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Genocide, exodus and exploitation for jihad: the urgent need to address the Rohingya crisis

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Abstract

The Rohingya people represent an ethnic minority group in Myanmar[1], where the main causes for the greatest regional exodus in contemporary Southeast Asia originate. Suffering from various kinds of state persecutions and discrimination by society in general, Rohingya are often forced to flee their homes. This situation is worsened by the fact that most of the potential host states in the region are not able to take care of all the refugees and/ or are not willing to accept further waves of immigration. Moreover, regional governments start to identify Rohingya not as a sole humanitarian and refugee issue, but rather as a threat towards internal security and as a critical determinant in international relations and regional cooperation. Today, the Rohingya population is one of the most oppressed groups in the world. This paper argues that the dramatic dimension of the Rohingya's refugee crisis is a clear result of several intermingling factors which are deeply embedded in negative historical trajectories enforced by contemporary unfortunate circumstances. In general terms, the Rohingya crisis is a politically and economically driven religious conflict. Following this rationale, it is considered that the vulnerable situation of the forcefully displaced persons is getting increasingly exploited by local and global acting jihadist groups trying to destabilise the region by hijacking the cause of Rohingya.

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[1] For consistency, this report uses the official term Myanmar to refer to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar which is also known as Burma. The exception is made for the process of 'Burmanisation' and related terms.

Therefore, it is important to take into account the security concerns as well as the economic and geopolitical considerations of the regional states, especially Myanmar, Bangladesh, and India. Only then it will be possible to create a constructive atmosphere and necessary political will to work out a sustainable solution. This SADF Working Paper analyses the initial and current conditions responsible for the Rohingya refugee crisis and calls attention to security orientated aspects and other factors influencing the course of the conflict and behaviour of the major actors involved. The paper also summarises several thoughts towards resolution of the problem.

Keywords:

Myanmar, Rohingya, terrorism, militancy, jihad, ethnic conflict, Rakhine, Buddhist fundamentalism, refugee, illegal migration, security, Bangladesh, India

Approaching the Rohingya refugee crisis: the puzzle

To approach the ongoing Rohingya refugee crises, the paper suggests the following factors to be considered. To begin with, the unfortunate historical trajectories set by the former British colonial rule featured by 'guided migration' of Muslim Rohingya from other parts of 'British India' to Buddhist Myanmar, especially into Rakhine State formerly known as Arakan[2], in order to run a repressive colonial administration and mutual cruelties between Buddhist people and Rohingya in the context of the World War II. Here, the historical trajectories led to the creation of a traumatic cognitive memory with far reaching impacts on the postcolonial political developments.

Secondly, the emergence of the authoritarian military regimes in Myanmar and their repressive policies to gain and maintain state control, particularly the implementation of an exclusive and repressive cultural policy of 'Burmanisation', favouring the country's majority ethnicity known as Burman. The 'Burmanisation' can be described as a cultural policy programme to form a society, 'where Burman culture, language and the Burman way of Buddhism are absolute hegemonic' (Collins, 2003: 31).

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[2] Arakan is bounded in the north by the Indian Union, in the south and west by the Bay of Bengal and in the east by the Yoma mountains. In the north and west Arakan had a common border with Bangladesh. Arakan is the only Muslim majority province in Myanmar (Siddique, 2012: 17, 18).

Another factor highlights the rise of state-supported Buddhist religious extremism in Myanmar which led to a rise of intolerance and, subsequently, to a cultural confrontation of different ethnic-religious communities, namely between Muslims and Buddhists (and partly Hindus). Coupled with the long lasting ignorance of policy makers worldwide, the Rohingya issue was increasingly becoming a regional issue with global impacts and remarkable coverage by international media and academia.

Additionally, the Rohingya crisis is not only religious but also economically and politically driven (Shams, 2015, June 4). Local conflicts over resource distribution and economic opportunities, armed violence, human rights violations, centre-periphery-tension and state-society antagonisms add to the precarious conditions of Rohingya. Hence, the Rohingya people must be seen not only as a local (i.e., provincial) conflict between Rakhine and Rohingya, but also as a clash between the regional Rakhine minority and the ruling Burman national majority. The feeling of betrayal along with the lack of support in their struggle against the exploitive national elite, multiplies distrust and hostility of Rakhine towards Rohingya.

Finally, there is a phenomenon of hypocrisy within the Muslim world, based on ignoring the treatment of religious, ethnic minorities in Muslim majority countries like Pakistan, about how the Government of Myanmar (GoM) represses its Muslim population (Shams, 2017, September 11). The Latter phenomenon is enforced due to biased reporting by international media on the Rohingya crisis. Regarding the Myanmar officials, this has worsened the conflict (Thein, 2017, September 13). More concretely, the biased reporting by the international media would ignore that the Rohingya militants would not only attack the Myanmar's security forces but also kill Buddhist Rakhine and Hindus. Furthermore, it is argued that the biased reporting and the 'emotional support' by the international community would encourage the militant sections of Rohingya to conduct terrorist activities.

In consequence, the Rohingya population became stateless and deprived of all kinds of rights (Shams, 2017, September 12). In fact, the Rohingya people have been dealing with this situation for decades. A senior UN official describes the systematic prosecution as 'ethnic cleansing' (BBC 2016, November 24), while some other observers even describe the cruelties against Rohingya as a 'genocide' (Ibrahim, 2016; McKirdy and Wright, 2017, September 4). Among the critics are, for

instance, several Nobel peace prize winners stating that the prosecutions of Muslims in Myanmar is 'nothing less than genocide' (Associated Press, 2015, May 31).

The current context of the Rohingya crisis

Southern Asia is currently witnessing another act of one of the world's most distressing refugee drama which could lead to a 'humanitarian catastrophe', according to the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres (Reuters, 2017, September 1). Since the 25th of August, the Rakhine province, a state in Myanmar, was once or more times rocked by an outbreak of massive violence leading to the death of least 400 people from the Rohingya community and tens of thousands refugees who were forced to leave their homes (Pandey, 2017, September 1). In response to several coordinated attacks organised by Rohingya militants against the country's security agencies, Myanmar's armed forces carried out a large-scale crackdown on the Rohingya settlements, described as 'clearance operations' to find the suspects involved in the attack (Slodkowski, 2017, April 25). This must be seen not as a single incident but rather as part of a long-lasting series of violent clashes between the GoM and militant sections of the Rohingya community in the country. In fact, these conflicts started already decades ago but with its varying intensity and with different levels of use of force over time (cf. ICG, 2016, December 15). It seems now, however, that a persistently simmering militant movement has been gaining a new impetus and new organisational structures since October 2016, leading to a wave of terror that has the potential to cause a severe escalation of the conflict.

The GoM and its security sector agents blame the militant Rohingya for 'Islamic terrorist' activities (RFA, 2016, October 14) and for pushing an insurgency (Associated Press, August 28) to split the country in order to create a new state for itself (Bhattacherjee, 2014, November 19). Furthermore, authorities like to state that the militants are entrenching communal tensions (Aljazeera, 2016, 10 October) between the country's Buddhists and Hindus by attacking religious sides (cf. Lewis and Lone, 2017, September 4). In contrast to claims of the Myanmar officials, the militant segments of the Rohingya community argue that their acts of violence are measures to fight for their neglected rights[3] and the means of 'self-defence' against the repressive and exploitative state as well as against the hostile majority trying to suppress ethnic and religious

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[3] Foremost the basic rights of citizenship and enfranchisement, marriage by choice, education, healthcare, security, and freedom of religion among others (Bhattacherjee, 2017, February 9).

minorities in the country (PALO, 2017, August 27). In more concrete terms, the attackers who apparently belonged to the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), formerly known as Harakat al-Yaqeen (HaY) or 'Faith Movement'[4] (Bhattacherjee, 2017, February 9; Wright & Watson, 2017, February 3), justified the terror attack by stating the following: 'This is a legitimate step for us to defend the world's persecuted people and liberate the oppressed people from the hands of the oppressors!' (Wright & Berlinger, 2017, August 25).

Clearly, the latest armed confrontations mark another peak in a 'spiral of violence' (cf. ICG, 2016, December 15) which started a few decades ago in the 1980s and 1990s (Bhattacherjee, 2017, February 9) with disastrous consequences for the Rakhine State in general and the Rohingya community in particular. Today, it is estimated that nearly 123,000 Rohingya people (Cook, Jesselyn, 2017, September 5) escaped from Myanmar during the ongoing exodus. Despite the reluctance of neighbouring Bangladesh to take on more refugees — the poor and overpopulated country that hosted already more than 400,000 Rohingya immigrants fleeing Myanmar during earlier clashes — and its subsequent tightened security control at the frontiers, approximately 73,000 people have poured into Bangladesh (Deutsche Welle, 2017, September 3). Nevertheless, it is reported that thousands of Rohingya are still trapped in the no-man's land of the border area suffering from horrendous living conditions (Cook, Jesselyn, 2017, September 5), neither able to enter Bangladesh, nor to return to the Rakhine State out of fear (cf. Roy and Jinnat, 2017, August 30). The situation is even more complex as the surrounding countries in the region refuse to take on more refugees — Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia closed their borders and the maritime routes are also getting strictly patrolled to choke off illegal sea-based migrations (Bhattacherjee, February 9).

For example, the Indian government decided to deport thousands of Rohingya — most of them sought illegally shelter in the country during the last decades (VoA, 2017, August 29) — back to Myanmar. It is estimated that around 40,000 refugees will have to leave India, including 16,500 Rohingya registered by the UNHRC which issues ID cards to them (Aljazeera 2017, August 14). Like Dhaka, also New Delhi refers to high numbers of refugees the country has already taken in and the lack of sufficient resources to take the sufficient care of them. What is more, both

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[4] There are reports about a group appeared which got also associated with the attacks starting in 2016 by Rohingya militants, called Aqa-Mul Mujahidin (AMM). But some observers suggesting that HAY and AMM could be the same group or that HaY/ARSA could be a front of AMM (Indian Express, 2017, January 8; Dhaka Tribune, 2017, January 10).

countries tend to point out the security related aspects to justify the legitimacy of their refusal to accommodate more Rohingya within their own borders. The question then arises, why are Rohingya continuously being persecuted by Myanmar's state agencies, plus there is also a puzzle about why the international community did not spend any significant efforts to stop the ongoing disputable use of coercive by the GoM against the Rohingya as well as to work towards a peaceful settlement of the confrontation. In order to address a potential political solution, one needs to identify the roots, and especially the correlations between the causes and consequences of the conflict between the Rohingya community and the GoM.

The Rohingya: a distinct ethnic-religious community

Despite different racial connections, the predominantly Muslim Rohingya population[5] is a distinct religious, ethnic, and linguistic group (Albert, 2017, January 12) 'officially' located in Myanmar's north-western Rakhine State where Rohingya, along with the dominant Buddhist Rakhine population, constitute one of the two major ethnic groups in this area (Siddique, 2012). Islam took root in Myanmar in the 7th century and has been growing ever since, starting with the arrival of Arab, Moorish, and Persian traders who intermingled with local population (Siddique, 2012: 29-28). They were followed by migrants coming from the Indian subcontinent, especially from Bengal towards the East into Arakan. Both areas, Bengal and Arakan, were under British colonial rule and had no fixed borders. The British administration encouraged many Indian Bengali Muslims to settle in Arakan (cf. Ibrahim, 2016: 26-27) that was populated predominantly by Rakhine Buddhists. Compared to the 'fair and soft' skinned Burmese/Burman majority which got often pointed in discriminatory statements, the 'dark-skinned' (cf. Pitman 2012, June 15) and Bengali-speaking Rohingya are historically related to the people of Bangladesh (Chambers, 2015, October 5).

However, questions over the descent of Rohingya remain disputed both in academia and society. In particular, this finds expression in the notion of the respective Muslim community. The term 'Rohingya' is preferred among the Rohingya people, while the Buddhist majority pejoratively refers to them as 'Bengali' or 'Kalar' (Chambers, 2015, October 5). The GoM even forbids the use of the word 'Rohingya' (Guardian, 2016, May 11). Both terms, 'Bengali' and 'Kalar', are

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[5] There are reports about the existence of the Hindu Rohingya communities which are also affected by the latest military actions against the Rohingya militants in Myanmar and seeking shelter in Bangladesh. Due to the scope of these articles, the following analysis focuses on Muslim Rohingya (Miazee, 2017, September 19; Wire, September 5).

vehemently rejected by the Rohingya people as descriptions for their community. Until today, Myanmar's officials and the majority of the country's Buddhist society refused to use the word 'Rohingya' and some even alleged that the term did not exist before the 1950s (Chambers, 2015, October 5). This must be seen as a strategy to deny the existence of the Rohingya ethnic identity (Uddin, 2015, July 9) and to describe them based on their foreign origin. Such a rationale apparently serves the GoM policy as an instrument to reject citizenship and other fundamental rights to Muslims living in the Rakhine province.

Historical legacies: colonial rule, liberation struggle, World War II, and the formation of a traumatic cognitive memory

Due to the influx of Bengali migrants during the British colonial period, the population of Muslims was rapidly increasing in the Rakhine province. But over time, the initial and mainly peaceful relations between Muslims and Buddhists in Myanmar started to deteriorate, leading to severe frictions between new settlers and old inhabitants. It did not take long for them to become politicised as well as polarised along the lines of confronting exclusive collective identities. On one side were the Arakanese Buddhists calling themselves 'Rakhine' and, on the other side, the Arakanese Muslims calling themselves 'Rohingya' (Siddique, 2012). The Rakhine Buddhists identified the Arakanese Muslims as 'unwanted' migrants coming from neighbouring Bengal with the help of the British who aimed at supporting the foreign suppressive regime. Since the beginning of the 1940s, the Muslim-Buddhist conflict in Arakan turned violent (Chambers, 2015, October 5). With the outbreak of the World War II, the Burmese liberation struggle against the colonial rule gained impetus with the Rakhine State as a major geographical flashpoint. The fact that the Rakhine State turned into an actual frontline in the 'great war' served as a catalyst in the subsequent confrontations between the Muslim and Buddhist segments of the population that resulted in the formation of armed units along the religious-ethnic lines (ICG, 2016, December 15: 3).

During the war, the region was occupied by the Imperial Japanese Army due to which the conflict became instrumentalised. By siding with the Arakan Buddhists, the Japanese started a systematic persecution against the Rohingya people during the period between 1942 and 1945, killing many of them and pushing others out of the country. In contrast, Muslim Rohingya fought with the British not only against the Japanese and their local Arakan allies but they also conducted several

massacres against Buddhists (cf. Kreibich, Goetz, and Murage, 2017, May 24). The experience of Rohingya supporting the British colonial rule followed by the tremendous inhumanities formed a traumatic cognitive memory among many Buddhists of the Muslim population as being 'anti-Buddhist' as well as anti-national. After the defeat of the Japanese, the end of World War II, the granting of independence and the subsequent formation of a new government by the Buddhist majority, this cognitive memory determined a decisive factor in various ways. The cognitive memory did not only lead to the formulation and implementation of sectarian policies by the new decision-makers, but also turned into a pushing factor for the growth of anti-Muslim sentiments within the Buddhist society. Furthermore, this cognitive memory created an atmosphere which proved to be beneficial for the emergence of a strong Buddhist fundamentalist movement.

Further entrenchment of Buddhist-Muslim antagonism in post-independence politics

After facing multitude of atrocities by the 'Japanese-Arakanese' forces, the conditions temporarily improved for the Rohingya in the 1950s, the years between independence and the coup d'état of General Ne Win in 1962 (Devi, 2014: 46). During this time, the Rohingya people were considered and recognised by many of the country's political leaders, foremost by the first and second Prime Ministers U Nu and U Ba Swe, as part of the larger fabric of Myanmar's people (Constantine, 2012, September 18). They were granted National Registration Cards in 1951 (ICG, 2014, October 22: 11) and the right to vote in the 1960 general election.

However, the violent actions along with the social and political wrongdoings against Rohingya continued. Not only by the military regime of Ne Win, which adopted a strict 'Burmanisation Policy' (Devi, 2014: 46), but also from within the society by the Arakanese Buddhists (Rakhine) themselves. It should be emphasised that despite being rich in natural resources, the Rakhine province 'is the poorest and among the most isolated regions among Myanmar' (Parnini, 2013). Rakhine started to feel culturally discriminated, economically exploited, and politically side-lined by the central government dominated by the ethnic majority community of the Burman (ICG, 2014, October 22: i-ii, 14-15).

The Rohingya people have been increasingly perceived by Rakhine Buddhists as undesirable competitors for resources and as a threat to their own identity vis-à-vis the state dominating

Burman identity or 'Burman-ness' (Walton, 212, October 19). Due to these tensions, the Rakhine State has been witnessing numerous violent conflicts between the two groups over many years. Considering these factors, one can state that the dilemma of the Rohingya partly originates from a regional limited conflict between two, economically competing and different religious-ethnic groups, as well as from a struggle between the national and provincial governments, often referred to as 'centre-periphery conflict' (ICG, 2014, October 22: i-ii, 14-15). In the latter conflict, the Rakhine people have been feeling politically betrayed over the years, as Rohingya have not voted for their political parties and, as such, supported the course of the Rakhine State vis-à-vis other provinces and towards the central government (Shams, 2015, June 4). This has created more animosities between the two ethnic groups.

Being aware of the conflict between Muslim Rohingya and Buddhist Rakhine, the central authorities, instead of fostering reconciliation, instrumentalises the conflict in order to split the local opposition. In practice, they encourage Rakhine Buddhist fundamentalists to keep the conflict going by carrying out an anti-Muslim agitation. The strategy of the national government is obvious: The Rakhine-Rohingya conflict weakens regional opposition towards the centre and undermines local demands for its fair share and distribution mechanism of the revenues from the resource-rich state. Nevertheless, in order to safeguard its own interests, the GoM not only attempts to control the political power of Rakhine, but also tries to truncate the economic, social and political leverage of Rohingya within the Rakhine State as much as possible.

Since gaining independence, Myanmar's rulers identified Rohingya not as locals, and especially not as citizens, but as foreign economic refugees challenging domestic economic composition, social fabric, and political power structure of the country. Since then, Rohingya have started to be seen as a threat to centralisation and monopolisation of power by the national Burman elite which was, and still is, dominated by the country's military. Around five decades ago, Myanmar's armed forces launched a strategy comprised of different measures, including cultural homogenisation, marginalisation, assimilation, and isolation (ethnic enclaves), to undermine the emergence of regional power centres and oppositional forces. In other words, the military top brass adopted more or less the major policy instruments of the former British colonial ruler of classify, divide, and rule (cf. Gravers, 1999: 109).

Military rule and 'Burmanisation' of state and society

In consequence, the GoM turned in periodical intervals against the Rohingya people. The emergence of the Rohingya insurgency to achieve self-determination was providing the occasions and justifications to carry out military operations to eradicate the Rohingya militancy (cf. Chambers, 2015, October 5). In 1962, the nationalist Burmese regime under military dictator General Ne Win responded and carried out armed actions against Rohingya. The immediate use of coercive force against Rohingya by the newly established military junta got flanked by the above mentioned cultural policy of 'Burmanisation', which got incrementally known as 'Myanmafication', especially after Burma was renamed to Myanmar in 1989 (BBC, 2007, September 26).

But not only the cultural policy got entrenched over time, but also several major military campaigns continued over the next years. Most noteworthy were the 'Operation King Dragon' (or Naga Min Sitsin Yae) in 1978[6], which repeated in 1991, equivocated as 'Operation Pyi Thaya' or 'Operation Clean and Beautiful Nation' (Constantine, 2012, September 18). Both campaigns were directed against Rohingya and led to large scale destruction and displacement. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya had to flee to other countries, most commonly to Bangladesh. The campaigns were accompanied by unrestricted use of violence and brought to end because of the intervention of the international community (Chambers, 2015, October 5). Nevertheless, the severe repression of Rohingya by the GoM continued. The Rakhine State was 'placed under the authority of Nasaka (Nay-Sat Kut-kwey Ye), a Burmese border guard force (inter-agency entity) founded in 1992 and composed of around 1200 soldiers, police, intelligence, and other security officials (ICG, 2013, July 13; Siddiqui, 2016, December 4). Many of the Nasaka members got recruited among the local Rakhine Buddhists, promoting a strong anti-Rohingya stand within this paramilitary border force (ICG, 2013, July 13). Soon after formation, the Nasaka were known for being responsible for communal violence and an institutional culture of corruption and abusive practices against Muslims in the Rakhine State (ICG, 2013, July 13; 2012, November 12). Amidst growing international criticism of the Nasaka's activities in the Rakhine State towards the Rohingya, on 12 July 2013, the Nasaka were disbanded under the new elected civilian

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[6] The official aim of this campaign was to root out Muslim rebels who were fighting for the establishment of an independent Islamic state in the Rakhine province and to remove illegal migrants.

government[7] (Dhaka Tribune, 2013, July 16; ICG, 2013, July 13). However, in September they were replaced with a new, equally brutal organisation named 'MaKhaPha', which can loosely be translated as 'Illegal Immigration Prevention Group' (Anwar, 2013, September 18; Chambers, 2015, October 5). Many of the former Nasaka members can be find within the rank and files of 'MaKhaPha', following the old anti-Muslim mindset and practices. Subsequently, one must state that the policy of using violence against Rohingya by Myanmar's military regimes continues by the succeeding civilian governments.

The emergence of Buddhist Fundamentalism as disruptive and decisive factor

The rise of Buddhist fundamentalism and terror in Myanmar is one of the main causal factors of the Rohingya crisis. It is thus argued that the state-supported Buddhist fundamentalism led to a rise of intolerance and, subsequently, to a cultural confrontation of different ethnic-religious communities, namely between Muslims and Buddhists. This conflict gained significance after the military rulers[8] attempted to assimilate religious-ethnic minorities into the mainstream Burmese culture. In other words, the above-mentioned strategy of the enforced cultural unification known as 'Burmanisation' or 'Myanmafication' was used as a way of 'National Reconsolidation', ensuring the political dominance of the Burman elite.

To support the 'Burmanisation', one of the major instruments by the GoM is the instrumentalization of radicalised Buddhist clerics. The emergence of organised Buddhist fundamentalism in Myanmar finds its expression predominantly in the so-called '969 movement' (Marshall, 2013, June 27; Palatino 2013, May 16). The three digits are supposed to symbolise the virtues of Buddha, Buddhist practices, and the Buddhist community (Palatino, 2013, May 16).[9] All three elements determine major elements in the process of collective identity construction to promote the unity of Buddhists. The strengthening of this unity is perceived as essential for the survival of Buddhism in Myanmar which is increasingly challenged by the monolithic religion of Islam. The latter one is clearly identified by the 969 movement and its

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[7] In November 2010, when military rule was replaced by a new military-backed civilian government which came into power by 'fake elections' which were neither fair nor free regarding then UN General Secretary Bann Ki-moon. However, they were the first election after 20 years (BBC, 2010, November 9).

[8] It is important to note that the successive civilian governments since 2011 continued the practices of the former military governments: (1) The use of coercive force to eradicate the Rohingya militancy; and (2) the formulation and implementation of exclusive cultural policies favouring the Buddhist majority.

[9] Regarding Palatino (2013, May 16): 'The numerological significance of the figure comes from the Buddhist tradition in which the Three Jewels (Tiratana) are made up of 24 attributes: nine special attributes of the Lord Buddha, six core Buddhist teachings, and the nine attributes of monkhood.'

proponents as 'the enemy' (DeHart, 2013, June 25) which should be vanquished (Palatino, 2013, May 16). The 969 movement as well as the 'MaBaTha', the organisation for the protection of race and religion which is another fundamentalist and nationalist organisation under the leadership of the extreme radicalised monk, Ashin Wirathu (ICG, 2017, September 5; Oppenheim, 2017, May 12; Walton and Hayward; 2014: 12-16), who represents one of the most decisive religious figures in contemporary Myanmar and, as stressed by Hannah Beech from the Time Magazine (2013, July 1), he is also referred to as 'the Face of Buddhist Terror'.

The core arguments of the Buddhist fundamentalists[10] such as the above mentioned Ashin Wirathu, are the following: Firstly, the Bengali Muslims are illegally migrated into Myanmar from Bangladesh. To enhance the feeling of fear among the Buddhist fellow believers and compatriots, the Buddhist fundamentalists tend to stress that they are largely 'surrounded' by Islamic majority countries, namely Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Malaysia, including Thailand's southern provinces with their relatively strong Malay Muslim population like the Thai-Myanmar border province of Satun with around 69 per cent Muslims[11]. Furthermore, China's Yunnan province with a relatively large minority of Muslim Hui, at least in concrete numbers counting for around 700,000 people, is getting instrumentalized to create the picture of a 'Muslim encirclement' of Buddhist Myanmar. Secondly, the country's Buddhist culture, lifestyle, faith and society are under siege by Muslims. Moreover, the Buddhist fundamentalists claim that the Muslim Rohingya aim at Islamising Myanmar (Galache, 2013, May 10) and therefore threaten the country's cultural heritage (cf. Economist, 2017, August 10). Thirdly and fourthly, some of the Muslims are considered terrorists (Galache, 2013, May 10) who secretly try to dominate the local economy (Palatino, 2013, May 16). And finally, the Buddhist fundamentalists also spread fears about alarmingly high birth rates of Muslims who can overtake the country (Economist, 2013, July 27; Walton and Hayward; 2014: 17).

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[10] Here one should not that the Buddhist clerics in Myanmar are not a monolithic bloc and that different organisations exists which do not necessarily agree with the '969 movement' or 'Ma Ba Tha' organisation. For example, there are the monks (and nuns) of the 'Saffron Revolution' (Saffran Revolution is one of the most recent and well-known protest episode against the government which appeared in 2007 but got successful suppressed by the authorities) or the '88 Generation' monks (the 88 refers to the anti-government protests in Summer 1988 by young monks and students). Both groups largely reject the radicalised views of the Buddhist fundamentalists. However, they are less influential and some of them went into exile or got arrested in Myanmar (Walton and Hayward; 2014: 11, 33, 55 EN 35).

[11] Other provinces are with Malay Muslim population from at least 25 per cent up to 90 per cent are Songkhla, Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala; four out this five are Muslim majority provinces. The five major Muslim southern provinces (including the above mentioned Satun province) as well as the 9 other provinces which are comprising the administrative description of 'Southern Thailand' have roughly 2,5 million Muslim inhabitants (based on 'The 2010 Population and Housing Census', (NSO, 2010).

In essence, the radicalised Buddhists state that there is an overall 'Muslim conspiracy to conquer Myanmar through economic exploitation, inter-faith marriage' and forced conversion by followers of Islam which is portrayed as intrinsically violent (Galache, 2013, May 10; Schissler, Walton & Thi, 2015, August 6). In other words, in Buddhist fundamentalist and Rahkine ethno-nationalist discourses, Muslims are getting constructed 'as an existential threat, in which Buddhism is vulnerable and needing protection lest Islam supplant it as the majority religion' (Galache, 2013, May 10; Schissler, Walton & Thi, 2015, August 6). In consequence, the Muslims, especially the Rohingya, are increasingly confronted with a deeply entrenched Islamophobia, making inter-religious relations extremely complicated. The Buddhist fundamentalists support the idea that 'any actions can be justified in order to protect the religion' (Walton, 2013, April 2) in the name of virtuous 'self-defence' (Schissler, Walton & Thi, 2015, August 6). This includes violent campaigns against Muslims, discriminatory legal regulations as well as demands by '969 movement' members claiming that their Buddhist countrymen should not do business with them or to intermingle with Muslims through inter-faith marriages. The movement also call for the proposal that Buddhist women must seek permission from local officials to marry a man of another faith and that the respective, envisaged should convert to Buddhism (Galache, 2013, May 10).

Myanmar's state-temple alliance

Instead of condemning the anti-Muslim agitation carried out by Wirathu, President Thein Sein's office released a statement in which Wirathu was referred to as a 'noble person', a 'son of Buddha' (DeHart, 2013, June 25). This underlines the strong relations and mutual support between the central authorities and the Buddhist clerics (cf. ICG, 2017, September 5). In other words, one can even speak about a 'state-temple alliance'. One of the most noteworthy outcomes of this alliance is that the radicalised Buddhist monks and their followers enjoy the large impunity. More concretely, Buddhists involved in atrocities against religious minorities usually do not face legal punishment. In contrast, Muslims involved in violent activities are more often imprisoned (DeHart, 2013, June 25).

It is important to note that the anti-Muslim agitations are not anymore restricted only to the Rakhine State. Occasions of Buddhist militancy can be found all over the country (DeHart, 2013, June 25). In result, Myanmar is persistently experiencing smaller and larger outbreaks of violence, leading to persistently recurring murdering and the destructions of homes of Muslims, and

subsequent enforced displacements. (Fuller, 2013, June 20; Palatino, 2013, May 16; Walton, 2013, April 2). It is estimated that the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Myanmar is around several hundreds of thousands.[12] By observing this, UN senior officials and human rights organisations described the treatment of the Rohingya by the GoM as 'ethnic cleansing' (BBC 2016, November 24; HRW, 2013a, April 22; 2013b, April 22). In this context, it seems that the army is more than willing in flanking the activities of violent sections of Buddhists fundamentalists by the to use force against the Muslims. The soldiers perceive the suppression of the Rohingya as 'a chance to present itself as the only institution capable of imposing order' (Galache, 2013, May 10).

Furthermore, in order to make the life of the Muslims even more difficult, the state denied aid for the suffering Rohingya and put restrictions of movement on them (HRW, 2013b, April 22). They are therefore not allowed to travel between different locations, including villages, towns, and cities (Uddin, 2015, July 7). There are also constrains on practicing Islam such as, for instance, ban on calling for prayer, restrictions on building and renovating mosques and religious schools (Uddin, 2015, July 7).

Beyond the humanitarian crisis: Rohingya refugee crises from a security perspective

Besides the dire humanitarian crisis, there is an increasing trend among regional governments and local communities to see the Rohingya migrations from a security dominated perspective. Countries like Bangladesh and India, started to perceive the illegally immigrated Rohingya not as a sole humanitarian and refugee issue, but rather as a threat towards internal security and a critical determinant in international relations. Regarding the latter one, it seems that the Rohingya refuges crises is increasingly considered by the regional governments of the affected countries as a disturbing factor in their bilateral relations among each other, for example between India and Bangladesh, as well as their relations towards Myanmar. In consequence, there is a growing number of government officials and analysts who identify the Rohingya refugees as a so-called 'non-traditional security threat'.

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[12] In 2013, Palatino reported about 450,000 IDPs (Palatino, 2013, May 16). Today, it is difficult to measures more concrete numbers of the IDPs due to the recent and still ongoing exodus of Rohingya refugees.

Looking at their usual statements, the Rohingya are considered responsible for the undermining of the general law and order situation in their host societies (cf. BEI, 2013, February), especially in Bangladesh. Besides terrorism and religious extremism, which will be explained below in a separate section, the Rohingya crisis is also associated with all kinds of trafficking and other criminal activities, including narcotics, human, SALW (small arms and light weapons), ammunition, stealing, armed robbery, and maritime piracy. Other major concerns are smuggling and other types of illegal cross-border infiltrations (cf. BEI, 2013, February). Additionally, Rohingya are increasingly linked with growing rates of crimes related to extortion, sexual harassment (including prostitution and sexual slavery), killings for organs, domestic servitude, and forced labour. For example, it is apparent that the refugee camps Nayapara (subdistrict Teknaf) and Kutupalang (subdistrict Ukhia) in the Bangladesh district of Cox's Bazar Sadar (Chittagong Division) have high rates of crime. Consequently, they often become remarkably violent places with spill-over effects into surrounding local communities in the district of Cox's Bazar. This is increasing the level of frustration and threat perception among local communities and Rohingya (BEI, 2013, February). However, besides increasing evidence of involvement of Rohingya in criminal activities, there is a tendency, especially among local communities in host countries, to blame the presence of the Rohingya refugees as the causal factor for upward appearance of all kinds of misdeeds (cf. BEI, 2013, February).

Of course such a perception of Rohingya discriminates and is far too narrow to understand the dimensions of the involvement of the refugees in criminal activities. But one must state that the contours of being a victim or a perpetrator of crime are fluent when it comes to the description of the role of Rohingya in it. Nonetheless, it is important to be aware that the accusations — whether justified or not — of Rohingya involvements in crime related activities in host countries are subsequently seriously undermining a constructive dialogue between both sides. There is also a strong economic dimension in the Rohingya threat perception attached. Due to various reasons, some government and local communities of host countries identify Rohingya as a significant and disturbing factor in the economic development. Following are examples of common reasons:

> (a) The Rohingya people constitute an additional demographic pressure on already densely populated area with is scarce resources, especially in Bangladesh and partly in India (Wolf, 2015, October 6).

(b) The (mostly illegal) penetration of the refugees offering cheap labour in the regional job market leads to further socio-economic inequalities and distortions in the field of employment opportunities for the local workforce.

(c) There is an increasing awareness about a potential ecological crisis allegedly caused by Rohingya resulting from the extensive use of natural resources in the surrounding of legal (officially registered camps) and illegal settlements. For example, the intensive use of forests such as the Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary in Bangladesh. The exploitation of firewood and deforestation for settlements cause severe forest destructions in protected areas (Tani and Rahman, 2017).

(d) The Rohingya settlements in Bangladesh are located in an area known as Chittagong Division which is of extraordinary strategy importance, since the country's primary seaport of Cox Bazar is located there. There is a claim that due to instability and consequent security measures because of the refugee problem is leading to a serious reduction in trade and commerce as well as tourism industry (Salvá, 2017, March 21). In this context, the Rohingya crisis is also blamed for hampering regional connectivity (infrastructure) projects, like Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project which is supposed to link the Indian port of Kolkata with the port in Sittwe, the provincial capital of the Rakhine State (cf. Weijia, 2017, September 6). This has negative impacts on economic cooperation in the whole extended region as well as between India and Myanmar.

(e) Tensions exist between Rohingya and local communities of the host countries, foremost in Bangladesh, in the context of international development support. There is an accusation against aid agencies providing scarce services to Rohingya which are not available for the local people who are also in a desperate need for the very same services. Therefore, Rohingya's image of being illegal economic refugees (IGC, 2016, December 15) and criminals is further exacerbating conflicts between the hosts and refugees. The ban on aid organisations' activities that encourage the influx of Rohingya is not only worrisome form of a humanitarian perspective but it also alienate international donors (Holmes, 2017, September 4).

There are attempts to classify Rohingya as a challenge towards the political-administrative institutional structure of host countries, foremost in Bangladesh. Three examples are noteworthy: (I) the impact of the Rohingya crisis on the Bangladesh's civil-military relations, (II) the implementation of Rohingya in the voters list, and (III) the refugees as catalysers of corruption.

Bangladesh has had unhealthy civil-military relations ever since gaining independence in 1971 (Wolf, 2013, October), plus the experience of two military rules — Ziaur Rahman (1975-81) and Hussain M. Ershad (1982-90) — as well as an extra-constitutional military-backed caretaker government (2006-2008) shall be seen as a hint for a traditional lack of civilian control over the armed forces. This is significant, since the deficiencies of the country's governance architecture, the civilian governments, and their administrations rely tremendously on the armed forces in order to avoid internal insecurity. The growth of domestic disorder arising from tensions between refugees and local communities, mostly due to conflicts over resources, illegal migration and subsequent establishment of illegal settlements, as well as the involvement of Rohingya in militant and criminal activities, will further add to the dependence of civilian authorities on the security forces to maintain law and order and control over the borders. There is a threat that the combination of factors such as weak civilian institutions, the lack of formal civilian control mechanisms, and the necessity to manage the Rohingya problem could create a situation in which the top brass of Bangladesh's security agencies would be able to gain significant decision-making power. In other words, with the growing domestic threat scenarios, the military can become more influential in matters of internal security. In addition to that, it might enforce a process of strengthening the role (and acceptance) of coercion, especially the use of force, in governance and decision-making processes. This might have a particularly negative impact on the quality of democracy if the elected civilians, who are supposed to represent the supreme power, the people of Bangladesh, would not authorise military decision-making or enable them to monitor their implementation.

More concretely, once the security forces start to formulate goals and make decisions about the methods of how to deal with the Rohingya crisis, civilian supremacy will be seriously challenged. This would also define a crucial challenge towards any processes of democratic consolidation. Having this in mind, reports of numerous human rights violations accompanied by activities of the

regular and paramilitary security forces and the respective impunity of these actions, point at tensions between civilians and military and the unstable state of democracy. Furthermore, besides producing democratic defects, indications made by Bangladeshi security agents that military orientated approaches of conflict solutions (unauthorised as well as authorised) add to the enhancement of tensions between state and refugees. Indeed, military strategies are in nature much more robust than those of civilian authorities. In order to keep the refugees separate from the local communities by gathering and registering them in camps, to avoid unmonitored and uncontrolled 'self-settlements' and massive influx of Rohingya into Bangladesh, the use of coercive force seems to be rather the norm than the exception. The level of frustration among the refugees (and local communities) is rising even more in view of the build-up of infrastructure in the area of operation which is serving for security rather than development purposes. Consequently, Rohingya are bound to become more desperate and militant to safeguard their interests which will find its expression in a strengthened position of the radicalised elements. In sum, the Rohingya crisis creates a 'vicious circle' which has the potential to further deteriorate the security situation and cause negative impacts on the quality of democracy.

Another political dimension of the Rohingya crisis is its negative impact on political competition in Bangladesh. Since the creation of Bangladesh, the country's politics may be characterised by an unrestricted zero-sum-game over political power between Bangladesh's leading politicians and their respective political parties. This political culture and leadership style trickled down through the different layers of state and society affecting all spheres of public life. In result, political actors have been using all kinds of opportunities to outbid potential rivals for power. In the given context, local politicians and their respective parties are often trying to use the Rohingya case for their partisan political interests. Certain politicians, for instance, have been supporting Rohingya (through illegal measures) with the help of local authorities in order to enroll themselves in respective voter lists. In order to do so, the very same influential political-administrative nexus has been providing Rohingya with false nationality certificates such as Bangladeshi birth certificates, national identity cards or passports. There is no doubt that the local political leaders are keen on fortifying their vote banks with Rohingya. This generates new inequalities and enhances the existing ones when it comes to ensuring free and fair electoral process. The argument here is that by helping the illegal migrants to enroll, is not only a criminal activity, but it also constitutes severe disturbances of equal opportunities, particularly with regard to free and fair political

competition. The latter phenomenon favours candidates with more influence and financial resources. Analysts stress that, besides severe efforts of Bangladesh's Elections Commission which sets up a Special Committee to clear the voters list from non-Bangladeshi citizens, there are still thousands of enrolled Rohingya.

Furthermore, it is argued that the refugees are an extremely economic but also additional administrative burden for the country's weak institutions. As such, it includes more 'favourable moments' for corruption among Bangladesh authorities. For example, by having the power of granting Rohingya refugees free movement, deciding on refugee status and official documents among other benefits, there is a critical amount of bribery involved in undermining the coherence and loyalty of the country's civil service and policing efforts.

The emergence of Rohingya militancy and the hijacking of the Rohingya cause by Jihadist

It is argued that the Rohingya crisis cannot be anymore seen as a sole humanitarian issue of an oppressed community isolated from related concerns like security on domestic and international levels. Instead, the approach to analysing the Rohingya cause must be significantly broadened in a way which considers the challenge of Islamic terrorism and the efforts of regional governments to prevent the influence and extension of Jihadism in Myanmar as well as in South Asia. Basically, one can find following rationale in statements which are putting the Rohingya refugees in the terrorist equation: the Rohingya problem is contributing to and is partly responsible for the rise of the Jihadist elements in Myanmar as well as in their host countries. In more operational terms, there is the claim that Rohingya are helping to support religious Islamic fundamentalism in various ways through processes starting decades ago.

The roots of the organised Rohingya militancy can be traced back to the 1940s (Chakravarty, 2016, December 30) in the context of armed support for the then British colonial ruler against Japanese troops and Myanmar's (Burmese) forces struggling for independence. In the 1950s, a mujahidin-oriented insurgency emerged but got crushed by Myanmar's armed forces in the following years (Singh, 2017, April 3). After decades of a simmering violent conflict between

Muslim Rohingya and Buddhist Rakhine on the regional level and with the national Burman elites at the centre, armed resistance gained again larger momentum in the early 1980s with the formation of the Rohingya Solidary Organisation/RSO (IGC, 2016, December 15: 4). The RSO was created in the wake of large scale military operations by Myanmar's armed forces against the Rohingya in the 1970s (Brennan and Christopher O'Hara, 2015, June 29).

The RSO was an offshoot of an earlier formation of Rohingya called Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF) which was known for being rather moderate (Brennan and Christopher O'Hara, 2015, June 29). The RPF appeared in 1974 and was composed of elements of former armed Rohingya groups but fall relatively soon apart in different factions. Also the RSO faced a similar faith and split in 1986. In consequence, besides the RSO a second militant group emerged called Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) appeared. It is reported that in 1988 the two factions of Rohingya militants formed a loose alliance (IGC, 2016, December 15: 4).

Operating from Bangladesh soil, where the RSO maintained training camps, it spearheaded the Rohingya militant movement for roughly a decade and conducted occasional attacks on Myanmar's security forces. However, it appeared that the RSO as well as ARIF never enjoyed any remarkable support of larger sections of the Rohingya people and become mostly defunct at the end of the 1990s. Furthermore, military operation by Bangladesh's armed forces gave another blow to RSO. In sum, one can state the armed struggle of militant Rohingya in the 1980s and 1990s did not determine a severe threat to Myanmar's internal security compared to other militant movements in the country, for example in the Kachin State or Chan State.

But since October 2016, there is obviously a remarkable change in Rohingya militancy. Compared to earlier attacks by groups like the RSO, the latest attacks were quite different. They were not just random ambushed, they were 'clearly planned and coordinated in a manner which could only point towards some military training' (Chakravarty, 2016, December 30) and that Rohingya militants achieved more tactical capabilities (Winchester, 2017, August 28). This new wave of Rohingya militancy is very close related to the emergence of a Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA[13]). However, the violent activities of Hay or ARSA are declared by Myanmar's official for being causal for the latest military operations in the Rakhine province. On August 25, around 150 to 300 Rohingya militants from the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked about 20

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[13] Which was formerly known as new group, called Harakat al-Yaqeen (HaY) or 'Faith Movement' as mentioned above.

police posts leading to the death of 71 people including 12 security forces, the other 59 deaths belonged to the attackers. Before, on October 9th 2016, several hundred Rohingya militants conducted attacks against three posts of the Border Guard Police (BGP), including the BGP headquarter killing 9 security forces followed by several ambushes between 10 and 12 October in which at least four soldiers got killed. Furthermore, there are unconfirmed reports about two other attacks on 3rd November. Subsequently, on the 12th of November, a senior army officer got assassinated by Rohingya militants (ICG, 2016, December 15; McPherson, 2017, August 25). In response, the GoM who declared ARSA as a terrorist organisation and conducted large-scale clearance operations to identify ARSA fighters which lead to the recent exodus of Rohingya people and massive destructions of Rohingya settlements as well as human losses, as mentioned earlier. Here one should note, that ARSA and Myanmar's military have both accused each other of burning locals' homes in the aftermath of the attacks. Furthermore, not only Rohingya but also thousands of Buddhists and Hindus got forcefully displaced. Latter one was conducted by Rohingya militants regarding official sources (Aung, 2017, August 29).

Witnessing the disastrous consequences and new peak of humanitarian crisis of the Rohingya, ARSA declared a one-month lasting unilateral ceasefire agreement (Marshall and Das, 2017, September 9). The official rationale behind this move was to give aid organisations the opportunity to offer humanitarian assistance to the suffering Rohingya people. However, experts are also claiming that a major reason for the announcement of a ceasefire by ARSA is that 'the group does not appear to have been able to put up significant resistance against the military force unleashed in Myanmar's northwestern Rakhine State' (Marshall and Das, 2017, September 9).

Having this in mind, it is obvious that the real threat from militant Rohingya is only partly deriving from their military capabilities. Until now, besides terrorist attacks related losses, Rohingya militants did not determine a severe challenge for Myanmar's armed forces in conventional terms yet (Independent, 2017, September 11). Nevertheless, the radicalised sections of the Rohingya pose a remarkable menace for the stability and internal security in Myanmar, especially in the Rakhine province with potential spill-over effects.

The concrete threat potential of radicalised Rohingya originates from their international links with Jihadist groups and their sponsors. In other words, the biggest asset of Rohingya militants is their

steady increasing network and subsequent entrenchment in the global jihadist movement. It is important to note that militant Rohingya groups enjoyed the sympathies Islamic terrorist organisation and the global Jihadist movement. Since the 1980s, after the defeat of the Soviets in Afghanistan, extremist jihadi-oriented groups from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region (Af-Pak) started to support armed struggle against the GoM (Singh, 2017, April 3). There are also the accusations that foreign intelligence agencies, especially Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) is involved in the process of building-up armed capacities among militant Rohingya and help to facilitate contacts with international terror groups (AsiaNews, 2017, September 6; Gupta, 2017, September 11). It is stated by Myanmar's officials that members of ARSA leadership received training by the Taliban in Pakistan (Aung, 2016, October 14). Also the International Crisis Group States, that there are indication that ARSA may have received some training from members of Jihadist outfits (ICG, 2017, August 27). There is evidence that central figures of the latest militant activities in Myanmar are based in Pakistan and the Middle East. One the most well-known person of this circle is Abdus Qadoos Burmi, a Pakistani national of Rohingya descent (BDnews24, 2016, October 19). Based in Pakistan's port city of Karachi, he is active in promoting Jihad in Myanmar trough social media and publication campaigns as well as mobilising its large network among his international and regional terrorist organisation to support militancy among the Rohingya (Roul, 2017, March 10). Burmi is head of the group Harkat ul Jihad Islami-Arakan (HUJI-A), which may be part of a broader network which got recently known as ARSA. HUJI-A is helping to recruit fighters in Pakistan, to set-up training camps in Bangladesh, to recruited Rohingya from refugee camps in Bangladesh, and to facilitate training of Rohingya in Pakistan (Roul, 2017, March 10).

Furthermore, the Pakistani born Rohingya are closely linked with the Jihadi groups Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), 'the Army of the Righteous' and its political front organisation Jamat ud Dawah (JuD). Both groups are banned but to operate more or less freely in Pakistan Lintner, 2016, December 15). LeT and JuD initiated a movement called the Difa-e-Musalman e-Arakan Conference to highlight the Rohingya issue (Mizzima, 2016, October 19). It is reported that JuD operatives visited Rohingya camps in Bangladesh to provide 'religious and some military-style training' (Lintner, 2016, December 15). Here, the latest formation of militant Rohingya groups can rely on earlier contacts established by the RSO which developed close ties with Jihadist Bangladesh Jihadist organisations like Bangladesh Jamaat e Islami (JeI) and its militant student wing Islami Chatro Shibir/ICS (SADF, 2017, March 2).

There is also the allegation that Rohingya are using their international network to allocate funds from donors in the Middle East and Pakistan for militant activities. For example, the interaction with the radicalised Middle East-based charity organisation Rabita-al-Alam-al-Islami moved the militant Rohingya, foremost the RSO, into the global stream of Islamic fundamentalism. In this context, Malaysia turned into a major hub for facilitating and clearing ARSA funding as well as being a transit point for fighters supporting the Rohingya or for Rohingya to take part in Jihadi activities in different world regions (cf. Davis, 2017, August 17).

Since 2013, al-Qaeda showed interest in the cause of the Rohingya. Latest by 2014, al-Qaeda started openly support the militant Rohingya movement by calling for a Jihad in Myanmar. This move must be seen in the context of the newly set-up (in September 2014) al-Qaeda branch in South Asia, namely Al Qaeda of the Indian Subcontinent/AQIS (Reed, 2015, May). AQIS clearly states that the territory of Myanmar in part of its area of operations (Singh, 2017, April 3). Moreover, waging a Muslim insurgency in Myanmar is seen as crucial for al-Qaeda's 'Ghazwa-e-Hind', or 'Battle of India' (Haqqani, 2015, March 27). However, it has to be noted that AQIS is not just aiming at India but on the whole extended South Asian region, which not only includes Bangladesh but Myanmar too. Or in the words of AQIS leader Asim Umar 'the 'caravan of Jihad' will begin in Pakistan and will reach India, Bangladesh, and Burma [Myanmar]' (Basit, 2014, November). It becomes obvious that 'Al Qaeda aims at making inroads among aggrieved and persecuted Muslims' in India and Myanmar (Rafiq, 2014, September 5). As such, winning over the Rohingya for a Jihad in Myanmar is also part of al Qaeda strategy to conduct terrorist activities in neighbouring India and Bangladesh (Reed, 2015, May). In other words, Myanmar should serve Al Qaeda as an additional platform as well as a gateway to launch a 'long war in South Asia' (Rafiq, 2014, September 5).

Besides Al Qaeda, the Islamic State (IS) also expressed its interest in the Rohingya cause and called for a Jihad in Myanmar in July 2014 (Singh, 2017, April 3). Subsequently, numerous pro-IS groups in South Asia, for example the Lashkar-e-Toiba (Let) in Pakistan, the Indian Mujahidin, the Jama'tul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) or the Bangladesh-based Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami (Huji) started to foster Jihadist activities in Myanmar. Also South East Asian Islamist networks including extremists from Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, linked with IS, supporting the call for

Jihad to back the militant Rohingya in Myanmar (Latiff, 2017, January 4). In order to justify their increasing activities in Myanmar, the Islamists are stating that their goal is to increase the ability of militant sections among the Rohingya to defend themselves. Furthermore, the notion is spread that the Rohingya should be enabled to carry out counterattacks on Buddhist perpetrators of violence and human rights abuses against the Muslim community in Myanmar and beyond.

Apparently, the international Jihadist groups, namely Al Qaeda and IS, and their local affiliates and sympathisers are increasingly capitalising the image of a persecuted Rohingya community and high-jacking their cause for a better treatment and more rights vis-à-vis the GoM. Besides the fact that experts, like from the International Crisis Group, stating that one should not 'over-interpreted the significance of the international links', the think tank also emphasise that '…the longer violence continues, the greater the risks become of such links deepening and potentially becoming operational' (ICG, 2016, December 15: 20). According to Jaswinder Singh (2017, April 3), a counter-terrorism expert based in Singapore, 'through direct and indirect support for the Rohingya, the seeds of jihadi doctrine and ideology are being planted and that may put the community on an irreversible trajectory of violence'. There is the threat that Rohingya militants, being indoctrinated by IS and/or Al Qaeda ideology, are using their networks to spread jihadist propaganda among moderate Rohingya and motivate them to join terror operations. Besides being in military terms relatively weak, radicalised Rohingya are quite effective when it comes to propaganda campaigns, for example through the use of social media to spread face news and images of atrocities against Rohingya (Ratcliffe, 2017, September 5). This is gaining significance since Rohingya are using these instruments not only to attract the international attention on the miserable conditions of Rohingya but also spreading jihadist agendas.

Here, Myanmar's officials claim that ARSA is calling for the establishment of an 'Islamic State' on Myanmar's territory (Aung, 2017, August 29). But militant Rohingya's rejecting such statements as well as denying all kinds of links with IS or Al Qaeda. However, it becomes obvious that ARSA is adopting increasingly the methods of IS and Al Qaeda, as well as the Taliban. The chosen timing (besides the way that they were coordinated and operationalised) clearly carries the 'footprint' of the global Jihadist movement. Conducting a major terrorist offensive within hours after the release (August 24) of the report by the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State to find a political solution clearly suggests that ARSA sought 'to exploit the release of the report with a

dramatic show of strength at a time when international attention was focused on the Rohingya crisis' (Winchester, 2017, August 28). Nevertheless, it remains unclear how much support the militant sections enjoy among the main stream Rohingya refugees. It is largely reported that the masses of Rohingya are rejecting violence. However, there also report that ARSA 'has growing popular support among Rohingya in Myanmar and there is the threat that the latest military crackdown on the militant group might 'inspire many Rohingya to join the militants' (Bearak, 2017, September 11). Despite the fact that it is still difficult to prove to which extent Islamic fundamentalist groups are getting support from Rohingya or how far global and regional jihadist actors supporting them, one can make the following conclusions:

The radicalised sections of Rohingya serve as a recruiting base for Islamist terror groups. There are obvious indications that several organised militant interest groups of Rohingya maintain links with domestically and internationally operating jihadist organisations. It is thus important to recognise that the radicalised Rohingya are not only sympathising with the fundamentalist worldview of the global jihadist movement but also actively providing support for Islamist militant outfits. More specifically, it is claimed that Rohingya are not only providing men power but also cooperation in training on arms and explosives as well as propaganda activities. In the past, it seemed difficult to identify sufficient evidence for linkages between radicalised Rohingya and foreign, 'non-Myanmar-based' terrorist groups, which resulted in concrete militant activities in Myanmar as well as in countries hosting the Rohingya refugees, foremost Bangladesh and India. But with the appearance of ARSA it becomes clearer that concrete and proven links between Rohingya militants and terrorist activities not only exist but also determine long time entrenched trajectories.

Final thoughts:
The urgent need to find a political solution and potential ways forward

The latest phase of internal violence can be easily termed as one of the most horrifying in Myanmar's recent history (Kundu, 2017, September 8). Taken into account the large-scale destruction, deaths of hundreds of people, and the subsequent migrations of several hundred-thousands of persons as a state counter-terrorism response to a series of attacks by militant Rohingya on some facilities by Myanmar's security forces seems obviously 'disproportionate' (IGC, 2017, August 27). It is also apparent that the Rohingya, like other

refugees and IDPs worldwide, are facing extraordinary miserable living conditions as well as numerous social, political and economic injustices and repressions (cf. AI, 2016, December 19). The fact that most of the neighbouring countries are extremely reluctant to take on more refugees and highlight the negative impacts of massive and uncontrolled migrations, does not only complicate the situation for the Rohingya, but it also signals an urgent need of a solution. There is no doubt that the roots of the Rohingya conflict originate from within Myanmar and thus only the 'internal approach' has the ability to lead to a long-term sustainable solution. However, the historical trajectories and causes as well as latest developments at the local and international level show us that such a resolution seems to be a distant reality, perhaps even just a 'wishful thinking'.

Several determinants are responsible for this grim prospect. To begin with, multiple attempts to work out a solution have not brought the desired results, except some immediate measures to improve the critical and deteriorating situation of the refugees, like the Bangkok ('Boat People') Conference on May 2015 (Besant, 2015, June 12; Wolf, 2015, June 18), which was followed by several bilateral and multilateral meetings of the participating countries. By observing the latest dramatic events, it is clear that all these efforts did not produce a 'breakthrough'. But they marked, at least temporarily, some important steps in the right direction: They initiated a dialogue between South and Southeast Asian states. As such, they offered a platform in which the affected countries had a chance to exchange their views in a comprehensive manner on how to tackle the Rohingya crisis. Most importantly, however, the earlier undertakings point at the following essentials for any kind of progress towards a conflict resolution:

First, the existence of the political will of the decision-makers in Myanmar (which are not apriori congruent with the members of the current GoM) to find an inclusive solution which is based on the acceptance of the Rohingya community as an integral part of Myanmar's society. Putting pressure on the current GoM and reputational attacks on the country's 'de-facto civilian leader' Aung San Suu Kyi (like demands to withdraw the noble peace prize from her) does not help to resolve the Rohingya crises in a non-violent manner (cf. Safi, 2017, September 7; Monbiot, 2017, September 5). In contrast, such activities are weakening the position of the civilian government vis-à-vis the army top-brass in a country which is featured by highly delicate and sensitive civil-military relations (Moe, 2017; Bünte, 2014, October 1). It is important to recognise, that after experiencing just a brief democratic-civilian intermezzo and more than five decades of military

rule — since achieving independence in 1948 — democracy is far away from being consolidated in Myanmar. It therefore does not come by surprise that the military is still the most dominant player (even if they act from behind the scene) in the country's political arena which far-reaching decision-making powers. As such, it is crucial to strengthen capacities of the elected government to exercise civilian control to chance the balance of power in favour of the civilians. Otherwise, it will be difficult to convince Myanmar's armed forces which traditionally tend towards the use of force to maintain internal security that a political solution is the only sustainable way forward in conflict resolution.

Second, the establishment and maintenance of a constructive and conducive environment for interaction is of utmost importance. Here, the subsequent biased reporting of several international media and human rights organisation on the Rohingya crisis gives not much room to establish an environment in which constructive dialogues between the involved actors are possible. For example, it is overwhelming to state that the militants do not represent the Rohingya, plus some observers even neglect the existence of Rohingya militancy. The rationale behind such reporting is obviously aiming at the strengthening of the picture of the Muslim Rohingya as the sole victims of the conflict. However, when it comes to shed light on the point of views of the Buddhist Burmese majority or the local Buddhist Rakhine, they get either completely ignored or mostly hardline Buddhist fundamentalists are getting considered. In result, the majority of the Buddhists feel denounced and sidelined by a 'partisan media'. This makes it very difficult to mobilise and engage the moderate sections of the Buddhist society in processes of reconciliation with the Rohingya. Furthermore, it is crucial to consider Myanmar's traditional 'self-imposed isolation from the outside world' and its 'streak of xenophobia' among its national elite and some influential section among of its society (Hindustan Times, 2017, September 7). Against this backdrop, the applied 'double standards' by foreign observers will rather enhance the phenomenon of encapsulation of Myanmar's leadership and alienate the Buddhist society, especially the clerics. Here, one need to be aware of the tremendous influence of the monks among the country's Buddhists. Without their goodwill and cooperation, it will be unlikely to establish a respective environment for a political solution.

Third, the awareness and respect that any conflict resolution mechanism initiated, either by individual states or international regimes and organisations, need to take the sovereignty and

integrity as well as related national (security) interests of the state of Myanmar into account. One has to be aware that Myanmar is still a young nation state which faces tremendous challenges in maintaining internal security and territorial integrity due to numerous insurgency movements all over the country. Due to the massive and successful propaganda campaigns of Rohingya, other armed conflicts in Myanmar are not attracting much attention of foreign observers. This gives the impression that the international community does not recognise Myanmar needs, especially its security interests.

Fourth, the interests of countries in the extended region effected by the Rakhine (conflict) needs to be taken in to account too. These interests are manifold and cover security, geopolitical, and economic aspects among others. If their respective governments consider above mentioned factors and take on an active role, they could contribute to de-escalation of the military dimension of the conflict as well as to improve the situation of the refugees.

It has become known that the means of the ASEAN member-states remain limited. But India and China with their large-scale investments in Myanmar possessing not only the necessary interests but also a sufficient leverage to persuade to GoM and other crucial political players in Myanmar to adopt a cooperative as well as conciliative approach towards a solution of the Rohingya crisis. Here it remains to be seen, if the latest crisis in India-China relations might function as a roadblock or an incentive to look for potential joint collaborations. To sum up, it is of great importance that both the international community and local actors understand that the Rohingya challenge needs to be urgently addressed. The increasing engagement of international terrorist organisations and related attempts of hijacking the cause of Rohingya for their militant Islamist agenda should be seen as an alarming signal. Otherwise, there is a serious threat that Myanmar will turn into another major flashpoint of the 'global jihad'.

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