



*Fears of Radicalization in the Rohingya refugee crisis*  
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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 graves<sup>1</sup>. 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 Afghanistan<sup>2</sup>. This analysis serves as a contribution to the study of the global phenomenon of violent extremism.

## Groups involved in the recruitment and exploitation of the crisis

Several groups are currently trying to take advantage of the refugee crisis. This occurs, for example, by means of recruiting individuals and spreading propaganda and ideology among them. Certain

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.

groups such as ARSA are merely ethno-nationalist while others belong to well-known global jihadist and Islamic terrorist networks. We decided to focus our research on four main organisations and their respective local affiliates. Apart from ARSA mentioned above, Al Qaeda and the Islamic State play a major role in the attempts to recruit Rohingya for terrorist purposes. Last but not least, the Islamist international organisation, Hizb ut Tahrir, has also actively approached the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh to ignite an escalation of conflict with Myanmar. Minor groups are active, too. However, we chose to focus our efforts towards the most significant organisations in the international context.

## ARSA

### *Origins and goals*

The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army was established in 2013, after the 2012 Rakhine riots, as the Harakah al-Yaqin (Faith Movement) by Ata Ullah, also known as Abu Ammar Jununi. He was born in Karachi from a Rohingya family who fled the persecution in Buthidaung, Rakhine state. Later, he moved to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, and served as an imam to the local Rohingya diaspora<sup>3</sup>. Ata Ullah said that his primary objective is “to liberate Rohingya people from dehumanized oppression perpetrated by the Burmese regime”<sup>4</sup>. ARSA stressed that it “doesn’t authorise any person to be interviewed with any media outlet on its behalf in Bangladesh, except its official spokesperson Mr. Abdullah”<sup>5</sup>. The Burmese government accused ARSA affiliates to be “extremist Bengali terrorists”, implying they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh<sup>6</sup>. In a public statement, Abdullah demanded the Rohingya to be recognised as an ethnic group in Myanmar. He also added that ARSA is not a jihadist organisation, but rather a ethno-nationalist insurgency<sup>7</sup>.

### *Relations with the jihadist networks*

In a statement released on 14 September 2017, ARSA denied any link with al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, Lashkar-e-Taiba or any other transnational terrorist group<sup>8</sup>. In all its official documents, the group does not call for an Islamic State nor for secession, but aims to fight in order to end the ethnic cleansing and discrimination of the Rohingya community. Even though Burma authorities portray ARSA as an Islamist terrorist organisation, there is little evidence that jihadism is or has been a major drive for recruitment. So far, ethnicity and the sense of belonging to a national community seem to be the main motivating factors. Furthermore, ARSA calls on the international community, the UN and national authorities to cooperate in order to solve the humanitarian crisis.

Despite the rejection of any connection with the jihadist networks, it is unquestionable that the group is Islamic-inspired. Every official statement issued by ARSA is introduced by the *basmala*. A 2016 Crisis Group report, which was based on interviews with alleged members of the group as well as sources in the region and the diaspora, found that Islamic clerics had blessed training camps and issued *fatwas* legitimising the group<sup>9</sup>. According to some reporters, in refugee camps in Bangladesh,

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<sup>3</sup> A. Sakhawat, *Who is Ata Ullah - the man at the heart of the Myanmar conflict?*, Dhaka Tribune, 20 October 2017.

<sup>4</sup> *Southeast Asia's Newest Rebel Group Calls Bangladesh 'Great Neighbor'*, Radio Free Asia, 23 August 2017.

<sup>5</sup> ARSA Twitter official account, link: [twitter.com/ARSA\\_Official/status/923046034984628224](https://twitter.com/ARSA_Official/status/923046034984628224).

<sup>6</sup> P. McPherson, *'We die or they die': Rohingya insurgency sparks fresh violence in Myanmar*, The Guardian, 3 September 2017.

<sup>7</sup> M. Winchester, *Birth of an ethnic insurgency in Myanmar*, Asia Times, 28 August 2017.

<sup>8</sup> ARSA Twitter account, statement at link: [https://twitter.com/ARSA\\_Official/status/908218055125172224](https://twitter.com/ARSA_Official/status/908218055125172224).

<sup>9</sup> *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State*, International Crisis Group, report n. 283, 15 December 2016.

joining ARSA is becoming a *fard* - a religious duty<sup>10</sup>. The Jakarta Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict suggests that some extremists from Indonesia and Malaysia may have joined ARSA, answering calls to defend their brothers of the Ummah in Myanmar.

### *Strategy and recruitment*

Over the past years, ARSA was financed by Rohingya from the diaspora, but the units in Myanmar were still poorly equipped, armed with few guns, wooden sticks and machetes. That explains why military actions undertaken were aimed at seizing as many weapons as possible, with raids targeting the Burmese forces. The first major action claimed by ARSA was carried out in October 2016. The insurgents attacked Burmese border posts, killing 13 security forces and stealing more than 50 guns<sup>11</sup>. Another deadly attack occurred on 25 August 2017, when ARSA militants attacked police stations in the Maungdaw district with IEDs, killing 12 policemen and provoking the Burmese reaction against Rohingya civilians in the region<sup>12</sup>. After a unilateral ceasefire declared by ARSA in September 2017, the group claimed a new attack on a Burmese military truck on 5 January 2018, confirmed by Ata Ullah via a statement on Twitter<sup>13</sup>.

According to several reports, ARSA is using the refugee camps as a safe haven and logistic hub to lead sorties and attacks across the border with Myanmar. In August, a high-ranking anonymous source at a refugee camp said that there were more than 150 members of ARSA in the Ukhia-Teknaf areas, who used to go back and forth across the border<sup>14</sup>. While many Rohingya have joined ARSA willingly, there have been reports of men forced to do so<sup>15</sup>. On the other hand, several videos circulating on the internet show armed men claiming to belong to ARSA and making threats against the Rakhine Buddhists or the security forces<sup>16</sup>. It is not clear to what extent these individuals are hierarchically dependent on ARSA leadership or whether they form improvised cells inspired by the organisation.

### **Al Qaeda**

#### *Al Qaeda Central*

Al Qaeda has a long-standing interest in the region, including in Bangladesh and Southeast Asia. Osama bin Laden first mentioned certain areas of India (Kashmir and Assam) as a target in 1996<sup>17</sup>. After his death, the new leader of Al Qaeda Central, Ayman al-Zawahiri, started to restructure the organisation, its main focus being on South Asia<sup>18</sup>. Even though the AQ leadership and its local network often threatened the Hindu community and the Indian government, most of the terrorist attacks took place in Pakistan, where its stronghold is believed to be located, and in Bangladesh. For

<sup>10</sup> Z. Abuza, *Who are the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army?*, Radio Free Asia, 1 September 2017.

<sup>11</sup> *Myanmar policemen killed in Rakhine border attack*, BBC, 9 October 2016.

<sup>12</sup> P. McPherson, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> G. Head, *Myanmar Rohingya militants Arsa vow to fight on after attack*, BBC, 7 January 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Radio Free Asia, *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> P. McPherson, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> YouTube channel Reporter Info, link: [youtube.com/watch?v=wPxbLU-fYP4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPxbLU-fYP4).

<sup>17</sup> R. H. Laskar, *Al Qaeda's Indian Subcontinent Wing an Old Plan*, India Today, 14 September 2014.

<sup>18</sup> A. Tanveer, M. Golovkina, *Al Qaeda's Shadowy New 'Emir' in South Asia Handed Tough Job*, Reuters, 9 September 2014.

instance, in 2014 jihadists attempted to seize the Pakistani Navy frigate Zulfiqar, from which they planned to launch missiles at nearby American and Pakistani warships<sup>19</sup>. The plan was eventually foiled and several terrorists were sentenced to death<sup>20</sup>.

According to some analysts, it is not easy for Al Qaeda to establish an infrastructure in India, except for Kashmir and Assam, as in the past it had failed to attract Rohingya in Myanmar<sup>21</sup>. In late 2017, however, India experienced a surge of jihadist activity, which reflects the competition between Al Qaeda and ISIS. In particular, Al Qaeda received a pledge of support from the Kashmiri group Ansar Ghazwatul Hind (AGH) in July 2017<sup>22</sup>, even though the Kashmiri wing of ISIS asked AGH emir Zakir Musa to pledge allegiance to the Caliphate<sup>23</sup>. Additionally, in September 2017 in Delhi, Indian police arrested a British national of Bangladeshi origin, who was allegedly trying to recruit Rohingya to fight for Al Qaeda<sup>24</sup>. According to Delhi police sources, the suspect had radicalised in a British prison and subsequently, in 2013, had travelled to Mauritania and later to Aleppo, Syria, where he fought as a member of Jabhat Al Nusra<sup>25</sup>. In September 2014, when he traveled to Bangladesh, he was arrested on charges of terror financing and recruitment, and stayed imprisoned until April 2017. Allegedly, he later entered India to recruit Rohingya for Al Qaeda<sup>26</sup>. So far, the outcome of his actions is not known.

### *Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent; Ansarullah Bangla Team; Ansar Al Islam Bangladesh*

In September 2014, Ayman al-Zawahiri appeared in a 1-hour video in which he announced the creation of Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). In October 2014, the first issue of the AQIS magazine, *Resurgence*, called Myanmar a “21st century concentration camp”. This shows Al Qaeda’s interest in the Rohingya crisis from the very beginning. AQIS was the result of unification of existing jihadist groups in Bangladesh and Pakistan, such as Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT). In 2013, ABT was initially created as a website used by the Bangladeshi Islamist preacher Muhammad Jasimuddin Rahmani, who advocated the murder of atheist and secular bloggers and was inspired by Anwar al-Awlaki<sup>27</sup>. Later, ABT gathered many jihadists from Bangladesh and the authorities finally banned it in March 2015. But already in 2014 most of the militants had merged into a new group affiliated with AQIS: Ansar Al Islam (AAI).

AAI launched an assassination campaign in 2015, killing a number of prominent secular bloggers, academics and LGBT activists in Bangladesh. The first attack claimed by the group was on 11 November 2014, when professor Shafiul Islam was killed by unknown assailants<sup>28</sup>. In late 2017, killers of the writer Avijit Roy were arrested in Dhaka, including Mozammel Hussain Saimon, the

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<sup>19</sup> S. Hasan, S. Shah, S. Gorman, *Al Qaeda Militants Tried to Seize Pakistan Navy Frigate*, Wall Street Journal, 16 September 2014.

<sup>20</sup> *PNS Zulfiqar attack: Five navy officers get death penalty*, The Express Tribune, 25 May 2016.

<sup>21</sup> S. Bengali, *Al Qaeda leader says terrorist network branching out to India*, Los Angeles Times, 4 September 2014.

<sup>22</sup> *Increase in jihadist messaging reflects competition between IS, AQIS*, MAX Security Solutions, December 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Twitter link: [twitter.com/VegetaMoustache/status/945047491367657473](https://twitter.com/VegetaMoustache/status/945047491367657473).

<sup>24</sup> C. Mortimer, *India trying to deport 40,000 Rohingya Muslim over 'ties to terrorism'*, Independent, 18 September 2017.

<sup>25</sup> *First images of suspected Al-Qaeda terrorist Subhan Haq, real name Shami Ur Rahman, arrested by Delhi Police*, The Sun.

<sup>26</sup> *Al-Qaeda Operative Arrested In Delhi Was Radicalised In London, Say Investigators*, NDTV, 18 September 2017.

<sup>27</sup> J. A. Manik, *Preaching militancy, building network*, The Daily Star, 14 August 2013.

<sup>28</sup> *Islamists group claim responsibility of RU teacher murder*, Bdnews24, 16 November 2014.

head of the “intelligence and media wing” of AAI<sup>29</sup>. One of the group’s leaders is former major of the Bangladesh Army and renegade Syed Mohammad Ziaul Haque, who took part in the 2012 thwarted coup to establish Sharia law in the country<sup>30</sup>. In 2016 AAI started claiming its actions in the name of AQIS. On 5 March 2017, the government of Bangladesh officially banned Ansar Al Islam. The strategy adopted by AQIS is different from the one of ISIS. Al Qaeda in Bangladesh has always avoided attacking the security forces or the government officials. In a statement released in May 2016, Ansar Al Islam criticized ISIS for targeting “new reverts to Islam” and “individuals against whom there is no proof or evidence”<sup>31</sup>.

### *Al Qaeda’s involvement in the Rohingya crisis*

According to some Indian sources, from 2014 onwards both Rohingya and Bangladeshi jihadists were known to have been training at AQIS Shorabak camps, in Kandahar district, Afghanistan, which was detected in 2015, as well as in the Qari Imran camp in South Waziristan, Pakistan tribal areas<sup>32</sup>. This allegation has not been verified yet. Furthermore, Indian intelligence has been investigating Rohingya from 2014, when a Myanmar national named Mohammad Khalid was arrested amid the accidental blast in a jihadist hideout in Burdwan, Western India. Khalid confessed he had received training by Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and had ties to the Bangladeshi terrorist group Jamaat-ul- Mujahideen<sup>33</sup>. This might be the sign of a larger presence of Rohingya jihadists in the AfPak scenario.

What is certain, on the other hand, is the interest of AQIS in exploiting the crisis in Myanmar. In late 2017, AQIS spokesman Usama Mahmoud called on Muslims in the region, namely Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, to act for the Rohingya in Burma<sup>34</sup>. In a document titled “A Call to Start Work”, Mahmoud addressed the Ummah to avenge the Rohingya “tortured by the infidels” in Myanmar, stating that: “We have to solve this problem by ourselves. Everyone who has declared the Tawhid of Allah should join Jihad”<sup>35</sup>. Few months before, in September, even the Al Qaeda branch in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) released a video with a speech by Khalid bin Umar Batarfi, who called on Muslims of Bangladesh, India and Southeast Asia to support their Rohingya brothers in Myanmar, and for AQIS to carry out attacks<sup>36</sup>. Al Shabaab echoed the call of AQAP, urging Muslims in the Indian Subcontinent to support the Islamic resistance in Myanmar<sup>37</sup>. Some analysts believe that AQIS

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<sup>29</sup> K. Hasan, S. Islam Tipu, *Arrested Ansar Al-Islam militant confesses to killing blogger Avijit Roy*, Dhaka Tribune, 19 November 2017.

<sup>30</sup> N. Labu, *The challenges to arresting sacked Maj Zia*, Dhaka Tribune, 17 November 2017.

<sup>31</sup> N. Barr, *Diverging Trajectories in Bangladesh: Islamic State vs al-Qaeda*, The Jamestown Foundation, 9 December 2017.

<sup>32</sup> P. Swami, *In fact: To India’s east, an emerging sanctuary for al-Qaeda*, The Indian Express, 6 January 2017.

<sup>33</sup> M. Sinan Siyech, *India’s Rohingya terror problem: real or imagined*, Southasian Monitor, 4 December 2017.

<sup>34</sup> SITE Intelligence Group, *AQIS Spokesman Calls Regional Muslims to Act for Rohingya Brethren in Myanmar*, 24 November 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Global Islamic Media Front Subcontinent translation for the as Sahab Media Subcontinent, November 2017 release.

<sup>36</sup> SITE Intelligence Group, *AQAP Official Batarfi Urges Support for Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, Calls AQIS to Attack*, 2 September 2017.

<sup>37</sup> SITE Intelligence Group, *Echoing AQAP, Shabaab Urges AQIS to Physically Support Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar*, 7 September 2017.

will try to further expand to Myanmar, either by trying to absorb parts of ARSA or by creating its own local jihadist network<sup>38</sup>.

## 8. Islamic State

### *The strategy of the Islamic State in Southeast Asia*

The Islamic State, also known as Daish, has been seeking a global dimension from the beginning of its existence. Part of its strategy is based on the establishment of regional *wilayah*. Daish is also gaining strength in Afghanistan and has claimed responsibility for several attacks in Kabul<sup>39</sup>. This appears to be the prelude of a larger expansion in the region, after the fall of the Caliphate in Syria and Iraq. But the Islamic State had already managed to establish its local branch in Bangladesh and in Southeast Asia as well.

The Indonesian government recently decided to add 600 extra personnel to the counter-terrorism Detachment 88, in order to monitor ISIS cells in the country<sup>40</sup>. The Detachment arrested a 26-year-old recruiter suspected of sending militants from Indonesia to the Philippines<sup>41</sup>. The most significant example comes in fact from the Philippines, where the city of Marawi was occupied by the Abu Sayyaf group and the Maute group, both affiliated to the Islamic State. Only after five months of bloody siege and the killings of the jihadist leaders, the city was liberated<sup>42</sup>. The experience of Marawi shows that a similar scenario might occur in Burma, too. Not surprisingly, in late 2017, jihadists participating in a Telegram chat group discussed the possibility of Daish establishing a presence in Myanmar and whether foreign fighters should join the conflict in Rakhine as well as receive support from ARSA and local fighters<sup>43</sup>. Moreover, a Telegram channel belonging to ISIS militants promoted a UK-based fundraising campaign to aid the Muslim Rohingya population in Myanmar<sup>44</sup>. The Indian Home minister claims that the government is in the possession of intelligence showing Rohingya links to ISIS and Pakistani networks<sup>45</sup>.

### *Jamaat ul Mujahideen Bangladesh*

The same technique as the one employed by Al Qaeda Central was used in Bangladesh by the Islamic State as well, but with a different set of targets. Al Qaeda and its proxies (Ansarullah Bangla Team and Ansar Al Islam) tend to be cautious and avoid casualties among the Muslims. On the other hand, the local branch of Daish has not hesitated to provoke direct confrontation with the security forces. That is why, when in June 2016 ISIS affiliates killed the wife of a counter-terrorism officer in

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<sup>38</sup> The Cipher Brief, *AQIS Fits Into al Qaeda's Global Strategy*, Interview with Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Senior Fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 14 April 2017.

<sup>39</sup> *Kabul blast kills at least 41 at Afghan cultural center*, Associated Press, 28 December 2017.

<sup>40</sup> R. Birsal, *Indonesia to Add Hundreds of Counter-Terrorism Police to Monitor IS*, The New York Times, 29 December 2017.

<sup>41</sup> T. Nathalia, *Police Arrest Recruiter for Militants in Philippines*, Jakarta Globe, 4 January 2018.

<sup>42</sup> T. Regencia, *Marawi siege: Army kills Abu Sayyaf, Maute commanders*, Al Jazeera, 16 October 2017.

<sup>43</sup> SITE Intelligence Group, *Jihadists discuss the possibility of IS establishing presence in Myanmar, foreign fighters entering conflict*, 27 October 2017.

<sup>44</sup> SITE Intelligence Group, *Pro-ISIS Telegram channel promotes fundraising campaign to aid Rohingyas*, 5 October 2017.

<sup>45</sup> C. Mortimer, *op. cit.*

Chittagong, AQIS released a statement via Ansar Al Islam condemning the murder of the woman<sup>46</sup>. Specifically, Daish managed to join forces with the local Jamaat ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), which was founded two decades ago but evolved into a new organisation after the rise of the Islamic State. JMB began to claim actions on behalf of ISIS in September 2015, when militants shot dead Cesare Tavella, an Italian aid worker in Gulshan, Dhaka<sup>47</sup>. That same year, in November, other terrorists in Dinajpur fired shots at the Italian priest Pietro Parolari, who underwent surgery in critical conditions but managed to survive. The attack was claimed by ISIS via Amaq agency and Al Bayan radio, and the priest was accused of “christianizing Bangladesh”<sup>48</sup>. Earlier in October, a Bangladeshi Protestant pastor narrowly escaped death after three members of Jamaat ul Mujahideen Bangladesh tried to slit his throat<sup>49</sup>.

The most devastating ISIS attack occurred on 1 July 2016, when a commando of six terrorists opened fire at the Holey Artisan Bakery restaurant, in Gulshan, Dhaka residential area. The attackers took hostages and released those able to recite the Quran. During the crisis and the raid by special forces, the terrorists slaughtered most of the hostages. The casualties included 9 Italian nationals, 7 Japanese as well as other foreigners and locals. Five terrorists were killed in action and one was captured alive. On 6 July, in a video released on ISIS channels, three Bengali speakers from Syria claimed responsibility for the attack and threatened the government of Bangladesh<sup>50</sup>. The attackers were identified as members of wealthy families from Bangladesh's elite, having attended top private schools and universities in Bangladesh and abroad<sup>51</sup>. Pictures showing the young smiling terrorists with ISIS flags behind them were released later. They are believed to be members of JMB, which became the local branch of Daish. This shows that the Islamic State and JMB are a pervasive network even among the educated youth of the Bengali society.

In the aftermath of Gulshan, the authorities of Bangladesh started to crack down on the JMB-ISIS network and on 27 August in Dhaka the police killed Tamim Ahmed Chowdhury, an alleged mastermind of the attack, who came back to Bangladesh from Canada in 2013 and was named the emir of Daish in Bangladesh<sup>52</sup> by Dabiq. In January 2017, two other leaders of JMB were killed by the police in Dhaka: Nurul Islam, also known as Marjan, and Saddam Hossain, also known as Rahul, both supposedly planners of the attack in Gulshan. The strategy of direct confrontation was a mistake on the part of ISIS and has wiped out large part of its leadership in Bangladesh. Despite the losses, the local wing of ISIS still counts many militants and is able to penetrate the Rohingya refugee camps of the country.

## **Hizb ut Tahrir**

### *Decline and revival of HT in Bangladesh and Pakistan*

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<sup>46</sup> ‘JMB planned murder in Ctg jail’, TheIndependentbd.com, 6 June 2016.

<sup>47</sup> J. Manik, D. Barstow, *ISIS Says It Killed Italian Aid Worker in Bangladesh*, The New York Times, 29 September 2015.

<sup>48</sup> *IS claims attack on Italian priest in Bangladesh*, Vatican Radio, 20 November 2015.

<sup>49</sup> S. Uttom, *Protestant pastor escapes murder attempt in Bangladesh*, Ucanews, 6 October 2015.

<sup>50</sup> R. Srivastava, *Dhaka cafe slaughter is trailer of what is to come, warns Islamic State in new video*, Zeenews, 6 July 2016.

<sup>51</sup> G. Manik, G. Anand, *After Slaughter, Bangladesh Reels at Revelations About Attackers*, The New York Times, 3 July 2016.

<sup>52</sup> L. Dearden, *Isis Bangladesh attack ‘mastermind’ identified as former student from Canada killed in police raid*, The Independent, 27 August 2016.

Hizb ut Tahrir (HT) is an international organisation which aims at unifying the Ummah and establishing an islamist regime under the Sharia law<sup>53</sup>. A branch in Bangladesh was officially launched in 2000, but it was banned by the government in 2009 for militant activities<sup>54</sup>. HT is believed to be involved in the 2012 coup attempt in Bangladesh, masterminded by islamist officers and eventually foiled<sup>55</sup>. One of the plotters was former Army major Zia, who later joined Ansar Al Islam. After that HT was outlawed and many of its militants decided to join other islamist and jihadist groups in Bangladesh, such as Ansarullah Bangla Team.

According to the Detective Branch of Dhaka police, some HT affiliates may have joined the Islamic State<sup>56</sup>. Even though the crackdown following the coup weakened the organisation, it managed to survive<sup>57</sup>. Interestingly, the international network of Hizb ut Tahrir has shown a deep interest in the crisis of the Rohingya. In September 2017, the HT Wilayah Pakistan issued a press release through its media office and claimed to have conducted a countrywide series of protests, *bayyans* in support of the Rohingya Muslims<sup>58</sup>. The Pakistani branch of Hizb ut Tahrir called on the government of Islamabad to take five aggressive and escalating actions: the closure of Myanmar's diplomatic mission and the withdrawal of the staff based in Rangoon, with a simultaneous announcement of beginning of hostilities; the termination of the JF-17 Thunder warplane production deal with Myanmar; the deployment of Pakistan's nuclear assets in readiness to send a message to Myanmar and India; the declaration of a state of emergency and establishment of an open call to recruit the youth of Pakistan for basic infantry training; finally, the use of Bangladesh military bases on the border with Myanmar by the Pakistani armed forces against “the heretics”. These delirious requests cannot be underestimated, because they come from an organisation with thousands of sympathisers in Pakistan and abroad, which in the past was able to infiltrate high-ranking officers<sup>59</sup>.

### *HT propaganda to recruit Rohingya in Bangladesh*

Several reports highlight the activities of Hizb ut Tahrir in Bangladesh, in cities and districts hosting the Rohingya refugee camps. The banned Islamist group has intensified its activity since August 2017, when the influx of refugees increased in Southeast Bangladesh. HT managed to secretly distribute leaflets in the city of Cox's Bazar<sup>60</sup>. The leaflets declare that the only way to liberate the Muslims in Myanmar is by establishing and expanding Arakan (Rakhine state) as a caliphate. Furthermore, HT is also inciting an escalation by stating: “We believe that the Rohingya issue has to be settled through a befitting military response, not by negotiating with such a criminal state”<sup>61</sup>. In the city of Chittagong, HT militants covered the walls with posters, especially in the neighbourhoods of Jamalkhan, Askar Dighir Par, Shulok Bohor, Bolir Haat and Dewan Haat. The posters call on fellow Muslims to unite and ask “devoted army officers” to overthrow the government of Bangladesh, accused of not supporting the Rohingya. The Deputy Commissioner Sahidullah, from the Chittagong Police Detective Branch, acknowledged that the campaign was organized by a banned organisation

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<sup>53</sup> See [www.hizb.org.uk](http://www.hizb.org.uk).

<sup>54</sup> M. J. Khan, *Banned Hizb ut-Tahrir now prefers direct action*, Dhaka Tribune, 3 July 2015.

<sup>55</sup> A. Ahmed, *Bangladesh Army says it foiled a coup via Facebook*, The Christian Science Monitor, 20 January 2012.

<sup>56</sup> M. J. Khan, *op. cit.*

<sup>57</sup> S. A. Khan, *Global connections: The crackdown on Hizbut Tahrir intensifies*, Herald.dawn.com, 12 February 2016.

<sup>58</sup> See [www.hizb-ut-tahrir.info/en/index.php/press-releases/pakistan/13881.html](http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.info/en/index.php/press-releases/pakistan/13881.html).

<sup>59</sup> Brig Ali Khan, *four army officers convicted over Hizbut Tahrir links*, The Dawn, 3 August 2012.

<sup>60</sup> T. Mahmud, *Hizb-ut Tahrir trying to build support using Rohingya crisis*, Dhaka Tribune, 26 November 2017.

<sup>61</sup> *Hizb ut-Tahrir active again, this time plays Rohingya card in Chittagong*, bdnews24.com, 17 September 2017.

and issued instructions to all the police stations of the district in order to catch those who have hung the posters. The intelligence apparatus in Bangladesh has also increased its vigilance in 12 Rohingya refugee camps, from Teknaf to Chittagong. Among the organisations and groups potentially interested in taking advantage of the crisis, Hizb ut Tahrir has been so far the most proactive in approaching the refugees in the camps. It aims at a political mass mobilization, rather than a recruitment of fighters to deploy in Myanmar, but the threat remains.

## Conclusion

This research paper attempts to describe the magnitude of the Rohingya crisis, as well as the political, social, and security challenges the government of Bangladesh will be faced with when attempting to solve the crisis. In order to establish the framework for the analysis, the first part of the report was devoted to identifying the root causes of the conflict in Rakhine State, namely by analysing how several decades of violence and discrimination have resulted in the Rohingya population being stripped of their fundamental rights and exposed to all sorts of suffering.

The analysis was necessary to provide the reader with a better understanding of the current situation and to highlight certain contributing factors that, if not dealt with appropriately, could become problematic in the medium/long term, producing a fertile ground for radical organisations interested in exploiting the momentum. By pointing out several factors driving these developments, the analysis has demonstrated that the Rohingya crisis fits into the radicalisation framework described in the previous paragraphs. Indeed, the more precarious their existence in Bangladesh is, the more likely Rohingya are to support - if not actively join - radical groups like ARSA.

In this regard, an analysis was conducted of the groups allegedly involved in the recruitment and exploitation of the crisis. Some of these are well-known international terrorist networks; others are insurgency groups, not directly related to the islamist ideology. In some instances, ARSA has demonstrated the capacity to get Rohingya in its ranks. The Al Qaeda network has also shown direct involvement, using recruiters in India and Bangladesh (Ansar al Islam). The Islamic State limited itself to ruthless propaganda and threats towards the authorities of Myanmar, while its local Bengali branch, JMB, is now weakened as a result of wrong strategic decisions and the crackdown on its leadership. In any case, we cannot exclude the possibility of isolated terrorist attacks against the Burmese society or institutions, carried out by lone wolves from the Rohingya community, emulating the tactics of the Islamic State propaganda in Myanmar. However, as access to weapons and explosives may prove challenging, anything similar to the coordinated attacks witnessed in several European capitals in previous years seems so far highly unlikely.

Despite the presence of the push and pull factors, the majority of refugees have so far shown great restraint and have refrained from seeking revenge for the brutalities they suffered. We think that this may be the result of cultural and traditional peculiarities of the Rohingya society and their particular relationship with religion. However, "Needs", being one of the main radicalisation factors, may come to play a major role if not mitigated by a strong effort on the part of the broad international humanitarian community to meet the most basic requirements for sustaining the lives and restoring the dignity of those who fled abuses and persecutions.

The possibility of radicalised Rohingya joining terrorist groups in conflict zones abroad shall not be discounted. Some reports remarked their presence in the Indian and AfPak scenarios, which confirms the transnational dimension of the threat.

In late November the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar reached an agreement on the return of the Rohingya. While the Bangladeshi side has underlined on several occasions that no refugees would be forced to go back, it is paramount for Myanmar to assure the international community that this will be done "in a principled way that prioritizes the need for these people to be recognised as Rohingya and as citizens of Myanmar." Failing to create these basic conditions may foster further tensions in the medium/long term, with the refugees fearing forced repatriation to

Myanmar, and may constitute an additional factor pushing the refugees towards their violence. As reported by Yanghee Lee, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Myanmar, “One mother said to me, ‘Our beautiful children were slaughtered, how can we go back?’ Refugees have been entirely excluded from conversations about their fate and going forward they must be involved in a meaningful way”<sup>62</sup>.



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<sup>62</sup> See [www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22620&LangID=E](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22620&LangID=E).