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Introduction

Beginning on August 25, 2017, the army of Myanmar¹ conducted a several-weeks-long crackdown on the Rohingya, a Muslim community in the north of the Rakhine “state” in western Myanmar. Tens of villages were burned down and eyewitnesses reported various acts of violence, including numerous cases of rape. It is estimated that more than 600,000 Rohingya fled toward Bangladesh and to this day are still housed in camps in that country. According to some accounts, the north of Rakhine has been cleared of almost 90 percent of its Rohingya population. The humanitarian organization Doctors without Borders [Médecines sans Frontières] has estimated the number of deaths between August 25 and September 24, 2017 at 6,700, 730 of whom were children under the age of five.²

This was not the first time that serious clashes have taken place between the Rohingya and government forces. Incidents occurred as early as 1942 when the Japanese captured Burma and came to the region. However, this was the first time that the unrest in Rakhine attracted world attention. This phenomenon is easily understood: Smartphones were used to disseminate pictures around the world and these aroused great interest in the events taking place in that remote corner of the globe. In the past, hardly anyone outside the region was even aware of these issues.

The Rakhine region in Myanmar extends some six hundred kilometers along the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal. It is separated from the rest of Myanmar by a mountain range that for centuries impeded permanent conquest of that country but permitted occasional inroads and contacts between Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) and Myanmar. The northern part of Rakhine, the Mayu region, was a route of contact between Myanmar and eastern Bengal. These geographical factors largely account for the distinct character and development of the

Rakhine region—both generally and in terms of its Muslim population, which was a separate kingdom until conquered by the Burmese in 1784. From the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the history of Rakhine was closely linked to that of Muslim Bengal. Rakhine came under British administration in 1826, joined the Union of Burma in 1948, and was constituted as the Rakhine “state” in 1974.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, most of Rakhine’s Muslims lived in the Mayu region in the north. They call themselves Rohingya, Rohinja, or Roewengyah (variously interpreted as “the dear,” “the compassionate,” or “the brave”) and they are Sunni. The Rohingya speak Arakanese, a southern Burmese dialect, and many of their customs are similar to those of their non-Muslim neighbors who are Buddhists. Cultural affinity did not, however, prevent the emergence of serious tension between Muslims and Buddhists both during and after the colonial period. In 1961, the number of Rohingya was estimated at 300,000, and in 2009 the estimate rose to 723,000. The big gap between these two estimates can hardly be explained by natural increase. In Yangon, this increase strengthened already existing suspicions of the large-scale illegal infiltration of Bengali Muslims into Rohingya-inhabited areas.³

Brief Historical Survey

From the beginning of Muslim commercial shipping in the Bay of Bengal, traders reached the ports of Rakhine, which already had a tradition of Indian settlement. Bengal adopted Islam in the thirteenth century. In northern Rakhine, close overland ties were formed with eastern Bengal. Because of these land and maritime links, Muslim cultural and political influence was of great significance in the Rakhine Kingdom.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, the Kingdom of Rakhine sought Bengali assistance against the encroachment of the Kingdom of Myanmar and recognized the sovereignty of the Muslim sultan of Bengal. Rakhine remained under Bengali control until 1531. During that period, there was considerable Bengali Muslim influence on Rakhine in many walks of life and many Bengali Muslims settled in various parts of Rakhine. Many more came to serve as mercenaries in Rakhine’s army, usually as members of the royal guard. These units were continually reinforced by Muslim mercenaries from different parts of the Indian sub-continent.

Rakhine was occupied by the British during the first Anglo–Burmese war of 1824–26. Large-scale Indian immigration, encouraged by the British, began immediately. Many of the new immigrants came from Bengal. Each year, during the ploughing and harvesting seasons, some twenty thousand Bengali migrants crossed the border to find temporary work in the rice fields of Rakhine. Some returned, but many remained. Inter-marriage between these Bengali Muslims and local Rohingya women became

common. This immigration led to tension between Muslims and Buddhists in Rakhine, which escalated when the British retreated and the Japanese advanced into the territory in 1942. Thousands of Muslims (their exact number is unknown) were expelled from regions under Japanese control, mostly in south Rakhine where Buddhists constituted the majority. Those expelled fled to eastern Bengal or to northern Rakhine, seeking refuge in territories still under British military rule.

For their part, Muslims conducted retaliatory raids from British-controlled territories against their Buddhist neighbors. These acts of reciprocal violence caused the Buddhist population of Rakhine to flee from the north just as Muslims had been compelled to leave the south. As a result, Rakhine was in effect divided into Buddhist and Muslim areas.

Rakhine was the westernmost point reached by the Japanese in their drive toward India during World War II. Thus, at the beginning of 1942, it became the front line with the British. By January 1945, most of the territory was again in British hands. It is not clear whether London had made any commitments to the Muslims of Rakhine regarding their status after the war, but their leaders claimed that the British had promised to grant them a Muslim national area in parts of Rakhine. Some Rohingya Muslim leaders went even further and supported the immediate secession of the territory from Myanmar and its subsequent annexation by Pakistan or India when these countries achieved independence in 1947.

Following British victories, Muslims who had fled to Bengal during the war returned to their villages accompanied by land-hungry immigrants from Bengal who settled in northern Rakhine. Roving Muslim and Buddhist armed bands in the area engaged in robbery and the smuggling of rice to Bengal. When it became clear that the British would leave Myanmar, irredentist and separatist tendencies in northern Rakhine grew stronger still. In July 1946 the Northern Arakan Muslim League was founded.

After Myanmar attained independence in January 1948, the new government allowed Buddhist refugees to return to northern Rakhine and regain the homes and villages they had been forced to cede to Rohingya Muslims several years earlier—and Muslims were forced off the Buddhist-owned lands they had seized.

Muslim guerilla and terror activity had already begun in November 1947. Religious leaders began preaching jihad. The Muslim fighters [*Mujāhīdeen*] were led by Moulvi Ja'afar Husayn (or Ja'afar Kawal). The Rohingya struggle for a Muslim state in northern Rakhine now took on a religious dimension. The number of armed *Mujāhīdeen* was estimated at 2,000–5,000.

As the Myanmar government was engaged in combatting rebel movements in other parts of the country, within a short time the *Mujāhīdeen* succeeded in

taking over a large part of northern Rakhine. The rebels, like many other Rakhine Muslims who did not actively support the struggle, sought to establish a Muslim political entity that would not necessarily secede from Myanmar, but would be separate from Buddhist northern Rakhine. Negotiations with the central government in Yangon in 1948 and 1949 eventually broke down, and from 1951 onward, Myanmar forces waged large-scale annual offensives against the Rohingya *Mujāhīdeen*. These culminated in Operation Monsoon in November 1954, in which the rebels were finally subdued. At that time, *Mujāhīdeen* strongholds were captured, and a number of their leaders killed. Others crossed the border and escaped to Bengal. From then on, the military threat they posed lessened considerably, and in 1960, Prime Minister U Nu appointed a commission of inquiry to assess all problems related to the Rakhine question.

The Rohingya Association of Ulama, speaking for the Muslims of Rakhine, demanded the creation of an autonomous district in northern Rakhine with its own regional council, which would be directly accountable to the central government in Yangon. This demand was rejected, but on May 1, 1961, the Myanmar government announced the establishment of the Mayu Frontier Administration (MFA) in northern Rakhine, which was to be administered by army officers. Although this was not the hoped-for autonomy, the Rohingya Muslim leadership agreed to the arrangement.

In March 1962, however, General Ne Win staged a military coup in Myanmar. The new government retained the MFA but put an end to all political activity related to minority demands, including those of the Rohingya, seeing them as a threat to national unity. Even after their military defeat, the *Mujāhīdeen* did not disappear entirely; in subsequent years, underground Muslim guerilla organizations were established or reactivated, based mainly in the hills of northern Rakhine, but little is known about these organizations.

In early 1975, because of persecution by the local Buddhist population, thousands of Rohingya Muslims from Rakhine were forced to flee their homes and cross the border into Bangladesh (which had seceded from Pakistan and become an independent state in December 1971). Some Rohingya activists sought allies among other non-Muslim minority separatist groups that had been active in Myanmar since the end of World War II. In May 1976, thirteen such organizations demanding autonomy for their communities, including the Rohingya Patriotic Front, met to coordinate their actions. In 1978, General Ne Win's government stepped up its suppression of minorities, including Muslims. In an attempt to stem the influx of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, the government launched a campaign called "*Naga Min*" [Dragon King] to register and classify all residents in the regions and determine whether they were citizens of Myanmar, legally domiciled foreigners, or illegal aliens. The majority of the Rohingya were illiterate and few were able to provide documents proving their citizenship. By August 1978,

more than a quarter of a million Muslims had fled to Bangladesh; many others hid in the jungle.

In July 1979, the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh agreed to the repatriation of 200,000 refugees to Rakhine, but many refused to return. Muslim fears that the Myanmar authorities were intent on ridding Rakhine of its Muslim population were confirmed when the new Burmese Citizenship Law of October 15, 1982 turned the Rohingya into de facto foreigners in their native country. According to the new law, only descendants of indigenous people who were present in Myanmar before 1823 were eligible for citizenship. That choice of date was not an arbitrary one. The first Anglo–Burmese war, which led to the British annexation of Rakhine, erupted the following year. As a result of that conflict and subsequent British conquests, immigrants arrived, particularly from the Indian subcontinent and China. Naturalized descendants of ethnic groups who entered Myanmar under British colonial rule constituted one of the categories regarded by the Burmese army as security risks. The new law rendered naturalized citizens ineligible to hold political posts, serve in the armed forces, or be appointed directors of government institutions. The close cross-border contacts and widespread integration between indigenous and immigrant Muslims that had gone on uninterrupted before and during the period of British rule made it especially difficult to decide who was of indigenous origin and who descended from immigrants.

At the end of 1989, the government began to settle Buddhists in Muslim areas of Rakhine by displacing the local population. Muslims claimed that community leaders were arrested, and others were conscripted by the Burmese army to work as forced laborers in the construction of roads or camps, or as porters. The army was accused of robbery, rape, murder, and the burning of mosques. In April 1991, refugees who had been expelled or had escaped began to appear in Bangladesh. It is estimated that by June 1992 some 210,000–280,000 had found refuge there. The numbers were actually higher because many other refugees were dispersed among the Bangladeshi population.

Under growing international pressure, Myanmar indicated a willingness to permit refugees to return. On April 28, 1992, the foreign ministers of Bangladesh and Myanmar signed a repatriation agreement. The Myanmar government agreed to accept even those refugees who had no proof of citizenship as long as they could prove that they had previously lived in Myanmar (by providing the names of their villages or village heads).

In November 1992, a memorandum of understanding was signed between Myanmar and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as well as other UN bodies, which provided for the presence of those organizations in Rakhine. By 1993, only some fifty thousand refugees had returned. By the end of 1996, the number had risen to 200,000. However, there were also reports of

retaliation carried out against refugees who had returned to Rakhine. It is estimated that a few thousand fled back to Bangladesh.

At the beginning of the 1990s, two militant Rohingya organizations emerged: the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO). Both were based in southeastern Bangladesh, where the government permitted them to operate. According to some reports, they tried to recruit experienced fighters from among veterans of the war in Afghanistan. It appears that the RSO had developed connections with radical Muslim organizations in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and (Qadhafi's) Libya, and with al-Qa'ida, although details are difficult to confirm.

Representatives of the movements attempted to mobilize material and moral assistance from Arab and Muslim countries and international Islamic bodies, such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), and to convince Muslim countries that taking a stand against Myanmar would be acting in the defense of Islam. However, the international community, including Arab and other Muslim countries, demonstrated little interest in the problem facing the Rohingya Muslims of Rakhine. The Rohingya problem raised fears in the Bangladeshi government that Rohingya refugee camps would become training grounds for extremists, that arms would be smuggled in, and that pan-Islamic activities among the refugees might, when combined with material aid from Islamic countries, foment militancy in Bangladesh. Throughout this period, there seem to have been no significant operations of any kind by Rohingya units, but only occasional skirmishes with army patrols in jungle areas.⁴

It should be noted that in addition to the Rohingya of Rakhine, there is another, somewhat larger, Muslim community in Myanmar, the Zerbadi, which cannot be found in any other country.⁵

In order to understand how this community came into existence, it is important to remember that the British conquest of Rakhine and Myanmar brought about profound change, including greatly increased Muslim immigration from India. Myanmar was sparsely populated, and India was the nearest and cheapest source of manpower. Due to immigration, Yangon and other towns developed rapidly. By 1921, there were one million Indians in Burma—half of them Muslims—amid some eleven million Burmese.

Over time, the number of intermarriages between Indian Muslims and local Buddhist women increased, and a group of mixed Indian-Muslim and Burmese-Buddhist descent emerged, which became known as the Zerbadis. The etymology of this word has not been established, nor is it known why it came to be used for this particular group of Muslims living in Myanmar. (Descendants of Burmese-Hindu marriages tended to assimilate into the Burmese Buddhist community.) According to the 1931 census, the number of Zerbadis increased between 1921

and 1931 by 30 percent, from 94,316 to 122,705 out of a total of 584,839 Muslims in Myanmar. They live mostly in Yangon and along the Irrawaddy Valley. Generally speaking, the Zerbadis identified with the Burmese-Buddhist majority and with the emerging Burmese national movement.

Political, economic, cultural, and religious factors contributed to the riots of 1930 and 1938 directed against Indians in general and Muslims in particular. The riots of 1938 were aimed especially at Indian Muslims and Zerbadis. Hundreds were killed and wounded.

It is not known how many Muslims resided in Myanmar when it gained independence in January 1948. There are no exact figures after 1931 for the general population of Myanmar or of Muslims in particular. In the 1931 census, 584,839 Muslims were reported out of a total population of 14,647,487 (4 percent, 68 percent of whom were Indians and only 30 percent Burmese-Muslims). Forty-one percent of all Muslims lived in Rakhine and most others in Yangon and the Irrawaddy Delta. Though no satisfactory census has been taken in Myanmar since 1931, it may be assumed that the percentage of Muslims in the Burmese population at the beginning of the twenty-first century remained at approximately 4 percent or somewhat lower. Many of the Muslims of Indian origin who had fled to India before the Japanese conquest did not return after the war. Of those remaining, many were either expelled by the military regime of General Ne Win or chose to leave. It is estimated that between 1963 and 1967, 300,000 Hindus and Muslims of Indian origin left the country.

According to population data of 1983, the Muslims of all communities in Myanmar made up less than 4 percent of the total population of 34 million people. If this estimate is correct, then the number of Muslims (Zerbadi, Rohingya, and others) should be approximately 1,360,000 or even less.

Brief mention should also be made of a Chinese Muslim community in Myanmar. Known as the Panthay, its members came from Yunnan in Western China, bordering on Myanmar. Most of them reached Myanmar as traders, muleteers, and especially as refugees after the failure of the Panthay revolt (1856–73) in Yunnan. The Panthay settled in various parts of northeastern Myanmar. In 1960 their numbers were estimated at some 10,000–15,000.⁶

The 2017 Events

The following description is based mainly on the report written by the International Working Group for Autochthonous People [Groupe International de travail pour les Peuples Autochtones—GITPA].⁷ The survey was conducted in March 2018 in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh by Professor Jean-Phillipe

Belleau of the University of Massachusetts Boston. It seems to be the most reliable description of events to date.

On the night of August 24, 2017, several police stations in northern Rakhine were attacked. Responsibility for this action, in which twelve policemen were killed, was claimed by a then-unknown group—the Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). The Myanmar military immediately embarked on a massive crackdown. The army's repression of the Rohingya population continued until November. At least two massacres of several hundred people were committed. Some fifty villages were burned down.

The GITPA report contains information from some sixteen interviews. Those accounts describe the way in which army and police units, assisted by local Buddhist civilians, entered Rohingya villages. In some places they expelled the inhabitants; in others they engaged in acts of murder and rape, and set homes on fire. It might have been interesting and useful to know what orders were given to the field commanders, as it seems that there was not a unified mode of behavior on the part of the various units. Be that as it may, the net result was that many acts of cruelty were undoubtedly committed and that most of the Rohingya population was either expelled, or escaped before the army came in.

There was a disproportionate number of men between the ages of twenty and thirty who were victims of the killings. Many of the Rohingya interviewed said that their elites—educated people in particular, but also local and labor group leaders and landowners, all of whom were men—were targeted by the Burmese army.

The absence of a significant educated class among the Rohingya is an important factor in their current plight. This population was unable to activate institutional mechanisms to defend their interests during the previous waves of repression.

The Rohingya are a people without allies. In addition to the hostility of the Myanmar authorities, they must contend with the indifference of the neighboring Muslim countries.⁸ In 2012, both Indonesia and Malaysia formally barred the entry of Rohingya refugees. The people of Bangladesh have made considerable efforts to help the Rohingya but are now showing signs of humanitarian fatigue. They are themselves impoverished and the international aid they receive is insufficient to cope with the magnitude of the problem.

The Rohingya lack of representation, leadership, and interlocution is of enormous consequence; however, this is not a new situation. The Muslims of Rakhine were unable to elevate leaders from within their ranks whose stature was such that they could unite the entire Rohingya people, or, for that matter, even most of them. They were also unable to build a network linking them to international Muslim bodies and Islamic countries. Back in the 1960s and '70s, Rohingya who had

settled and were educated in Yangon attempted but failed to form political groups or produce political representatives. This has been the case in recent decades too, where mainly fringe groups, such as the RSO and the National Rohingya Organization of Arakan, seem to have attracted more attention. The lack of genuine and legitimate interlocution is now giving the Bangladeshi authorities, UN agencies, and international NGOs a “hold” on Rohingya interests. At the Humanitarian Aid Coordination Cell in Bangladesh, weekly meetings take place at which some thirty international organizations gather under the auspices of the United Nations; however, there are no Rohingya representatives present.

At present, several thousand Rohingya have chosen to remain in Rakhine or cannot leave, including those in villages that have come under attack and have sustained great damage. As far as is known, they are suffering greatly.

The main intention of the repressive Myanmar apparatus (at least according to most testimonies) was to clear northern Rakhine of its Muslim population. On several occasions when army units came into contact with lines of refugees, they shot and killed them.

The terror campaign of the military—including atrocities carried out against children, rape, executions, and mutilation—could indeed be part of a plan, the objective of which is to rid the area of Rohingya.

In sum, the *modus operandi* for the violence carried out by the Myanmar army generally followed a pattern: The army entered a Rohingya village, shot villagers, set fire to dwellings, and sometimes committed outrages; the villagers then fled and hid for several days; the army did not follow them; and, finally, the villagers set off on foot to the Bangladeshi border. It is estimated that some 600,000–700,000 refugees have reached Bangladesh.

The fact that violence has been committed against Rohingya women is irrefutable. However, the terror campaign’s main targets have been men, and, as mentioned earlier, a disproportionate number of victims were men between twenty and thirty years of age. A careful examination of the nature of the violence and the testimonies presented in the GITPA report clearly suggest that a crime against humanity has been committed by the Myanmar army against the Rohingya in Rakhine. That, in fact, is the final conclusion of the report.

Conclusions and Prospects

It seems that it will be impossible to alter Myanmar’s policy and perception that the Rohingya are foreigners. This view is undoubtedly shared by the vast majority of the Burmese-Buddhist public.

Secessionist tendencies at the end of World War II, and especially the *Mujāhid* rebellion, only aggravated this perception. The Myanmar media and various political figures refer to the Rohingya as “Bengalis.” Significantly, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is no exception. In 2015 she triumphed in the general elections in Myanmar. The same year she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The following year she became the leader of Myanmar. The recent crisis in Rakhine has greatly damaged San Suu Kyi’s image as a symbol of democracy. She considers the Rohingya illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Human rights activists accuse her of failing to defend the persecuted Rohingya and of supporting the army’s version of events.

In addition to the notion of the Rohingya as foreigners, they are also seen as being linked to terrorism. The perception of the Rohingya as threatening the demographic balance in Rakhine contributes to the idea that they pose a great danger to Myanmar. The other Muslim communities in Myanmar (Zerbadi, Panthay) are not the objects of such antipathy.

Attempting to establish the true facts about what is happening in Rakhine is very difficult. The government of Myanmar has not allowed representatives of the UN, news reporters, or other observers to visit the affected areas, and it appears that outside pressure will not change this policy. It should be noted that in past years, during the dictatorship of the military junta, there were efforts to impose sanctions on Myanmar, but to no avail. Myanmar enjoyed the friendship and support of China, which is a tremendous asset, while the Rohingya have no meaningful support, not even, astonishingly enough, from other Muslim countries. In November 2017, then-US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson met San Suu Kyi and other civilian and military leaders and called for a thorough investigation of the events in Rakhine. The official response was only that Rohingya terrorists had been killed but not “Bengali” civilians.

It is possible that we shall witness a recurrence of past patterns of activity, as described above: The governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh will agree to repatriate the Rohingya refugees, or at least some of them. This process, if it takes place, will require several years to accomplish. The government of Myanmar will place various obstacles in the path of returnees so as to limit their numbers to the greatest extent possible. Many will refuse to return and will be absorbed into Bangladesh until the next outburst.

There is another option, however, that should be explored, which may provide a reasonable solution. It is estimated that most of the Rohingya are already in Bangladesh, languishing in squalid refugee camps. Some have found temporary, if uncomfortable, refuge in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. Nobody knows how many still live in Rakhine; there cannot be too many left, and their existence is undoubtedly precarious.

Perhaps the government of Bangladesh should be asked to allocate an ample-sized tract of land on which to resettle the Rohingya in Bengal. They should

be concentrated in this area and allowed to recreate their settlements and villages. They will not require political autonomy but should be allowed to maintain their cultural identity and distinct way of life. After all, this will constitute an additional Muslim community in a Muslim country that already has diverse Muslim communities, all of which are loyal to Bangladesh. This is a much more humane option than sending them back to a Buddhist country that clearly does not want them.

Absorbing and resettling a community that is estimated to number less than one million people is not too large a project to undertake. However, impoverished Bangladesh should not be expected to cover the expenses involved in that endeavor. Wealthy Arab-Muslim countries and Iran, which spend fortunes on missionary activity all around the world and on support of Muslim terrorist organizations, should be approached to shoulder this financial burden. Implementation of the plan should be carried out by UN agencies. Clearly the Rohingya themselves will be unable to do so. The consent of both the Rohingya people and the government of Bangladesh must be obtained in order to ensure the success of this enterprise. Obviously Myanmar would be amenable to such a proposal, which all sides would certainly find advantageous.

Notes

- ¹ Burma's name was changed to Myanmar in 1989. Most other place names were also changed (e.g., Arakan to Rakhine, Rangoon to Yangon).
- ² Groupe International de travail pour les Peuples Autochtones (GITPA) Report of March 2018.
- ³ "Arkan," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 3rd Edition, (Leiden), part 2009-4, p. 42.
- ⁴ Ibid., pp. 42-47; Moshe Yegar, "Burmese," *Muslim Peoples: A World Ethnographic Survey*, Richard V. Weekes (ed.) (Westport, 1984), pp. 187-90; Moshe Yegar, "The Muslims of Burma," *The Crescent in the East: Islam in Asia Major*, Raphael Israeli (London, 1982), pp. 123-29.
- ⁵ "Burma (Myanmar), Muslims in," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 3rd Edition, op. cit., pp. 123-32.
- ⁶ Moshe Yegar, "The Panthay of Burma and Yunnan," *The Journal of Southeast Asian History*, VII:1 (March, 1966), 73-85.
- ⁷ The GITPA is an indigenous rights organization. It was founded by anthropologists mainly to document the situation of indigenous peoples in the Amazon region. Over the years it has extended its reach.
- ⁸ The situation is different in the case of the Moro (Muslim) rebellion in the southern Philippines and even in the less-known case of the Pattani-Muslim rebellion in southern Thailand. See Moshe Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand and Western Burma/Myanmar* (Lanham, 2002).