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Reflections of the Rohingya in the Online Jihadi Propaganda

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One of the less familiar arenas of jihad is Myanmar (formerly Burma), a country known for the ongoing conflict between the government-backed Buddhist majority and the Rohingya Muslim minority in the Rakhine state (formerly known as Arakan).¹ This ethno-religious conflict has gained worldwide attention following massacres and forced deportations led by Myanmar's army against the Rohingya.² Recently, the army overthrew the elected government, raising concern about the Rohingya's fate. This conflict has also been reflected in the discourse of various Islamist and Salafi-Jihadist

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¹ "[Myanmar \(Burma\): Extremism & Counter-Extremism](#)," *Counter Extremism Project*, [n.d.].

² Yousuf Storai, "[Systematic Ethnic Cleansing: The Case Study of Rohingya](#)," *Art and Social Sciences Journal*, vol. 9, no. 4, January 2018; Ashley Westerman, "[What Myanmar's Coup Means For The Rohingya](#)," *National Public Radio*, 11 February 2021.

organizations, which try to radicalize Myanmar's Muslims, or encourage Muslims to defend their coreligionists.³ Al-Qaeda was the first to address the situation.

On March 13, 2021, al-Qaeda's mouthpiece "As-Sahab Institute for Media Productions" released a video focusing on the situation in Myanmar and discussing the recent *coup*. The video includes a voice message from al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who addressed "Muslim brothers in Burma" and elsewhere. In the video, al-Zawahiri threatens Myanmar: "This criminal Buddhist government that has been pampered by the West shall not be deterred," he says, "except by force and by making it pay the price of its aggression within and beyond Myanmar." According to al-Zawahiri, "the wound of the Rohingya Muslims is the wound of the Ummah in its entirety." Thus, there is only one way forward: "Striking the interests of Myanmar and the criminals of Myanmar wherever we are able to do so."⁴ Al-Qaeda's interest in Myanmar sounds like an empty tribute and an attempt to attract local Muslims who otherwise might join al-Qaeda's rival, the Islamic State.

Jihadi propaganda directed at Myanmar's Muslims is not a new phenomenon. In 2014, the al-Qaeda's branch in East Africa *al-Shabab al-Mujahideen* praised Muslims in Iraq, Burma, Afghanistan, and Syria for their determination in the battle against the so-called Zionist crusade against Islamic countries.⁵ The spokesman of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, once affiliated with al-Qaeda, urged the Rohingya to wage jihad against the Buddhists: "Rise O servants of Allah to help your brothers and sisters! [...] Rise to save your sons and daughters! Do your best in jihad, O guardians of creed and [monotheism], against the enemies of Allah the idolatrous Buddhists, and target the most important installations of Burma, China and Germany, and their interests and the

³ Laura Steckman, "[Myanmar at the Crossroads: The Shadow of Jihadist Extremism](#)," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, vol. 7, no. 4, (May 2015), pp. 10-16.

⁴ Thomas Joscelyn, "[Al Qaeda Leader Threatens Myanmar in New Video](#)," *Long War Journal*, 12 March 2021.

⁵ "[Periodical Report: Summary of the Information Published on the Jihadi Forums The First half of December 2012](#), *ICT's Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group*, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 10 February 2013.

interests of the United Nations, which supports these massacres and this genocide in Arakan.”⁶

In 2015, a spokesperson of *Jamaat-ul-Ahrar*, an al-Qaeda-affiliated splinter group of Taliban Pakistan (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, TTP), has offered the Rohingya “Our [training] centres, our resources, training, people, everything is available to provide comfort to you.” He also called on the Muslims in Myanmar to “take up the sword and kill in the path of God. No doubt, God is with us.”⁷ In 2017, the leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula urged Muslims in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, and Malaysia to support the Rohingya.⁸ Although many tried to inspire a new jihadi front, these efforts failed to mobilize masses. The last known force that was formed by foreign jihadists was known as the Mujahideen Brigade, composed of volunteers from Myanmar, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Pakistani Taliban.⁹ Jihadi groups in Bangladesh, some of which affiliate with al-Qaeda and some others with the Islamic State (IS), also expressed their support with the Rohingya.

As noted by researchers in Singapore regarding the IS, already in June 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed caliph, called for jihad in Myanmar and “promised revenge for atrocities committed against Muslims.”¹⁰ Such calls were repeated by the IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani.¹¹ Moreover, the researchers in Singapore wrote that “in 2016, the *amir* [leader] of IS affiliate in Bangladesh (or IS Bengal) Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif reiterated the call for jihad, viewing Bangladesh as a stepping stone to Myanmar,” and that “other pro-IS groups in Bangladesh also called for jihad in Myanmar to support the Rohingya.”¹²

⁶ Bill Roggio, “[Jihadists seek to open new front in Burma](#),” *Long War Journal*, 15 July 2013.

⁷ “[Pakistani Taliban urges Muslims in Myanmar to ‘take up the sword’ against country’s leaders](#),” *ABC News Australia*, 8 June 2015.

⁸ “[Yemeni al Qaeda leader calls for attacks in support of Myanmar’s Rohingya](#),” *Reuters*, 2 September 2021.

⁹ Bill Roggio, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Jasmin Singh, Bilveer Singh and Muhammad Haziq Bin Jani, “[IS Entry into Rakhine Conflict: Urgency in Nation-Building](#),” *RSIS Commentary*, Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 8 January 2021.

¹¹ Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami, “[Indeed Your Lord is Ever Watchful](#),” 22 September 2014.

¹² Singh, Singh and Bin Jani, “[IS Entry into Rakhine Conflict: Urgency in Nation-Building](#),” January 2021.

Other Islamist actors also try to influence the Rohingya. For example, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (HuT), a transnational movement that seeks to re-establish the Islamic Caliphate, is known for inciting against Myanmar's government and its allies. It declared in 2017 that "Crusader America, killer of Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and around the world, is working with her ally the Modi government, and using the Golden Girl of Democracy, so-called Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi to gain her regional control over this strategic zone [Rakhine]." However, HuT clarified that only after the Caliphate is restored the Caliph "will then command you for jihad to rescue your Rohingya brothers and sisters as Allah commanded and liberate Arakan and bring it back under the shade of the Khilafah."¹³ On Twitter, many users expressed their support for jihad in different places, including supporters of a Pakistani Islamist movement, who posted the same message stating: "If Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Burma are all free and victorious, then only by Jihad."¹⁴

Random users also express their support for the Rohingya's jihad. For example, the Instagram account of *Quran Majid*, which has approximately 180,000 followers, has posted a message urging Muslims to wage jihad in order to save Myanmar's Muslims: "O Muslims! You are not a Muslim! If you can help other Muslims, and don't [do] it. They are killing our sisters and brothers in #Myanmar #Burma, And we are safe with our own family, Why are we silent? I swear to Allah; He will ask us! You could do something! So why did you do nothing? My sister and brother! If you want to meet Allah? Do something! Get up for #jihad."¹⁵ A similar message was shared also on other social media platforms.

According to a joint report by the European Union and the United Nations published in 2020, "organizations fighting the government in Thailand and Myanmar identify as strictly ethno-nationalist insurgents and have actively distanced themselves from globalized jihadist causes."¹⁶ This report noted that among the various ethnic insurgent

¹³ "[Bringing Arakan back under the Khilafah is the Only Way to Liberate the Rohingya Muslims](#)," *Khilafah*, 17 September 10 2017. Accessed February 24, 2021.

¹⁴ [@MFS_Rzvi](#), *Twitter*, 2 January 2021; accessed 16 March 2021.

¹⁵ [Quran.Majid](#), *Instagram*, 7 September, 2017; accessed 16 March 2021.

¹⁶ UNDP and EU, "[Assuming the Worst: 1 Narratives and their Impacts on Violent Extremism in South-East Asia](#)," (UNDP: 2020), p. 22.

groups in Myanmar, “the tiny Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) is sometimes distinguished from the others due only to its Muslim membership.”¹⁷ Although “tiny,” according to Amnesty International, ARSA, previously known as Harakat al-Yaqeen (HaY), is responsible for massacres of Buddhists.¹⁸ Some supporters of ARSA and the jihad in Myanmar use social media platforms, writing in English in order to connect to a larger audience, such as the Twitter account of @OnlyOne60978181.¹⁹ Another example can be found in a video shared on the “Stop Killing Muslim’s in Burma” page, featuring a “Brother from #Kashmir [who] got permission from her [sic] mother for #jihad in #burma #rohongia #Mayanmar.”²⁰



A message posted on [Twitter](#) by a supporter of ARSA.

According to a report by the International Crisis Group think tank published in 2016, HaY “does not appear to have a transnational jihadist or terrorist agenda.” However,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.18.

¹⁸ “[Myanmar: New evidence reveals Rohingya armed group massacred scores in Rakhine State](#)”, *Amnesty International*, 22 May 2018.

¹⁹ [@OnlyOne60978181](#), *Twitter*, 16 September 2020; accessed 16 March 2021.

²⁰ [@Stop Killing Muslim's in Burma](#), *Facebook*, 5 September 5 2017; accessed 16 March 2021.

the actions of the Myanmar government and the military “could create conditions for radicalising sections of the Rohingya population that jihadist groups might exploit for their own agendas.”²¹ Four years after, in November 2020, a new jihadi group emerged, *Katiba al-Mahdi fi Bilad al-Arakan* (KMBA, The Mahdi Brigade in the Land of Arakan), which pledged allegiance to IS, but has yet to claim any attack, maybe because the IS leadership has not endorsed it.²²

Until now, KMBA has published one issue of an English magazine that promotes jihad and calls Muslim to make *hijrah* (migration) to Myanmar. In it, the group incites hatred against Buddhists, who are accused of being infidels (*kuffar*); and, in accordance to IS excommunication (*takfir*) of other Muslims and especially other rival Islamist groups, KMBA defines ASRA as *munafiqun* (hypocrites, Muslims who inwardly denounce Islam), undermining its claims to be a devote Muslim group, and blaming it for being motivated by nationalism.²³ KMBA’s leader, who goes by the name “Abu Dawud al-Arkani,” urged Muslims to join jihad in Myanmar: “We call upon Muslims to perform Hijrah to Bilād al-Arakan [...] to help your brothers and the Religion of your Rabb.”²⁴

While most of the calls to support jihad in Myanmar and to protect the Rohingya have remained unanswered, the formation of KMBA may indicate the beginnings of an Islamist and jihadist awakening in the country. It may also point to the despair of extremist Islamist elements from the attempts of separatist-nationalist factions to achieve the desired goal. This may also reveal the aspiration to merge the local struggle of the Rohingya with a source of intimidation, power, and fanaticism that generates terrorism worldwide and already operates in neighboring countries. Moreover, this has possible implications for the intra-jihadist arena. For example, al-Qaeda, which is competing with IS for the primacy and leadership of global jihad, may step up its efforts to establish presence in the country. Al-Zawahiri’s video could be such an attempt.

²¹ “[Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State](#),” *International Crisis Group*, Asia Report No. 283, 15 December 2016.

²² Jacob Zenn, “[Islamic State Receives Loyalty Pledge from Myanmar’s Rohingya Militants](#),” *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 18, n.21, 20 November 2020.

²³ *Arrukn Media Center*, [Arkan: A Call to Hijrah](#), Issue 1, December 2020, p. 30; accessed 16 March 2021.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Other jihadi groups that operate in Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, India, or Pakistan, may also try to “jump in” and assist their coreligionists in the struggle against “infidel” and “atheist” force.

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