

Rohingya radicalisation in Malaysia: Where's the evidence?



The attacks perpetrated by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in Rakhine State in 2016 and 2017 sparked fears of wide-scale radicalisation within the Rohingya community. Such suspicions were fuelled by Islamist political actors across the Islamic world hailing the Rohingya cause.

But such alarmist views are rarely backed by evidence or field research. Our interviews with Rohingya refugees in Malaysia indicate that there is no evidence of widespread Rohingya radicalisation, either in Myanmar or abroad. Rather, the Rohingya in Malaysia and Bangladesh disapprove of ARSA's approach to the crisis and denounce the employment of violence for political goals. For them, the larger concern is the political fragmentation in their community and the lack of effective leadership.

ARSA—known in Myanmar as Harakah al-Yakin—was allegedly established in 2012 in Saudi Arabia by Ata Ullah, a Rohingya born in Karachi, Pakistan, who later immigrated to Saudi Arabia. Although some [sources](#) claim ARSA has been trained and assisted by Pakistani terrorist outfits, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), there is no further evidence to suggest ARSA's connection to any other transnational or global jihadi groups. While the group proclaims the phrase “*Allah-u-Akbar*” and presumably trains its recruits to die as martyrs, its [motivations](#) are rooted in ethnic, not religious causes. While Myanmar authorities warned of a surge in ARSA's membership, the group enjoys

little legitimacy within the Rohingya community, which has historically found [violence a counterproductive strategy](#). Despite its negative reputation among the Rohingya in Myanmar and its small membership, ARSA's 2017 attacks spawned fears of radicalisation amongst Rohingya communities, both locally and in exile.

While scholars emphasise that ethnicity is the underlying bone of contention, Islamist actors around the world have hailed the Myanmar military's activities in Rakhine State as an attack on Islam. In solidarity with their Muslim brethren, protests and activism campaigns have been organised across the world, including the UK, Iran, Chechnya, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia. In September and October 2017, thousands of conservative Islamists marched in Dhaka and Chittagong to demand the revocation of Myanmar President Aung San Suu Kyi's Nobel Prize and for the Bangladeshi government to arm the Rohingya refugees. State media in the Arab world have been avidly campaigning for the Rohingya cause, with levels of emotionality usually reserved for the Palestinians' plight. Perhaps most vehemently, Iranian state officials have called for military mobilisation of Muslim-majority states around the world, suggesting the formation of a joint force, Sepah-e Rasulullah, led by Iran, Turkey, Syria and Iraq.

In Malaysia, the Rohingya issue has been used by different political actors to secure support for their respective agendas. In December 2016, the two major Malay political parties, Prime Minister Najib Razak's United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) and the Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) organised a rally in Kuala Lumpur condemning the Myanmar policy. Incidentally, this rally further fuelled speculation that UMNO may cooperate with PAS ahead of the upcoming general elections.

The Rohingya cause has also featured prominently in the discourse of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its affiliates. As early as 2014, the group's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi listed Rakhine state as a critical place for the waging of jihad. In September 2017, Al-Qaeda (AQ) called for Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian and Filipino Muslims to travel to Myanmar and wage jihad against the state. Indonesia's Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), a radical organisation infamous for inciting communal violence, urged fellow Muslims to wage jihad against Burmese Buddhists, in defence of the Rohingya. The Rohingya issue has also been used by ISIS-affiliated individuals within Malaysia, who sought to recruit Malaysian Muslims to join some extreme movements. In January 2018, Malaysian authorities arrested two suspected ISIS supporters, a Malaysian and an Indonesian, who planned on stabbing Buddhist monks in retaliation to the violence against the Rohingyas in Myanmar.

The attention from various Islamist outfits in relation to the Rohingya has raised concerns over the involvement of the Rohingya in militant activities. Considering this, some governments pushed for the deportation of Rohingya refugees in their countries. In September 2017 India's home ministry demanded the deportation of 40,000 Rohingya refugees on the basis of their alleged links to Pakistan-based armed groups.

In Malaysia, UMNO and PAS's moves to call attention to the poor treatment of the Rohingyas are ploys to score political points at home and brandish their Islamic credentials to appeal to Malaysia's Muslim majority. Besides handing out humanitarian aid to the Rohingya and accepting Rohingya refugees into the country, the UMNO-led government has done little to pressure the Myanmar government to stop its violent excesses against the Rohingya people. Likewise, beyond mere rhetoric, PAS has not done anything significant to assist the Rohingya people, including those living in Malaysia. The extreme right-wing elements within UMNO such as the leader of the red shirts, Jamal Md Yunos, called on the Malaysian government to shut the Myanmar embassy and deport all citizens of Myanmar back to their home country.

This same dynamic appears to in the cases of ISIS, AQ or groups such as the FPI, which seek to justify violence in defence of their Rohingya Muslim brethren. ISIS made the Rohingya crisis an integral part of its [rhetoric](#) in late 2017, as the group suffered inestimable losses in the Iraqi and Syrian-led offensives. Nonetheless, there has been little traction for these extreme elements within the Rohingya community in Malaysia. In September 2017 ARSA issued [an official statement](#) denying any links to either ISIS, AQ or LeT. In its statement, ARSA clearly outlined that its goals would suffer from an affiliation with such terrorist outfits. In fact, ARSA's standpoint vis-à-vis the involvement of transnational and global terrorist outfits in the Rakhine conflict have been echoed by numerous Rohingya actors.

The realities of Rohingya refugees

The Rohingya's rejection of violence can be understood from several perspectives. The head of Malaysia's intelligence, Datuk Ayob Khan Mydin Pitchay, noted that ISIS was using the Rohingya issue as a platform to recruit new by sharing images of oppressed Rohingya online to evoke sympathy and lure young Malaysians. One such example was a Malaysian man who was arrested in September 2017 for planning to take part in ISIS activities in the Philippines and Rakhine State. Attempts have also been made to recruit Rohingyas living in Bangladesh. Yet when commenting on the security threat posed by Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque stated that there are no signs of Rohingya radicalisation. To the contrary, the community remains largely neutral, most of them expressing high hopes of returning to Rakhine.

So far, any attempts to recruit Rohingya in Malaysia, for either ARSA or ISIS, seem to have garnered little success. The Rohingya in Malaysia whom we spoke to during recent field work are acutely aware of the need to distance their struggle from international terrorism. In an interview, a community leader named Sharifah noted that from a strategic point of view Rohingya men are unlikely to join terrorism. On the one hand, they do not speak Arabic, English or Urdu, making interactions difficult. As most of their family members are still in Myanmar, they fear retaliation from the government. Beyond these challenges, Sharifah postulated that the Rohingya do not see violence as a solution. She also mentioned that ARSA enjoys little legitimacy in Malaysia. As most of the Rohingya refugees consider Rakhine their homeland and Myanmar their country, they are

hopeful that violence and persecution will come to an end so that they may return.

This point was also emphasised by Mohammad Faruk, a 25-year-old Rohingya who arrived in Malaysia after spending four years in refugee camps in Bangladesh. Faruk candidly mentioned that the Rohingya are, in fact, drained from the persecution they've been subjected to; afraid and traumatised, they are not interested in joining terrorist organisations. Abdul Ghani, the principal of a Rohingya school who has been living in Malaysia for the past 25 years, said he has never experienced nor heard of any Rohingya men advocating for violence in response to the conflict in Rakhine. He claimed the Rohingya feel too impotent and, while their cause is highly politicised across the world, they lack any real international support. Ghani also mentioned that the mutual antipathies between Malaysians and the Rohingya community in Malaysia make jihadi recruitment of Rohingya in Malaysia very difficult. As they are afraid of the government, most Rohingya are sceptical of any Malaysian men approaching them.

Both Sharifah and Faruk claimed that another factor inhibiting terrorist mobilisation is the political fragmentation of the community. In both Malaysia and Bangladesh, as well as Rakhine, community leaders are disinterested in genuinely assisting the community as they compete for funding and influence. As international charity funding comes without the security-related headaches of terrorist funding, community leaders fear that affiliation with terrorism would dissipate current international sympathies. Since Rohingya communities are factionalised and internally pitted against each other, there is little room for any joint political effort. According to Ghani, the current politicisation has had the greatest impact on children and youth, as there are virtually no funds to cover the cost of education. This, he forecast, is likely to perpetuate the crisis in the future.

The flight of Rohingya from Myanmar, usually referred to as ethnic cleansing, has been declared one of the worst humanitarian crises in modern history. Yet, instead of attracting sustainable humanitarian assistance, the Rohingya refugee crisis has been politicised by actors across the Muslim world purely for strategic and electoral gains. This includes ISIS and Al Qaeda's calls for jihad in support of the Rohingya people. The political misappropriation of the Rohingya plight, along with the emergence of ARSA in Myanmar, conjured up alarmist estimations of the rates of Rohingya radicalisation. However, our recent fieldwork in Malaysia revealed little evidence to support such claims. On the contrary, the Rohingya in Malaysia disavow violence as a solution to the conflict in Myanmar, partly based on strategic considerations. Most bemoan the international politicisation of their situation which, rather than contributing to any resolution or sustainable assistance, exacerbates their dire circumstances.