasted till 2001.

Another major exodus was recorded in 1991, when over 250,800 Rohingyas from Rakhine state took refuge in Bangladesh, which left them at the mercy of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).⁸ Though many Rohingyas were sent back to Myanmar after an intense bilateral negotiation, many came back to Bangladesh as the situation in Rakhine state was not safe for them and Rohingyas faced severe systematic discrimination. Human smuggling surged and hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas started to leave for the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

Until recently, there has not been any major mass exodus of Rohingyas since 1993, but the community continued to live in sub-human conditions in Rakhine state without basic rights such as education and healthcare. Over the years, Buddhist ultra-nationalism surfaced and became more

⁷ Bertil Lintner, Bangladesh: Extremist Islamist Consolidation, <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume14/Article1.htm>.

⁸ C.R. Abrar, "Repatriation of Rohingya Refugees", <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs/Abrar-repatriation.htm>.

visible during Myanmar's cautious strides towards democracy, marked by political reforms and a renewed peace negotiation with the Ethnic Armed Groups (EAGs). Though Myanmar took a reconciliatory approach towards almost all the EAGs, the Rohingyas were side-lined and continued to face discrimination. Decades of military rule and economic mismanagement turned Rakhine state into one of the poorest states of Myanmar, resulting in the growth of anti-Rohingya rhetoric which saw Rohingyas as "foreigners" with ambitions to secede from Myanmar.

The anti-Rohingya rhetoric, coupled with Islamophobia, made Rakhine state more volatile and as a result, 2012 saw a new wave of communal violence. The violence left 57 Rohingyas dead and displaced 100,000.⁹ Many Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh, though it was unprepared and unwilling to receive new refugees, as the country was already burdened with half a million Rohingyas from previous influxes since 1978. Human smuggling swelled again; this time, through the maritime route, and in hundreds of boats bound for Malaysia and Indonesia. Myanmar was criticised by the international community but this made no difference on the ground. The Rohingya crisis continued. Myanmar did establish an investigation committee but this did not change the policy towards recognising the Rohingya community or ensuring their rights. The first Rakhine Inquiry Commission was established on 17 August 2012 under the authority of the then President Thein Sein's Executive Order to discover the root causes of communal violence and provide recommendations for the prevention of recurrence of violence in the future and the promotion of peaceful coexistence.¹⁰ This inquiry commission's report failed to bring about meaningful change as Myanmar could not resolve the root causes of the conflict. After Aung San Suu Kyi came to power there were some more initiatives. In September 2016, following a request from Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the State Counsellor of Myanmar, the Kofi Annan Foundation and the Office of the State Counsellor established an Advisory Commission on Rakhine state. The Commission is a national entity and the majority of its members are from Myanmar. It was mandated to examine the complex challenges

⁹ Press Release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Government of the Union of Myanmar, 21 August 2012, [https://www.webcitation.org/6Bj9aSWM5?url=http://www.mofa.gov.mm/pressrelease/Press_Release_Rakhine_State_Affairs_Webversion\(21-08-12\).pdf](https://www.webcitation.org/6Bj9aSWM5?url=http://www.mofa.gov.mm/pressrelease/Press_Release_Rakhine_State_Affairs_Webversion(21-08-12).pdf).

¹⁰ Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Final Report of Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State, http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/Rakhine_Commission_Report-en-red.pdf.

facing Rakhine state and to propose answers to those challenges.¹¹ Though the Kofi Annan Commission came up with some practical solutions and presented its final report in August 2017, by that time a little-known organisation name Harkat al Yaqeen (Faith Movement) had surfaced under the leadership of Ataullah abu Ammar Jununi, a Rohingya born in Karachi, Pakistan who grew up in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The group renamed itself as Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and claimed to be fighting for the rights of the Rohingyas. ARSA, in its video messages, claimed that it was “not a terrorist group” and that it “does not have any links with any terrorist groups from anywhere in the world.”¹² Despite its claim the group seems to have adopted terrorism as a tactic to gain recognition. The group took responsibility for attacks on Myanmar border posts in October 2016 which left nine border officers and four soldiers dead. The following counter-offensive caused 87,000 Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh. In this already tense situation, ARSA launched a coordinated attack on 30 police posts in Rakhine state on 25 August 2017, killing 12 security personnel.¹³ The ensuing counter-insurgency campaign left 6,700 Rohingyas dead and 700,000 were forced to leave Myanmar and took shelter across the border in Bangladesh. The Central Committee for Counter Terrorism of Myanmar, in a statement published on 25 August 2017, declared the armed attackers and ARSA as terrorist groups in accordance with the Counter-Terrorism Law of the country.¹⁴ Bangladeshi sources believe ARSA was behind the May 2016 killing of a paramilitary commander and looting of 11 arms from the Shalbagan Ansar barrack near a Rohingya camp in Mochni area under Teknaf upazila of Cox’s Bazar district. Some of these weapons were probably used by ARSA for its operations in Myanmar. When ARSA was chased out of Myanmar they dropped their weapons on the Bangladeshi side of

¹¹ Final Report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, <http://www.rakhinecommission.org/>.

¹² Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJoWeV1DIFM>.

¹³ “Arsa: The Rohingya militants who tipped Rakhine into crisis”, *The Straits Times*, 10 September 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/arsa-the-rohingya-militants-who-tipped-rakhine-into-crisis>, and “At least 71 killed in Myanmar as Rohingya insurgents stage major attack”, Reuters, 25 August 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya/at-least-71-killed-in-myanmar-as-rohingya-insurgents-stage-major-attack-idUSKCN1B507K>.

¹⁴ “Exclusive: Is this the final confrontation for the Rohingya?”, *The Dhaka Tribune*, 4 September 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/world/south-asia/2017/08/27/final-confrontation-rohingyas/>.

the border and escaped to India. There is no clear evidence of ARSA's linkage to any terrorist group; however such possibilities cannot be ruled out. Though it is hard to estimate the strength of ARSA, several sources have indicated that it has less than 200 foot-soldiers left. ARSA does not enjoy large-scale support within the Rohingya community. Many Rohingyas perceive them as a cause of their sufferings. However, there exists a niche of support for ARSA, particularly among those who view violence as the only way to get recognition. A prolonged crisis will increase the possibility of the re-emergence of ARSA. The terrain in the Myanmar-Bangladesh-India border triangle is remote, mountainous, often inaccessible and suitable for terrorist and insurgent activities. The area is also known for availability of small arms and light weapons.

A major concern for Bangladesh is the sheer number of Rohingyas in its territory. Bangladesh's population density and resource scarcity does not allow it to accept Rohingyas for permanent settlement inside its territory. Therefore, the country emphasises the safe repatriation of the Rohingyas to Myanmar. Bangladeshi authorities are of the view that unless Rohingyas feel safe enough to go back to Myanmar, they will remain in Bangladesh and a segment of them will inevitably be recruited by terrorist and organised criminal groups and thereby pose a threat not only to Bangladesh but also to the rest of the region.

Impact on the Threat Landscape

The Rohingya crisis has a sustained impact on the threat landscape of the Bangladesh-Myanmar borderland. It has not only heightened the possibility of a prolonged volatility of the borderland but also created opportunities for violent extremist groups to boost their activities, including recruiting and raising funds. The plight of the Rohingya minority has been attracting the attention of regional and international violent extremist groups for a long time. Rohingya militants also tried to adopt Islamist rhetoric in order to get external support from transnational non-state actors.

In the aftermath of the 1991 crisis, Rohingya militant organisations, namely the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation and Arakan Rohingya National Organisation, developed external linkages, particularly with Al Qaeda-centric groups in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. In the post-9/11 period, such linkages became weak and no major incidents

were recorded. Bangladesh has also carried out several operations to dismantle the Rohingya insurgent networks of RSO and ARNO within its territory. It has also arrested three Pakistani citizens who came to provide training to Rohingyas. However, Bangladesh seems to be facing new challenges, especially since the June 2012 communal violence in Rakhine state and more recently since the 2017 violence. Currently, over a million Rohingyas are living in Bangladesh as refugees and illegal immigrants. Most of them are living near the Bangladesh-Myanmar border area. There is a growing presence of both local and foreign charities in the camp area and it is not difficult for extremist organisations to infiltrate under a humanitarian banner. Therefore, scaling up the surveillance and policing of such a large number of people is a challenge.

Al Qaeda

Al Qaeda (AQ) has a presence in South Asia and Southeast Asia through a network of local affiliates that emerged in the aftermath of the Soviet-Afghan war.¹⁵ The group, with a sustained presence in the region, seems to be locally entrenched and has a long-game approach as opposed to Daesh. Though Daesh was able to overshadow AQ through the declaration of a so-called “caliphate”, AQ is known to be quietly rebranding and fortifying its various branches.¹⁶ The launching of Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) to cover a vast territory that includes Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar is a case in point.

As AQIS narratives draw heavily on local grievances, particularly of Muslim minorities, it was therefore no surprise that they have been showing renewed interest in the Rohingya issue, particularly since the June 2012 communal violence in Rakhine state. Since then the group as well as its local affiliates and supporters in the region have issued many statements and published audio and video lectures on the Rohingya issue, highlighting the plight of the Rohingyas and the obligation of an armed jihad in Myanmar. These groups include Ansar al Islam, Jemaah Islamiyah, Tehrik-

¹⁵ Iftekharul Bashar, “India’s Leading Role and South Asia’s Security Concerns,” in Rohan Gunaratna and Douglas Woodall (eds.), *Afghanistan After the Western Drawdown*, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015.

¹⁶ Bruce Hoffman, “Al-Qaeda’s Resurrection,” Expert Brief, Council on Foreign Relations, 6 March 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/al-qaedas-resurrection> (accessed: 12 May 2018).

e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)¹⁷, Afghan Taliban, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)¹⁸, and Jama'ah Ansharut Tawhid. These materials have been spread and shared online and gave the groups widespread coverage and at the same time constructed a moral justification for using violence against Myanmar through recognition of the Rohingyas. There have been repeated calls from an influential AQ-linked ideologue, Abu Zar al-Burmi (a Pakistani citizen with Burmese origin), for armed jihad against Myanmar.¹⁹ Burmi is known to have contacts with TTP, IMU as well as Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which is the key jihadist platform for Uyghurs.

In one of its key publications in June 2017, Al Qaeda identified Myanmar as part of its theatre of operations and specifically identified the Myanmar military as one of its key targets. The group has clearly laid out its three objectives in Myanmar. These are: (1) "Helping and defending" Muslims in Myanmar, (2) "Avenging" the oppression on Myanmar Muslims by the military, and (3) "Retaking" the Islamic Arakan from the "occupying" military.²⁰ The group has expressed its interest to work with jihadist groups in India, Bangladesh and Myanmar in this regard. It is noteworthy that Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has urged the AQIS leadership to physically support Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. On 12 September 2017, Al Qaeda Central released a statement calling for revenge attacks to punish the government of Myanmar for the persecution of the Muslim-minority Rohingya population. The group urged Muslims around the world and especially those in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines to support Rohingyas in Myanmar financially and physically. This increases the possibility of Bangladeshi territory being used by both local and foreign militant groups.

Bangladesh has a number of AQ-centric groups which may be instrumental for mobilising support to Rohingya militants. The Ansar al Islam, Jamma'tul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harkat ul Jihad al Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B) are cases in point. Though all three groups are banned

¹⁷ "Pak Taliban threaten to attack Myanmar over Rohingya Muslims," *The Indian Express*, 26 July 2012, <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/pak-taliban-threaten-to-attack-myanmar-over-rohingya-muslims/979769/> (accessed 12 May 2018).

¹⁸ "Islamic militants take aim at Myanmar", *Asia Times*, 27 July 2012, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/NG27Ae04.html.

¹⁹ "Jihad is my way of life Rohingya mujahed," 19 July 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wBEvNeGnRPQ>.

²⁰ As-Sahab Media Subcontinent, "Code of Conduct: Al Qaeda in the Subcontinent," June 2018.

in Bangladesh, they have a substantial operational capacity. Among these three groups, Ansar al Islam is officially recognised by Al Qaeda as part of Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and as AQ's representative group in Bangladesh. In the past few years, Ansar al Islam has tried to send teams of fighters to Myanmar but they were not successful as Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies thwarted the attempts.²¹ JMB reportedly carried out an IED attack in Kalchakra Maidan, Bodh Gaya, India to avenge atrocities on Rohingya in Myanmar.²² Ansar al Islam has a significant following in Bangladesh and the group has been mostly involved in target killings. Ansar al Islam is led by a Ziaul Haq, a sacked major of the Bangladesh army.

Al Balagh is a Bengali AQIS magazine first released in September 2016. It also urged Muslims to join their fight against oppression. In 2017, the magazine published a special issue featuring the Rohingya crisis. Through its Bangladeshi affiliate, the Ansar al Islam, Al Qaeda has provided training and support for the Rohingya militants RSO. Ansar al Islam is active in southeastern Bangladesh, bordering northeast India and Myanmar. On 10 December 2016, Al Qaeda's Bengali media platform (known as Titumir Media) released a video in Bengali calling for taking revenge for the persecution of the Arakan Muslims through an armed struggle. If the Rohingya crisis continues, it will not be difficult for Al Qaeda and its local affiliates to recruit from the refugee camps. According to some sources, a AQIS-JMB-ARSA nexus is emerging in the eastern and southeastern regions of Bangladesh, particularly along the Bangladesh-India and Bangladesh-Myanmar borders. There is lack of presence of law enforcement agencies and the terrain is suitable for militant groups to use as a sanctuary as well as a training ground.²³

Daesh

Though the future of Daesh looks uncertain at present, in the context of Daesh's eastward expansion, its interest in the Rohingya issue is signifi-

²¹ Author's interview with a Bangladeshi agency that thwarted the attempt, Dhaka, May 2016.

²² National Investigation Agency, India, "Two main accused arrested by NIA in 'Kalchakra Maidan, Bodh Gaya, Bihar' Case", 7 August 2018, http://www.nia.gov.in/writereaddata/Portal/News/325_1_Pr.pdf.

²³ Author's interview with a Bangladeshi counter-terrorism professional, Dhaka, May 2018.

cant.²⁴ Daesh, from the beginning, used the Rohingya issue in its narrative. In a speech in 1 July 2014 in which he declared the establishment of a caliphate, Daesh leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi alluded to the Rohingyas as being among the “oppressed” Muslim populations worldwide that Daesh was looking to lift up.²⁵ In September 2015, Daesh’s Furat Media published an article titled “Bangladesh and the Declaration of the Caliphate”. The article urged Bangladeshis to pledge allegiance to the leader of Daesh, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. It demanded the release of jihadists from the country’s prisons and, significantly, called for waging an armed jihad in Myanmar from Bangladesh. It also called for the battle *Gazwatul Hind* – the final battle to bring the Indian Subcontinent under “Islamic” rule. Echoing its strategy in southern Philippines, Daesh has routinely, through its online publication *Dabiq*, claimed that it plans to establish a base in Bangladesh to launch revenge attacks on the Myanmar government over its treatment of the Muslim Rohingyas. For example, *Dabiq*’s 12th issue came out in November 2015. In that article, Daesh revealed its plan to expand in South Asia by establishing a base in Bangladesh. The group expressed its intention to use this base as a springboard for its expansion in India and Myanmar. The article claimed to have found a “new leader” in Bangladesh. The article highly praised JMB’s founder, Abdur Rahman. The 14th issue of *Dabiq* was published in April 2016. This issue carried an interview of Daesh leader Abu Ibrahim al Hanif. The article indicated that the Bangladesh chapter has the ability to work with various chapters/wilayats of Daesh, including Wilayat Khurasan. It called on the Muslims of Bangladesh and neighbouring areas to join Daesh and fight with their wealth and with their life. The article emphasised that Bengal was an important region for Daesh and the global jihad due to its strategic geographic position. It also clearly expressed that having a strong base in Bengal would be useful for carrying out attacks in India and eventually Myanmar. This may result in another longstanding conflict in Southeast Asia, following the siege of the southern Philippine city of Marawi by Islamist militants. Recently revealed details from Malaysia that Daesh-linked groups have recruited Rohingya refugees

²⁴ For details see Rohan Gunaratna, “The Islamic State’s Eastward Expansion,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2016.

²⁵ “Islamic State, Other Islamist Groups Exploit Plight of The Rohingya,” *Benarnews*, 11 May 2015, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/rohingya-06112015174307.html>.

further demonstrate the risk that the case can be exploited even beyond the Bangladesh-Myanmar border region.²⁶

Aung San Suu Kyi was also singled out by Daesh as a possible target in a “kill list” sent to Malaysian police in August. In November 2016, Indonesian police thwarted an attempt by a local pro-Daesh extremist group to carry out a bombing attack on the Myanmar embassy in Jakarta. If Daesh were to firmly establish a foothold in Bangladesh, it would not be difficult for the group to expand its operations into Myanmar. The porous border between Bangladesh and Myanmar provides a suitable terrain for insurgent operations. Should Daesh declare a new wilayat in South Asia, it is likely to include Myanmar’s Rakhine state. Daesh may capitalise on its contacts with the Bangladeshi militant group known as Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), which already has a pro-Daesh faction. In cyberspace, regional online extremists have sought to capitalise on the issue, pledging their support through profile pictures with the Daesh flag and the hashtag “Pray for P_A_R_I_S”, which refers to the conflict areas of Palestine, Africa, Rohingya areas, Iraq and Syria. Online extremists in Indonesia have expressed a desire to mount “jihad” on behalf of the Rohingyas and made reference to their hopes of bringing the “mujahidin” (jihadi fighters) into Myanmar. These online jihadist flare-ups suggest that the Rohingya issue is being hijacked by global jihadism.

Transnational Crime-Terror Nexus

An often under-reported consequence of the Rohingya crisis is the growth of a transnational crime-terror nexus along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. The terrain of the border is conducive for transnational crime as it cuts through hills, forests, rivers, canals and sea, which makes border management difficult for Bangladesh. The Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, out of their dire need for livelihood, often get involved in various forms of transnational crimes, such as human trafficking, drugs trafficking and arms trafficking.

The Rohingya crisis is the key reason behind the growth of human trafficking from the borderland. The statelessness and prolonged refugee-life of the Rohingyas is a push factor for them to desperately try to leave the

²⁶ “IS recruiting Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, says anti-terror chief,” *Today*, 27 August 2018, <https://www.todayonline.com/world/recruiting-rohingya-refugees-malaysia-says-anti-terror-chief>.

borderland in search of a better life overseas. According to Bangladeshi sources more than two dozen human smuggling syndicates are known to be active in the coastal region of Bangladesh and Myanmar, bringing boat people to Southeast Asia. According to the UNHCR, thousands of Rohingyas have undertaken irregular maritime journeys in the Bay of Bengal towards Thailand and Malaysia, and several hundred have reportedly died in recent years during the journey.²⁷ Though the crime-terror nexus is not new in the Bangladesh-Myanmar borderland, the vulnerability of the Rohingyas will inevitably make the threat even more complex.

Myanmar is a key producer of narcotics; most importantly, of Ya Baa (Methamphetamine). The Bangladesh-Myanmar border region has been identified by the Bangladesh Department of Narcotics Control as an important entry point for narcotics. There are at least 10 Ya Baa factories in the border area inside Myanmar which produces illegal drugs that are being smuggled into Bangladesh. The Rohingyas are recruited as carriers, intermediaries or traffickers.²⁸

These trafficking networks are also reportedly connected to various militant groups in the region. The militant groups provide security and tax the traffickers in return. Militant groups also depend on transnational crime syndicates for the procurement of weapons. Bangladeshi authorities believe that there exists a nexus between transnational crime and terrorism at the Bangladesh-Myanmar border and that unless the Rohingya issue is resolved, the nexus will manage to survive. It is noteworthy that Bangladesh is carrying out counter-narcotics operations on a regular basis; success, however, is limited.

In light of this, there is a need for Myanmar and Bangladesh to collaborate on aspects such as repatriation and security. The repatriation of the Rohingyas to Myanmar is the key to a sustainable solution. In order to achieve the conditions for return, it is important that refugees feel safe and have assurance of their livelihoods, rights to land ownership and permanent legal status in the form of citizenship and associated rights. Both countries must improve security cooperation, specifically in addressing

²⁷ UNHCR, "South-East Asia Irregular Maritime Movements," January – June 2014, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR%20-%20Irregular%20maritime%20movements.pdf>.

²⁸ "I carry yaba to survive: Rohingya and Bangladesh's meth trade," Al Jazeera, 20 August 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/carry-yaba-survive-rohingya-bangladesh-meth-trade-180818115319992.html>.

the challenges of drug-trafficking, violent extremism and border control. As a starting point, Myanmar and Bangladesh must revive/implement existing Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs), including on border liaison offices. It is also necessary to establish hotlines (between both militaries as well as border forces), promote intelligence-sharing and police-to-police exchanges, resume meetings at the highest level of the two respective militaries, further exchanges between the two defence colleges, Ministries of Home Affairs and Defence as well as joint (instead of just concurrent) operations on border control, demining and patrols.

Concluding Remarks

With terrorist groups actively exploiting the Rohingya crisis, the Bangladesh-Myanmar border is likely to see a new resurgence of violent extremism, with implications for regional security. Unless Rohingya grievances are addressed, the extremist narratives will continue to spread and a vulnerable segment of the Rohingya refugees will start perceiving violence as the only means to attract recognition. The changing threat landscape along the common border highlights the need for a sustainable resolution of the Rohingya crisis within a reasonable timeframe. There are three areas where bilateral, regional and international cooperation and collaboration is needed: first, ensuring the safe and voluntary repatriation of the Rohingyas to Rakhine state. This includes recognition of their identity as well as giving them citizenship of Myanmar. Second, socio-economic development in Rakhine state, with a particular focus on basic human rights and inter-communal harmony. Third, sharing of intelligence and building capacity on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in both Bangladesh and Myanmar.

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