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Fears of Radicalisation in the Rohingya refugee
crisis/1

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Executive Summary

Following the outbreak of violence observed in Myanmar's Rakhine state at the end of August 2017, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have tried to cross the border to Bangladesh. The magnitude of the crisis, along with the brutalities perpetrated by Myanmar's security apparatus with the support of the Buddhist population, has been extensively reported by the media and the international humanitarian community. Despite an initial denial of the role played in the escalation of violence, the Myanmar's military has later admitted that some of its members were actually involved in the indiscriminate killings of Rohingya found in mass graves¹. According to UNHCR, the crisis represents the "world's fastest growing refugee crisis" and is "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing".

With nearly a million Rohingya refugees who have settled along the border of South-East Bangladesh to escape several decades of ever rising discrimination and violence, the international community fears that Rohingya's grievances might be exploited by existing militant groups.

This report seeks to provide the reader with an overview - though not exhaustive - of the crisis by analysing factors which may influence in a medium to long term a possible Rohingya path to radicalisation. Additionally, this study attempts to identify reasons that have led a relatively small number of individuals to join and actively work for jihadist organisations. In this regard, it is of paramount importance to understand whether, based on a set of generally accepted criteria, the current concrete situation of the Rohingya shows signs that could eventually lead to violent extremism.

The paper comprises an accurate theoretical analysis coupled with research conducted on the ground. Field work consisted mainly of a qualitative analysis of the security context in Rohingya refugee camps and makeshifts. This has been possible by conducting a number of interviews and thematic discussions with different stakeholders - including local authorities, law enforcement and intelligence agencies, non-governmental organisations, and the refugees themselves - and most importantly, by putting the "foot on the ground" and experiencing the harsh living conditions refugees are currently exposed to.

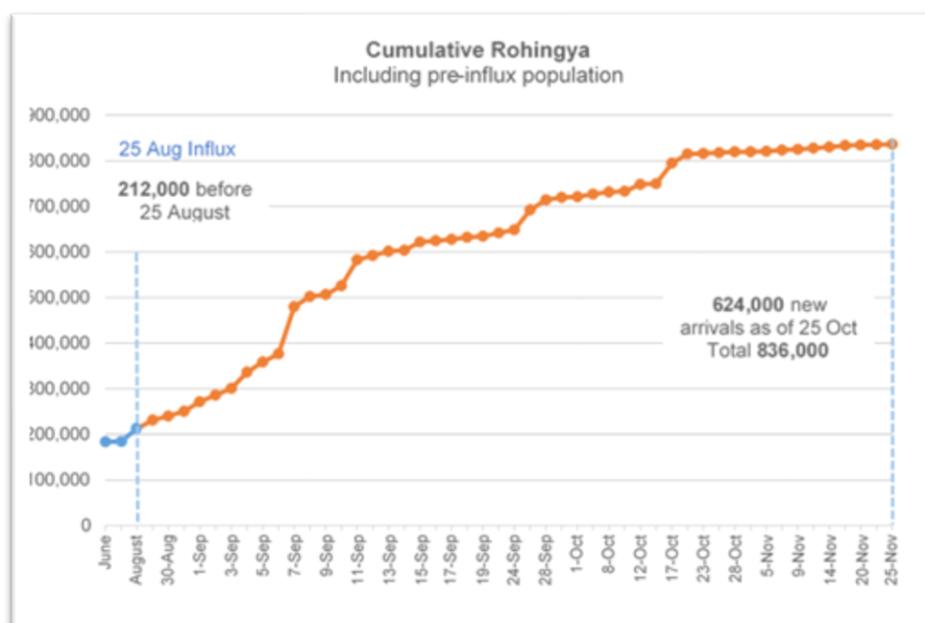
Field work has been supported by an in-depth OSINT analysis aimed at identifying initiatives undertaken by extremist groups - whether armed or not - to recruit Rohingya for their causes. Whilst several groups seem to be currently attempting to take advantage of the crisis, the report primarily focuses on the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) - the best known ethno-nationalist insurgent group in Myanmar - as well as on the influence exercised by Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, which seem to have played a significant role in the online propaganda about the Rohingya. Subsequently, the paper analyses the Bangladeshi Islamist militant group Hizb ut Tahrir, which was allegedly disseminating propaganda leaflets among the refugees. More broadly, the report will analyse the possibility of radicalised Rohingya joining terrorist groups operating in other theatres, such as India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan². This analysis serves as a contribution to the study of the global phenomenon of violent extremism.

¹ K. Olarn, J. Griffiths, *Myanmar military admits role in killing Rohingya found in mass grave*, CNN, 11 January 2018.

² P. Swami, *In fact: To India's east, an emerging sanctuary for al-Qaeda*, The Indian Express, 6 January 2017; M. Sinan Siyech, *India's Rohingya terror problem: real or imagined*, Southasian Monitor, 4 December 2017.

1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of violence observed in Myanmar's Rakhine state at the end of August 2017, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have tried to cross the border to Bangladesh. The influx has so far resulted in approximately 671,500 Rohingya³ reaching Cox's Bazar District, and establishing their presence in makeshift settlements, refugee camps, and among the host community.



The significant increase of people in the area has challenged the local services, infrastructures, and the capacity of the Bangladesh Government to cope with what UNHCR has defined as the “world's fastest growing refugee crisis” and “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing”. As of today, the humanitarian situation remains dramatic; poor water and sanitation conditions coupled with low vaccination coverage on extremely densely populated areas constitute ideal conditions for the spread of diseases - as demonstrated by the recent diphtheria outbreak in the camps. This, along with an increasing sense of frustration among the host community, may represent a dangerous combination exacerbating the crisis.

2. Who are the Rohingya?

The term “Rohingya” is commonly used to refer to a Muslim community inhabiting the Rakhine state of in majority Buddhist Myanmar. This nomenclature, however, remains a source of debate in the country; in fact, while this term is widely used by the United Nations and the broad international community to denote this group, “the Myanmar government and the overwhelming population of Myanmar call them illegal Bengali migrants from neighbouring Bangladesh”⁴. The reasons for this can be found in the history of the region: during the British

³ IOM ISCG Situation Report: Rohingya Refugee Crisis. See: reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/iscg-situation-report-rohingya-refugee-crisis-cox-s-bazar-25-march-2018.

⁴ N. Kipgen, *Conflict in Rakhine State in Myanmar: Rohingya Muslims' Conundrum*, Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, 2013, 33:2, 298-310, DOI: 10.1080/13602004.2013.810117.

rule, which lasted more than one hundred years (1824-1948), waves of labourers were migrating within the broader region (including from what we know today as Bangladesh). Many of them established their presence in the British administered territories which are now known as Myanmar. Myanmar, however, has so far failed to include them among the 135 ethnic groups officially recognised by the government, and has denied them citizenship and the right to an identity.

Since Myanmar's independence from the British rule in 1948, Rohingya population has struggled to be recognised and to be granted basic citizenship rights. Upon the adoption of the 1948 Union Citizenship Act, the post-colonial government sought to define Myanmar citizenship and to identify which among the "indigenous races of Burma" were eligible to be granted it - Rohingya was not included among them. The act, however, allowed individuals whose families had been living in the country for at least two generations to apply for identity cards, and in some cases for citizenship - a provision which allowed some Rohingya to hold positions in the government⁵. The situation changed dramatically with the military coup of 1962, which led to even more humiliating restrictions against them - for instance the refusal of the new political entourage to recognize citizenship rights of the new generations. In the following years, the Rohingya people were given foreign registration cards, which further jeopardized their access to education and job opportunities⁶.

Many people point to 1982 as the year when the Rohingya statelessness was formally institutionalized by the Burmese 1982 Citizenship Law. Indeed, to be eligible, an individual had to demonstrate that he or she had been living in the country prior to 1948. The individual should also have been fluent in one of Myanmar's national languages. The vast majority of Rohingya lacked any written official records and, due to the limited access to education, only few were fluent in languages other than their own dialect⁷. The government of Myanmar, on several occasions, denied the existence of the Rohingya. This can be seen in the 1992 statement of then Myanmar's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ohn Gyaw, who went on to claim, "[H]istorically, there has never been a 'Rohingya' race in Myanmar"⁸.

This political climate, along with violence and human rights violations observed since the 1970s, has forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to flee to neighbouring Bangladesh as well as to other Southeast Asian countries. The military crackdown which followed the killing of nine police officers by ARSA (Harakah al-Yaqin) - a Rohingya militant group - in northern Rakhine state, in October 2016, resulted in a spiral of violence which witnessed security forces performing mass executions, arson, and rape. As a consequence, approximately 70,000 Rohingya crossed the border to Bangladesh⁹. Violence erupted again on August 25, 2017, after Rohingya militants killed twelve members of the security forces in a coordinated attack on more than 20 police posts in northern Rakhine. The government security forces responded with what is being considered a systematic campaign of "ethnic cleansing." In the weeks that followed, over 350 villages were burned down by the military, and thousands of Rohingya killed or subjected to various acts of human rights violations. According to Human Rights

⁵ *The 17 Rohingya, including a woman, in the Burmese parliament*, Dhaka Tribune, 15 September 2017.

⁶ M. Haque, *1982 Citizenship Law in Burma and the Arbitrary Deprivation of Rohingyas' Nationality*, South Asian Journal of Policy and Governance, 30 December 2014.

⁷ A. K. Lowenstein, *Persecution of the Rohingya Muslims: is genocide occurring in Myanmar's Rakhine State? A legal analysis*, International Human Rights Clinic, Yale Law School, October 2015.

⁸ Human Rights Watch, *Burma: e Rohingya Muslims: Ending a Cycle of Exodus?*, p. 29, Report, September 1996.

⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Burma: Security Forces Raped Rohingya Women, Girls*, 6 February 2017.

Watch, “an estimated one-third of Burma’s Rohingya population of 1.2 million have crossed into neighbouring Bangladesh [...] while tens of thousands remain internally displaced inside Burma, without access to vital humanitarian aid.”

3. Bengali migrants from neighbouring Bangladesh

Despite decades of contacts and migration, as well as religious and linguistic ties – Chittagonian (from the Bengali District of Chittagong in the southeastern region of Bangladesh) and Rohingya dialects share some similarities – Rohingya are still perceived by the local Bangladeshi population as foreigners. Generally stereotyped as dangerous, criminal, poorly educated and carriers of diseases - in particular HIV - Rohingya are increasingly perceived by many in the host community as mainly responsible for the sharp increase in prices, massive deforestation, and land deprivation. According to UNHCR, the Rohingya refugee population that has settled along the border of the South-East of Bangladesh totals approximately 980,000 individuals¹⁰, of which an estimated 307,500 were already present in the country before the crisis. The majority (over half a million, see Fig.1) is located in a large 3,000-acre piece of land, known as Kutupalong Extension, designated by the Bangladesh government for the new arrivals. The Bangladeshi 10th Infantry Division currently covers Cox’s Bazar District through three of its brigades. At the beginning of the response, the military established four coordination cells that correspond to four geographic areas in the Cox’s Bazar District: Ukhia (for Kutupalong and Balukhali1 area), Kerontoli (Balukhali2 to Chakmarkul area), Unchiprang (for Unchiprang and Shamlapur area), and Nhilla (for Leda and Nayapara). These brigades have specific areas of responsibility (AOR), and each has a Coordination Cell to serve as a space for contact between the army, civil government agencies, local and international NGOs, UN agencies, and private groups/individuals. The current government predicts an imminent scenario where military will hand over full responsibility to the Police. This, however, appears to be unrealistic: given a serious lack of manpower and assets, the Police do not seem to possess the capacity to cope with the new security landscape.

The current operational environment sees nearly a million Rohingya refugees who have fled from Myanmar after several decades of ever-increasing discrimination and violence, where their basic rights - such as citizenship, marriage, voting, the possibility of travel, and access to education and job opportunities - were stripped from them in a manner that often precedes genocide. As a result, they are atomized, tired, angry, yet still full of vigor and hope. These feelings, together with a growing sense of frustration caused by the harsh living conditions in the camps, may in the long term offer a fertile ground for radical organisations interested in exploiting their momentum. Indeed, as Richard Horsey, an independent analyst based in Myanmar, put it: “any long-term hopeless situation is very conducive for recruitment by radical groups who want to pursue their agenda”¹¹.

Despite the current situation, however, Rohingya do not represent a target for radicalisation attempts by global jihadi groups, as several factors seem to mitigate such a possibility. Rohingya are mostly illiterate due to their limited access to education; they are closely linked to their own imams; they follow a deeply traditional interpretation of Islam. Jihadi violence, on the other hand, is mostly associated with modern forms of Islam that appeal to the educated, urban, and globalized. Rohingya sentiments focus more on demands for citizenship and for civil rights, and not towards some inchoate hatred of the Western world or dreams of a Caliphate¹².

¹⁰ See reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/unhcr-bangladesh-operational-update-21-february-2018-6-march-2018.

¹¹ *Rohingya plight in Bangladesh raises fears of radicalisation*, Financial Times, 6 December 2017.

¹² Discussion with an international analyst who preferred to remain anonymous.

Interviews conducted in one of the crowded makeshifts, which has replaced what used to be a beautiful hill covered by tropical vegetation, show that few Rohingya know much about the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA); at the same time, they are very critical of the brutal methods of the Myanmar Army. The security situation, as well as political, and humanitarian environment however, remain extremely unstable and, as stated by another independent analyst who preferred to remain anonymous: “Years enduring unfathomable boredom in a squalid camp will probably result in the very young population becoming drawn to revenge and violence”.

4. The risk of radicalisation

Many scholars agree on a number of recurring factors encouraging radicalisation, describing it as the process whereby people turn to extremism. It is clear that there is no single driver of radicalization. Rather than that, it stems from a combination of different conditions. Some theories identify grievances and unfulfilled needs as the main reasons for radicalisation¹³. Certain ideologies, social context as well as violence itself may also play an important role. These processes might be ambiguous and unclear, but the path of radicalisation follows some push and pull factors, including but not limited to individual and collective motivations, ideas spread by some preachers, revenge for injustice, hatred, and need for a sense of belonging.

What transpires very clearly from the analysis of the Rohingya crisis is the presence of several factors mentioned above. In particular, the situation of refugees matches the criteria of grievances and unfulfilled needs. Rohingya staying in the camps have many reasons to harbor resentment and vengeance against those who drove them out of their land in Rakhine. Also, discrimination suffered in Burma strengthened the sense of community and common fate among the Rohingya. This fosters the collective emotional needs of the group at risk of radicalisation. Other strong recurring factors are family and tribal bonds of loyalty and commitment in this population. Some reports say that in the refugee camps, joining the armed resistance is becoming a *fard*, a religious duty, and certain local religious leaders are in charge of recruiting cells. Violent conflicts are another primary root of radicalisation, and most of the Rohingya population has been exposed to brutal violence. The weakest element in this specific case is the ideology, since so far the Rohingya community has shown great resilience to propaganda despite all the abuses suffered.

The Rohingya crisis, therefore, seems to fit the radicalisation framework described above as it meets several of the most important conditions. As highlighted in the previous paragraphs, the more precarious their existence in Bangladesh is, the more likely Rohingya are to support - if not actively join - radical groups such as ARSA. “Needs”, as one of the main factors, plays a significant role, if not mitigated by strong efforts by the broad international humanitarian community to meet the most basic requirements for sustaining lives and restoring the dignity of the affected.

On 23 November 2017, the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar reached an agreement on the return of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar. While welcomed by some as a positive development towards the resolution of the crisis, the agreement - in the medium/long term - may foster additional tensions between local Bangladeshi communities and the refugees fearing forced repatriation to Myanmar. Indeed, as recently stated by the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, “For returns to be ever realized in a way that is voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable they must be treated as equals – citizens of Myanmar with all the rights that that status affords.” She also added that “This must be done

¹³ P. Neumann, *Radicalized, new jihadists and the threat to the West*, Tauris, London 2016.

in a principled way that prioritizes the need for these people to be recognised as Rohingya and as citizens of Myanmar”¹⁴.

In addition, Bangladesh faces another challenge when it comes to the process of de-radicalisation. The Bengali General Inspectorate for Prisons admitted that it had abandoned the efforts to de-radicalise around 600 militants, staying in 68 prisons of the country. Between January 2016 and September 2017, at least 564 radical suspects, including JMB (ISIS-affiliate) militants, have walked out of jail on bail and at least nine of them have gone into hiding¹⁵. This may pose a serious threat to the Rohingya community in refugee camps, exposing them to the risk of being recruited by veterans who have been radicalised in prison.

While the analysis of these elements seems to imply an unavoidable Rohingya path to radicalisation, the reality on the ground seems to discount - at least for the time being - such imminent undesirable scenario. At the strategic level, ARSA or other radical groups would have to compensate for the lack of a strong ideological drive by trying to take advantage of the rage of young people languishing without any perspectives for the future in the overcrowded Bangladeshi camps. At the operational level, the group “will have to shift its *modus operandi* from attacks under the cover of the community to cross-border attacks.”¹⁶

Only by taking into account the necessary level of complexity between actors, relationships, and local and power dynamics - for instance by analysing interactions at different levels of the current operational environment: i.e. refugees - refugees; refugees - host community; refugees - national law enforcement agencies - could the Bangladeshi security apparatus develop the indicators necessary to monitor a possible shift in the current security situation and detect any acceleration of the usual path to radicalisation if the international community fails to find a long-term solution for the Rohingya crisis.

¹⁴ See www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22620&LangID=E.

¹⁵ S. Islam, R. Islam, *Militants in Prisons: De-radicalisation call falls on deaf ears*, The Daily Star, 22 January 2018.

¹⁶ See www.ft.com/content/eef90090-d95a-11e7-a039-c64b1c09b482.